

The Birder's Eye

Those Sneaky Sparrows (part 1)

Photos by S. Thompson

An eye-stripe glimpsed in a dense thicket; a soft call-note heard from a wet ditch and a brown blur in the forest undergrowth – all are sure-fire indications of those sneaky sparrows. Some of us love New World sparrows, but others hate them. “They all look the same” is a common complaint I often hear.

Well.....yes! To be honest, most sparrows are essentially little brown birds, but the complicated feather patterns vary considerably between many of the closely-related species. Their habitat preferences also differ, with some species preferring wet long-grass ditches, and others thick underbrush. Some are only found in open, park-like habitat, while others are never seen out of dense cover.

Let's start our exploration of sparrows here in Asheville in mid-summer. Take a wander around our own Beaver Lake Bird Sanctuary. There's only one species that's likely to be seen here during the breeding season and that's the familiar Song Sparrow. Heavily streaked and easy to see, this friendly bird is present in our area throughout the year, although the numbers of our local birds get augmented by many more moving south in the colder months. So, a heavily streaked sparrow here in the summer can only be a Song Sparrow.



Song Sparrow

Keep those streaks in mind and wait until the fall and winter months. In the late fall, a few really sneaky Lincoln's Sparrows start to move through our area. They're always hiding deep in usually wet thickets and overgrown tangles. They can pretty easily be “pished” or “squeaked” up, but once they disappear, they rarely if ever pop back up again. Lincoln's Sparrows are lovely, neat little birds with their finely streaked underparts (think pencil streaks compared to the magic marker streaks of the Song Sparrow). Also, they have soft gray faces, a buff malar stripe and often raise their crown feathers when disturbed.



Lincoln's Sparrow

Later in the winter, when the weather starts to get colder, a few Fox Sparrows usually appear. Never easy nor reliable to find, these thrush-sized sparrows seem to only appear in our back gardens when snow begins to blanket their more rural habitats. Fox Sparrows are again one of those streaked sparrows, but they are rich red-brown above with heavy red-brown spots below. A bird of dense tangles of more open country, Fox Sparrows often share their preferred habitat with the more abundant Song Sparrows, although not as often in wet and marshy situations.



Fox Sparrow



Savannah Sparrow

Our last streaked sparrow is the Savannah Sparrow. We tend to think of this smaller, short-tailed version of the Song Sparrow as a winter visitor, but we have found breeding birds in Transylvania County and they may even nest in the more open agricultural areas. Like many sparrows, Savannahs are easy to “squeak” into view where they often perch atop stalks and dead stems in their preferred open country habitats. Superficially they resemble the familiar Song Sparrow, but their breast streaking is finer, their tails are shorter, and they show pinkish legs and a striped head and crown. If you manage to get closer views, you should be able to see the yellow loreal spot that most adult birds sport.

Of course, there are more sparrows to contend with, some which may show some diffuse streaks in some plumages, but the four described above are the four classic streaked species.

Next month I will talk about un-streaked sparrows, including Swamp, Chipping and Field which all have their own preferred habitats in Western North Carolina.

If attention to detail is what drives your birding, those sneaky sparrows are the perfect family of birds to get into. Their overall brown plumage is a complex series of spots, streaks and stripes – all unique to the species. It’s a lot of fun to figure them out.

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