

Grasshopper Sparrows

Many birders cringe when they are trying to identify sparrows, the family of birds affectionately known to birders as “those little brown jobs.” Sparrows can be difficult to identify even with long good looks at them; however, the identification problem is compounded if the birds are secretive and provide only quick looks before they disappear from sight. Grasshopper Sparrows are among the ground-hugging birds that allow limited time to observe them. They do not form flocks and are difficult to flush, preferring to run through the grass like mice.

Spring is the one time of the year when the male sparrows expose themselves allowing easier identification as they sing their buzzy song. Their song is a short buzzy “chip-chip-zeeeeeeee.” Grasshopper Sparrows prefer grassy, weedy fields or meadows where they sing from low perches on short shrubs. They will also sing from wire strands on fences. While singing the birds seem to lose their shyness and will spend long periods of time singing.

I had thought that these sparrows were named for their songs representing the sounds of insects, especially grasshoppers. In doing research for this article, I learned that grasshoppers are also a big part of these birds’ diets. I am not sure why they were given the name “grasshopper” sparrows, but I would think their buzzy insect-like song is the more likely reason for their name, rather than diet. One characteristic I use to identify Grasshopper Sparrows is by noting their very flat heads. From the tip of the beak to the back of the head is a flat profile – little or no forehead feature. The bird’s crown has a central cream or light colored center stripe flanked by dark crown stripes. Other good identifiers are their stocky body shapes and short tails. Most sparrows have either clear breasts or streaked breasts. In contrast, the Grasshopper Sparrow has a short “necklace” of faint brown stripes in a buffy brown wash separating the white throat and belly.

Other ways to identify these sparrows include their distinct eye rings and yellow spots in front of their eyes, known as “lores.” These sparrows have very heavily streaked backs and faint wing bars. In addition to these characteristics, the sparrows have an undulating flight indicative of a flap and glide flying technique. When not singing they are generally secretive and are difficult to flush. Instead of flying to a perch, they make short zig-zag flights and drop into cover.

Grasshopper Sparrows are migratory, spending their winters in the southern edges of our country and southward into Mexico and beyond. Most of these sparrows breed in the north-eastern quadrant of our country and extend westward into the Pacific Northwest. Some spend their summers in the coastal regions of California. Here in the Hill Country, they occur year-around, but only because their winter and summer ranges overlap here. They would not likely be classified as permanent residents.

Range maps show that the Grasshopper Sparrow nests in the Hill Country, but I have never found a Grasshopper Sparrow nest. Because these sparrows are ground nesters in grassy and weedy areas, it would be very difficult to find one of their nests. To protect their nest locations from predators and cowbirds, many ground-nesting birds will not fly directly to their nest locations. Instead, they land several yards from their nest site and walk the rest of the way. The nests are concealed in grass clumps or in shallow holes, thereby being very difficult to spot.

If a Grasshopper Sparrow is not on your life list, now is the time to make that addition. Look for them in fallow grassy and weedy fields, likely perched on a bush only a few feet high. If you see a small chunky “brown” bird sitting alone on a fence wire, there is a good chance it is a Grasshopper Sparrow singing his buzzy song. If the plants are not native, the chances are you will not see one. Many of our introduced fields of coastal Bermudagrass and kleingrass will likely be void of these sparrows. Unfortunately, these birds are declining in some parts of the country because of loss of native habitat.