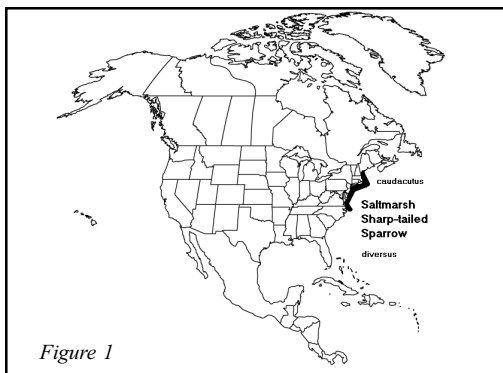


# Some Notes on Sharp-tailed Sparrows

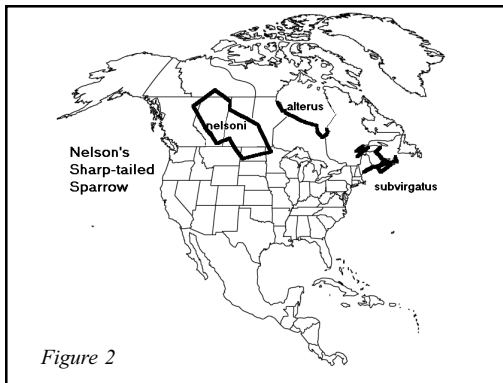
Frank Windfelder

In 1995, the American Ornithological Union (AOU) split the Sharp-tailed Sparrow into two species, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, *Ammodramus caudacutus*, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, *Ammodramus nelsoni*.

*A. caudacutus* consists of two races. The nominate race *A.c.caudacutus* nests coastally from southern Maine to Tuckerton, New Jersey; *A.c.diversus* nests from southern New Jersey to North Carolina. (Figure 1)



*A. nelsoni* consists of three races, whose breeding ranges are discontinuous. The nominate race *A.n.nelsoni* nests in the central Canadian prairie region, south to North Dakota; *A.n.alterus* nests on the shores of Hudson and James Bays, and *A.n.subvirgatus* nests coastally from the maritime provinces of Canada south to southern Maine. (Figure 2)



This article will attempt to delineate the differences between Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows as they appear in the fall. No attempt will be made to separate *A.c.caudacutus* from *A.c.diversus*.

In our region, the best time to see all three races of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is on fall migration, particularly from late September through early November. Fortunately, this is also the time when they are easiest to separate from Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow. At this time, all Nelson's should be in fresh plumage, having molted on the breeding grounds. According to Sibley (1996), the peak migration period for the inland races *nelsoni* and *alterus* is from September 20 to October 10. *Caudacutus*, *diversus*, and *subvirgatus* winter primarily on the southern Atlantic Coast, whereas *nelsoni* and *alterus* winter on both the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.

*A. caudacutus*. It is most useful to start by becoming familiar with this species. It is rather large, flat-headed and long-billed. The flank streaking is very heavy and distinct, with the streaks forming continuous broad dark lines. There is a triangle of rich orange on the face, which frames dark gray cheeks. The deepest orange is usually in the loreal area. There are usually some dark markings around the eye, extending onto the orange rear supercilium, and a dark whisker mark (lateral throat stripe).

The ground color of the under-parts is whitish. The unmarked throat is also whitish. The breast is covered with broad, heavy streaks, which connect with the heavy flank streaking and blends into the rest of the under-parts, which are unmarked. There is some orange on the sides of the breast, but this is not as bright as the orange on the face. The ground color of the upper-parts is a rather dull brownish gray, with some white and black streaking. There is a contrasting rusty area on the wing coverts. The nape is medium gray.

*A.n.subvirgatus* (Acadian race of Nelson's). This race is similar to *caudacutus* in overall size and

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shape. The bill is only slightly shorter than *caudacutus*. However, it is easy to identify, because it is such a dull, washed-out bird. There is no black in the plumage. The breast and flank streaking is indistinct and blurry. There is a quite dull orange triangle on the face, tending towards yellow in the loreal area. The rear supercilium is clouded. The cheek patch is not as distinct as on *caudacutus*. Dark markings around the eye are usually lacking. The ground color of the upper-parts is grayer than on *caudacutus*. The wing coverts lack contrasting reddish-brown.

***A.n.nelsoni* (Prairie race of Nelson's).** This is the most colorful bird in the Sharptail complex. It looks like a "little ball of feathers", as opposed to the rangier appearance of *caudacutus*. Not only is it smaller in body size than *caudacutus*, but it has a much shorter bill and a rounder crown, imparting a gentler appearance. The flank streaking is heavy and distinct, but the individual streaks appear to be narrower than in *caudacutus*. These streaks look like elongated islands, and do not usually form continuous lines. The triangle of orange is present on the face, but the entire orange area is an even tone. The supercilium is also orange, lacking the black around the eye and the dark streaks in the rear supercilium of *caudacutus*. The gray cheek patch is not as distinct as on *caudacutus*. The ground color of the breast is orange, unlike typical *caudacutus*, and there is little contrast between the orange on the breast and the face. The breast also contains many distinct or blurry dark streaks. There is usually a clean demarcation between the orange, streaked breast area and the rest of the under-parts, reminiscent of Pectoral Sandpiper but ending abruptly higher on the breast. The throat can appear unmarked and whitish, but frequently has an orange tinge. The background color of the back is dark, over-layed with numerous fine white streaks. As in *caudacutus*, the wing coverts can be reddish brown. The nape is a pearly gray.

***A.n.alterus*. (James Bay race of Nelson's).** This is the most difficult of the three races of Nelson's to identify. Its plumage is intermediate between *A.n.subvirgatus* and *A.n.nelsoni*, but the overall appearance is more like *nelsoni* than *subvirgatus*. The bill is short, as in *nelsoni*. The rear supercilium can be clouded, as in *subvirgatus*. The streaking on the breast and flanks is blurry. The breast pattern is reminiscent

of *nelsoni*. Both *nelsoni* and *alterus* can show blurry streaking on the whitish lower breast and belly area. Take a look at figure 16 in the Sibley (1996) article.

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow have an advertising song, but Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow does not. Have you ever noticed that when you locate a singing bird in coastal New Jersey or Delaware, it always turns out to be a Seaside Sparrow? The Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs (Eastern Region) has the songs of all three species.

Some words of caution are in order. Some individuals show intermediate characteristics, and may not be identifiable. In recent years, the zone of overlap between *caudacutus* and *subvirgatus* along the New England coast has been found to be much greater than previously realized, so hybrids are possible. Use all of the field marks, not just one, to confirm your sighting. As you gain experience, it will get easier. This article deals mainly with my own observations of these species in the field. I welcome suggestions from anyone who can enhance my own limited knowledge.

I know that when we are looking for birds that we have seen before we have a mental search image that enables us to hone in on those characteristics that identify a particular species. The table below should give you a headstart in this process.

Finally, an excellent place to look for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the fall is the rank, weedy area at the end of Great Bay Boulevard, which runs east from Tuckerton, New Jersey. All three races of *A.nelsoni* are possible here at that time. The area is described in Boyle (2002). In Pennsylvania, the Conejohela Flats of the Susquehanna River could produce both *nelsoni* and *alterus*. Coastal Delaware could yield all five races of Sharp-tailed Sparrows; a particularly good spot is the saltmarsh southwest of Indian River Inlet.

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### Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the Fall – An Identification Checklist

Characteristic	Saltmarsh	Nelson's* ( <i>nelsoni</i> )	Nelson's* ( <i>subvirgatus</i> )
Overall washed out grayish bird			X
Very neat and clean plumage		X	
Very small size – a little ball of feathers		X	
Head is round and bill is short		X	
Head is flat & bill is long	X		
Supercilium is BRIGHT orange	X	X	
Dark streaks in rear supercilium	X		
Clouded rear supercilium			X
Contrasting dark gray ear coverts	X	1	
Dark “whisker” mark	X	1	
White streaks on back	X	X	
Rusty on wing coverts	X	X	
All under-parts streaking is blurry			X
Very heavily streaked below, little orange	X		
Well-defined dark streaks on flanks	X	X	
Dark streaking heaviest on flanks		X	
Streaking on breast like Pectoral Sandpiper		X	
Dark streaking on breast well-defined	X	2	
Orange on breast same color as face		X	
Throat is orange		3	
Center of lower breast & belly streaked		4	
Advertising Song		X	X
Whispered low-volume warble	X		

\* Nelson's (*alterus*) is intermediate between *nelsoni* and *subvirgatus*.

#### KEY

- 1 = Not as pronounced as on Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow
- 2 = Breast area may have blurry streaking instead
- 3 = Some individuals appear to have a whitish throat
- 4 = True for some individuals of *nelsoni* and *alterus*

Be careful. Do not try to put a name on every bird. Be aware of the possibility of hybridization. A bird that otherwise looks like *nelsoni*, but has blurry streaks on the flanks and / or a clouded rear supercilium, along with blurry breast streaking, is an *alterus* candidate. A washed-out bird with bright white streaks on the back is an *alterus* candidate.

#### References

- Boyle, W.J. 2002. A Guide to Bird Finding in New Jersey. Rutgers University Press.
- Sibley, D.A. 1996. Field Identification of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow Complex. *Birding* 28 (3) 205. American Birding Association.

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