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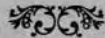
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FIELD NOTES ON THE SPARROWS OF TENNESSEE

By GEORGE R. MAYFIELD

During migration and in the summer season the warblers challenge the bird observer to his best efforts. The hope of seeing a new warbler or one of the rarer species keeps him ever on the alert at these times, and the measure of his skill can usually be taken from his list of warblers. But there is another family of birds that offers almost as great an incentive to field work in winter as the warblers do from April to October, and it is the aim of this article to arouse a greater interest in the less spectacular but equally important group—the sparrows of Tennessee.

There are sixteen species of the Fringillidae listed already for the Volunteer State and two or three more species are yet to be found and recorded. Many otherwise good observers throw up their hands in despair and say that the sparrows are too difficult for them and thus this family of birds fails to receive the attention rightly due a group of birds that come second only to the warblers in number. And so, the writer will endeavor in this article to give some practical observations of his own and mention some field marks that will enable even beginners to more easily identify them.

The Field Sparrow is the one species which is found the year round throughout the state. He is a lover of hedges, of thickets and even the open field, if a few patches of briars or buckbush are to be found for cover. His sweet, plaintive song can be heard almost every month in the year, and his nesting season extends from early April to late August. His call is a plaintive "cheep," easily mastered, and his abundance, summer and winter, make him an easy mark for beginners.

The Chipping Sparrow is with us from March through October. He prefers yards, gardens and parks. His song is a poor specimen of music, but his persistent attempts at melody make him a most welcome guest around every home. The field mark is a chestnut crown with a lighter line below, and this in turn bordered by a black line through the eye. The young are not so easily identified, but all of them have a sharp chip which is not difficult to master.

In a contest for the world's sweetest singer among birds, the Bachman Sparrow would receive many enthusiastic votes. Only the Wood Thrush, in my estimation, surpasses him in depth of soul and sweetness of melody. This bird arrives about April the first and sings regularly until July. A knowledge of his song will reveal his presence often where he has not been reported. Open pastures with thick grass and low trees are his preference. Finding his nest is the acid test of patience and skill, for it is built on the ground in the thick grass and arched over like that of a Bob-white. Possibly this is done to conceal the eggs, which, unlike those of any other sparrow, are pure white and without markings. A Field Sparrow in appearance,

but without a pinkish bill, is a good mark for recognizing this species in the field.

The Grasshopper Sparrow gets his name from the trilling insect-like song of this sparrow. His companions in clover and high grass are Meadow Larks, Red-wings, Dickcissels and Bobolinks. No wonder his insignificant notes are usually overlooked. Even when heard by a novice, the sound will be attributed to some insect and passed up. The author's veracity has been doubted more often in connection with this bird than any other; due to the bird's elusiveness, the writer has almost been dubbed a nature faker. A blackish crown with central stripe and a yellow mark in front of the eye helps to identify this bird even when he is silent.

The Lark Sparrow is one of our least-known sparrows; only a few records, which have been made at widely-varied intervals and widely-separated localities (Bellemeade golf links, Hendersonville, Kingston Springs and Old Jefferson) over a period of fifteen years, tell the story of his rareness. Nearly all of these records are of migrating birds, in August. Large, handsome, melodious in voice, and easily recognized, he is the bird we should like to substitute for that "little rat of the air," the House Sparrow. Should you see in the open fields a large sparrow with white outer tail feathers and white and chestnut marks on the crown and cheeks, you can count that day a fortunate one in your bird calendar.

After naming the one permanent resident and four summer residents and transient sparrows, a more careful survey of the entire state may change our records to some extent, and any information as to the various species of sparrows will be greatly appreciated. Many of the statements made about the following birds are based on limited observations and are subject to revision at any time.

Present records show that the White-throated Sparrow ranks next to the Field Sparrow in abundance—in some places he is found in even greater numbers. He arrives about the twelfth of October and some stay as late as mid-May. Bright winter days and even dark ones, are made quite cheerful by his vibrant "Peabody. Peabody, Peabody" song. A chorus of many White-throats at eventide makes music which any choir might envy. These birds like thickets and tangles and dense hedges; still they are friendly and approachable. Their white throats, large size and characteristic calls make them very easy to identify.

Next to the White-throat comes the Song Sparrow. Strictly speaking, he could be classed as a permanent resident of Tennessee, since he nests in East Tennessee in considerable numbers and over extensive areas. But for practical purposes he is a winter resident and is so regarded by most of us. These birds are usually found along gullies and streams bordered with plenty of briars and weeds. They come by twos and threes generally, but by following up a narrow stream one may corral a real flock. Arrival in Middle Tennessee is in early October and departure is late March and early April. His presence over the United States, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada to the Gulf, makes him the sparrow universal. The best field mark is a black shield in the middle of a gray breast streaked with dark brown lines. His flight is marked by a jerky, pumping sort of movement and his calls are readily learned.

The White-crowned Sparrow may be distinguished from the White-throated by virtue of the fact that the former has no white markings at the throat. The heads of the White-crowned look as if they were bandaged conspicuously with white cotton batting held in place by black tape. He loves old fence rows and gullies lined with briars and thorn bushes. His song is

rather a poor effort, but sounds quite welcome to the admirer of this handsome, proud-looking sparrow. These birds have a vigorous chip which should be learned along with those of the Chipping, the Field, the Song, the White-throat and the Swamp Sparrow. They are all characteristic and aid in locating species which would otherwise be passed by.

The Savannah Sparrow is generally found in grassy fields and damp cut-over meadows. They stay in flocks, but fly as individuals. In fact, they run as long as possible before taking flight. A gray breast streaked with black, without the shield in the center, is a good field mark. There is a streak of yellow before the eye and at the bend of the wing. From October to April they are to be found in the open fields, but no observer need listen for a chip or a song. They must be flushed and followed for identification.

Swamp Sparrows are well-named, since they frequent swamps and marshes, where they slip along like some small water animal, from leaf to leaf or stick to stick. They are very quiet and fairly tame, until frightened. They have black and dark brown colors to match the shadows of the marsh and a whitish throat and unmarked breast. Their song is a kind of chatter and clatter like those of the Marsh Wrens, with which he is so fitly associated. These birds would appear on field lists more often if observers knew their chirps and were willing to follow them into their damp haunts.

Vesper Sparrows love the roadsides, where posts and rails and wires give them a chance to watch the world go by. Late March and early April is the time to watch for a fairly large sparrow with white outer tail feathers. The Lark Sparrow and the Junco also have this field mark, but are so different in other ways that there should be no trouble in separating the three species. Their songs are quite musical and are frequently united to make up an attractive chorus. Strange to say, fall records are extremely rare. The Vesper breeds in the extreme northeastern part of the state.

Fox Sparrows are so named because they bear the tawny color of the Red Fox. They resemble thrushes very much, but the more reddish cast and stronger beak reveal him as one of the fringillidae. Swamps, damp ravines and brier patches appeal to them for winter quarters. They can be found in flocks varying in number from 3 to 30, but usually only 2 or 3 are seen together. A flock of them can make a valley vibrant with melodies that remind one of a chorus of Purple Finches. They also have a loud "cluck" like the scold of a Thrasher.

The Lincoln Sparrow, too, has very few records to his credit. Some ten days after the Song Sparrow has gone North, one should be on the lookout for a bird in the same localities and with similar markings except that the shield at the center of breast is lacking. By May 1 they, too, are gone and fall records are limited to one. His song and chirp I do not know, as he is always silent when I see him, slipping in and out of the undergrowth to prevent a good observation. A closer watch should be kept for this elusive species.

Our smallest sparrow is the Leconte's, and we have less than half a dozen records of this species. It passes through in autumn and again in spring, and may be found in open grassy fields such as are preferred by the Savannah. It is mouse-like in its actions and hard to flush, always alighting again on the ground after a short flight. It has a buffy cast of plumage with unmarked breast.

The Tree Sparrow winters regularly in Kentucky, but is extremely rare in Tennessee. Only in severe winters does he come to our more hospitable climate. Due to his mingling with Field Sparrows and Juncos, the Tree Sparrow might be easily overlooked. Field notes show that he has always

