

# Clay-colored Sparrow



Clay-colored Sparrow



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**Scientific Name** *Spizella pallida*  
(Swainson, 1832)

**Family Name** Emberizidae  
Buntings, American Sparrows  
and Relatives

**Did you know?**

Clay-colored Sparrows have been known to breed with Chipping Sparrows.

## Summary

**Protection** Protected Bird in New York State, protected federally.

This level of state protection means: Defined as a Protected Bird by New York State law. This species may not be hunted or taken at any time in New York.

This species is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act implements various treaties and conventions between the U. S. and Canada, Japan, Mexico and the former Soviet Union for the protection of migratory birds. Under this Act, taking, killing, or possessing migratory birds, including nests or eggs, is unlawful unless specifically permitted by other regulations.

## Conservation and Management

### Threats

The main threat to Clay-colored Sparrows in New York is loss of suitable habitat through succession. There are many areas in the state where farming has declined allowing for old farm fields to succeed to a shrub habitat. This has resulted in what is likely a temporary increase in suitable breeding habitat. However, without management, succession will continue and suitable shrubby areas will eventually decline. Brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds is another potential threat.

## Conservation Strategies and Management Practices

Efforts should be made to maintain habitat so that shrubs persist in areas where Clay-colored Sparrows breed. Management may include mowing or burning in patches or light grazing. Allow grasslands to remain idle to promote shrubby vegetation growth. While Clay-colored Sparrows readily use cropland to forage, they do not for nesting. It is important to retain or promote brushy edges along cropland edges for nesting (NatureServe 2007).

## Research Needs

Additional research is needed to determine the percentage of time Clay-colored Sparrows are breeding with Chipping Sparrows.

## Habitat

In New York, breeding Clay-colored Sparrows are typically found in abandoned agricultural land that has been invaded by shrubs and saplings, young conifer plantations, and regenerating clear-cuts (Carroll and Andrie 1988, McGowan and Corwin 2008). Areas with scattered shrubs or small trees interspersed with grassy or weedy openings seem to be preferred. In western parts of the state, young conifer tree plantations are used more often. To the north, sandy pine barrens habitat is more likely to be occupied by breeding birds. Idle or lightly grazed grasslands with low shrubs are used in other parts of the state.

## Associated Ecological Communities

### Brushy Cleared Land

A former forest, woodland, or shrubland that has been clearcut or cleared by brush-hog. The cut stumps of trees and shrubs are evident and usually common. There may be a lot of woody debris such as branches and slashings from trees that were logged. Vegetation is patchy, with scattered herbs, shrubs, and tree saplings.

### Calcareous Pavement Barrens

A savanna community that occurs on nearly level outcrops of calcareous bedrock (limestone or dolomite). The community consists of a mosaic of shrub-savanna, grass-savanna, and rock outcrop vegetation.

### Successional Old Field

A meadow dominated by forbs and grasses that occurs on sites that have been cleared and plowed (for farming or development), and then abandoned or only occasionally mowed.

### Successional Shrubland

A shrubland that occurs on sites that have been cleared (for farming, logging, development, etc.) or otherwise disturbed. This community has at least 50% cover of shrubs.

## Associated Species

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*)

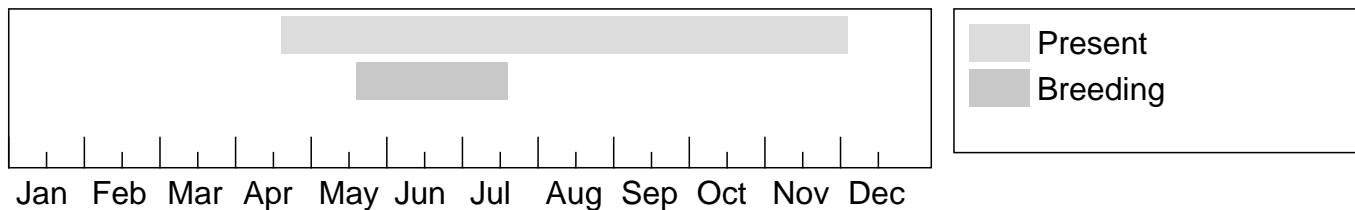
# Identification Comments

## Identifying Characteristics

The Clay-colored Sparrow is a small sparrow with a notched tail. Underparts are buff to gray with a brown rump. Wings are streaked with 2 white wing bars. There is a gray band across the nape of the neck splitting the streaked head and neck. Sexes are similar. During the breeding season, plumage differs in that there is a white eye stripe, a dark cheek line that includes a distinctive moustache, and a white throat patch with dark bars dividing the patch into three segments in males. Nests are fairly compact and cup-shaped. Typically, nests are woven grasses that are lined with finer grasses, rootlets, and animal hair that are usually in a low shrub or tree. Vocalizations are a series of two to eight low, flat buzzes that can be easily mistaken for an insect.

## The Best Time to See

The best time to observe Clay-colored Sparrows is during the breeding season when the males are maintaining territories from late May to early July. They may be observed migrating until the end of November.



**The time of year you would expect to find Clay-colored Sparrow in New York.**

## Similar Species

**Chipping Sparrow(*Spizella passerina*):** Chipping Sparrows have a darker face pattern and no moustache. Clay-colored Sparrows have a brown rump. Typically, Clay-colored Sparrows are smaller and have smaller bills than Chipping Sparrows.

# Taxonomy

Kingdom Animalia

└ Phylum Craniata

└ Class Birds (Aves)

└ Order Perching Birds (Passeriformes)

└ Family Emberizidae (Buntings, American Sparrows and Relatives)

# Additional Resources

## Links

### NatureServe Explorer

<http://natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchName=SPIZELLA+PALLIDA>

### Google Images

<http://images.google.com/images?q=SPIZELLA+PALLIDA>

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