

Always challenging, sparrows and related "little brown jobs" consistently provide grist for the field problem mill. To start the identification process for June's mystery photograph, it is important to first determine whether the bird in question is in the Subfamily Emberizinae (towhees, sparrows, longspurs, etc.) or Subfamily Fringillinae (Fingilline finches, e.g., "winter finches").

This determination is fairly straightforward in that the streaked species in the group Fringillinae often appear large-headed and possess stouter bills with greater curvature to the culmen (upper mandible) than the bills of Emberizines. The females of the Purple and House finches are good examples. Other Emberizine finches typically possess unique plumage markings (e.g., the black chin of a redpoll) that readily eliminate them as possibilities. The only representative that possesses the combination of streaked underparts and a bill shaped like that of the mystery species is the Pine Siskin. Siskins, however, are more extensively streaked below, lack the prominent eye ring of the bird in the photograph, and possess a yellow flash at the base of the flight feathers.



*Photograph by Roger Everett*

Having determined that the bird in question is an Emberizid, it is next necessary to focus on features that differentiate species in this group. From time to time in this column, it has been suggested that considering generic characteristics (i.e. characteristics of different genera) can be a useful first step when sorting various kinds of bird species belonging to large families (e.g., waterfowl, hawks, shorebirds). This approach is one that applies well to sparrows as well.

Clearly, the head shape of the pictured bird is not typical of the various "flat-headed" sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus*, a group that usually also display short, pointed tails (e.g., Grasshopper Sparrow, sharp-tailed sparrows). Likewise, the mystery sparrow is not particularly slim in appearance, and it does not appear to have an especially long tail - features characteristic of most members of the genus *Spizella* (e.g., American Tree Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow). Nor does the sparrow appear especially large or have strong crown or facial markings, features characteristic of sparrows in the genus *Zonotrichia* (e.g., White-crowned Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow).

Using a more traditional approach, notice what characteristics the mystery sparrow does possess. Most notable are prominent streaks on the underparts that extend all the way down the sides to the flanks, a streaked crown devoid of an obvious median stripe, and the presence of a conspicuous eye ring. Although the juveniles of a number of sparrows are streaked below, the generic features previously described will often assist in identifying birds in non-adult plumages. With this in mind, the only likely remaining sparrow choices that are streaked below in adult plumage are Vesper, Savannah, Fox, Song, and Lincoln's.

Because only two of the above possibilities have a clearly defined eye ring, the final choice is between Vesper Sparrow and Lincoln's Sparrow. Lincoln's Sparrow possesses a broad, gray supercilium, a median crown stripe, a sharply defined necklace of fine streaks across the upper breast, and often a more peaked appearance to the crown. By contrast, Vesper Sparrow has a finely streaked crown, a rounded head, and a distinct white mark (i.e., submoustachial stripe) in contrast with a dark malar (jaw) stripe. These last features clinch the identification of the mystery bird as a Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*).

The Vesper Sparrow is an uncommon migrant and a very uncommon and local breeder in Massachusetts. The species is listed as Threatened by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program.

## AT A GLANCE

---

Photograph by Roger Everett



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

We give avid birders something few binocular and telescope stores can.

### Help.

We at the F.C. Meichsner Co. don't just talk to our customers about optical equipment. We *listen* to them, too.

And when you've been listening to people for 72 years, you can't help but learn a thing or two.

Like what birders want in a pair of binoculars—and what they don't.

So when you're about ready for a new spotting scope, binoculars, or repairs on equipment you already own, give us a call.

We accept most major credit cards, and we'd be happy to let you do most of the talking.



**F.C. Meichsner Co.**

182 Lincoln St., Boston, MA 02111  
(617) 426-7092

