

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Sparrows

LBJs: Little Brown Jobs

For many birders, it seems that all sparrows are difficult to identify. There are various reasons for this, including the secretive nature of the birds themselves, but dwarfing all other problems is the fact that the “field marks approach” works very poorly on sparrows.

Here is a typical encounter between a beginner (myself, a few years ago) and a sparrow. The sparrow sets off the encounter by flying up onto a fence wire. Fighting off a sense of panic, the birder tries to focus on field marks. Does the bird have a streaked or plain breast? Streaked; okay. Is there or is there not a pale central stripe on the crown? Can't see that at this angle. What about a central breast spot? And wing bars; do those pale lines qualify as wing bars? At this point the bird drops back into the grass. The observer has noted only one definite field mark: the streaked breast; that would rule out some species, except that even most plain-breasted sparrows have streaks in juvenile plumage.

On the other hand, an experienced birder will often know what a sparrow is after a split-second glimpse—narrowing down the choice, if not to species, at least to a group of two or three related forms. Can practiced eyes really tabulate field marks so fast? Not likely; the expert is probably using a different system entirely, one that begins not with field marks but with the characteristic shape and behavior of each group of sparrows.

Consider, for example, a comparison between the typical eastern forms of Savannah Sparrow and Song Sparrow. They are quite similar in plumage pat-

tern, but their shapes are so different that the practiced birder will never confuse them.

Here are the major groups of eastern sparrows as described and compared. When you see the sparrows you know in the field, think of them as members of these groups, and try to see how shape, habitat, and behavior help to make them distinctive.

[This is an excerpt from Jack Connor's *The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding*. He goes into detail on how to distinguish between individual species.]



Some Pitfalls of Sparrow Identification

Median crown stripes:

In several cases among the sparrows, the presence or absence of a pale stripe down the center of the crown is a significant field mark. But there is a potential hazard here: some sparrows with crowns that are either solidly colored or evenly patterned with fine streaks may show a short, pale median stripe on the forehead, just above the base of the upper mandible. Viewed from some angles, this could be interpreted as a median crown stripe.

Central breast spots:

The central spot on the breast is an often-quoted field mark for the Song Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow, and some others, but it is not an infallible mark. The streaks may or may not seem to coalesce into a central spot on any of the streak-breasted sparrows. On plain-breasted species, any ruffling of the feathers can expose their darker basal areas, briefly creating the impression of a dark spot.

Breast streaking:

Bird guides often separate sparrows into broad categories by noting whether they have streaked or plain under-parts, but it can be misleading to use this as an absolute field mark. In almost all sparrows, the juveniles have finely streaked breasts, and some species (for example, Chipping Sparrow) retain these streaks for some time after they are independent. Even adults of some plain-breasted species can show a vaguely streaked or mottled effect in this area. Conversely summer adults of some streaked-breasted sparrows can be in such worn plumage that they appear unstreaked.

Other sparrow-like birds:

It is worth remembering that a confusing little thick-billed brown bird does not have to be one of our sparrows. There are some other common candidates, like Pine Siskins, winter-plumaged longspurs, and female-plumaged *Carpodacus* finches. Although they are not closely similar to any particular sparrow, they can cause temporary confusion. A “sparrow” that looks truly confusing could turn out to be an escaped cage bird or zoo bird of some kind— many exotic finches are kept in captivity—or even a stray individual of some migratory species from Eurasia.



Spizella. Chipping, Clay-colored, and Field. Small sparrows with rounded heads, small bills, and medium-long tails that are usually notched at the tip. Generally found in wooded or brushy areas, not open grass or marshes. In migration and winter usually in small flocks; often feed on the ground, but also seen high in trees, and likely to perch conspicuously in the open. Most call notes are thin and lisping.



Vesper Sparrow. A medium-large sparrow with a medium-length, square-tipped tail, the outer tail feathers noticeably white. Inhabits fields, including dry fields and brushy areas. In winter often found in small, loose flocks; not particularly secretive, often perching in the open. Call note a loud hsip.



Lark Sparrow. A rather large sparrow; tail rather long, with a broad rounded tip and conspicuous white outer edges and comers. Inhabits brushy country near areas of bare ground; often perches conspicuously in the open. Often in small, loose flocks in winter. May fly rather high, giving a sharp, metallic call note.



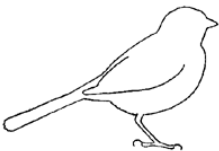
Savannah Sparrow. A small, short-tailed sparrow, similar to *Ammodramus* (next) but not as chunky, large-headed, flat-crowned, or large-billed as the field-inhabiting members of that genus. Inhabits fields and marshes. Not particularly secretive. Often in loose flocks in winter. Thin, lisping call notes; often calls when flushed.



Ammodramus. Grasshopper, Henslow's, Le Conte's, Sharp-tailed, and Seaside sparrows. Chunky, short-tailed birds with flat foreheads; the first three species listed above look large-headed and large-billed, while the latter three have proportionately smaller heads and thinner bills. Inhabit fields, wet meadows, and marshes, tending to be secretive, not perching freely in the open except when singing. Never found in flocks. Most call notes are thin and lisping; usually silent when flushed.



Fox Sparrow. A large sparrow; rather chunky, with a medium-long tail. Bill shape varies regionally: some races have a large bill with a swollen lower mandible. Usually on the ground in woods or brush, foraging by scratching with its feet among dead leaves. Often mixes with other sparrows in winter, but seldom forms flocks of its own kind. Call notes sharp and distinctive.



Melospiza. Song, Lincoln's, and Swamp sparrows. Robust, medium-large sparrows, with longish tails that are rounded at the tip. Usually found low in dense vegetation, and can be secretive. Never in large flocks: usually solitary, or in pairs at the most. Call notes are loud and distinctive.



Zonotrichia. White-throated and White-crowned. Medium-large to large sparrows, with tail fairly long and square-tipped, crown slightly peaked, bill not disproportionately large. In winter found in brushy areas, almost always in flocks; feed on the ground but often perch conspicuously in the open when disturbed. Call notes sharp and distinctive.