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A VAGRANT BELL'S SPARROW IN BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR

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Although at least seven Sage Sparrow subspecies have been described, the species has generally been regarded as comprising five distinct subspecies (AOU 1957). Nominate *belli* is resident in chaparral from the inner northern Coast Ranges of California south to the coast in Marin County, and south along the coast and foothills through northern Baja California, west of the Sierra Juárez and Sierra San Pedro Mártir, to Santa Catarina Landing at 29° 30' N. Isolated populations occur in the western Sierra Nevada from El Dorado County south to Mariposa County (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Birds occupying San Clemente Island—the southernmost of California's Channel Islands—have been separated as *A. b. clementeae* on the basis of their average paler plumage and larger bill. *Amphispiza b. cinerea* is resident in the “waist” of the Baja California Peninsula, from 26° 40' N at Bahía de Ballenas, Baja California Sur, north through the central Vizcaíno Desert to 28° 30' N at San Javier and along the Pacific coast to Bahía Playa Maria at 28° 54' N (Grinnell 1928). Although *cinerea* is not known to occur farther north, specimens from Santa Catarina Landing are intermediate between *belli* and *cinerea* and were the basis of the name *A. b. xerophilus* (Huey 1930). In the interior west, *A. b. nevadensis* occupies the Great Basin and Mojave Desert, breeding from central Washington east to extreme southeastern Montana and south to southwestern Colorado and central California. This subspecies is partly migratory and winters from the southern portions of the breeding range south to northern Baja California (generally east of the sierras) as far south as San Andrés at 28° 44' N (Huey 1931), as well as in northern Sonora and central Chihuahua (Howell and Webb 1995). The population breeding from southwestern Nevada through the Central Valley of California has been separated as *A. b. canescens*, but its winter range is not well-known, as a result of the difficulties of diagnosing this dubious subspecies (Patten and Unitt 2002; see below).

Some recent authors recognize two closely related sibling species within the Sage Sparrow complex: the *belli* group (Bell's Sparrow), including *belli*, *clementeae*, and *cinerea*, and the *nevadensis* group, including *nevadensis* and *canescens* (Rising 1996, Beadle and Rising 2002). The AOU (1998) followed Johnson and Marten (1992), who compared morphometric and genetic variation in samples of *belli*, *canescens*, and *nevadensis*, and concluded that despite the similar appearance and habits of the latter two subspecies, *canescens* is more closely related to *belli* than it is to *nevadensis*. Patten and Unitt (2002) provided a contrary view. They used the Sage Sparrow complex as an example for recommendations on the quantification of the “75% rule” of subspecies diagnosis: “that 75% of a population effectively must lie outside 99% of the range of other populations for a given defining character or set of characters.” Working with museum specimens, they assessed the diagnosability of the five subspecies of Sage Sparrow recognized by the AOU (1957), recommending that *canescens* be synonymized with *nevadensis* and *clementeae* be synonymized with *belli*. My discussion below follows Patten and Unitt (2002) in the recognition of just three subspecies, comprising two distinct groups: the coastal Bell's Sparrow group, comprising *A. b. belli* and *A. b. cinerea*, and the interior *A. b. nevadensis* (which includes birds from the range of “*canescens*”).

Separation of the three subspecies should be possible in the field given good views. Among those three subspecies, *nevadensis* is the most distinctive, being generally pale gray overall, especially on the back, which contrasts noticeably with the darker

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tail. The back is typically well streaked, and the malar stripe is indistinct and grayish, and often incomplete. The breast spot is typically grayish and indistinct, and the breast and flank streaking is typically extensive. Birds occupying the western portion of the range ("*canescens*") average slightly smaller and more well-marked about the face, with the thicker malar stripe and darker back tending towards *belli*. The Bell's Sparrow group differs in its smaller size, generally darker mantle with streaking indistinct or absent, and a more prominent, blackish malar stripe. The tail does not contrast markedly with the back. Rising (1996) and Sibley (2003) suggested that while unworn *nevadensis* has a white outer web to the outer rectrix, *belli* has (at most) buffy edging to this feather. The paler *cinerea* differs from *belli* in its "pale smoke gray or pale buffy ashy gray" upperparts, "narrower, more interrupted, and dull grayish" malar, and "smaller and dusky grayish" central breast spot (Ridgway 1901). Its dark tail does contrast with the paler back. Conventional field guides (e.g., Rising 1996, National Geographic Society 2002, Sibley 2000) depict both *belli* and *nevadensis*, and Beadle and Rising (2002) have color photos of both forms, but to my knowledge there are no published photos or illustrations of *cinerea*.

The featured photos on the back cover show three views of a Bell's Sparrow that Steve N. G. Howell, Richard A. Erickson, and I saw 23 September 2002 at Rancho Santa Mónica, on the Vizcaíno Peninsula, Baja California Sur. Although the images are small, they clearly show a prominent blackish malar stripe, a dark brownish-gray back without prominent streaking, and sparse streaking about the breast and flanks, all of which eliminate the migratory (and thus more likely at this location) *nevadensis*. Resident *cinerea* can safely be eliminated as well, as this individual was quite dark brown on the back and has a distinct breast spot and very distinct malar stripe. The tail does not contrast markedly with the back, eliminating both *nevadensis* and *cinerea*.

Rancho Santa Mónica is located some 250 km south of the nearest known location for *belli*, Santa Catarina Landing, Baja California (about 60 km southeast of El Rosario), and thus this represents the first record for Baja California Sur. Interestingly, although Bell's Sparrow is a bird of dry chaparral, the individual pictured was found in a classic "vagrant trap": a small ranchyard in the desert of the central Vizcaíno Peninsula. The bird frequented a small vegetable garden, overgrown with an abundance of weeds where other sparrows, buntings, and a Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Carduelis lawrencei*) were foraging. Given that the surrounding habitat is desert scrub occupied by resident *cinerea* (though none were found on our visit), it was interesting and significant that the Bell's Sparrow chose this patch of atypical habitat. The Bell's Sparrow was not located during a search on the following day.

The Sage Sparrow (*nevadensis*) is migratory and has occurred as a vagrant as far as southwestern British Columbia, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma (AOU 1998), coastal San Diego County (Unitt 1984), and even Nova Scotia (13 November 1994; Forsythe 1995), but Bell's Sparrow is little known away from breeding areas. Although there are no winter records (Harris 1996), it remains unclear whether the more northerly populations of *belli* in the inner northern Coast Range are resident or engage in some degree of migration or dispersal, as Small (1994) suspected. Bell's Sparrow is essentially unrecorded away from its breeding grounds; I am aware of just eight records away from breeding areas, and all previous records are from areas within 30 km of known breeding sites. Of eight records of the Sage Sparrow from Southeast Farallon Island, just two are documented (P. Pyle pers. comm.): an apparent *nevadensis* described 17 April 1970 and an apparent *belli* described 1 October 1981. One "definite" *belli* wintered at Emeryville Marina, Alameda County, 9 December 1984–29 January 1985, while another at nearby Robert's Landing that same winter was considered only probably *belli* (Am. Birds 39:208). In Monterey County, Roberson (2002) reported that *belli* is "almost entirely sedentary" but mentioned individuals away from breeding sites at Salinas 8 September 1985 and "downstream along the Big Sur River" 14 September 1994. Out-of-place Sage

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Sparrows in Santa Barbara County have not been identified to subspecies (Lehman 1994), but, in Orange County, Hamilton and Willick (1996) reported two out-of-range records of *belli* away from breeding habitat: one collected at Seal Beach 5 July 1956 and one at San Joaquin Marsh, Irvine, 28–30 October 1993. The latter record coincided with a large fire in the nearby San Joaquin Hills, where Bell's Sparrow is a very rare breeder. In San Diego County, Unitt (1984) reported that it "seems to be sedentary, but apparently wanders occasionally, since two were seen at Point Loma, a locality where this race does not breed, on 4 and 5 October 1981." To my knowledge these are the only suggestions of movement away from breeding areas, and there are no other reports of this usually sedentary subspecies out of its range. There is a striking coincidence of September and October dates in six out of the eight records of stray *belli*, including the individual in Baja California Sur.

A variety of predominantly foothill and mountain species appeared in out-of-place localities on the Baja California Peninsula during fall 2002, including the Western Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*), Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*), Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca* ssp.), and Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*). Erickson et al. (2003) drew a connection between these records and severe regional drought in 2001/2002. It is quite likely that our far-flung Bell's Sparrow at Rancho Santa Mónica was part of that same pattern.

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