

AT A GLANCE

December 2001



DAVID LARSON

It's a brisk November morning and you are carefully walking through a dew-laden weedy field in search of sparrows, an activity that many birders engage in each autumn. As you proceed through the weed lot, numerous, small brown forms jump from the tangle before you, some immediately disappearing into nearby shrubby vegetation, while others pause briefly to provide a momentary opportunity to observe critical field marks. Such is the way of sparrows in migration.

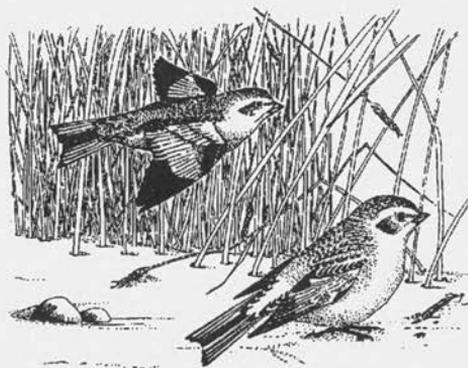
With this description in mind, it should be obvious that this month's mystery species is a sparrow. Because sparrows often represent the quintessential field identification nightmare, the bird in the photograph needs to be thoughtfully examined in order to make a proper identification. Although sparrow identification has been extensively discussed in previous issues of *Bird Observer*, a few simple reminders are still in order. First, sparrows can generally be divided into groups, based upon whether they have conspicuous wing bars or not, and also whether their breasts are prominently streaked or are devoid of streaks. This process of dividing sparrows into one or the other of these broad groups substantially eliminates many of the identification options that would otherwise be possible if the observer thinks of the identification challenge as simply "some type of sparrow."

A close look at the mystery sparrow clearly indicates that it lacks both conspicuous wing bars and prominent breast streaks. The pictured bird is also

relatively short-tailed, unlike species such as the Field Sparrow or Song Sparrow, for example. Likewise, it fails to show a strongly patterned crown and the long-necked appearance that are typical of a White-crowned Sparrow. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the wings, especially the primaries, appear to be uniformly dark, lacking the pale fringes to the feathers that are typical of a species such as the American Tree Sparrow. With these negative pieces of information in mind, the door is open for making a reasonably straightforward identification.

Features conspicuously present on the sparrow in the photograph include a broad, gray nuchal collar (i.e., nape) at the sides of the neck, a small but distinct whitish throat, a dark line behind the eye, and what appears to be a solid crown without an obvious median stripe. This combination of no wing bars, a virtually unstreaked breast, short tail, dark wings, whitish throat, dusky flanks, and dark cap all point to only one Massachusetts sparrow species — Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*). It is difficult to be certain from the published image whether the pictured individual is an adult in winter plumage or a first winter immature, a determination that might be more clearly ascertained in a colored image. David M. Larson captured the image of the Swamp Sparrow in eastern Massachusetts, during the month of November

Wayne R. Petersen



GEORGE C. WEST

News from MassWildlife

Bowhunters also appreciate a quality and traditional outdoor experience, observing the rhythms of Nature at dawn and dusk and using the renewable deer resource for meat and leather. “My greatest memories from this bow season didn’t include a deer,” observes one veteran bowhunter. I watched a black-capped chickadee land on my bow and inspect the camouflage pattern for seeds or insects. Then it hopped over to my fanny pack and continued its search. Golden-crowned kinglets and tufted titmice landed within an arms-length, totally unaware of my presence. I was really part of the forest for a few brief hours that morning, rather than an intruder. Another day it was the flash of an immature goshawk gliding through the oaks and pines just three feet off the ground. You don’t have those opportunities in our busy, day-to-day world.”

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ROGER S. EVERETT

Can you identify this bird?

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

Hawk Migration Conference March 9

Anyone with an interest in hawks is cordially invited to attend the NorthEast Hawk Watch's seventh regional hawk migration conference in Holyoke, Massachusetts, on Saturday, March 9, 2002. Entitled "Hawk Watching in the New Millennium," the conference will include presentations on such topics as population trends for Osprey, Cooper's Hawk, and American Kestrel; analyzing site data; the future of hawkwatching and the Internet; habitat management; advanced hawk identification; and more, including live birds of prey. There will also be a special showing of the spectacular, expanded length, locally produced video, "Looking Skyward: A Passion for Hawkwatching."

The conference will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Registration is \$30 (including coffee breaks), with an optional luncheon buffet for \$7.25. The conference is geared for *anyone* with an interest in learning more about our spectacular birds of prey. Register early; seating is limited. The conference is held every four years, so don't miss this one!

For complete program information and a registration form, visit: <<http://www.battaly.com/nehw/conference>>, or contact Paul Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155, call 781-483-4263, or e-mail phawk@world.std.com

