

Solving Sparrows

(Supplemental to the North Branch Nature Center Online Presentation on 1 May 2020)

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1. Know Song Sparrow and Its Repertoire

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) is one of the most widespread birds on the continent. It is your “default” sparrow: abundant, visible, heavily streaked and with a longish tail. You can’t know sparrows until you know Song Sparrow. Its song is variable, but most often begins with two or three repeated short notes followed by a drawn, odd, nasal, somewhat buzzy note or two, then ending in a trill. Those first few repeated notes are your best handles for learning this song.

2. Learn the “Sparrow Impostors”

They included: female Red-winged Blackbird (raucous with a dagger-like bill), American Pipit (rather than hopping like most other sparrows, it has a silly walk), female Purple Finch and House Finch (high in trees), various streaked thrushes, female Bobolink, female Indigo Bunting, House Sparrow (particularly females), two warbler species: Northern Waterthrush and Louisiana Waterthrush.

3. Is Your Sparrow Clean or Streaked Below?

Although this step has some pitfalls, this is a fine start for beginning sparrow watchers. It helps you limit your choices. In Vermont, a birder might encounter about a dozen sparrow species in any given year. Swamp Sparrow is sort of an in-betweenener.

Streaked

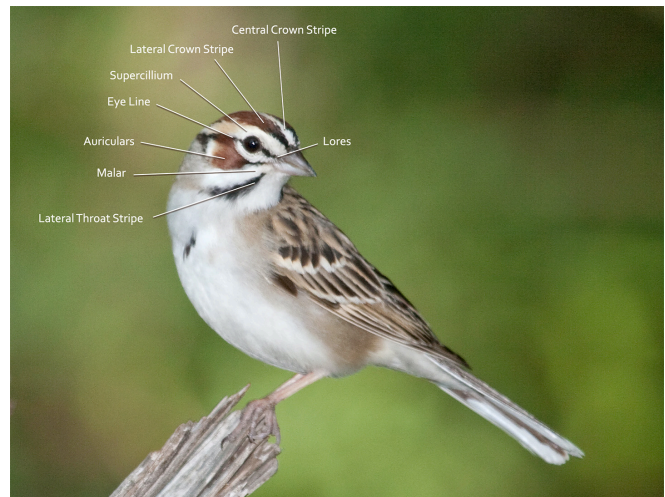
- Song Sparrow
- Savannah Sparrow
- Fox Sparrow (migrant)
- Lincoln’s Sparrow
- Vesper Sparrow (upper breast)

Clean

- Chipping Sparrow
- White-throated Sparrow (can be faintly streaked or messy)
- Swamp Sparrow (dingy)
- American Tree Sparrow (winter)
- White-crowned Sparrow (migrant)
- Field Sparrow
- Clay-colored Sparrow
- Grasshopper Sparrow

4. Head for the Head

Facial, throat and crown markings are essential in nearly all sparrow identification. Study the beginning of your field guide for nomenclature that includes: lateral throat stripe, malar, auriculars, eye line, supercillium, lateral crown stripe, central crown stripe and lores. Learn them on Lark Sparrow; then find them on other sparrow species.



5. Vocalization

Sparrows sing a lot. Few share similar songs. In fact, in spring, you will *hear* the vast majority of sparrows singing before you actually see them. Homework: For a great illustration of how song can help in sparrow identification have a look (in your field guide) at Cassin’s Sparrow and Botteri’s Sparrow (they look a lot alike). Then go online and listen to their distinctive songs.

6. Habitat — It’s a Big Deal

It will make your life — and sparrow sorting — much easier. Swamp Sparrows hang out in, yeah, swamps (well, actually, mostly in cattail marshes). You won’t find Swamp Sparrows in the woods. Chipping Sparrows have a trill for a song somewhat like Swamp Sparrow. But Chipping Sparrows likes woodland openings, even your front yard. Unlike most sparrows, Chippies sing from fairly high in trees. No self-respecting Chipping Sparrow will be chipping away in a cattail marsh. Savannah Sparrow is among the most overlooked birds in Vermont, found in most hayfields and pastures.

7. Know the “Dastardly Duos” (They’re not really dastardly.)

These are species pairs that require careful observation to distinguish. Vermont has very few of them. But you’ll find other duos farther afield. Use all of the above to help separate these duos. But, most importantly, know in advance the key field marks on duos. For example, have a look in your field guide at winter plumage Chipping Sparrow and Clay-colored Sparrow, which, for most folks, is a fairly common fall identification challenge in the East. Although there are several marks to check, the most obvious (and usually the first you’ll check) is the lores: dark on Chipping Sparrow and pale on Clay-colored Sparrow. Next compare the lateral throat stripes, and then the lower margin to the auriculars.

8. Wait! You Actually Thought Sparrows Could Be Made Easy?

Sparrow-ology for beginners features many generalizations designed to get you started. Recognize, however, that birds don’t always follow rules. So here are some caveats:

- **Streaked vs. Clean** – This tip applies only to adult birds, which is mostly what we see in spring when we’re birding a lot. Fledglings of clean sparrows are almost invariably streaked below. But most (with the notable exception of Chipping Sparrow) are clean by fall, when we tend to resume watching birds. Also note that Swamp Sparrows and White-throated Sparrow can appear faintly streaked below. To call a bird streaked below, you’ll need to see genuine streaking – not dingy or messy markings.
- **The Breast Spot** – You’ll see it pointed out in field guides (Song Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, for example). But this mark can be variable, depending in part on a bird’s posture. Sometimes it’s hard to see, or sometimes it’s a confluence of breast streaking can suggest a spot. For the most part, you don’t need this field mark to identify sparrows. It can help confirm what you’ve got, but treat it as a fairly inconsequential field mark.
- **Eschew Expectations** – One problem with this simplified approach to sparrows is that it limits your expectations. Our focus on the dozen or so regular Vermont species can prevent you from finding the rare and unexpected sparrow. So don’t always assume you’ve got something common. Odds are that your sparrow will indeed be what you might expect, but rarities such as Golden-crowned Sparrow and LeConte’s Sparrow have turned up in Vermont.

9. A Seasonal and Habitat Approach to Sparrow Identification (in Vermont)

Beyond streaky vs. clean, you can limit your sparrow identification choices by considering habitat and season.

A Habitat and Seasonal Approach to Vermont Sparrows			
Common Breeders		Common Migrants	
Streaked <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Song Sparrow – Widespread, almost everywhere except forests, mountain summits• Savannah Sparrow – Fields in breeding season, varied in migration• Swamp Sparrow (dingy) – Wetlands, mostly cattail marshes; elsewhere in migration	Clean <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chipping Sparrow – Yards, forest openings; sings from trees• White-throated Sparrow (can be faintly streaked or messy) – Widespread in forests and forest openings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fox Sparrow (Streaky) – Widespread, often at feeders; woodlands• White-crowned Sparrow (Clean) – Feeders or scrubby openings; sometimes with White-throats in migration; note brown crowns on first-winter birds	
Uncommon or Rare Breeders		Winter “Residents”	
Streaked <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lincoln’s Sparrow – Bogs but sometimes scrubby fields or, rarely, even cattails; varied in habitat choices during migration• Vesper Sparrow – Grasslands (near trees) at scattered sites; grasslands in migration	Clean <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Field Sparrow – Scrubby fields, “bouncing ball” song is often your first clue• Clay-colored Sparrow – Relatively new breeder in scattered scrubby sites• Grasshopper Sparrow – Very few grassland sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• American Tree Sparrow – Shrubby areas; compare with Chipping Sparrow• Lapland Longspur – Not really a sparrow; best located among Snow Buntings in the Champlain Valley	
		Other Crazy-Rare Species	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lark Sparrow – Fall migrant; distinctive• Nelson’s Sparrow – Fall migrant; rare but seemingly regular• Harris’ Sparrow – Few records.	