Seedeaters of Fall

Marjorie Rines

Spring migration is filled with urgency as songbirds rush to their breeding grounds to fulfill their mission in life. After a seemingly endless winter birders are also affected with this urgency, and the three to four weeks of peak spring migration is never enough. Fall sparrow migration is slower and more leisurely. The muggy days of summer are gone, and as we search hopefully for our first Lincoln's Sparrow on Labor Day, we know we can continue to enjoy fall migration until the last Fox Sparrow departs on Thanksgiving.

This article is not intended to recommend specific locations to find sparrows, but rather discusses how to find the places where they may be lurking. The focus will be on those inland species that comprise the majority of the seedeaters.

What to look for: Food, Space, and Cover

While migrating birds await favorable winds to take them to their next destination, their primary driving force is food. In the fall there is an abundance of seeds and berries which comprise the majority of their diet. Although the seeds of some food crops and cultivated flowers are good, the seeds most favored by sparrows are those of common weeds and grasses that grow virtually anywhere. A diversity of plants provides a variety for different tastes, different times of seed ripening, and different heights and growth structure for different foraging styles.

Most sparrows prefer open spaces such as gardens, fields, and meadows, but there are many other habitats that are less obvious. Even the most manicured lawn can be bordered by weedy edges that attract seedeaters.

Birds are always aware of potential danger, as is obvious to anyone who has watched a flock of birds scatter at the appearance of a raptor. Hedgerows and thickets at the edge of a field provide cover for wary sparrows, and many will not stray far from these hiding places.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW BY MARJORIE RINES

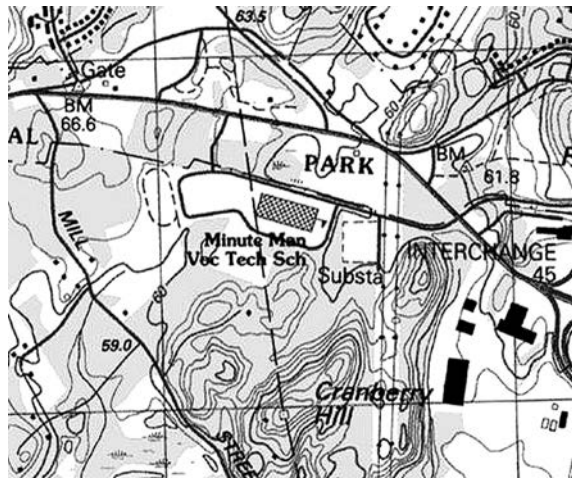
How and Where to Start

There are numerous publicly accessible areas in Massachusetts that are good for sparrow hunting. Government-owned areas include National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, MassWildlife's Wildlife Management Areas, and Massachusetts Forests and Parks.

Private nonprofit organizations such as Mass Audubon and Trustees of

Reservations preserve lands for public use, including many that are attractive to sparrows. The local land trusts in Massachusetts are too numerous to mention, but users of the internet can visit <http://Massbird.Org> and click on “Places to Visit” to discover many of these options.

Your road atlas can also be useful, since many highlight public lands. Call your local Conservation Commission to see if they provide maps of public spaces. Get a topographic map of your area and look for the spaces that are white, showing open land (see below). Often these spaces are labeled with additional information such as park, cemetery, school, gravel pit, industrial parks, or golf course (ignore the latter!). Finally, just explore; the following suggestions are some places to try.



Community Gardens: These are some of the most productive spots to explore. Most are open to the public, have easy access from a main road, and can be found by calling the community town hall. By the peak of sparrow season in October, gardeners have all but given up on most crops and allowed weeds to run rampant. Both cultivars and weeds potentially provide desirable seeds, and the posts and fences common to most community gardens provide perches unobscured by leaves. Even large cities often have community gardens, giving urban dwellers a wonderful fall birding opportunity.

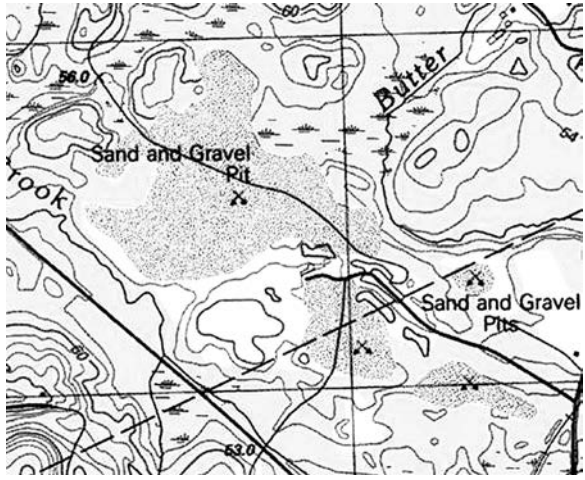
Agricultural Fields: Some towns own fields which they lease to farmers or cooperatives, and many of these are available to the public, especially after the growing season. Privately owned fields are normally off-limits, but if a land owner is working the field, you can ask for permission to bird the area. By late September and October, corn is a magnet for birds once harvesting is over. Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers work the tassels, blackbirds and Bobolinks peck at the leftover corn, and Savannah Sparrows scuttle up and down the rows between the stalks. Raspberry plants are also a big draw for most sparrows, and in an agricultural field these are usually kept trimmed so it is easier both to walk between the rows and to see sparrows. Even if a field appears to be completely harvested, there are always grains

on the ground, and these open fields regularly attract "ground birds" such as Horned Larks and American Pipits, and later in the season look for Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs.

Farm Stands: Behind a farm stand there are often acres of gardens. Forget the beautifully tended fields and look for weedy ones surrounded by an edge with good cover. If most crops are harvested, explain to the owner that you are a birder and ask permission to walk the edges of the fields. They can only say "no."

Landfills: Many towns have areas where leaves, brush, and other yard waste are brought for composting. By autumn compost piles are covered with weeds – and often seedeaters. Find out the hours that the landfill is open, and speak to the manager about permission to bird the area. Sometimes the manager will even allow people to enter when the landfill is closed. The diversity of habitats in different landfills can be astonishing, so explore more than one.

Abandoned gravel pits: Exploring gravel pits requires some dedication and extra effort. Get out your topographic map and look for pinkish-brown areas with squiggly lines (see below). There should be a symbol of crossed shovels and even a label saying "gravel pit." Then just go and look. Working gravel pits are usually posted "no trespassing" and are rarely productive, but if abandoned do some exploration. The habitat can be varied, from barrens-like vegetation to overgrown trees and bushes. It is a hit-or-miss affair, but can be rewarding.



Cemeteries: Most cemeteries are open to the public and are easy to explore. Birders who frequent Mount Auburn Cemetery or other similar spring hot spots may think of the manicured lawns and trees, and do not think of sparrows at all. Many cemeteries, however, have a dumping area for dirt, dead flowers, discarded weeds, and grass clippings. As the weeds grow up, these areas become irresistible to seedeaters.

Industrial Parks, Shopping Centers, Parking Lots, Playing Fields, Churches, Schools: In other words, sparrows can be found anywhere that there might be open space. These areas may sound pretty sterile, but many of them have overgrown weedy edges that drop seeds on tarmac, packed dirt, or lawn, which is not only attractive to sparrows, but makes them extremely visible as they forage in the open along the edge. These places seldom turn into hot spots, but they are listed to stimulate the imagination to always be looking, even in the most unexpected places.

FOX SPARROW BY MARJORIE RINES

Behavior clues

Leaf Turners: Most of us are familiar with the way towhees scratch among the leaves, kicking with both feet to expose food. White-throated, White-crowned, and Fox sparrows use the same technique, often under bushes and tangles, so listen for the rustle of leaves as you walk the edges of fields and hedgerows. All of these birds readily gather into small flocks which often associate with each other.

Flocking birds: Chipping and Savannah sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos usually feed in flocks on the ground and will flush to the edge of an open area if startled. Unlike many species which fly low to hide in the thickets, these birds usually fly up to elevated perches in trees or bushes.

Skulkers: *Ammodramus* sparrows are almost always loners in the fall, perhaps because they are so uncommon. They are secretive feeders, difficult to find, and when flushed either plunge into the vegetation or fly a short distance low to the ground. The flat head and large bill of birds in this genus give them a big-headed look, and with their short tails and furtive behavior may provide clues if you see them fly. This group includes sparrows that any Massachusetts birder would be delighted to find: Grasshopper, Henslow's, and Le Conte's. Also included are the two sharp-tailed sparrow species and Seaside Sparrow, all of which are regular at certain coastal locations, but are rarely found inland.

Often Seen: American Tree Sparrows are winter residents that arrive in small flocks late in sparrow migration. Field Sparrows are common breeders in the right habitat, but in the fall rarely join large flocks of other sparrows. Song Sparrows congregate in large numbers in the weedy areas in fall, both adults and first-year birds, and their variable plumages can present identification problems if not seen well. Swamp Sparrows can also be quite plentiful in a good weed field.

Less common birds: identification tips

Clay-colored Sparrows are often sought only among flocks of the more common Chipping Sparrows, but they are just as likely to mix with other species. Many birders look for a brown rump color for identification, but this field mark is not always reliable and can be difficult to see. Look for the bolder facial shield and more warm and buffy tones in the breast. Clay-coloreds usually have a pinker bill and have a "sweeter" appearance than Chipping Sparrows.

Vesper Sparrow is probably most similar to the smaller Savannah Sparrow, although its behavior is somewhat different. Unlike Savannah Sparrows, Vespers rarely feed in large flocks and are more inclined to stay close to edges, where they may perch up if disturbed. The thin eye ring and white outer tail feathers are usually easily seen, even in worn plumage.

Lark Sparrow is very distinctive with its bold facial pattern and dark breast spot. It usually feeds in open areas close to good cover and is often a loner. When flushed, it tends to perch in bushes or trees.

Lincoln's Sparrow's gray face is sometimes pointed out as an important field mark, but the fine streaking with a warm ochre wash on its breast is far easier to see. Its chip note is short and sharp, and it usually feeds in or close to good cover. It often perches on low posts or fences with its crown feathers ruffled and neck stretched, giving it an alert, slender appearance.

Dickcissel is generally compared with House Sparrow, since it is the same basic size and shape, and first winter birds are similar in color. Dickcissel, however, is a tidier-looking bird, with a more alert posture. Its strong mustache stripe gives its face more of an expression. Dickcissels are usually loners and rarely associate with large flocks of House Sparrows, except in winter when they occasionally show up at feeders.

And all the rest . . .

While you are looking for sparrows, there are other species that exploit similar habitats. Orange-crowned Warblers overlap nicely with sparrow season, so look carefully at plain, dull yellow warblers in weedy areas in fall. Look-alike species such as Tennessee and female Black-throated Blue can be distracting, so look for the yellow undertail coverts and faint streaking on the breast that characterize the Orange-crowned. Connecticut and Mourning warblers can also be found through early October, but examine that skulking bird carefully, since yellowthroats and Nashville Warblers can mimic the behavior and superficial appearance of the more unusual *Oporornis* warblers.

Blue Grosbeaks are fond of corn and other commercial grain crops. Indigo Buntings can be plentiful in community gardens and grain fields, but are almost completely lacking in field marks at this time of year. If you see a sparrow-sized golden-brown bird with faint streaks on the breast in a weedy field, it is likely to be an Indigo Bunting.

Icterids are common in the fall in grain fields (particularly corn). The Bobolink's

boink call note can alert you to its presence (especially in flight), but fall birds can be deceptive, so look for a golden bird that is larger than a sparrow and almost always in a small flock. Fall Red-wings in female or first-year plumages have led many a birder astray with their sparrow-like streaking, so be alert to the larger size and more pointed bill. Search Red-wing and grackle flocks for Rusty Blackbirds. Rusties can be very vocal even in fall, and their squeaking babble contrasts with the *chup* call notes that grackles and Red-wings typically make in the fall. Always be on the lookout for rarer blackbirds such as Yellow-headed or Brewer's.

But most of all have fun

Fall should be an exciting time, but many birders feel they have to wait for the weekend to make a special trip to a birding hot spot. Just remember that sparrows can be found anywhere that there are seeds and might be as close as the edge of the lot where you left your car. Other birders may dread the prospect of dealing with the "little brown jobs." Before you start agonizing over field marks for every bird you see, look for something different: difference in behavior or difference in overall appearance. The different bird may be the very one that will make your day.

SAVANNAH SPARROW BY MARJORIE RINES

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