



Sparrow Identification Workshop

Revised, 2011. Original by Luke Tiller, 2007.

Connecticut Sparrows (from the Avian Records Committee of Connecticut (ARCC) Checklist of Connecticut Birds:

Eastern Towhee
American Tree Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-colored Sparrow
Field Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow
Nelson's Sparrow
Saltmarsh Sparrow

Seaside Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Lapland Longspur
Snow Bunting

RARE SPECIES
Green-tailed Towhee*
Spotted Towhee*
Lark Bunting*
Henslow's Sparrow*
Le Conte's Sparrow*
Harris's Sparrow*
Golden-crowned Sparrow*(S)
Smith's Longspur*
Chestnut-collared Longspur*
**ARCC requests details*

SORTING OUT SOME OF THE CONFUSING SPECIES

SONG SPARROW vs. SAVANNAH SPARROW

Structure

Note the chunkier look of the Song combined with a very long rounded tail. In contrast the Savannah has short notched tail. The tail can help identify the Song Sparrow even in flight. In combination with a weak 'floppy' flight style the long tail makes the Song fairly readily identifiable. Song Sparrows tend to look bulkier and more 'bull headed' in appearance as opposed to slender Savannahs. Savannahs often have a noticeably short crested look when flushed.

Behavior

Song Sparrow is typically a bird of shrubby areas often poking around in weedy patches near dense cover and bushes much the same as a Yellowthroat might. Savannahs, when flushed tend to head high into trees or onto tops of bushes; they also tend to flush further. Songs often flush down just a small distance into the next shrubby patch along. In general Savannahs are much more active and acrobatic looking in flight, you will often see them whizzing around, chasing each other (note the thin flight call), by contrast the Song Sparrows flight looks weak and labored and they rarely seem to fly just for the sake of it.

Field Marks

If every Savannah and Song had read the Field Guide rules it would all be easy! The Savannah would have a bright yellow supercillium and only the Song Sparrows would have streaking that coalesced into a central breast spot. Unfortunately you'll find plenty of 'spot-breasted' Savannahs in the field with no or little noticeable yellow in the supercillium. If you spot the yellow you are good to make your ID, as I assume no-one can mistake Savannah for White-throated Sparrow but beyond that you must be careful.

The Savannah is generally a much paler bird than the Song Sparrow. Part of that is probably the finer streaking leading to more exposure of the pale breast. Savannahs also tend to be pale headed as well with white median crown stripes and fairly pale supercilliums and malar stripes. Look even at the

back of the Savannah, it is often marked with distinct pale/white streaks on the mantle and wing coverts a feature you will not find on the Song Sparrow which is very brown backed.

The Savannah in flight will also show flashes of white in the tail which are the pale edges to the outer tail feathers, something you will never see in Song Sparrows. Song Sparrows are often very variable and quite scruffy in fall and their markings are quite clumsy. Savannahs generally are much neater looking birds with much more delicate patterns. You can also compare the streaking on the breast; the Songs seem to be drawn on with a felt tip the Savannahs by contrast with a fine liner.

CLAY-COLORED vs. CHIPPING SPARROW – Genus Spizella

Field marks

The rarity of Clay-colored in Connecticut makes it a much sought after species in Connecticut however it essentially looks very similar to first winter and non-breeding Chipping Sparrows which leads to a number of misidentifications. To separate from the Chipping careful study of the bird is required and a good knowledge of the variation possible in Chipping Sparrows is essential. In general close scrutiny of any pale looking chipping sparrows is the way to find a Clay-colored.

Head: In the Clay-colored I tend to find the bill a brighter shade of pink, more akin to the Field Sparrow than the Chipping. The supercillium and the malar stripe are often very white in Clay-colored making them jump out on the bird, by contrast in these areas the Chipping Sparrows facial marking are less contrasting and therefore less prominent. **The definitive ID mark is that the Clay-colored has pale lores (the area in front of the eye) whereas the Chipping Sparrows are dark.** This can be difficult to observe in the field unless you have great scope views. Even with poorer views however this feature does lend the Clay-colored a more 'open faced' look and the Chipping a more 'squinty' or closed faced appearance.

Body: Overall upper part coloration of the Clay-colored is, as you would expect, paler and 'buffier' than the average Chipping Sparrow. The rump coloration is gray in Chipping and buff on the Clay-colored. The belly coloration is generally I find much whiter on Clay-colored with warmer caramel/buff flanks and upper breast. Although some care must be taken with similar looking 1st winter Chipping Sparrows, in general Chippings to me usually appear grayer on their under parts than Clay colored.

Genus: Melospiza – SONG, SWAMP, LINCOLN'S SPARROW

Song vs. Lincoln's

As has been said before the Song Sparrow looks to me as if its streaking has been drawn on with a felt tip marker, by contrast the Lincoln's small fine breast streaks look as if they have been put on with a needle dipped into a pot of ink. Note that the streaking on the Lincoln's also runs through a breast that is something of a warm buff/orange in color. Song Sparrows may show a little buff coloration on the flanks but never shows this rich coloration in the breast. Also note how abruptly the coloration cuts off below the breast of the Lincoln's. Note (if you are close enough) that the streaking of the Lincoln's extends into the clean white throat area; both **Song and Swamp show just a clean white throat with no streaking.** Even from behind the Lincoln's is a delicately patterned bird and its back is quite a pale dusty brown with intricate black markings. By contrast the Song is a rather heavily/clumsily marked bird with a redder brown coloration.

Lincoln's vs. Swamp

Most people think of the Swamp as having a plain breast but in fact the grayish breast shows more or less diffuse streaking in non-breeding and first winter birds. Given brief and less than perfect looks I have seen a few Swamp Sparrows turned into Lincoln's Sparrows by birders. Note however the rich rufous coloration of the Swamps wings and the rich buff/rufous of the Swamp's flanks. Combine that with the grayish breast and the overall impression even with just a brief glimpse of the bird is that of a rather dark, richly colored sparrow. By contrast the Lincoln's overall is a dusky colored bird and the breast markings of fine distinct black lines on an orangey breast is pretty distinctive (your only real comparison species being the marsh sparrows).

Melospiza Behavior

All Melospizas are rather 'rooting' and 'wren-like' in my experience often inhabiting dense almost shrubby areas and often found around brush piles. All can be found in less open areas and I have often seen Lincoln's in low, wet brushy understory of woods mixed in with Warblers in spring in the Northeast. They all respond quite well to pishing in my experience although their reaction can be either to pop up or to dive deeper into cover. As opposed to Savannah and some other species that flush high and far Melospizas often burrow down deeper into cover to avoid you. When Swamp and most noticeably Lincoln's are agitated they take on a crested appearance. In fact this state of being seems to be so regular in Lincoln's Sparrows that you rarely ever see without them where they don't seem to be in this agitated state. This appearance can often be helpful in getting towards an ID with just an initial glimpse of the bird.

VESPER SPARROW vs. SAVANNAH SPARROW

Why the confusion?

The key to identifying **Vesper Sparrow is that they have a strong white malar stripe, a strong white eye-ring and white outer tail feathers that are noticeable in flight.** Here is where I have seen birders go wrong in the past: One sees a flash of white as a bird takes off, it perches up on a fence top or in a tree nearby. One looks immediately to the birds face and it has a fairly noticeable eye-ring and a fairly white malar stripe. One happily ticks off Vesper Sparrow for the day and heads on having just turned a Savannah Sparrow into a Vesper.

Field Marks

The white either on a Savannah's back or the white on just the outer edges of their outer tail feathers can often give the impression of the flash of white that one might expect to see in the tail of a sparrow with white outer tail feathers. To be sure you have Vesper check the eye-ring, if it is strong and complete and it is a Vesper. Look at the head pattern closely. Vespers basically have a complicatedly streaked head which appears to have no prominent facial patterns apart from the bold white malar stripe that generally reaches around into the cheek (auricular) area. In contrast the Savannah has prominently highly contrasting face pattern with pale malar and supercillium stripe as well as a prominent median crown stripe which is almost never seen in Vespers. Savannahs also have rufous coloration in their tertials which can vary in individuals, by contrast the Vesper has some rufous in the lesser coverts (which are rarely seen) but the general impression of the wing coloration is of a fairly 'buffy' winged bird. Both behave fairly similarly often feeding in open areas with bare ground and often escape high into trees when flushed.

General notes on sparrows and finding rarities

Think about structure

Take a look in your guides at the winter Chipping Sparrow and the 1st winter White-crowned sparrow. Plumage wise superficially there are some similarities: a reddish brown striped cap, a dark eye-line, two white wing-bars, and a grayish belly. I have seen people confuse these two species but in reality they are almost nothing like each other. While the White-crowned is a large bulky sparrow, the other is a rather small, slender sparrow where much of the size of the bird is made up of the long tail. Where possible try to use the bird's structure to aid your identification.

Really study the common species to get to the rare ones

Learn to quickly identify the Song Sparrow's shape and flight style as well as it's call as it will help you sift out a good number of sparrows allowing you to concentrate on looking at other birds, If you then move on to do the same with Savannah and White-throat you have eliminated spending a lot of time looking at our most common sparrow species. There are lots of individuals of these species around so on quiet days you can spend time studying them.

Concentrate on a small area

Don't try to do too much. My usual approach to sparrows is to concentrate on really covering the area that I am visiting properly. At Allen's that usually means at least a couple of very slow turns around the community gardens. You never see everything at the first pass and there have been plenty of good birds that I have found after looking in a certain area for the second or third time in a morning.

Follow the sparrow with the white in the tail

Once you are used to what you might see in the tail of a Savannah (which was discussed previously) any sparrow (apart from the obviously dark Junco) with white in the tail is worth chasing down. Worst case scenario it may 'just' be a Vesper Sparrow, best case scenario it could be a Lark Sparrow or even a Lark Bunting. Although open country Warblers such as Palm and Yellow-rumps can show you flashes of white in their tale other exciting open country possibilities with white in the tail include all four Longspur species and American Pipits.

Chase that mousy sparrow!

Did a sparrow that you flushed just scuttle off through the grass or along the ground? This behavior is typical of many Ammodramus sparrows of which we find Grasshopper, Henslow's and Le Conte's in CT (the marsh/seaside sparrow's also belong to this group but are only almost exclusively found at coastal sites – interior Nelson's Sparrow may be a very rare exception to this rule). When flushed they tend to move just a handful of yards and following them you will usually flush them again.

The bill was what color?

A very uncommon bird in Connecticut is the Golden-crowned Sparrow but it's similarity in first winter plumage to White-crowned Sparrow probably mean that a few get overlooked each year out on the east coast. Probably the easiest difference one would spot on the bird would be the color of the bill from pinky-orange in White-crowned to gray in Golden-crowned. Then go on to note the lack of post ocular stripe and browner coloration.

Keep your eyes open for other goodies

The same time of year you are looking for sparrows is also the time to find a Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel or Bunting in with the flock. This is also the time to look for Eastern Meadowlark, American Pipit and Horned Lark as well as late migrant warblers like Nashville and Orange-crowned. October through November is open country birding season – keep your eyes peeled and who knows what you might find.

The Occurrence of Various Sparrow Species in Connecticut

* Species marked with an asterisk denote birds that would require a submittal of a report to the Avian Records Committee of Connecticut

***Lark Bunting** – Exceptionally rare stray to the Northeast, with a couple of CT records.

Chipping Sparrow – More or less common all year only really becoming difficult to find between December and March when it becomes uncommon and a nice addition to the Connecticut Birders Xmas Bird Count or 'Big January'.

Clay-colored Sparrow – Rare fall migrant, even more rarely found during spring migration and has even been found singing from territory in Connecticut. Breeding birds are moving east and now breed as close as NY State so may become slightly more common in future.

Field Sparrow – A fairly widespread breeder in the state. Fairly common in fall migration and uncommon in winter.

American Tree Sparrow – Fairly common late fall (mainly November arrival) and winter visitor.

Vesper Sparrow – Hardest to find of the regular uncommon sparrows. Rarer in spring and very rarely lingers into winter. A nice find on any day out in CT.

Lark Sparrow – Very rare in fall and winter around 1 to 5 records annually in the state. Note that Lark Sparrow can arrive quite early in Migration with reports in New England as early as August.

Grasshopper Sparrow – A rare and local breeding bird which requires very large grasslands. Most easily found on breeding grounds at Bradley International Airport. Very rarely seen in migration.

***Henslow's Sparrow** – Very rare migrant in fall, not necessarily seen annually within the state.

***Le Conte's Sparrow** – Very rare migrant in fall, only a handful of state records.

Saltmarsh Sparrow – Local breeder and fairly common migrant in coastal salt marshes.

Nelson's Sparrow – Fairly common fall migrant in coastal salt marsh.

Seaside Sparrow – Uncommon breeder and fall migrant in coastal salt marsh.

Savannah Sparrow – Uncommon breeding bird in expansive grasslands in the state. Almost abundant migrant in fall. Uncommon in winter.

Song Sparrow – Common resident species.

Lincoln's Sparrow – Uncommon spring and fall migrant but more common in fall and should be readily found.

Swamp Sparrow – Fairly common migrant, uncommon in winter. Localized breeding species in freshwater marshes and pond edges.

Fox Sparrow – Fairly Common in CT in November and March. Less common in winter.

***Harris's Sparrow** – Very rare in CT with just a handful of state records.

White-crowned Sparrow - Uncommon spring migrant – also uncommon in fall but should be readily findable at a good sparrow site. Rare in winter.

White-throated Sparrow – Almost abundant migrant in CT especially in fall. Very uncommon and localized breeder in the state.

***Golden Crowned Sparrow** – Very rare in CT with just a handful of state records.