

Photo Quiz

by
Bob Curry



The mystery bird, this time, is a member of the Emberizinae or sparrow-longspur subfamily, judging from the stocky, compact size and thick, triangular bill. This does not narrow it down terribly as many species of sparrows resemble the subject in possessing fairly complicated crown and face patterns combined with breast and flank streakings. Furthermore, we are not permitted a view of the entire bird which would have aided us in eliminating several genera of sparrows based on overall shapes and folded wing and tail proportions.

But let's look at what we can see. It is a rather thick or "chesty" bird. Most noticeable is the discrete rounded patch of vague dark streaks or spots or even blotches of black in the centre of the upper breast. Notice that, although there are bold distinctive blackish streaks on the sides of the breast which seem to extend to the flanks, these are separate from the breast patch. The crown is not particularly unique in pattern, being dark with a light median streak, and there is a light supercilium. More distinctive is the light auricular (ear) patch which is boldly framed in black.

This "busy" head is continued below the lower edge of the ear-coverts (moustachial stripe) by a bold light submoustachial stripe and a rather broad black malar stripe.

Now, let's eliminate some groups of sparrows. For instance, some of the *Ammodramus* or grassland sparrows, such as Henslow's and Baird's, to name just two, have fairly similar head and breast patterns although the streaks are finer, more discrete and extend onto the sides of the breast. These birds have proportionately bigger heads and bigger bills and "flat-headed" profiles, and are not so plump as our bird. Vesper Sparrow has a fine but distinctive eye-ring, the auriculars are not so boldly etched in black, and it has dark, relatively fine streaking right across the upper breast extending farther down the breast and contiguous with the flank streaking. Similarly, both Song and Savannah Sparrows have streaked breasts, but the streaks extend farther down the breast and coalesce into a central spot in the former, while the streaks extend onto the sides of the breast and flanks in the latter. Although both these species have dark ear-coverts, they are not quite so boldly outlined in black.

One *Zonotrichia* sparrow, Harris's, can have a breast patch which in winter plumage resembles this. A sketch in my notebook of such a bird near Woodstock in January 1988 displays a patch of black on the upper breast, but it is more solid black and not as extensive or rounded. Moreover,

there is no well defined auricular patch, and although there is a black malar stripe, there is no bold, light submoustachial stripe. Finally, the bill is a distinctive light flesh colour.

In summary, all these birds with head patterns resembling the subject have relatively fine discrete streaks on the centre and sides of the breast and, conversely, the one bird with an upper breast patch has a much simpler head pattern.

Three of the longspurs, however, are characterized by blackish breast patches of varying extent and intensity. Our bird is clearly not sufficiently boldly marked to be a male in alternate plumage. In a basic-plumaged Chestnut-collared male, the black extends farther down the breast and the lower half of the face and throat are plain and unmarked, quite unlike our bird. Females have dull buff underparts with light streaking and, again, a plain face. McCown's basic male or alternate female has a breast patch similar to the photo bird but it is a different shape, being cut straight across and extending to the sides of the breast and sharply demarcated from a plain light throat. Again, McCown's does not have such a boldly demarcated submoustachial stripe and auricular patch. Moreover, they do not have bold streaking on the sides of the breast.

To avoid further repetition, our bird is a **Lapland Longspur**. It would seem to be a basic-plumaged male but there is the possibility of alternate (breeding) female. There is at least a partial white streak

posterior to the auricular patch and joining up with the whitish supercilium. It is impossible to determine whether the nape, which seems to contrast with the head and back, is plain or streaked. If plain, then the bird is likely a male. Of interest is that alternate plumage is attained partly by a prealternate molt, but mostly through feather wear.

(Editors' Note: Relying solely on what could be determined from the photograph, Bob undertook his analysis without knowing where or when the picture was taken. In actual fact, this female Lapland Longspur in alternate plumage was photographed by Doug McRae in June 1983 at Churchill, Manitoba.)

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PUBLICATION NOTICES

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From 1911 to 1942, Percy Taverner was Ornithologist at The National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa, now called The Canadian Museum of Nature. He laid the foundations of scientific ornithology in Canada by building up the necessary collections of birds at the museum, and studying their distribution, working through a network of people who collected specimens and gathered ornithological information from across the country. He was a leading advocate of the need for conservation and wild bird protection, and played a major role, through his research and recommendations, in the creation of a National Park at Point Pelee and bird sanctuaries along the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and at Percé Rock and Bonaventure Island off the south coast of the Gaspé Peninsula.

Perhaps Taverner's most far-reaching contribution was as an educator of public thought. His wide knowledge was passed to the public in his books, *Birds of Eastern Canada* (1919), *Birds of Western Canada* (1926) and *Birds of Canada* (1934). He presented scientific information about his birds in their many plumages and habitats, and at the same time conveyed to the reader his own sense of appreciation of the birds he was describing. In this way he helped to make the study of birds and their habitats popular recreation. He was an active council member of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club and an influential Associate Editor and frequent contributor to *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*.