

ON THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE DICK CISSEL (*SPIZA AMERICANA*) FROM THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

BY

HUGH M. SMITH,

Assistant, U. S. Fish Commission.

While it is a matter of no great rarity for certain of the larger birds inhabiting a particular region to become scarce, or locally extinct, because of the direct persecution and slaughter carried on by man or on account of the cutting away of forests and other similar procedures, instances of the disappearance of small birds from a locality which they have regularly frequented are by no means common, especially when this disappearance is independent of the agency of man.

Such is the case of the Dick Cissel in the vicinity of Washington. At one time an abundant summer visitant, it is now a veritable *rara avis*.

Speaking of this subject in their "Avifauna Columbiana," Coues and Prentiss say:

This bird used to arrive regularly about the first of May, and leave toward the end of September, meanwhile being very abundant. * * * Now, however, the bird appears to have forsaken us, few if any having been heard of for the past few years. * * * Whatever the cause, it is one of the most remarkable changes in the bird fauna of the immediate vicinity of the city.

This was in 1883. At the present time there can be no doubt that the species is nothing more than the most accidental straggler, since only one bird has been observed during the past fifteen years, notwithstanding the activity of the local collectors in searching for the species.

The late Professor Baird stated a short time before his death that he remembered when the Dick Cissel nested commonly in the Smithsonian Grounds, and he was accustomed to observe the birds daily at the proper season as he passed to and from his work in the Institution.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Ridgway, the Curator of the Department of Birds, it has been possible to prepare the following list, showing all

the specimens from the District that found their way to the Smithsonian Institution:

Museum number.	Date.	Sex.	Collector.
10133		♂	J. C. McGuire.
12235	May 25, 1859	♂	C. Drexler.
59415	May 17, 1860	♂	D. W. Prentiss.
83771	May 10, 1861	♂	Elliott Coues.
10132		♂	J. C. McGuire.
28630		♂	C. Drexler.
29095	June, 1856	♂	Elliott Coues.
29096	May 13, 1859	♂	Do
30043		♂	D. W. Prentiss.
30044	Jan. 25, 1860	♂	Do
30045	May 10, 1861	♂	Do
59416	May, 1860	♂	Do
59417		♀	Do

Of these thirteen specimens, only the first four are now in the museum collection, all the others having probably been exchanged many years ago. The only other specimen extant, so far as known, is a female in the possession of the writer, taken by Dr. T. C. Smith in 1861.

It will thus be seen that no specimens of this species have been obtained for nearly thirty years. During the first half of that period the bird was still a regular sojourner with us, Mr. Ridgway having found it not uncommon on Columbia Heights about 1872 or 1873, and in 1874 he observed a male on the Virginia side of the Potomac River above the Aqueduct Bridge. He has seen none since that time and believes, as the result of his observations, that the species does not now breed within 40 miles of Washington.

The most recent and, in fact, the only other record of the bird's occurrence was in May, 1887, when Mr. H. W. Henshaw saw a male in a field beyond Soldiers' Home, a locality which the species formerly frequented.

Mr. Ridgway's intimate knowledge of the habits of the dick cissel in the Mississippi Valley leads him to state that its occurrence in abundance in 1860 is almost as much of a mystery as its absence in 1890, inasmuch as it is a bird of the prairies and extensive natural meadows, such as clover fields—topographical conditions not existing in the vicinity of Washington.