

SPARROWS**Donald Shephard**

Fox Sparrow photo Ron LeValley

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On a December visit to England, the long hours of darkness allowed plenty of time to read and reflect. I remember my mother teaching me the difference between Blackbirds and Starlings. "Watch them Donald, Blackbirds hop and Starlings walk." Her own favorite bird, known there as Wren, we call Winter Wren. She referred to all other small brown birds as "Sparrows". Later, I came to distinguish three "sparrows"; Hedge Sparrows, House Sparrows, and Tree Sparrows. Today, Brits name Hedge Sparrows, Dunnocks, since they belong to the Accentors. House and Eurasian Tree Sparrows are in the genus *Passer* or Old World Sparrows.

New World Sparrows belong to a different family of passerines, called Emberizids. They are small songbirds, often brown and streaked, with rounded wings and conical bills for husking seeds in winter. In breeding season they add insects for more protein to fuel their young-raising activities. Their rounded wings allow flitting through shrubs, grasses and, in some species, deserts and mature pine forests. Several species have adapted well to human-altered ecosystems, becoming familiar yard birds.

Mendocino Coast sparrows commonly include Savannah, Song, and White-crowned, Fox and Golden-crowned.

To find out more about rare visiting sparrows, I called Dorothy Tobkin, who has recorded all sparrows on the American Birding Association list. That claim may change soon as several species are likely to be split after careful DNA analysis of subspecies.

Toby tells me the Chipping Sparrow although found inland, is an unusual migrant here on the coast. A few Lincoln's Sparrow are regular in small numbers in fall, winter and spring. The Lark Sparrow, fairly common inland, rarely turns up here. Vesper Sparrows, rare inland, are a very rare coastal vagrant. White-throated Sparrows although uncommon, do come to feeders as they migrate to breed north and east of us. Toby spotted one Clay-colored Sparrow this fall. East of Covelo, you may find the Black-chinned Sparrow, but not on the coast. Once, a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow appeared. Art Morley discovered Grasshopper Sparrows nesting on a hill north of Ten Mile, but they move from year to year. Karen Havlena has recorded one Harris's Sparrow. This is not a complete county list.

Common or rare, these ground-dwelling songbirds glean most of their food from the surface of the ground or low vegetation. They exist mostly in North America where they breed

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continued

from the Arctic tree line to the Mexican border, but you may spot them in Eurasia and Africa. Emberizids are absent from Australia and Antarctica.

Beginning birders often divide sparrows into those with breast streaks and those without. Confusion results when encountering juvenile birds. Even when adults of the species lack breast streaks, most young display them. In winter flocks, sparrows of several species may occur together.

Both sparrow parents feed insects to their young. Nestlings and fledglings favor caterpillars for their soft bodies. Parents prepare hard bodied insects like grasshoppers by removing difficult parts such as legs. Emberizids predominantly feed on seeds in winter. Small-billed species can crack and remove husks from small seeds while bigger billed birds can handle larger seeds. A feeder filled with large sunflower seeds will attract less sparrows than one filled with millet, a small, thin-coated seed.

In more natural surroundings, some sparrows simultaneously rake the claws of both feet across the ground discarding leaf litter and digging into the upper soil surface. They position their heads directly over the scratch area ready to pick up any exposed food. Experienced birders identify the rhythmic sound of double-scratching sparrows. White-crowned Sparrows, Golden-crowned Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows all employ this technique.

Smaller sparrow species use another method of foraging. They fly to a seed cluster atop a grass stem and ride it to the ground where their weight holds the stem steady while they devour the kernels.

Sparrows solve the combined problems of survival in winter, finding food and avoiding predators in two ways. They may forage close to refuge cover or feed in flocks relying on the combined vigilance of flock mates. Species with longer wings and more agility forage safely far from cover.

For example, if you stroll along the bluffs at Point Cabrillo, you will likely flush Savannah Sparrows while higher up Song Sparrows disturbed by a hiker will dive into low shrubs at the edge of open areas.

I learned from my mother to watch bird behavior and even though neither she nor I had any idea of the number of sparrow species here on the coast, my early training helps me to distinguish one small brown songbird from another. In later newsletters, we will



Song Sparrow photo Ron LeValley
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