

Tips and tricks for Finding and Identifying Wintering Sparrows

They are small, various shades of brown, off white and gray, and have a seemingly amazing ability to frustrate the heck out of birders, particularly those who are attempting to learn to identify them for the first time. Sparrow identification provides distinct challenges to the birder, beginner or not. That said, you can become proficient with sparrow id through the tried and true technique of ... practice, practice, practice. And, since Texas is home to a wide variety of sparrows during the winter months, you have many opportunities to do just that. Let's talk about the species we would be most likely to encounter during an average winter. So where do we start? Probably by purchasing a good field guide.

Let's begin with habitat. Brush piles are wonderful areas in which to look for sparrows. If the piles are in field settings, watch for Lincoln's, white-crowned, Harris's, field and occasionally, lark sparrows. If the brush piles are in brushy areas or along woodland border, watch for fox, white-throated, Lincoln's and perhaps rufous-crowned sparrows. If water is nearby, add in song, and if lucky, swamp sparrows.

If you are searching open fields with scattered small trees and brush along fence lines you'll most likely encounter vesper, savannah, Harris's, lark, field and white-crowned sparrows. Areas with dense, tall grasses and wildflowers with scattered shrubs will hold grasshopper, Le Conte's, field and Lincoln's. You may notice I didn't say anything about one of our most common winter sparrows, the chipper. Fact is, chipping sparrows travel in flocks and are quite ubiquitous, seeming to be almost anywhere.

Now let's turn our attention to characteristics of individual birds. Harris's, white-crowned, lark, vesper, rufous-crowned and fox sparrows are the big guys and distinctly marked. The vesper sparrow is most readily confused with other smaller but similarly patterned cousins. The vesper has a complete white eye ring and white outer tail feathers. These two marks in combination will separated this bird from the similarly streaked savannah sparrow, its closest look-alike. The savannah's other field mark of the yellowish tint on the supraloral area will help, but is sometimes variable and hard to see.

The medium-sized and small sparrows are the real challenges in identification. Included in this group are the song, savannah, white-throated, Lincoln's, field and chipping sparrows. The small sparrows are the grasshopper and Le Conte's.

Determine if the bird has streaks on its chest or flanks (remember we are talking winter time). If the answer is yes, there are four choices: Savannah, Le Conte's, song and Lincoln's. Let's attempt to separate these birds.

Of these birds, the song sparrow is the most heavily streaked, with thick, bold streaking on the chest and flanks. Two things make them easy to identify—the heavy brown malar and its habit of flicking its tail when in the brush and when it's flying away. Add in habitat difference between this and the other streaked sparrows and most of the time you should be able to identify the song sparrow.

Lincoln's sparrows are dainty, common and found in a variety of habitats. The most recognizable field marks are broad gray supercilium, rufous wings, and the finely streaked, buffy breast. Swamp sparrows

are similar but have a hint of blurry streaking as well as a hint of buff against an overall gray colored breast and are mostly found near water.

Now we come to the two final pairs of birds I will discuss. The first pair is represented by the Le Conte's and the grasshopper sparrows. Both are less common during the winter months than the previous sparrows, and because of their love for tall grassland, they can present a real challenge to actually get a look at. Only on the Le Conte's will you find fine streaking on the chest and flanks. The grasshopper appears to have a flat forehead and heavier bill. The Le Conte's face is deep ochre while the grasshopper's is paler with a brighter yellowish-ochre loreal area.

We are down to our last pair. The field and chipping sparrows are often among the most common winter sparrows found in a wide array of habitats. Field sparrows are beautiful, cleanly marked birds. I tell people, "pink beak, pink feet, no streaks, pale reddish cap, it's a field sparrow."

The chipping sparrow is a similarly easy bird to identify because of one field mark, the dark line through the eye. No other sparrow you are going to encounter has this singular dark line beginning at the base of the bill and passing through the eye to the back of the head.

Okay, there you have it. No, I haven't covered every species, but hopefully some of the pointers above will help you when you are out in the field this winter. Sparrows are one of the birder's greatest challenges, but often among our most rewarding. Good birding!