

## Sparrows

Fifty-one species of birds in the sparrow and warbler family (Emberizidae) are known in Alaska. This large and diverse group also includes the grosbeaks, orioles, blackbirds, tanagers, longspurs, juncos, and buntings. This notebook series deals with eleven of these species, those known by the common name "sparrow." **Sparrows** are secretive birds and rarely allow close approach. One good way to identify them is by learning the distinctive song of each species.

**Fox sparrows** (*Passerella iliaca*), at 7½ inches (19 cm) in length, are one of the largest sparrows breeding in Alaska. The reddish-brown tail and heavy brown streaks on the breast, as well as the grayish brown back, are good field marks for this species. One of the easiest ways to identify the fox sparrow is by its musical and melodic song, which is comprised of several clear whistles followed by a series of trills. Often seen foraging along rocky coastlines, this bird inhabits dense brushy areas and forest undergrowth and builds its nest either low in bushes or on the ground. The female lays four to five pale greenish eggs in the nest, which may be lined with feathers.

**White-crowned sparrows** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) are easily recognized by the black and white striped crown, the brownish streaked back, and the gray unstreaked breast. Their distinctive multi-note whistled song is also a key identifying feature. One of the larger sparrows in Alaska, 6½ to 7 inches (16.5-18 cm) in length, this species is common in shrub thickets of alder and willow. Nests are usually built on the ground in a slight depression or low in bushes. Adult birds can be quite vocal when intruders approach their nesting area. White-crowned sparrows lay three to five eggs in a clutch.

**Golden-crowned sparrows** (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*), as their name implies, have a dull yellow stripe on their head, widely bordered on either side by black stripes. If seen from a distance, the unstreaked gray breast and similar size may cause confusion with the white-crowned sparrow. The descending three-note whistled song is quite distinctive and easily remembered. This bird is a fairly common nester in willow and alder thickets and can sometimes be found in the same habitat as the white-crowned sparrow. Four to five eggs are usually laid in a nest built on the ground.

**Song sparrows** (*Melospiza melodia*) are one of the most variable sparrows in appearance in Alaska. The largest form, a resident of the Aleutian chain, may be as large as the largest fox sparrow. Song sparrows are brown and gray streaked on the back and heavily brown streaked on the paler breast. These breast streaks often form a central spot. In Alaska, the overall color varies from paler birds on the Alaska Peninsula to darker birds in southeastern Alaska and the Aleutians. As the specific name *melodia* implies, the song is quite musical with a buzzy quality. Coastal beaches, adjacent marshes, and brush areas are the primary habitats of the birds in Alaska. Nests are usually built on the ground in grass clumps and contain three to five eggs.

**American tree sparrows** (*Spizella arborea*) are medium-sized sparrows with a solid reddish-brown cap, grayish face, and grayish-white unstreaked breast with a central spot or "stickpin." The bill is dark above and yellow below, and two prominent white wing bars distinguish this sparrow from the other Alaskan sparrows except the chipping sparrow. The song is somewhat variable around the state and has been described as quite melodic. The general habitat is low birch-willow thickets near or above treeline, but they may also be found in willow and shrubby bogs at lower elevations. Nests are built on the ground or low in shrubs and often lined with ptarmigan feathers. The normal clutch size is four to five eggs.

**Chipping sparrows** (*Spizella passerina*) have the same general appearance as the tree sparrows, except they do not have a central breast spot, are somewhat smaller, have a white stripe over the eye and black line through the eye. This sparrow has a restricted range in Alaska and can usually only be found along the major river drainages of Southeast Alaska and in the Tanana River valley of Interior Alaska. An evenly pitched trill is the usual song, and it may sound like a series of "chips," hence, the common name. The type of habitat used by chipping sparrows is woodland edges and openings, usually with deciduous trees present. Nests contain three to five eggs, are made of grass stems, and are usually built in trees and bushes.

**Lincoln's sparrows** (*Melospiza lincolni*) are small, elusive, brownish-gray streaked birds. The buffy band of breast feathers combined with the fine brown streaks on the breast and grayish sides to the head make this a very handsome bird when viewed at close range. Like that of their close relative the song sparrow, their song is very musical and quite wren-like in quality. Lincoln's sparrows may be found in the shrubby bogs of Interior Alaska and in open grassy areas of tidal sloughs and stream banks of Southeast Alaska. Four to five eggs are laid in a well-concealed nest built on the ground in wet, shrubby areas.

**Savannah sparrows** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) are uniformly streaked both on the back and breast and have a distinctive yellow eye-brow stripe that can be seen at close range. The short notched tail is also an identifying feature. The savannah sparrow may somewhat resemble the song sparrow but is usually paler in color, and its buzzing song with an insect-like trill is quite different. Alpine meadows, wet meadows, salt marshes, shrubby bogs, and open grassy areas are the usual habitats of the savannah sparrow. The grass-lined nests of this species are built on the ground and are usually very well concealed by overhanging grass or other vegetation. The clutch size of savannah sparrows varies from four to five eggs.

**Migration:** All the sparrows covered here are migratory and arrive in Alaska each spring and leave each fall, except the song sparrows of the Aleutian Islands and Southeast Alaska, which are year-round residents. Also, some individuals of other species may stay longer through the winter, since white-crowned and tree sparrows have been reported in Fairbanks in December. Major migration routes for most sparrows are through Southeast Alaska, the Yukon, and even across the Gulf of Alaska. Wintering varies by species, but some range from British Columbia, south to the Gulf of Mexico; others migrate as far as Central America.

**Food habits:** Sparrows as a group are seed eaters, but different species eat various sizes and types of seeds. During the breeding season, more animal matter in the form of spiders, mosquitoes, caterpillars, and other insects is taken by adult birds, and nestlings are fed almost entirely on animal matter. Crowberries, blueberries, and other fruits are also eaten, especially by tundra nesting species such as the tree sparrow. The song sparrow, due to its beachcombing existence, eats small marine life (mollusks and crustaceans) as well as seeds, berries and insects.

**Predation:** Little is known of the major predators of sparrows in Alaska. Probably northern shrikes, small hawks, small falcons such as merlins, and owls take adult and immature birds. Nestling and egg predators probably include weasels, foxes, and some birds.

**Management:** Habitat changes, including avalanches, logging, fire, construction of powerlines and rights-of-way, and clearing for small agricultural projects create preferred environments for sparrows. Thus, populations can be expected to increase in many areas of Alaska as development occurs. Near towns and cities,



however, the open fields and brushy areas sparrows use are often turned into parking lots, buildings, or sterile areas. Landscaping should be carried out to provide food and nest sites and to maintain populations of sparrows around towns and cities where people can enjoy these birds.

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