

IDENTIFICATION OF WINTER SPARROWS IN UMATILLA COUNTY

Updated February 10, 2010

For many birders, among the most commonly observed birds, sparrows offer the greatest identification challenge. Sparrows are songbirds that are classified in the family of birds called Emberizidae. In Umatilla County, towhees, sparrows (except House Sparrow), Dark-eyed Juncos, Lapland Longspurs, and Snow Buntings are members of the Emberizidae. Sparrows have conical beaks, are usually ground-feeders, often reside in grassland or brushy habitats (of course there are exceptions), and are primarily seed eaters. All of our sparrows sport streaked breasts at some time in their life: some species only as juveniles and others throughout their entire life.

I've developed a dichotomous key with the intent of assisting birders in identifying our **local, winter sparrows** (members of the Emberizidae). This key is intended for use between mid October and mid March. From spring migration through late summer, there are additional species that are found locally. These species are not present during the winter, and therefore are not included in this key. This key does not include the finches (family Fringillidae), such as Pine Siskin, House Finch, or American Goldfinch, which may resemble, and therefore be confused with, sparrows. The following 16 species of sparrows are included in the key, but some species such as Vesper Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting are very rare (or absent some years) in winter:

Spotted Towhee	Song Sparrow	White-crowned Sparrow
American Tree Sparrow	Lincoln's Sparrow	Golden-crowned Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow	Swamp Sparrow	Dark-eyed Junco
Sage Sparrow	White-throated Sparrow	Lapland Longspur
Savannah Sparrow	Harris's Sparrow	Snow Bunting
Fox Sparrow		

To successfully use the key, you'll need to get a good look at the sparrow in question, noting some field marks. If you can study the bird for some time, you can work your way through the key while you are watching the bird. Many observations, however, are too short duration to work your way through the key while viewing the bird. This is a shortcoming in using keys to identify birds in the field, and is a primary reason why keys are almost never used for bird identification. The high degree of plumage variation within species is another factor that complicates the use of keys to identify birds.

I recommend that you become familiar with the principal field marks used in the key, so you can make note of those clues while watching the sparrow you want to identify. The initial field mark I decided to use in the key (the characteristics noted in dichotomy 1A and 1B, below) is whether or not the bird has prominent dark streaking or markings or a central spot on the breast. As an example, if the bird in question matches the description in 1A, you then proceed to 2A and 2B. If the bird matches the description in 2B, you then go to dichotomy 4A and 4B. Continue through the key, but not past 11A and 11B in this example, matching field marks with the dichotomous characteristics until you have made your identification. As another example, if your bird does not have streaks or a central spot on the breast, you will start with 1B and proceed to the next dichotomy, 12A and 12B, and so on down the key until you've made your identification. Confirm your ID by looking in your field guide. With enough practice, you will no longer need the key to make your identifications of local winter sparrows.

Key to the Winter Sparrows in Umatilla County

1A. Prominent dark streaking or markings on breast or dark central spot on gray or whitish breast – Vesper, Savannah, Fox, Song, Lincoln's, Sage, American Tree, Swamp, and Harris's Sparrow, Lapland Longspur

2A. Dark central breast spot on otherwise clear gray or whitish breast; may show streaks on sides or flanks (Am. Tree Sparrow and Sage Sparrow)

3A. Crown gray and rusty striped; bi-colored bill, upper mandible black, lower yellow – **American Tree Sparrow** (very rare but annual)

3B. Crown not striped; prominent white eye ring and white spot in front of eye; often has streaks on sides and flanks – **Sage Sparrow** (very rare but annual from February to early April)

2B. Dark markings or streaking on breast; often streaking on belly; sometimes streaking converges to a central spot on breast

4A. Center of crown black; face gray or buffy-gray; throat black (adult) or white (immature); black "necklace" on immature; black streaking on sides of breast – **Harris's Sparrow** (rare but annual)

4B. Center of crown white, buffy, gray or brown, sometimes rusty (Vesper, Savannah, Fox, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, Lapland Longspur)

5A. Breast streaking composed of lines of arrowhead-shaped spots.

6A. Center of crown paler (whitish or grayish) than sides of crown; supercilium usually prominent and pale grayish or whitish; lower mandible bone colored or brownish. **Song Sparrow** (common)

6B. Center of crown as dark as or darker than sides of crown; lower mandible almost always yellowish, at least at the base; face, crown, and supercilium usually plain brown (rarely gray and reddish streaked); breast streaking composed of lines of prominent arrowhead-shaped spots. **Fox Sparrow** (rare but annual)

5B. Breast streaking not composed of lines of arrowhead-shaped spots.

7A. Outer tail feather(s) with white edges – **Vesper Sparrow** (upper parts brownish, longish tail, brown streaks on breast, and white eye ring) and **Lapland Longspur** (upper parts with rusty overtones, shortish tail, prominent buffy/brown supercilium) (Both species extremely rare and not seen annually)

7B. Outer tail feathers all brown

8A. Lores yellowish – **Savannah Sparrow** (very uncommon but annual)

8B. Lores not yellow

9A. Breast without streaks or with inconspicuous blurry streaks – **Swamp Sparrow** (very rare but probably annual)

9B. Breast with prominent dark streaking

10A. Breast washed with buff; breast streaking usually thin and delicate – **Lincoln's Sparrow** (rare but annual)

10B. Breast white or grayish, never buff; breast streaking broad

11A. Supercilium gray or whitish; tail long – **Song Sparrow** (common)

11B. Supercilium usually pale brown, buffy, or yellowish; tail short – **Savannah Sparrow** (very uncommon but annual)

1B. Breast not streaked (or inconspicuous blurry streaks) and no central breast spot (White-throated, White-crowned, Golden-crowned, and Swamp Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Spotted Towhee, Snow Bunting)

12A. No stripes on head; head and neck solid black, brown, or gray

13A. Sides and flanks boldly rufous; bill blackish; white spots on back and wings; our largest sparrow – **Spotted Towhee** (uncommon but annual)

13B. Sides not boldly rufous, but often pinkish to pale rusty brown (or gray in the "Slate-colored" form); bill pink; no white spots on back – **Dark-eyed Junco** ("Oregon" common; "Slate-colored" rare)

12B. Head never one solid color; crown streaked with white, black, brown, yellow, gray, and/or rufous (Swamp, White-throated, White-crowned, Golden-crowned, Snow Bunting)

14A. Center of crown or fore-crown conspicuously yellowish – **Golden-crowned Sparrow** (uncommon but annual)

14B. Center of crown or fore-crown never yellow, occasionally pale buff

15A. Large, white patches on wing, especially noticeable in flight – **Snow Bunting** (extremely rare and not annual)

15B. White wing bars may be present, but never large, white wing patches

16A. No white wing bars; blurry, inconspicuous breast streaks; rufous on wings – **Swamp Sparrow** (extremely rare but probably annual)

16B. White wing bars and usually bold black and white (sometimes tan) stripes on head (adults); or brown/rusty and beige head stripes (immature birds)

17A. Yellow spot on lores; conspicuous and bold white throat patch offset by gray or brownish breast – **White-throated Sparrow** (very rare but annual)

17B. No yellow on lores; throat white or whitish but not bold – **White-crowned Sparrow** (common)