

- Curry, R.** 1991. Ontario Bird Records Committee report for 1990. Ontario Birds 9: 18-44.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1986. The Birds of Canada. 2nd edition. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.
- James, R.D., P.L. McLaren, and J.C. Barlow.** 1976. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
- Pittaway, R.** 1991. Checklist of recognizable Ontario bird forms. Ontario Birds 9: 49-55.
- Speirs, J.M.** 1985. Birds of Ontario, Volume 2. Natural Heritage/Natural History Press, Toronto.
- Wormington, A. and R.D. James.** 1984. Ontario Bird Records Committee, checklist of the birds of Ontario. Ontario Birds 2: 13-23.

Robert Curry, 92 Hostein Drive, Ancaster, Ontario L9G 2S7

## Photo Quiz

by  
Doug McRae

Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds 9 (3)*: **White-crowned Sparrow.**

This bird is one member of a family that traditionally causes various forms of mental trauma for many birders -- the sparrows. Due to reproduction problems, some of the field identification points discussed below can't be seen in our photograph -- but it is an immature White-crowned Sparrow! Before going into the fine details as to why, there are a few general points on sparrow identification to keep in mind that may be helpful.

Just over twenty species of sparrows have occurred in Ontario. Most have distinct plumages for adults and immatures, and some have different plumages in winter and summer and between male and female. All told, that's a lot of plumage possibilities and this is why some birders, especially those who

are starting out, find sparrows to be a bit of a nightmare. Sparrows in juvenile plumage (the first set of body feathers they attain) are hard and that's all there is to that, but fortunately the plumage is held briefly! Also, when in this plumage, they are often attended by adults which can help facilitate identification -- but there is no shame in letting some go unidentified.

Despite this initial hurdle, sparrows are not so bad once you get used to them. Some, like the Dark-eyed Junco, are really quite easy and shouldn't present a problem once out of juvenile plumage. If you can take the time to learn five or ten common species well, most others will fall into place surprisingly quickly. To learn them well, however, means watching different individuals of the same species over and over, and not for just a few seconds. For example, find a Song Sparrow and then follow it.

Watch it from behind, silhouetted above you, obscured by bushes, etc. When you have watched them enough you will find that recognition comes almost instantly, and at this point you know the bird! If you don't have the patience or interest to learn them well, you will always have trouble with the dreaded little brown birds.

Now let's get on to the bird at hand. The conical bill and rather "average" body proportions put this bird in the sparrow family. There are several features that are obvious and help to eliminate many possibilities right away. First of all, this sparrow is unstreaked on the breast and flanks. It has two obvious white wingbars. The bill is light coloured, and the crown appears dark with a lighter area in the middle. If you flip through a field guide and look at the plain-breasted sparrows that have occurred in Ontario, you will find the following: Grasshopper, Le Conte's, Sharp-tailed, Lark, American Tree, Field, Chipping, Clay-colored, White-throated, White-crowned and Golden-crowned.

Now take the same birds and see which ones have two clear white wingbars, and you are left with American Tree, Field, Chipping, White-throated, White-crowned and Golden-crowned. Our bird is not a Tree Sparrow because it lacks the black breast spot, does not have a bicoloured bill, and has a strong head pattern (which is lacking on Tree). Field Sparrow can be eliminated because of the strong head pattern on our bird, and the incomplete eye ring (compared to Field's full eye ring). Chipping Sparrow is easily eliminated since adults lack any conspicuous

head pattern in winter and in breeding plumage show a bright red cap with a bold white eyebrow above a black eye line, while juveniles are heavily streaked on the breast.

This leaves us with the three big sparrows. White-throated is ruled out by several features. While some White-throats can be quite dull, virtually all will show some trace of the white throat and bordering dark malar stripes. Also, all birds will show yellow lores, albeit dull on some individuals. Because our bird lacks bold black or white on the crown, it is an immature bird. (The photo was taken in October.) White-crowned and Golden-crowned are quite similar in this plumage. While the colour of the central crown stripe differs somewhat between these two, this can be difficult to detect and can be variable. However, there is one feature that is visible that tells us that this is a White-crowned -- and that is the fine black eye line. You can clearly see that the lores are dark and the black line extends through the eye on to the ear covert area. This feature helps to accentuate the light eye-brow of the immature White-crown while the Golden-crowns do not have this line, and as a result, have a somewhat plainer looking face.

So when you are out birding next fall, and see White-crowned Sparrows, check for the black eye line. Who know's, maybe you will be the next person to discover the very rare (in the east anyway) Golden-crowned!

The next bird could be seen just about anywhere in Ontario.