

THE LARK SPARROW IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard A. Forster

Field sketches by Julie Zickefoose

Most recreational birdwatchers and all but a handful of hard-core birders in the state show disdain for an interesting group known as sparrows, a.k.a. "little brown jobs." The lack of passion for this group can be attributed to their generally drab coloration, somewhat secretive and retiring nature, and lack of virtuosity as songsters. (But I have never heard a Bachman's Sparrow.) Perhaps only a dedicated scientist like Margaret Morse Nice could truly appreciate the daily comings and goings of a Song Sparrow.

However, as is often true, there are exceptions to every rule. One can but marvel at a crisply plumaged adult light morph White-throated Sparrow or the strikingly patterned black-and-white head, pearl gray breast, and attentive upright posture of an adult White-crowned Sparrow. Ranking slightly below these exalted exemplars of sparrowdom is the Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*). The bold chestnut-and-white head and facial pattern is striking and distinctive. The underparts are not typically sparrowlike, being devoid of streaks. Rather they are whitish with a prominent black spot or "stickpin." When flushed, the Lark Sparrow is likewise easily recognized by the towhee-like white-bordered black tail that contrasts with the brown back. Immatures are patterned similarly to adults, but the bright chestnut head markings tend to be reddish brown. Like most sparrows, including the clear-breasted ones, the Lark Sparrow, immediately after leaving the nest, has a juvenile plumage that endures for up to a month, wherein it is streaked below. Since the duration of this plumage is short, it is unlikely to be encountered in Massachusetts. But a word of caution: I once found a bird of this plumage in the state. With the obscured facial pattern and streaked underparts, this bird looks remarkably like a Vesper Sparrow. Indeed, I changed my identification of the one I saw three or four times. While on the ground, a juvenile Lark Sparrow has a Black-throated Blue Warbler-like white spot on the wing. This feature is also shared by the adult and is illustrated in most field guides but never mentioned. When in doubt, flush the bird, and the distinctive white-cornered tail will cement the identification. Also the call note of the Lark Sparrow is relatively distinctive. It is a sharp, metallic "chink," reminiscent of the notes of both the White-crowned Sparrow or the Blue Grosbeak. If this call note is heard before mid-September, the observer can be fairly safe in assuming it is a Lark Sparrow.

The Lark Sparrow occurs in Massachusetts almost exclusively as a fall migrant with the majority of the annual records occurring coastally. Unlike most

5/27/89

*Burnham Brook Preserve
East Haddam, CT
80 degrees, humid
hazy to light rain
Bird was watched
9:30-11:10 A.M.,
4-4:30 P.M.,
and 7-7:20 P.M.*



*Undulating flight
with flaps and
swooping glides,
wings closed.
Flared tail spots
upon landing.*

*Ran in short bursts,
was not seen
to hop or scratch.*



This sketch was made at a distance of 55 feet using Zeiss 8x30 binoculars.



*7 P.M. It's cold and the
bird's puffed up now.
7:20 P.M. Went to roost(?)*



sparrows whose period of abundance is from mid-September to mid-October, the Lark Sparrow is most likely to appear in the last week of August and the first week of September. In any given year fully fifty percent of reports are likely to fall in this abbreviated period. Early migrants have occurred in the waning days of July, and stragglers appear in October almost every year.

Coastal observers can be most optimistic about seeing this handsome Westerner. These birds prefer sparsely vegetated open areas—roadside edges, weedy margins of parking lots, occasionally dunes, and edges of agricultural fields. Unfortunately, the frequency of this species in Massachusetts has diminished markedly from highs in the 1960s. At that time it was possible to see as many in a day as are now seen each fall.

The Lark Sparrow is very rare in winter, with most reports from feeders. Surprisingly, in this season it is recorded almost as frequently inland as at the coast. Spring reports of migrants are as unlikely as winter occurrences.

The field sketches by artist Julie Zickefoose that accompany this article are of an individual that appeared on May 27, 1989, at East Haddam, Connecticut. Because of the rarity of a spring sighting in that state, Zickefoose has submitted these sketches and her report for review by the Rare Records Committee of the Connecticut Ornithological Association.

RICHARD A. FORSTER, a lifelong naturalist, began his study of birds in childhood. He is a professional field ornithologist, a writer, author, and lecturer, and has led natural history tours worldwide. A familiar figure in the Sudbury River Valley and Essex County, areas to which he is devoted, he is a recognized authority on Massachusetts bird life and New England bird records.

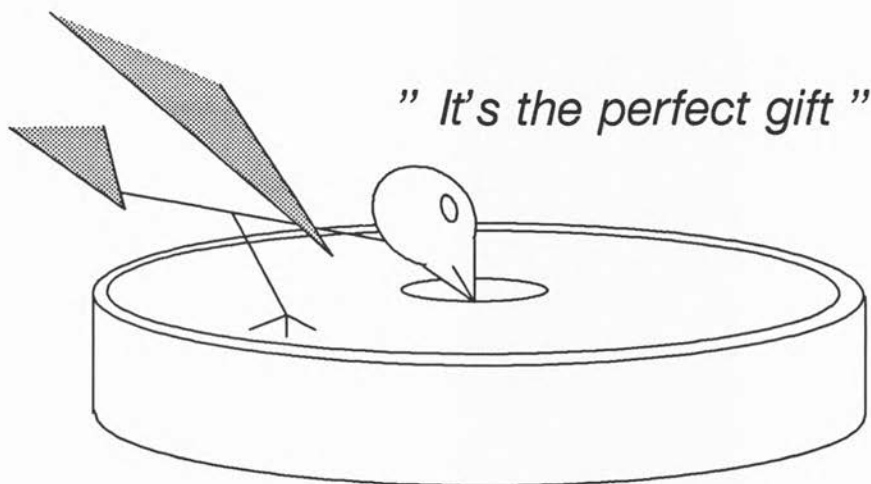
JULIE ZICKEFOOSE combines daily field sketching with serious birdwatching in her profession as a wildlife artist and writer. Her work has appeared in *American Birds*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *Bird Observer*, and other publications. About the Lark Sparrow sketches, she says, "For these field sketches, as for all those made of birds whose identification might be questionable, I was careful not to 'pollute' them by consulting any reference—rather I stayed with the bird all morning, drawing it so as to fix its features in my mind. Even a quick peek at a book can ruin an otherwise objective drawing session!"



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