

SONG SPARROW**Donald Shephard**

Serious birders might hang a sign upon their door, "Gone pishing". A few utterances of "pish, pish" will bring out those birds that like to hide in cover. Often, the first birds to respond are Song Sparrows. Other, meeker birds follow. If you see a rich, russet-and-gray sparrow with bold streaks down its white chest and a dark brown spot in the middle, suspect a Song Sparrow. If you watch it in an open, shrubby, or wet area and it perches on a low shrub, leans back, and sings a stuttering, chattering song, you may be sure it's a Song Sparrow. One of the most regionally variable birds in North America, coastal and northern birds appear darker and streakier, with southern and desert birds wearing paler plumages. They sport a brown cap and a long brown rounded tail. A streak through the eye decorates their grey face. Song Sparrow subspecies of wet, coastal areas have darker plumage as a defense against feather mites and other decay agents that thrive in humid climates. The darker plumage contains more of melanin, which makes feathers tougher and harder to degrade.

You will most easily confuse them with their relatives, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Savannah Sparrow. Recognize the former by a buff wash across the chest and differently-patterned head, and with more gray on the face. The Savannah Sparrow shows a forked tail and yellowish-tinged lores (between the bill and the eye) when seen up close and finer streaks on the breast.

You may catch their short, fluttering flight and characteristic downward-pumping tail as they flit through dense, low vegetation. Look for Song Sparrows in marsh edges, overgrown fields, backyards, desert washes, and forest edges. These birds forage on the ground, in shrubs or in very shallow water. They eat insects and seeds.

The male of this species uses its melodious, complex song to declare ownership of its territory and to attract females. The Song Sparrow's song consists of a combination of repeated notes and trills. The crisp, clear, precise songs make them easily distinguishable. Identify a particular song not only by pitch and rhythm but also by the timbre of the trills. One bird will know as many as 20 different tunes with a 1,000 improvisations on the basic theme. The Song Sparrow usually repeats the same song many times before switching to a different song. They learn songs shared in common between neighbors. Ultimately, they choose a territory close to or replacing the tutor birds. This allows the Song Sparrows to address their neighbors with local songs. Male song attracts females who prefer males that closely match their song tutors. Mimics,

**Song Sparrow photo Ron LeValley****LeValleyphoto.com**

SONG SPARROW**continued**

**Brown-headed Cowbird
nest parasite of Song Sparrows.**

Photo Ron LeValley.

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Song Sparrow nest and eggs.

Photos Susan Weimer.

such as mockingbirds are not able to imitate effectively the Song Sparrow's song.

Courting birds fly together, fluttering their wings, with tails cocked up and legs dangling. Song Sparrows are primarily monogamous, but up to 20 percent of all Song Sparrows sire young with multiple mates each breeding season. They search together for nest sites hidden in grasses or weeds, sometimes placed on the ground though occasionally as high as 15 feet, often near water. The female builds a simple, sturdy cup nest using loose grasses, weeds, and bark on the outside and tidily lines it with grasses, rootlets, and animal hair. She lays blue, blue-green, or gray-green spotted eggs with brown, red-brown, or lilac markings. Young hatch nearly naked with sparse blackish down and closed eyes.

Song Sparrows normally lay only one clutch of eggs per breeding season; in exceptional circumstances, however, such as loss of clutches from predation, or an excess of resources, Song Sparrows have been recorded laying as many as seven clutches in a single breeding season and successfully rearing up to four clutches.

Brown-headed Cowbirds parasitize Song Sparrow nests. Although slightly larger, cowbirds' eggs closely resemble Song Sparrows' eggs. Song Sparrows recognize cowbirds as a threat and attack the cowbirds when they are near the nest. This behavior is learned rather than instinctual. By attacking cowbirds, female Song Sparrows may unwittingly be identifying themselves as potentially successful parents of a cowbird chick. Despite cowbird parasitism Song Sparrow populations maintain constant levels because they manage to raise their own chicks as well as the intrusion of Cowbird chicks.

Although Song Sparrows do not form flocks, young birds may group on a bush in autumn. Meanwhile, if you bird in damp, open country, throw caution to the wind and "pish" for birds. Most likely a Song Sparrow or two will reward you. If he sings for you in return for your "pishing" then that is paradise enough.