



LOUISIANA
SPARROWS

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What is a Sparrow?

Generally, sparrows are characterized as small, gray or brown-streaked, conical-billed birds that live on or near the ground. The cryptic blend of gray, white, black, and brown hues which comprise a typical sparrow's color pattern is the result of tens of thousands of sparrow generations living in grassland and brushland habitats. The triangular or cone-shaped bills inherent to most all sparrow species are perfectly adapted for a life of granivory – of crushing and husking seeds.

Sparrows possess well-developed claws on their toes, the evolutionary result of so much time spent on the ground, scratching for seeds through leaf litter and other duff. Additionally, most species incorporate a substantial amount of insect, spider, snail, and other invertebrate food items into their diets, especially during the spring and summer months. Most sparrow species exhibit moderately strong, direct flight styles, with the exception of the Ammodramus sparrows, which possess short wings, thin, short tails, and notably weak flight patterns.

New World sparrows belong to the bird family Emberizidae. Here in North America, sparrows are divided into 13 genera, which also includes the towhees (genus *Pipilo*), longspurs (genus *Calcarius*), juncos (genus *Junco*), and Lark Bunting (genus *Calamospiza*) – all of which are technically sparrows. Emberizidae is a large family, containing well over 300 species

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worldwide, 50 of which occur in the United States on a regular basis, and 33 of which have been recorded for Louisiana.

Of Louisiana’s 33 recorded sparrows, only seven species breed here: Eastern Towhee, Bachman’s Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Seaside Sparrow. Fourteen species migrate through and/or overwinter here on a regular

Opposite page:
Bachman Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



White-crowned Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)



Eastern Towhee
(Greg Lavaty)

basis: Clay-colored Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, LeConte's Sparrow, Nelson's Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, and Lapland Longspur.

Twelve additional species have been

“Fourteen Species migrate through and/or overwinter here on a regular basis.”

recorded here on rare/irregular occasions: Green-tailed Towhee, Spotted Towhee, Cassin's Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow, Brewer's Sparrow, Lark Bunting, Baird's Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, McCown's Longspur, Smith's Longspur, and Chestnut-collared Longspur. Of these, Spotted Towhee and Harris's Sparrow can very

Opposite page:
Nelson's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

nearly be considered a regularly-occurring species here, as several reports are filed from Louisiana each winter, most often involving birds which often remain in single locales for long periods.

Here, it is appropriate to note that the abundant and familiar House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is actually a member of the “Weaver Finch” family (Ploceidae), an Old World, non-native, exotic introduction into the United States, and is therefore not included within this group of native North American sparrows.

Due to their secretive habits and distressingly similar cryptic color patterns, sparrows are often overlooked or ignored by most people, including neophyte birders. Through a series of photographs it is hoped that this publication will shed well-deserved light upon Louisiana's substantial sparrow community.



Louisiana Sparrows



Lark Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

The majority of New World sparrow species have adapted to lives spent in grassy and/or brushy habitats, of which there is no shortage in Louisiana. Woodlands, brushlands, woodland edges, agricultural fields and hedgerows, fallow fields, woody/grassy water edges, “pocket” meadows and prairies, and marshes are all in good supply in our state; and so are the sparrows that fill them at different times each year. Consider that nearly half (23 of 50) of native U.S./Canadian sparrow species either breed, overwinter, or otherwise spend varying amounts of time in Louisiana on an annual basis.

Field sparrows and Fox sparrows are dedicated brushland specialists, secreting themselves in very young, open-canopied forest habitats and also in older, climax-type shrub-scrub habitats. Such habitats include “old fields” of varying ages, pineland cutovers, back-beach thorn-scrub along the coast, and other natural settings that include large expanses of dense shrub and sapling tree thickets.

Similarly, overwintering Song, Lincoln’s, and White-crowned sparrows appreciate dense, brushy conditions, and seem especially attracted

to the more narrow, linear hedgerows bordering agricultural fields. Hedgerows in Louisiana are commonly populated with small trees such as rough-leaf dogwood, elderberry, and prickly ash, rising just above dense colonial shrub thickets of blackberry, dewberry, American beautyberry, Japanese honeysuckle, and other shrubs and vines. White-throated Sparrows are also dwellers of dense shrub thickets, and are often encountered in thickly-overgrown fence rows.

A substantial number of Louisiana sparrows are grassland dwellers. Most common and ubiquitous during the winter months is the Savannah Sparrow, which readily occupies taller native and non-native grassy edges of agricultural fields and roadsides. Vesper Sparrows are often found near Savannah Sparrows, but prefer to occupy adjacent areas of close-cropped grasses and very short agricultural stubble, such as pastures, and harvested fields. The harvested cotton fields of central and northern Louisiana, for example, are excellent locales in which to look for Vesper Sparrows. When disturbed, both of these species

flush to the nearest woody vegetation (trees or brush), where they might momentarily intermingle.

All four of the longspur species recorded in Louisiana are short-grass dwellers, most often found in harvested agricultural fields, pastures, and short-mowed fields, including those around airports.

Our native Lark Sparrow is fond of flat, open expanses of pastures and harvested fields, especially those adjacent to woodland edges. Because of its larger size, and often solitary winter nature, this species is sometimes overlooked by field observers, around the much larger numbers of Savannah and other grassland sparrows.

Overwintering Swamp Sparrows, often found along the edges of hedgerows and brushlands, seem also fond of foraging in pure, 3-foot tall stands of broomsedge, a native grass species possessing fluffy, rust-colored seed heads during the winter months, growing commonly throughout most of Louisiana. Swamp Sparrows are also attracted to dense 2-foot tall expanses of harvested rice. During the winter months, Swamp Sparrows are sure to be abundant in both of these habitat types, often along with the very secretive and cryptic Sedge Wren, and other grassland sparrows such as the beautiful LeConte’s Sparrow, albeit in far fewer numbers than that of the Swamp Sparrow.

Marsh habitats provide homes for several species, including our native Seaside Sparrow, which

“The majority of New World sparrow species have adapted to lives spent in grassy and/or brushy habitats...”

is most often found in salt-marsh habitats nearest to the Gulf of Mexico. The overwintering Nelson’s Sparrow seems most attracted to freshwater cattail marsh pockets, including those embedded within intermediate and even salt-marshes within the coastal zone.

Brush piles, comprised of bulldozed trees, and often overgrown with blackberry, honeysuckle and other thicket-forming shrubs and vines, have proven to be excellent places to search for some of our rarer sparrows, including Harris’s Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Green-tailed Towhee, as well as other rarities such as Bewick’s Wren and Sage Thrasher. Another interesting setting for uncommon sparrows includes the modified thorn-scrub thickets

Swamp Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)





of huisache acacia along the back-beaches of our coastal parishes. These large thorny shrubs hold a surprisingly diverse variety of bird life, particularly during the spring, fall and winter months, including the uncommon but regularly-occurring Grasshopper and Clay-colored sparrows.

Chipping Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos forage in very short vegetation or bare ground habitats, almost always along woodland edges, where foraging groups flush up at characteristically steep angles into nearby canopy trees when disturbed. Both “Chippies” and Dark-eyed Juncos are also popular backyard seed-feeder birds.

Only a few sparrow species live in closed-canopied forests in our state. The Eastern Towhee nests exclusively under mature forest canopies, especially those possessing dense understories of shrub thickets. The habitat of Bachman’s Sparrow, another year-round resident species here in Louisiana, is almost completely limited to the thin, shrubby understory scattered beneath mature pine forests, especially the longleaf pine savannahs of the Florida parishes and west-central Louisiana. Overwintering Henslow’s Sparrows appreciate the thick, short-grass forest floors of these same pineland savannahs, particularly the wetter locations.

The White-throated Sparrow, one of the most abundant of our winter-visiting sparrow species, also prefers the shady, understory thickets and edges of almost any forest, including urban forests, bottomland hardwoods, mixed pine-hardwood, and pure pine habitats. White-throated Sparrow is by far the most abundant of the “backyard seed-feeder” sparrows throughout the state.

Most all sparrow species are ground-gleaning foragers, hopping or walking over bare or vegetation-covered ground, scratching and pecking for seeds, insects, and other invertebrate organisms. Some sparrows also habitually alight upon the standing seed heads of selected wildflower and weed species to pluck seeds directly from the plant’s seed heads. A couple of “Louisiana” examples of such behavior include White-throated Sparrows alighting and “riding-down” the seed heads of ironweed, plucking at the seed heads as they descend. Another is of Swamp Sparrows alighting on the stalks of goldenrod, for the same purpose.

During the winter months, a substantial number of sparrow species have also been observed to take fleshy fruits, especially those of vines such as poison ivy, honeysuckle, Virginia creeper, and shrubs and trees such as American beautyberry, yaupon holly, and hackberry. In Louisiana, Eastern Towhee, Spotted Towhee, Fox Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco have all been reported to engage in such frugivorous behavior.

Biologists Paul R. Ehrlich, D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye (*The Birder’s Handbook*, 1988) mention that like the Killdeer, most nesting sparrows

“Most all sparrow species are ground-gleaning foragers, ...”

– including towhees and longspurs – exhibit distraction displays when disturbed, feigning a broken wing or leg as they limp or weakly flutter, leading potential predators away from their nests. These authors also mention an interesting brooding behavior exhibited by numerous sparrow species whereby care for individual brood members is split evenly by the adult male and female.

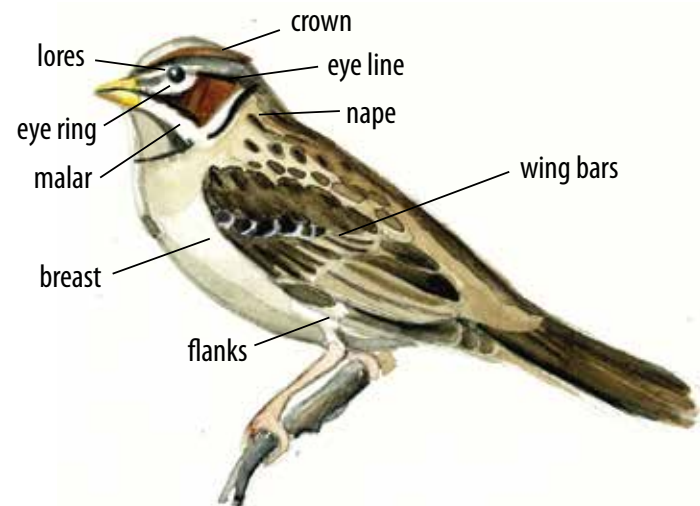
As a group, sparrows are probably the most under-studied of North American birds; again, at least partially due to the difficulties involved in locating and observing them through dense brush and grasses. North American sparrow expert Jim Rising (*The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996) mentions this for numerous species highlighted in his book. Extreme examples include LeConte’s and Swamp sparrows.

Opposite:
Dark-eyed Junco
(Richard DeMay)



Identifying Sparrows in the Field

Because birds are so active and mobile, many if not most of the different groups (waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, gulls and terns, flycatchers, warblers, etc.) present their share of identification challenges. In this regard, sparrows are no different. The combination of their small size, secretive habits,



The best way to begin learning sparrows is to study those species which most commonly visit your seed feeders during the winter months, such as White-throated and Chipping sparrows. Just about anywhere in Louisiana, the constant presence of these two species at millet seed feeders should provide ample opportunity to get acquainted with sparrow field marks. Begin by learning to observe the presence or absence of coarser, more easily viewable field marks such as breast and side streaking and wingbars. Then, gradually hone in on finer details such as the presence or absence of eye rings, eyebrows (supercillia), eye lines (dark line running through the eye), and “moustachial” (malar) marks.

Does the bird that you are studying possess a pair of white wingbars? If it does, consider that of the 18 regularly occurring sparrow species in Louisiana, only four or five of them possess overt, “bright” white wingbars. Thus, the presence of wingbars on a subject sparrow immediately narrows down the identification possibilities by nearly 75%. Similarly, 10 of the 18 common sparrow species in Louisiana possess streaked sides and/or breasts. Thus, noting the presence or absence of ventral

numerous species, and cryptic color patterns has rightfully earned them the collective nickname, “LBJ” – “little brown jobs” – by less experienced birders.



Chipping Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

streaking on your subject bird can immediately narrow down the range of possibilities by 50%.

As your study of field marks becomes more refined, you’ll find yourself able to eliminate even more species, gradually winnowing down the number of possibilities to only one or two.

Most sparrows possess lots of brown, gray, and cream-colored markings, along with more occasional bits of buff, black, and rufous markings. Simply learning which species possess which of the latter group of markings, and where on their bodies each species possesses them, is a very effective way of identifying sparrows down to species level.

For example, Rufous coloration (a red-brown hue that also includes “bright chestnut” and “rust” tone) in Louisiana’s regularly occurring sparrow species is limited to the wings only on but five species: Swamp, Lincoln’s, White-throated, Nelson’s and Seaside sparrows. Likewise, buff hues located on the facial regions only are limited mostly to the Clay-colored, Chipping (young birds), Lincoln’s, Grasshopper, LeConte’s, Henslow’s, and Nelson’s sparrows. Thus, if even a portion of a sparrow’s body is well-viewed, chances for field identification can rise substantially.

For beginner birders, the studying of finer facial details on sparrows – or on any bird, for that matter – is best learned with a spotting scope, which when mounted on a tripod possesses not only higher magnification possibilities, but also provides a more stable platform for more leisurely and relaxed viewing. Because mounted spotting scopes are slower to move and adjust than binoculars are, it becomes even more important that students set up scopes near areas where sparrows are known to feed, rest, and preen out in the open.

In addition to bird feeders, the edges and corners of agricultural fields where they meet with hedgerows, fence rows, and other brushy/grassy thickets are excellent places to set up spotting scopes. Also keep in mind that the first hours after sunrise are excellent for more leisurely sparrow-viewing, when many birds perch high upon bare trees, shrubs, fences, utility lines, etc. in order to dry and preen their plumage. With a 20-30x spotting scope, facial details of sparrows are relatively easy to discern at distances of 50-100 feet.

One of the best methods for studying sparrows in the field is to contact a farm-owning

friend or relative and get permission to erect simple elevated platform type seed feeders (a single 20” X 20” scrap board will work fine) in an open short grass area adjacent to a hedgerow or woodland edge. Better yet, erect a 100-foot row of feeders at 25-foot intervals (= four feeders). During the fall and winter months, fill the feeders daily with cheap commercial bird seed (high millet content) for best results. For best viewing, position yourself in an unobtrusive

“The best way to begin learning sparrows is to study those species which most commonly visit your seed feeders ...”



Lincoln's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

locale where you can gain relatively easy spotting scope views of all feeders. Keep a low profile by lowering your tripod and sitting in a folding chair. During the winter months in Louisiana, it is entirely possible to view and compare 3-5 sparrow species at a time on a daily basis using such an arrangement.

Unfortunately most grassland species such as the Savannah Sparrow, and birds from the sparrow genera Ammodramus and Calcarius do not



often visit seed feeders. For those birds, observers must walk or slowly drive (windows down) along appropriate habitats, ears and eyes attuned for sparrow sounds and movements.

As soon as possible, learn to identify all local non-sparrow bird species which might superficially resemble a sparrow, including the female Red-winged Blackbird, female House Finch and Purple Finch, female Blue-grosbeak and Indigo Bunting, female Brown-headed Cowbird, and of course, male and female House Sparrow.

Lastly, many seasoned sparrow observers suggest that determining the appearance of a sparrow's breast, sides (unstreaked or not), and wings (white wingbars or not) upon first viewing an unidentified sparrow is key to identifying the species. Be aware, however, that the juvenal plumage of many clear-breasted species possess streaked patterns. In these cases, the streaking is generally vague or blurry compared with bona fide streak-breasted species. Nevertheless, juvenal-plumaged wintering sparrows occur with some frequency in Louisiana. In many cases, these sub-adult plumages can persist well into December, if not later.

A common example of misidentification based on observing birds with juvenal plumage involves mistaking a juvenal-plumaged Swamp Sparrow for a Lincoln's Sparrow. Juvenal (as well as many non-breeding adults) Swamp Sparrows possess buffy-gray breasts and sides suffused with vague grayish streaking. Both adult and juvenal Lincoln's Sparrow, on the other hand, possess pure, bright buff breasts and sides, etched with more bold, concise, black streaking.

These are but a few tips in learning to identify sparrows in the field. The most important point to remember is that regardless of how avid of a field guide reader you are, there is no substitute for the actual practice of viewing birds through magnification. Whether from the comfortable confines of your own kitchen table, or out in the field, use your optics as often as possible, over and over, moving from bird to bird. After hours of visual study and mental notes, comparisons and contrasts with adjacent known species, and then field guide study, you'll learn sparrows in the same way that you learned other birds – one species at a time.

Opposite:
Savannah Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)

Sparrow Species of Louisiana

As of 2010, thirty-three sparrow species have been recorded in Louisiana; seven of which breed here, fourteen which migrate to or through our state on an annual basis, and twelve which are recorded on an irregular basis. The group of birds known as "sparrows" consists of the longspurs, towhees, and typical sparrows. Each of the thirty-three species is presented on the following pages.



LeConte's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Longspurs

Longspurs are strong-flying, highly-migratory birds named for the elongated hind claws of their feet. They are mid-sized, short-grass-dwelling sparrows possessing relatively long wings which result in flight styles far more quick and powerful than that of other sparrows. Each winter, these

“... – the only New World sparrow species with a breeding range that includes parts of the Old World...”

northern breeders descend southward in large flocks, which can be mixed with two or more of North America’s four longspur species, along with other short-grass-dwellers such as the Horned Lark and American Pipit.

All four longspur species have been recorded in Louisiana, though only one (Lapland Longspur) can be considered a regularly-occurring winter species here. All longspur species exhibit more sexual dimorphism (separate plumages on separate sexes) than any other sparrow group. Moreover, the winter/non-breeding plumages of the four species can be distressingly similar in appearance. Additionally, wintering birds are generally shy and “nervous,” constantly moving from spot to spot over wide expanses of harvested fields or short-grass pastures – and seemingly more often than not, well out of the binocular range of observers.

Thus, locating and identifying winter longspurs in Louisiana requires equal measures of skill and patience. The use of a spotting scope is almost mandatory; and learning the vocalizations of all four species (plus that of the Horned Lark) before setting out in search of them is strongly encouraged. Fortunately, today’s technology, allows observers to bring digital recordings with them into



Lapland Longspur
(Greg Lavaty)

the field – a development which greatly aids in field identification of the longspurs and other “difficult” birds.

Harvested fields are by far the best habitats to look for longspurs during the winter months. Muddy fields interspersed with stubble and/or with short, winter-germinated grasses and other forbs are ideal. Typically, observers should look for likely fields possessing safe pull-off areas for vehicles, and scan those fields with binoculars. In such settings, longspurs, Horned Larks, and American Pipits can all occur in flocks of various sizes and species mixtures; and all appear as small, swift-flying, pale-brown to grayish birds, frequently changing locations by flying in low, undulating, linear formations. Observers should also listen carefully for the telltale “rattling” flight trills of longspurs.

Presently considered an uncommon but regularly-occurring winter species in Louisiana, the Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) is a circumpolar breeder, nesting in the tundra of Eurasia as well as the high Arctic of Canada, Alaska, and Newfoundland – the only New World sparrow species with a breeding range that includes parts of the Old World. The winter range of this species is by far the most expansive of the longspurs, stretching from the front range of the Rocky Mountains eastward through the Gulf Coast and up to New England through the entire Atlantic coast north of peninsular Florida.

Forty years ago, in *Louisiana Birds*, 1974 George Lowery, Jr. characterized this species’ winter status in Louisiana as “an irregular winter visitor that is sometimes abundant when the state is blanketed in snow.” Today, Lapland Longspurs migrate in varying numbers as far south as the harvested rice fields of southwestern Louisiana almost every winter, but are generally more common in the harvested fields of northern and central Louisiana. Most often, contemporary Lapland Longspur detections in Louisiana consist of several individuals mixed in with flocks of Horned Larks. Occasionally, however, pure flocks consisting of several to over a thousand birds are recorded.

Prior to 1932, the Lapland Longspur was unrecorded in Louisiana; but on 19 December of that year, nineteen-year-old George Lowery, Jr. happened upon a single bird foraging along the shore of Lake Beulah, a small lake in his hometown

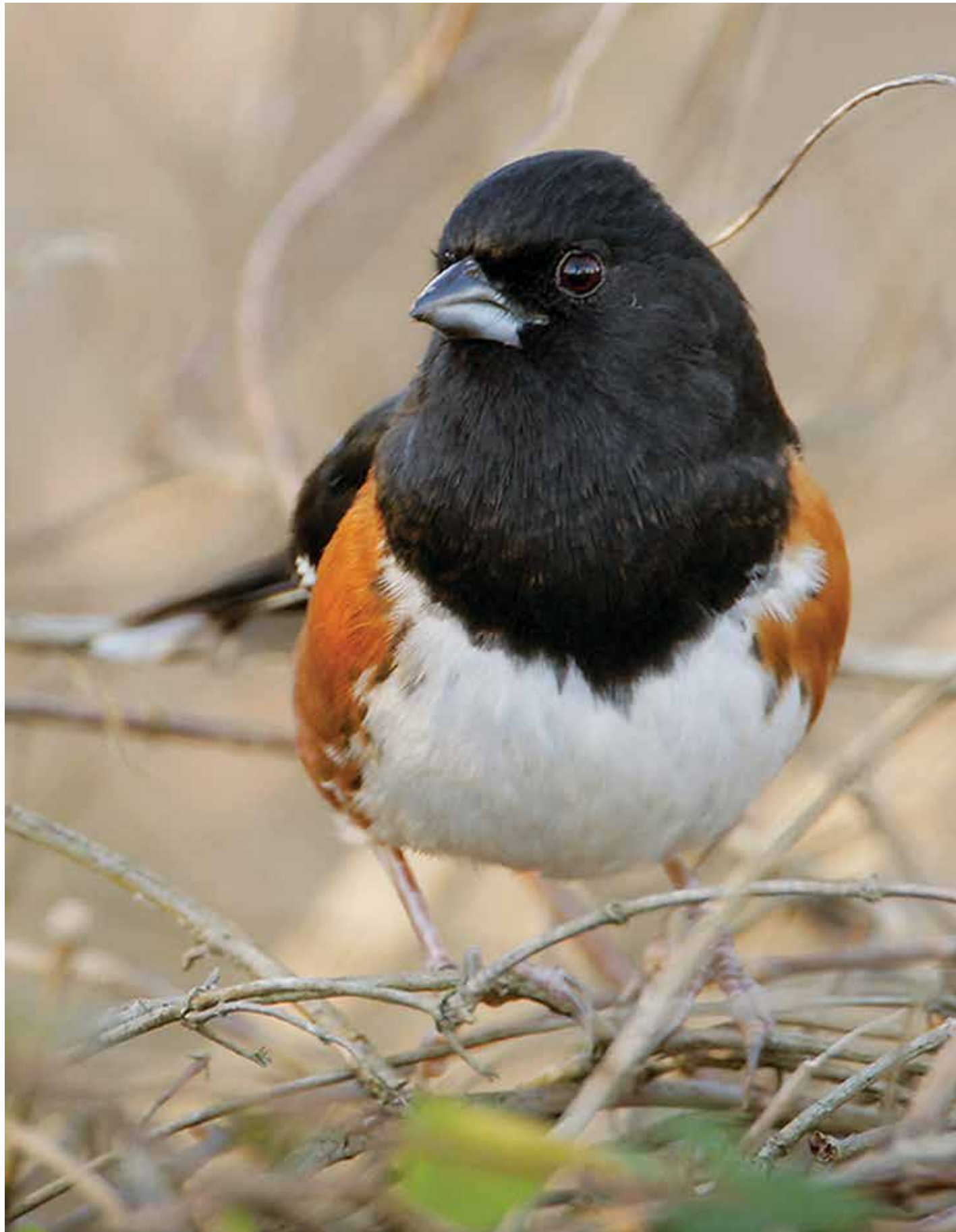
of Monroe. In *Louisiana Birds* (1974), Lowery writes, “Two days later two more individuals were seen at a different place several miles away. On the next day, however, I made an extraordinary and wholly unexpected find – a flock of no less than two thousand longspurs in an old cotton field a few miles south of Monroe. The species thus came close to being added to the state list on the basis of an unprecedented number of individuals.”

Possessing the most heavily-streaked upperparts and sides/flanks of the four longspur

“...found in Louisiana include Smith’s Longspur, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and McCown’s Longspur...”

species, the Lapland Longspur shows only one completely white outer tail feather on an otherwise black tail when in flight. As with McCown’s Longspur, the flight call of the Lapland Longspur is a short “rattle,” but somewhat drier or more mechanical than that of the former.

The other three longspur species to be found in Louisiana include Smith’s Longspur, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and McCown’s Longspur, however, only a handful of observations of each of these three species has ever occurred here. As such, reference to this species is included under the heading “Vagrants” found later in this publication.



Towhees

Towhees are rather large sparrows possessing relatively long tails and large feet with well-developed claws. On rare occasions, when foraging towhees can be observed without disturbing them, bird-watchers can witness their trademark “double scratch,” in which they hop upwards and then land leaning forward and scratching backward simultaneously with both feet. Towhees diverge somewhat from other sparrows in that they lack the ornate body-streaking common to species in most other genera. Most towhee species are woodland dwellers. Like the thrashers, towhees prefer dense, shrubby haunts in both open-canopied and closed-canopied woodlands, and are heard far more often than seen.

The Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), can be considered the western counterpart to the more common Eastern Towhee here in Louisiana. A close cousin to the Eastern Towhee, the Spotted Towhee differs in appearance only by the presence of bright white spots on its black mantle and wing coverts. Otherwise, the two species are remarkably similar, and have indeed been lumped into one species at different points in U.S. ornithological history. In fact, only recently have the two been separated as distinct species. Before that they were lumped together under the accepted common name Rufous-sided Towhee.

Most winters, several Spotted Towhees are recorded in Louisiana in the same dense, shrubby, forested habitats as those favored by the Eastern Towhee. Fortunately, the call of the Spotted Towhee differs enough from that of the Eastern Towhee, resulting in fairly easy separation of the two. In Louisiana, winter Spotted Towhee detections are scattered nearly statewide, but with most occurring in the northwestern corner.

Here in Louisiana, the Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) is a fairly common and widely distributed year-round species, breeding in the more dense understory shrub thickets of many forested habitats in nearly every parish. As recently as the mid-1970s, Eastern Towhee nesting in Louisiana was mostly confined to the Florida parishes; and, according to George Lowery, Jr. ([Louisiana](#)

[Birds](#), 1974), “would seem to have occupied the southeastern corner of the state as a breeding bird quite recently, at least in the last hundred years, for John James Audubon failed to find it nesting in the vicinity of either St. Francisville or New Orleans – places where he spent a great deal of time. . .”



Spotted Towhee
(Greg Lavaty)

Most U.S. sparrows average about 6-inches in length. At 8.5-inches, the Eastern Towhee is notably larger. While lacking the intricate streaking pattern of most other sparrows, the Eastern Towhee is nonetheless dramatically tri-colored, with solid black upperparts, bright-rust sides, and pure white underparts and outer tail feathers. Females are similarly patterned, except with dark-brown upperparts.

Notoriously shy, the Eastern Towhee is fairly easily detected even when concealed in dense brush, owing to its clear, loud vocalizations. The male’s breeding song is a short but beautiful series of whistled trills, phonetically translated by birders as, “drink your teeeee,” which it sings throughout the day and often into the night during spring and summer breeding season. Its call, uttered with some frequency on a year round basis, translates to, “chee-Wink!” or “jor-EE!”

The only other towhee to be found in Louisiana is the Green-tailed Towhee, however, only a handful of observations have ever been recorded. As such, reference to this species is included under the heading “Vagrants” found later in this publication.

Opposite Page:
Eastern Towhee
(Greg Lavaty)

Bachman's Sparrow

Aimophila aestivalis

The native Bachman's Sparrow is considered a pine-woodland species restricted in range to the southeastern United States (including east Texas). Here in Louisiana, Bachman's Sparrows favors mature pine forests sparsely dotted with small trees and shrubs on a grassy floor. Exceedingly shy, Bachman's Sparrows are rarely seen by birders. Those wishing to add it onto their "life lists" usually wait until the spring breeding season, when males ascend into the branches of low trees for bouts of territorial singing.

In a letter to John James Audubon from his friend, naturalist John Bachman, the latter mentions encountering this species (then known as the "Pinewoods Sparrow") along the Edisto River in South Carolina: "It is in fact oftener heard than seen. When I first heard its notes, they so nearly resembled those of the Towhee Bunting [Eastern Towhee], that I took it to be that bird."

Like the Eastern Towhee, the song of Bachman's Sparrow's is a loud, clear mix of whistles and trills, but is quite variable in both tempo and

Opposite and Below:
Bachman's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



pitch. D. A. Sibley (*The Sibley Guide to Birds*, 2000) describes a typical phrase as, "feeeee-trrr, soo-treee..." Sibley also notes that "When flushed may give piercing, sharp "tsees," and, "...when agitated an extremely high-pitched "tsisisisi."

Bachman's Sparrows possesses a somewhat subtle color pattern, with dingy/gray sides and upperparts vaguely streaked with dull, dark-brownish and reddish-brown hues. Its gray face is bisected by a dark-brown eyeline and topped with a chestnut-brown cap. The breast and sides of adults are suffused with tawny-buff. Three subspecies are recognized throughout Bachman's Sparrow's southeastern U.S. range. The plumage of the subspecies breeding in Louisiana (*A. aestivalis illinoensis*) possesses the brightest rufous-brown overtones on the upperparts, and the least amount of streaking, resulting in an almost thrush-like appearance.

The U.S. population of Bachman's Sparrow has been experiencing a long, gradual decline, generally corresponding to a decline in mature, open

"Bachman's Sparrow favors mature pine forests sparsely dotted with small trees and shrubs on a grassy floor."

pine forests, especially long-leaf pine savannahs, also the preferred habitat of the federally endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Long-leaf pine forest restoration meant to benefit that species have benefitted Bachman's Sparrow as well.

In Louisiana, nesting Bachman's Sparrows are reported primarily from the more mature pine forests of the eastern Florida parishes and west-central portions of the state. Fortunately, quite a bit of long-leaf pine savannah forest restoration is presently occurring in the Kisatchie National Forest, and selected holdings managed by other agencies, including The Nature Conservancy.

Chipping Sparrow

Spizella passerina

Common throughout much of our state during the winter months, the Louisiana breeding range of the Chipping Sparrow is restricted to the pine forests of western, central, northern, and Florida parishes of Louisiana. Unlike most sparrow species, Chipping Sparrows nest high in the branches of pines, occupying a breeding niche similar to that of the much more numerous Pine Warbler. Interestingly,

“...this little sparrow which is easily approached and often closely associated with human habitations.”

the trilling breeding songs of the males of these two species are remarkably similar, with that of the Chipping Sparrow being a bit less musical – more of a dry, rattling trill.

Like most all of the species within the genus *Spizella*, the Chipping Sparrow is slim and “athletic,”



Opposite:
Chipping Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Chipping Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)

possessing a strong, explosive, and agile flight style, especially when disturbed.

Adult Chipping Sparrows in breeding plumage are among the easiest of the sparrow species to identify, possessing solid, nearly brick-red caps, and pure white supercillia (“eyebrows”), malar areas, and wingbars. A strong, dark eyeline runs through the entire face, neatly separating the eyebrow from the nape and cheek. Otherwise, much of the Chipping

Sparrow’s body is of a clear, unstreaked, ashy to medium-gray color. In strong contrast, its mantle and wings are rather heavily streaked with black and chestnut-brown (buff-brown in young birds).

Compared to breeding adults, first-year Chipping Sparrows are quite different in appearance, being more subtly patterned, and with all white areas on the face and all bright-brown plumage on the upperparts being replaced with tawny-buff coloration. In direct contrast to the adults, young Chipping Sparrows possess rather heavily-streaked sides and breasts. Also, the crowns of both first year birds and many wintering adults is more brownish than reddish, and finely streaked.

Unlike most sparrow species, the Chipping Sparrow lives throughout both the eastern and western halves of the United States and Canada, migrating southward into the southwestern and southeastern regions of the United States and much of Mexico during the fall and winter months. Louisiana’s rather meager population of breeding Chipping Sparrows is greatly augmented by northern migrants each winter – so much so that this species becomes one of our more common backyard feeder birds.

Jim Rising (*The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996) mentions, “In 1810, when the American Ornithologist Alexander Wilson named the Chipping Sparrow, he called it *Fringilla socialis*, the social sparrow, a fitting name for this little sparrow which is easily approached and often closely associated with human habitations.” As an interesting side note, Rising goes on to mention that “unbeknownst to Wilson, the [Chipping Sparrow] had [already] been named in 1798 . . . by German biologist Johann Matthaeus Bechstein on the basis of a specimen [collected] from Quebec City.”

Throughout its wintering grounds, the Chipping Sparrow often forms small flocks of 10-30 birds, scouring short grass and bare ground areas of open forests and roadsides for seeds. When flushed, these flocks erupt in a characteristically strong, steep-angled escape flight, landing high up into the branches of the nearest trees.





Clay-colored Sparrow *Spizella pallida*

In contrast to the Chipping Sparrow, the Clay-colored Sparrow is strictly a migrant through Louisiana, more or less “sneaking through” the state during the late fall months en route to its wintering grounds in Mexico and southern Texas. One of the best times and places to observe this beautifully-patterned species in Louisiana is in early November along the brushy, huisache acacia thorn-scrub habitat immediately north of the gulf beaches of Cameron Parish. Elsewhere in the state, this species is characterized as a rare fall migrant. Even more rarely, a lingering individual is detected in winter on one of southern Louisiana’s Christmas Bird Counts.

Very similar in appearance to first year and non-breeding adult Chipping Sparrows, winter-plumaged Clay-colored Sparrows can be separated from the former only by close examination of the head, breast, and rump. In comparison to the winter Chipping Sparrow, the winter Clay-colored Sparrow possesses a strong, cream-colored median crown stripe dividing its reddish-brown crown, a dark eyeline that does not run completely through the

eye (leaving the loreal area between the eye and base of the bill unmarked), double “moustacial” lines framing the malar area below the cheek, a brownish (rather than grayish) rump, and buff coloration across the breast and sides.

“... the Clay-colored Sparrow is strictly a migrant through Louisiana,...”

The Clay-colored Sparrow is a bird of the grassy-floored brushlands and open-canopied forests of upper Midwestern United States, and west-central Canada. According to Jim Rising (*The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996), the Clay-colored Sparrow is presently expanding its breeding range eastward through the abandoned fields and conifer (Christmas tree) plantations of northern Illinois, northern Michigan, Ontario, southern Quebec, and into New York.

Opposite:
Clay-colored Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Clay-colored Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Field Sparrow *Spizella pusilla*

Like the Chipping Sparrow, the Field Sparrow is another relatively sparse breeder from the genus *Spizella* in Louisiana, again favoring the pine forests of the Florida parishes and the northwestern and western portions of the state. As with the Chipping Sparrow, our native Field Sparrow population is greatly augmented by the arrival of northern migrants each winter, making it a fairly common bird statewide, particularly within its favored brushland and fallow field habitats.

“...our native Field Sparrow population is greatly augmented by the arrival of northern migrants ...”



Field Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Also like the Chipping Sparrow, the Field Sparrow is a notably thin and agile bird, exhibiting swift flight.

Though possessing the same “clean” well-demarcated color pattern (clear gray body with contrasting heavily streaked mantle and wings) of the Chipping Sparrow, the Field Sparrow is easily

distinguished due to the presence of a fairly bright pink bill and thin but bright white eyerings – both of which fairly “glow” from behind the curtain of thin shrub branches to which they are almost always associated.

Unlike the more arboreal Chipping Sparrow, the Field Sparrow nests on or near the ground, most often in dense thickets of brush, saplings, and/or blackberry and honeysuckle. Throughout the nesting season, males sing their combination whistle-trill breeding songs from the tops of these thickets.

The song is unique in that it gradually accelerates from deliberate, individually whistled notes into a rapidly uttered, ascending trill, recalling that of a canary species. Moreover, George Lowery, Jr. (*Louisiana Birds*, 1974) writes, “The song of the Field Sparrow is a highly pleasing but somewhat plaintive whistle of two or three notes ending in a trill. The song of a single individual is remarkably constant, but the songs of individual birds differ noticeably from each other. An expertly compiled collection of bird songs reproduced on phonograph records amply illustrates this individual variability by giving successively five slightly different songs of the Field Sparrow as rendered by five different birds.”

The Field Sparrow is a bird of the eastern half of the United States, breeding and wintering almost exclusively within that region. Field Sparrows occupy a downright strange breeding range, which begins in New England, swings westward through the Midwest, then circles back southward and eastward through the eastern half of Texas before terminating in Louisiana. Birds winter as far north as Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois, southward through the entire Gulf Coast, and westward through the Trans Pecos of Texas.

In South Carolina, Audubon wrote of seeing “loose flocks, sometimes of forty or fifty . . . hopping along sandy roads, picking up particles of gravel.” In present-day Louisiana, Field Sparrows are most often observed in pairs or in small groups of 3-5, perhaps signifying family units.



Field Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Vesper Sparrow

Pooecetes gramineus

The Vesper Sparrow is a fairly robust, heavily-streaked sparrow of fields, roadsides, and other short-grass habitats. Originally named for its melodious song, which was thought to be more frequently given in the evening hours, the Vesper Sparrow occupies a huge nesting range stretching from most of western Canada southward through California's central valley and into northern Arizona and New Mexico, eastward through the Appalachians and New England. According to North American Breeding Bird Survey records, the state of Montana is its center of highest breeding abundance, with the western half of that state hosting from 20-50 or more birds per BBS route. Like most sparrows, it migrates southward in winter, ranging throughout the southern United States and much of Mexico.

In appearance, the Vesper Sparrow is quite similar to the Savannah Sparrow, a slightly smaller grassland species with which it sometimes associates on both its breeding and wintering grounds. Both Vesper Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows possess gray and brown-streaked upperparts and breasts, and pale, unmarked bellies.

In Louisiana, wintering Vesper Sparrows are more commonly encountered in the northern half of the state, where they seem almost inordinately fond of harvested cotton fields. In the southern half of the state, they are far more rare and local in distribution, and are most often found around harvested rice or sugar cane stubble, and pastures, particularly in the vicinity of woodland edges or hedgerows.

In many parts of Louisiana, Savannah and Vesper sparrows winter in the same fields, with the former often occupying shaggier, long-grass portions and the latter in the short-grass and crop stubble portions. In cases where food resources are plentiful in short-grass habitats, Savannah Sparrows will readily mix in with Vesper Sparrows. When disturbed, both species habitually flush up into the nearest fences, utility lines, or winter-bare trees and shrubs, where they may both be studied at leisure.

Careful observation of these two species side-by-side will reveal that not only are Vesper Sparrows a bit larger (over 6.0" total length for Vesper versus about 5.5" for Savannah), but they can also be

further distinguished by the presence of incomplete supercilia ("eyebrows"), bright-white outer tail feathers, more prominent white eyerings, and – especially on individuals exhibiting more worn plumage – a bright chestnut patch at the bend of the upper wings.

"...encountered in the northern half of the state, where they seem almost inordinately fond of harvested cotton"

Depending on the degree of plumage wear and genetic strain, both species can exhibit varying amounts of buff coloration suffused within the dark streaking along the sides and breast. The Savannah Sparrow possesses a pure white belly versus cream-colored on the Vesper Sparrow. Lastly, the undertail of the Savannah sparrow is dark, whereas the undertail of the Vesper Sparrow is white.

Opposite and below:
Vesper Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Lark Sparrow

Chondestes grammacus

Lark Sparrows have long tails, slender body shape, and flight style similar to that of an outsized Field Sparrow. Adult Lark Sparrows possess pale, unmarked underparts, punctuated with a prominent blackish spot in the center of the breast. Lark Sparrows of any age also possess very prominent, contrasting head markings and equally prominent

“... the Lark Sparrow is also attracted to winter-grown millet (“milo”) fields in Louisiana.”

white outer tail feathers – a combination which allows for fairly easy field identification. Focusing on the head, the dark face is nearly encircled by a pale gray supercillium (“eyebrow”) and neck; and then by a blackish eyeline and moustachial marks inside of the pale parts. The cheek and crown are dark and prominent as well, colored a rich chocolate in young birds, and bright reddish in adults.

Breeding throughout much of the United States west of the Mississippi River, the Lark Sparrow is a year round resident in parts of Louisiana. In 1938 (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*) ornithologist Harry Oberholser characterized it as “a rare and local permanent resident.” By 1974 (*Louisiana Birds*), George Lowery, Jr. refined its status as “a common summer resident in north-central Louisiana,” and mentioning it as a spring and fall transient [migrant], and rare winter bird in the southern half of the state. Today, the Lark Sparrow is a confirmed breeder in western, northwestern, and north-central Louisiana; and a “probable” breeder in the agricultural areas of northeastern Louisiana. Winter detections are somewhat uncommon in Louisiana, and confined mostly to agricultural lands in the south-central and southwestern portions of the state.

During the breeding months, the Lark Sparrow is best detected by its unusual song,

comprised of a diverse array of rattles and trills. D. A. Sibley (*The Sibley Guide to Birds*, 2000) gives an almost comical phonetic rendering: “zeer puk treeeeeeee chido chido kreet-kreet-kreet-kreet trrrrrrrrrrrrrr,” recalling the cadence and variety of a mockingbird or chat.

As with other Louisiana breeding sparrow species, Lark Sparrow numbers in our state are greatly augmented during the winter months via the arrival of northern migrants. Indeed, this species’ large U.S. breeding range contracts southward in dramatic fashion during winter, with birds settling into a rather thin geographical band in the United States, including only parts of California, Arizona, Texas, and Louisiana; but also including almost all of Mexico.

Like the Vesper Sparrow, the Lark Sparrow favors flat expanses of croplands or pastures in our state, particularly those adjacent to forest edges and hedgerows and other wooded habitats, to which it takes immediate refuge when disturbed. Along with other sparrow species, the Lark Sparrow is also attracted to winter-grown millet (“milo”) fields in Louisiana. Elsewhere in the United States, James D. Rising (*The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996) gives its favored haunts as, “open cottonwood woodland, especially along rivers, scrubland, mesquite, or oak savannah, pinon-juniper woodland, and ponderosa pine interspersed with bunch grass.

As with the Field Sparrow, numerous writers refer to winter flocks of Lark Sparrow, whereas this species seems far more commonly encountered as single individuals here in Louisiana.



Opposite:
Lark Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Savannah Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis

Along with the White-throated Sparrow, the Savannah Sparrow is among the most abundant and ubiquitously distributed winter sparrow species in Louisiana. In contrast to the forest-loving White-throated Sparrow, the Savannah Sparrow is a grassland bird, and most commonly occurs in and around agricultural fields and marshlands, both of which are in good supply in Louisiana.

The great 19th century U.S. ornithologist Alexander Wilson initially named the Savannah Sparrow, *Fringilla savanna*, after Savannah, Georgia, from which the initial specimen apparently came. *Fringilla* was eventually replaced by *Passerculus*, but ‘Savanna’ stuck, now as the common name of this species.

The breeding range of the Savannah Sparrow is truly massive, encompassing nearly all of Canada, Alaska, the northern continental United States, the Appalachian Mountains, the U.S. Pacific coast, and the mountainous regions of Mexico, and involving four fairly recognizable genetic strains. The wintering range of the Savannah Sparrow is equally impressive, stretching over most of the Atlantic and Pacific U.S. coasts, the entire southern tier of states, along with most of Mexico. Inexplicably, the only portion of North America where this species does not occur is in the central United States (most of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, and Illinois).

Among the most heavily-streaked of all North American sparrows, the Savannah Sparrow is fairly easy to identify – particularly after a bit of careful visual and audio study has been accomplished on this easily observable species. The Savannah Sparrow can be confused only with the Vesper Sparrow, and perhaps the Song Sparrow. Ultimately, however, the biggest challenge for sparrow identification students would be in learning to recognize the various genetic strains of the Savannah Sparrow itself. J. D. Rising (Sparrows of the United States and Canada, 1996) reports no less than twelve subspecies of Savannah Sparrow.

During Louisiana winters, at least two major genetic strains commonly occur, with one additional strain uncommonly occurring. The western U.S.

(exclusive of the Pacific coast) strain possesses a more grayish background color overlain with dark-brown to blackish streaking, whereas the eastern U.S. strain possesses a “warmer” brown background color, again, overlain with dark-brown to blackish streaking. Both of these genetic strains possess yellowish lores (the area between the base of the bill and the front of the eye). Only rarely encountered is the “Ipswich” Savannah Sparrow strain from the northern Atlantic coast, possessing a slightly larger body, a very pale-gray background color, and more vague, gray-brown streaking. All strains possess bright chestnut-brown secondary wing coverts, easily viewed on perched birds.



Savannah Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

All strains of Savannah Sparrow possess the same call, a thin, ascending, “seeet!” which they constantly give in the presence of human intruders. Within a relatively short period of time, most birders will easily learn this call, which will often alert an observer to the presence of this species well before he/she can see it.

Grasshopper Sparrow

Ammodramus savannarum

Described as “a rare permanent resident in northwestern and southeastern Louisiana . . . probably also throughout at least the greater portion of the remainder of the state,” and, “. . . evidently of much less frequent occurrence in Louisiana than in former years . . .” by H. C. Oberholser (The Bird Life of Louisiana) in 1938, the presence of the Grasshopper Sparrow remains as enigmatic today.

“...the Grasshopper Sparrow occurs as a very sparse nesting species in our state.”

Presently the Grasshopper Sparrow occurs as a very sparse nesting species in our state. During recent years, breeding season detections have been limited to northwestern Louisiana, where local birders Terry Davis, Hubert Hervey, and others have been occasionally finding them in grassy waste areas

Grasshopper Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



along the Red River floodplain in Caddo Parish just north of Shreveport – very near to the locale where they were discovered some 30 years earlier.

During migration and winter months each year, Grasshopper Sparrow reports expand to other parts of Louisiana as well; but still on an uncommon to rare basis. As with most grassland sparrows, the Grasshopper Sparrow is shy and retiring in habit and any opportunity to view one in Louisiana is a memorable one.

As with several other *Ammodramus* sparrows, including Le Conte’s, Henslow’s, and Nelson’s sparrows, the Grasshopper Sparrow possesses a tell-tale, buff-colored flanks, sides, and breast expanding up through its cheeks, chin, and lores (the area between the base of bill and front of the eye). Unlike the others, however, the Grasshopper possesses mostly clear, unstreaked sides and breast.

North American sparrow expert Jim Rising (Sparrows of the U.S. and Canada, 1996) writes, “Grasshopper Sparrows breed in wet or dry grassy pastures, interspersed with sparse shrubs or weeds; in some parts of their range, they are found in alfalfa or clover fields, and seasonally wet meadows. In Florida, Grasshopper Sparrows are resident in small stunted saw palmetto and dwarf oaks, interspersed with sparse grass and bare ground.”

Continent-wide, it seems that the Grasshopper Sparrow reached peak numbers in the 19th century, following the clearing of forest lands. Audubon wrote that it was “found in considerable numbers from Maryland to Maine, and not uncommon in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.” Today, the Grasshopper Sparrow is listed as “Endangered” in Connecticut.

Attracted to nearly any grassy situation, the Grasshopper Sparrow can, and does, turn up in all sorts of Louisiana locales, including dry or wet grassy fields interspersed with shrubs and small trees, uncut edges of agricultural fields, and unmowed roadsides. During the winter months, it has been occasionally detected associating with Savannah Sparrows.



Top Bird:
Grasshopper Sparrow
Bottom Bird:
Savannah Sparrow



Henslow Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Henslow's Sparrow *Ammodramus henslowii*

Discovered by Audubon in 1820 and named after his friend (and mentor of Charles Darwin), the English botanist John Stevens Henslow, Henslow's Sparrow is presently experiencing dramatic population declines within parts of its range, and has been declared a "species of highest priority" by the international bird conservation agency, Partners in Flight. Additionally, it has been categorized as "threatened or endangered" in 12 states, and noted as a "species of special concern" in four more.

According to a number of sources, Henslow's Sparrow was once a marshland specialist along the Atlantic Coast, but has severely declined in that habitat in recent years. Today, it is mostly found breeding in tallgrass prairies and wet tallgrass meadows from the upper Midwest eastward through the Great Lakes region, southern Ontario, and New England.

In Louisiana, Henslow's Sparrow occurs as an uncommon to rare and local winter species. Although it is occasionally detected from a variety

of grassy areas throughout the state, it is most often recorded from the moist, grassy forest floors of restored long-leaf pine savannah habitats in the west-central and Florida parishes.

Of the *Ammodramus* sparrow species, Henslow's Sparrow is the only one possessing a clearly-demarcated face suffused with olive-green coloration. Otherwise, it is very similar in size, shape, and color patterns to the other three buffy/streak-breasted *Ammodramus* species (Baird's, Le Conte's, Nelson's) recorded for Louisiana.

"In Louisiana, Henslow's Sparrow occurs as an uncommon to rare and local winter species."



Henslow Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

LeConte's Sparrow *Ammodramus leconteii*

Le Conte's Sparrow is distinguished by its bright buff-ochre face and fine, maroon-purple streaking on its grayish neck.

Le Conte's Sparrow is primarily a Canadian breeder. North American Breeding Bird Survey records show only a small amount of nesting activity in the United States, limited mostly to the Dakotas, northern Minnesota, and Michigan's Upper

"In Louisiana, Le Conte's is an uncommon and local winterer,..."

Peninsula. It is fond of wet, tallgrass habitats both in breeding and wintering modes.

In Louisiana, Le Conte's is an uncommon and local winterer, found in a variety of damp to wet, dense-grass settings. In northeastern Louisiana, local birder Steve Pagans routinely reports this species from densely-overgrown waste areas as well as from early-successional bottomland hardwood restoration sites within the D'Arbonne National Wildlife Refuge. In the latter situation, widely-spaced hardwood

saplings grow from a dense, mixed tallgrass setting.

Throughout much of southern Louisiana, where winter Le Conte's Sparrow observations are substantially more common, tall *Spartina* grass marshlands and harvested rice fields hold the majority of the population. Experienced birders know that a short walk in almost any harvested rice field south of Interstate-10 – especially along the uncut levees and edges – will more often than not produce Le Conte's Sparrows. Likewise, taller, more overgrown portions of intermediate marsh hold as many or more than do the rice fields; though the walking is far more difficult.

Unlike Henslow's Sparrow, which is substantially more retiring in temperament, Le Conte's Sparrow seems a bit more curious, and when disturbed or coaxed, will rise up to the tops of grasses much more easily than the former.

Interestingly, Le Conte's Sparrow is one of the few North American species to which sparrow expert Jim Rising ([The Sparrows of the United States and Canada](#), 1996) notes no geographic variation in plumage, structure, etc.



Le Conte's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Le Conte's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Nelson's Sparrow

Ammodramus nelsoni

Along with the Saltmarsh Sparrow, and the Seaside Sparrow, Nelson's Sparrow is a dedicated marsh-dweller. It is occasionally found away from marsh habitat in migration, but even during migration it most often settles into whatever bits of marsh it can find, especially freshwater cattail marshlands.

Until recently, the Saltmarsh Sparrow and Nelson's Sparrow were lumped together as one species notably called for a brief period the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Today, they are once again separated into two distinct species, both possessing rather sharp tails and similar plumages with minor subtle differences.

Compared to the other streaked Ammodramus sparrow species, Nelson's Sparrow possesses more vague, blurry streaks on its underparts. Its breast, sides and face are well-suffused with bright ochraceous-buff, which contrasts beautifully with its medium-gray, unmarked nape, neck, and cheek patch.

Like all species within this group, the diet of Nelson's Sparrows consist mainly of seeds during winter months including cordgrass seeds; the predominant plant of Louisiana's salt marshes. As spring approaches and the energy demands change to facilitate nesting and the raising of a brood, the

diet will consist mainly of animal matter, particularly mature and larval insects, spiders, and other bugs.

Breeding primarily in Canada, each year, the relatively few U.S. breeding records come from North Dakota and extreme northwestern Minnesota. Unlike other species within this group and considered a rarity in the bird world, Nelson's Sparrows do not develop pair bonds between males and females during the breeding season. In spring and early summer, males will spend much of the day singing from a low perch attracting nearby females. Interested females may mate with several males but in the end, she is left alone to fulfill the duties of incubating and feeding young birds.

Nelson's Sparrow winters on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of the United States. In Louisiana, wintering Nelson's Sparrows are mostly confined to the coastal zone where varied marsh types abound.

Because of its propensity to inhabit often unaccessible marshlands, there are far fewer Nelson's Sparrow records generated during Louisiana winters compared to the other regularly-occurring Ammodramus species. Nevertheless, Lowery (Louisiana Birds, 1974) regarded it as a common winter species here, whereas 36 years earlier, Oberholser (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*, 1938) characterized it as, "a rare winter resident."



Opposite and Below:
Nelson's Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)

Seaside Sparrow

Ammodramus maritimus

At six-inches total length, the Seaside Sparrow is the largest and longest-billed species of the Ammodramus sparrows. Confined exclusively to salt-marsh habitat, this species breeds throughout most of the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines of the United States, including most of coastal Louisiana. In fact, it is the only regularly-breeding Ammodramus sparrow species in our state.

“...the Seaside Sparrow structurally and behaviorally mimics a small rail...”

The Gulf Coast race of Seaside Sparrow possesses a very dark, charcoal-gray body color, heavily marked above and below with wide, blackish streaking. Like many of the Ammodramus species, its wing coverts are edged with relatively bright rufous coloration, and it also possesses tell-tale, bright yellowish lores (area between the base of the bill and the front of the eye), and a pure-white throat. Its long blackish bill is less conical in shape than in most other sparrow species. Rarely studied

in the field, its feet are proportionately large, and very useful in running (it only rarely flies) across soft mud. Thus, with its elongate bill and large feet, the Seaside Sparrow structurally and behaviorally mimics a small rail as it deliberately stalks prey items across the boggy ground and through dense curtains of marsh grasses.

This shy species is most often found in tidal situations where salt-water alternately floods and then retreats the ground below. In coastal Louisiana, the Seaside Sparrow is a remotely-distributed species, requiring a bit of diligence – or better, just plain luck – in order to observe it. Fortunately, upon flushing, it will often fly a very short distance and sit up atop foliage of smooth cordgrass for a short time before descending into the grass. However, it generally prefers running to flying when disturbed.

Louisiana ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. (*Louisiana Birds*, 1974) regarded the Seaside Sparrow as “an abundant permanent resident, mainly in densely matted and usually sharp-pointed grass and sedges that line our shores in places where the ground just back of the beach is flooded at high tide. Here they run about on the ground, or on masses of debris washed up by the waves, and would



Seaside Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Seaside Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

escape detection if we did not know that by making a squeaking noise we can cause them to mount the taller stalks of grass and even fly toward us from every direction.”

As with Bachman’s Sparrow, birders wishing to observe the Seaside Sparrow should focus their efforts in salt-marsh settings during breeding season, when males ascend to the tops of cordgrasses to sing for long periods throughout the day.

First collected and described in coastal New Jersey in 1810 by the great 19th century American ornithologist, Alexander Wilson regarded it as an abundant species at that place and time. Later, John James Audubon would write, “Having one day shot a number of these birds. . . I had them made into a pie, which, however, could not be eaten on account of its fishy savour.”



Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca*

In all of North America north of Mexico, this genus is represented by only one species, the Fox Sparrow. However, according to J. D. Rising (*Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996), “. . . recently published molecular and behavioral (vocal) evidence indicates that the Fox Sparrow should be divided into as many as four species: the Red Fox Sparrow (*P. iliaca*) of the boreal forests of Newfoundland to Alaska; the Sooty Fox Sparrow (*P. unalaschcensis*) of coastal Alaska and British Columbia; the Slate-colored Fox Sparrow (*P. schistacea*) from the Rocky Mountains and Great Basin; the Thick-billed Fox Sparrow (*P. megarhyncha*) of the California Mountains.”

At 7-inches in total length, the Fox Sparrow is one of North America’s largest sparrow species. Stocky in shape, and possessing proportionately long wings, tail, and legs, Fox Sparrows are superficially thrush-like in appearance; but this species’ strong conical bill shape and heavily-streaked underparts are distinctively sparrow-like.

The Fox Sparrow inhabits dense shrub-scrub habitats, preferably in damp settings. Dense expanses of woodland edges and young (early-successional) regenerating forests possessing near-impenetrable thickets of woody shrubs and sapling trees are favored locales.

The Red Fox Sparrow is the predominant race which overwinters in Louisiana, as well as much

of the eastern United States and coastal California. Considered to be the most brightly-patterned of the four races, it possesses a pale gray head and rump, and pure-white underparts, with much of its upperparts and underparts heavily-marked with wide, reddish streaks. Its wings and tail are nearly solid bright reddish-brown, and the lower half of the bill is mostly yellow. When observed in combination, these field marks equate to fairly easy identification of this species.

The Fox Sparrow is thought to winter in small, loose flocks; again, in dense shrub-scrub habitats. In Louisiana, the true numbers of overwintering Fox Sparrows may never be fully realized due to the large acreage of shrub-scrub habitat (mostly in the form of young regenerating forests) and the few numbers of field observers. Here, it is well to note that Fox Sparrows respond readily to playbacks of their song, flying swiftly to the source of the playback with thrasher-like “thuck!” warning calls.

From Louisiana Christmas Bird Count data, it seems that Fox Sparrows occur in highest densities in extreme northwestern Louisiana, decreasing steadily in southeasterly fashion. Despite the efforts of skilled CBC observers, Fox Sparrows are rarely recorded in the New Orleans area and other portions of extreme southeastern Louisiana, nor through the entirety of our coastal zone, for that matter.



Opposite Page :
Fox Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Fox Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Song Sparrow

Melospiza melodia

Easily the most cosmopolitan of any North American sparrow species, the Song Sparrow nests and/or winters throughout most all of the United States and Canada south of the Arctic/ tundra lands. It has also been declared the most variable bird species in visual appearance, with at least 30 recognizable subspecies described north of Mexico! Even still, among most all North American sparrows, the Song Sparrow is fairly easy to identify due to a combination of its large size (up to 7-inches in total length), heavily streaked body, and proportionately long, rounded tail.



Opposite and Above:
Song Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)

As with the Savannah Sparrow and Vesper Sparrow, the Song Sparrow is rather heavily streaked both above and below. Frequently, its breast streaks coalesce into a central breast spot. The broad dark-brown lateral throat stripes extending downward from the chin occasionally extend all the way down onto the sides of the upper breast, resulting in a “Fu-Manchu” appearance. The wings and tails of most adult Song Sparrows are dominated by bright-chestnut or reddish hues, and with gray shades on face, nape, and mantle (upper back).

During the winter months, an occasional individual will exhibit retained-juvinal plumage in which the malar area, throat, breast, and sides are suffused with rich, buff coloration. This, combined with the gray face, and brown crown divided by grayish central crown stripe, results in those birds appearing very similar to the adult Lincoln’s Sparrow. In such cases, the color and width of

the bird’s breast streaking (black, finely-etched in Lincoln’s; brown, blurry on Song) should be carefully noted.

The flight of the Song Sparrow is somewhat low and weak, and its long tail tends to flop loosely from side to side as it flies, making for a somewhat ungainly flight style.

Historically, the Song Sparrow has been known as a northern United States/Canadian breeder; but due perhaps to an increase in brushy, fallow (abandoned farms) lands in the eastern portion of its range, the Song Sparrow is currently expanding its breeding range southward into Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

Relatively “tame” in behavior throughout its breeding grounds, which include urban and suburban settings, the Song Sparrow is more shy on its wintering grounds, tightly adhering to dense shrub thickets, most frequently those located near permanent water such as the heavily vegetated edges of lakes, ponds, streams, and irrigation canals, as well as marshes.

While not as numerically abundant as other winter sparrows in Louisiana such as the Savannah, Swamp, or White-throated Sparrow, the Song Sparrow is rather easy to “pish up” (to coax into open view by making “spishing” noises with one’s mouth) by savvy observers. Moreover, Song Sparrows are more likely than most other sparrows to “sit up” once they’ve been “spished up.” Thus, of all sparrows, this species is one of the more easily observed and studied. Occasionally, Song Sparrows will even appear at artificial seed feeders, especially on those feeders located in densely vegetated suburban and rural settings.

In 1938 (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*), ornithologist Harry Oberholser characterized the Song Sparrow as, “fairly common in the northern, and rare in the southern part of the state.” Today, the Song Sparrow seems more commonly encountered in Louisiana than in Oberholser’s time, being fairly commonly encountered throughout south Louisiana, and very common throughout the northern portions of the state.





Lincoln Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Lincoln's Sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii

With breeding grounds limited mostly to Canada and the U.S. Rocky and Sierra Mountain ranges, the handsome Lincoln's Sparrow is an uncommon wintering species and locally common spring migrant (mostly within the southwestern coastal zone) in Louisiana. Possessing reddish wings and tail, buff-colored sides, breast, and malar areas, and a mostly gray head, this species stands out wherever it is encountered.

John James Audubon seemed particularly enamored with this species. Of his first encounter with it, he wrote of hearing, "the sweet notes of this bird . . . surpassing in vigour those of any American finch with which I am acquainted, and forming a song which seemed a compound of those of the Canary and Wood-lark in Europe."

Audubon named the bird after Thomas Lincoln, writing, "Chance placed my young companion, Thomas Lincoln, in a situation where he

saw it alight within shot, and with his usual unerring aim, he cut short its career."

In Louisiana, wintering Lincoln's Sparrows are most often found in the company of Swamp Sparrows in wet, brushy and/or grassy settings. Though superficially similar in appearance to the

"Lincoln's Sparrows are most often found in the company of Swamp Sparrows"

more numerous Swamp Sparrow – especially young Swamp Sparrows – Lincoln's Sparrow is easily separated by its buffy breast, finely etched with black streaks, versus the brown-gray breasts and sides marked with blurry brown streaks of the former.



Lincoln Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Swamp Sparrow

Melospiza georgiana



Swamp Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

After the White-throated and Savannah sparrows, the Swamp Sparrow is one of the most commonly encountered winter sparrow species in Louisiana, where it tends to reside in small flocks around wet, brushy and/or grassy habitats such as densely vegetated irrigation canals, damp broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*) fields, the edges of bottomland hardwood forests, and marshlands throughout the state. Having slightly longer legs than sparrows of similar size, Swamp Sparrows have been known to feed in shallow water sometimes dipping their head below the surface of the water in search for tasty aquatic invertebrate treats.

Breeding throughout most of central and eastern Canada, and the Great Lakes and northeastern regions of the United States, the Swamp Sparrow commonly winters through the Ohio River Valley and the southeastern United States, and more sparsely so in the southern Great Plains, and in the eastern half of Texas down into central Mexico.

Shy and retiring, the Swamp Sparrow is rather easily flushed, but then drops back quickly into dense vegetation via short, weak, bursts of flight accompanied by loose-jointed wagging of

its tail, similar to that of its larger, longer-tailed cousin, the Song Sparrow. More often than not, the Swamp Sparrow is detected by its trademark, metallic, “chink!” call note, similar to that of both the Song Sparrow and the White-throated Sparrow, though not nearly as melodious as the latter two. During the winter months in Louisiana, especially in the early morning and late evening hours, certain damp, grassy fields come alive with dozens of calling Swamp Sparrows.

Unlike some birds in this group, the Swamp Sparrow populations are considered stable possibly increasing through time. This is good news, particularly when one considers its propensity for inhabiting wetland habitats, with much of this habitat type being converted to other land uses over the last 100 years.

According to North American sparrow expert, James D. Rising (*Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996), the Swamp Sparrow was originally called the “reed sparrow” by 18th century American naturalist William Bartram, until it was officially described and re-named in 1790 by the British ornithologist John Latham, based on a specimen sent to him from Georgia.



Opposite:
Swamp Sparrow
(Richard DeMay)



Top: White-throated Sparrow
"bright" phase
(Richard DeMay)
Bottom: White-throated Sparrow
immature
(Richard DeMay)

White-throated Sparrow

Zonotrichin albicollis

Between November and April each year, the most commonly encountered sparrow in Louisiana is the White-throated Sparrow. Each winter hordes of this far-north breeding species descend into the woodlands and shrub-scrublands of the United States, filling these habitats with their frequently uttered, musical, "tseet!" call notes. On warmer, sunny days, wintering males will even break out into their forlornly-whistled, "old sam pea-body" territorial breeding song, which, according to ornithologist Harry Oberholser (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*, 1938), earned them the nickname, "Peabody Bird."

In Louisiana, White-throated Sparrows fill seemingly every woodland niche available: mixed and pure pine forests, upland and bottomland hardwood forests, shrubby cutovers and "old field" sites and agricultural hedgerows, all the way down to the thorn-scrub thickets and cheniere forests of our coastal zone.

Interestingly, two color forms of the White-throated Sparrow exist. The first, the "bright" form, possesses a pure-white central crown stripe, supercillia ("eyebrows"), and chin/throat, punctuated by a bold, golden-yellow spot at the corner of the eye. The second type is the "dull" form, possessing a dull-white throat, and buff-tan central crown stripe, and supercillia, resulting in a duller, less contrasting appearance. Both forms also possess reddish wings, black/brown/gray streaked backs, and clear, gray breasts, which contrast strongly against their pure white throats.

Neither age nor sex have any bearing on which birds attain dull versus bright plumage. Careful White-throated Sparrow observers conclude that the bright form apparently dominates the dull form in most all behavioral activities. Interestingly, it also appears that in breeding situations, mixed dull-bright pairs are far more common than dull-dull or bright-bright pairs.

In *The Bird Life of Louisiana* (1938), ornithologist Harry Oberholser wrote, "The food of this bird consists of seeds of weeds and of grasses, a very little grain, most of it waste, and some berries,

such as those of poison ivy, smilax [greenbriar], wild cherry, blueberry, dogwood, and blackberry. In its animal food it is notably beneficial, since it consumes a great many injurious insects such as beetles, grasshoppers, locusts, ants, the bollweevil, and other weevils."

The White-throated Sparrow has been reported as abundant as far back as European settlement began in the United States, and remains so today.

"Interestingly, two color forms of the White-throated Sparrow exist."

In *Sparrows of the U.S. and Canada* (1996), author James Rising provides this quote by John James Audubon: "It is a plump bird, fattening almost to excess, whilst in Louisiana, and affords delicious eating, for which purpose many are killed with blow-guns. These instruments – should you not have seen them – are prepared by the Indians, who cut the straightest canes, perforating them by forcing a hickory rod through the internal partitions which intersect this species of bamboo . . . With these blowguns or pipes, several species of birds are killed in large quantities . . ."



White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys

With its pink bill, black-and-white “zebra-striped” crown, and gray body, the dapper White-crowned Sparrow is a favorite of many sparrow enthusiasts. Louisiana’s preeminent ornithologist, George Lowery, Jr., no “sparrow enthusiast” by any stretch, was nonetheless smitten by the White-crowned Sparrow, commenting (*Louisiana Birds*, 1974), “Few birds possess the debonair appearance of the adult White-crowned Sparrow. The way it holds itself erect, with the feathers on the back of the head slightly raised, gives it a peculiar distinction . . .”



Opposite and Above:
White-crowned Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Though juvenal-plumaged birds exhibit much streaking above and below, the adult White-crowned Sparrow is among the “cleanest” of all North American sparrows, possessing bluish-gray, unmarked face, neck, nape, and underparts, which contrast beautifully with its heavily chestnut/black/white-streaked wings and mantle. In first-winter birds, the black-and-white crown striping is replaced by reddish-brown-and-gray striping, set off dramatically by a coral-pink bill.

Breeding from the Mountain West of the United States upward through western Canada and Alaska across through the entirety of northern Canada, the White-crowned Sparrow winters throughout the southern half of North America (excluding the southern Atlantic Coast of the United States), Mexico included.

Ornithologist Harry Oberholser considered this species to be “a rare winter visitor in northern, central, and southeastern Louisiana in 1938 (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*), not even mentioning the southwestern quadrant of the state. By 1974, ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. characterized it as “. . . at no time very common in Louisiana, but sometimes a small flock will take up its winter residence in the corner of a certain pasture or along one short section of railroad right-of-way [e.g. ‘locally common’].” Presently, somewhat contrary to Lowery’s status assessment 40 years earlier, Christmas Bird Count data indicates that the White-crowned Sparrow is fairly common throughout the western half of the state – with peak abundance in the northwestern quadrant – but rare in the eastern half.

Today in Louisiana, White-crowns tend to be locally common in agricultural lands with shaggy, overgrown fence rows and hedgerows. Typically, this species is encountered in small groups of 5-7 members, some in first-winter-plumage, some in adult plumage – and often in the company of other sparrow species such as White-throated, Song, and Swamp sparrows.

Not quite as “extroverted” as White-throated, Song, and some other sparrows, the White-crowned is nonetheless fairly easy to coax up onto an exposed perch by using one’s mouth to produce “spishing” or “squeaking” sounds.

As with White-throated and Song sparrows, males of this species will occasionally sing their breeding songs on warm, sunny winter days here in Louisiana. Its lazy, low-keyed, mournfully-timbered song superficially resembles that of the White-throated Sparrow – enough so that inexperienced birders might confuse it with the latter. Field guide author David Sibley (*The Sibley Guide to Birds*, 2000) interprets the song of the Taiga race of White-crowned Sparrow as, “feeee odi odi zeeee zaaaa zoooo.”



Harris's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula*

Harris's Sparrow is the largest, most robust-bodied member of a genus (*Zonotrichia*) known for these qualities. This big (7.5-inches, total length), streaky, pink-billed species possesses one of the most restricted breeding ranges (north-central Canada, just below the Arctic Circle) of any North American sparrow. During the winter months, it migrates into an equally small wintering range centered in the U.S. Great Plains – although stray birds are regularly reported from throughout the remainder of the lower 48 states. In fact, winter detection rates have climbed so high in California, that North American sparrow expert Jim Rising (*The Sparrows of the U.S. and Canada*, 1996) has included that state (and northward through western Oregon and Washington) as part of the regular wintering range of this species.

In Louisiana, winter Harris's Sparrows are detected on a rare but regular basis, and are most frequently observed in the northwestern quadrant, nearest the southeastern limit of their regular southern Great Plains wintering range. In 1938 (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*), Harry Oberholser characterized it as “a casual winter visitor in central Louisiana,” though at that time he was aware of but one record, a specimen taken in LaSalle Parish by

biologist Stanley C. Arthur on 25 January 1916. Some 40 years later, in *Louisiana Birds* (1974), George Lowery, Jr. wrote that Harris's Sparrow “appears to be a regular but uncommon winter visitor, occurring here and there. . . and usually in the company of other winter sparrows;” a winter status which still holds true today.

Each winter, several Harris's Sparrow reports are filed from around the state. Often, the detections originate from observations at backyard seed feeders, particularly from those in rural areas.

“Each winter, several Harris's Sparrow reports are filed from around the state.”

Sparrow students should note that the black crown, forehead, chin, throat, and upper breast, set off dramatically by a pink-colored bill, so apparent on adult wintering Harris's Sparrow, is either not present, or present as a vague outline in young first-winter birds. In either age group, the darker, streaky upperparts contrast sharply with the relatively-unmarked, bright-white underparts of this species.



Harris's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Dark-eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis

Each winter, backyard seed feeder watchers throughout the United States are cheered by the presence of the Dark-eyed Junco, often referred to as the “snowbird” in more northerly latitudes. Unmistakable in appearance, adult Dark-eyed Juncos possess gray to blackish heads, breasts, and flight feathers (wings and tail), dramatically set off by a pink bill, pure-white belly, and broad, white outer tail feathers. By ear alone, this species’ short, sweet, “tinkling” trill is sufficient to identify it.

Round-headed and “chubby” in appearance, the Dark-eyed Junco is a dedicated ground-forager, incessantly picking at small seeds; flushing up into trees only when disturbed, or for roosting purposes, where dense evergreen species such as eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) are most often selected.



Dark-eyed Junco
(Greg Lavaty)

During Louisiana winters, Dark-eyed Juncos can be found nearly statewide (though rare in the southeastern quadrant), from the edges of mixed-pine forests all the way southward into the back-beach thorn-scrub of the coast itself. Peak abundance, however, is centered in the northern half of the state; and statewide, observations are far more frequent at seed feeders than in the wild.

Interestingly, ornithologist Harry Oberholser reported it as, “apparently not recorded from the southwestern part of the state” in 1938 (*The Bird Life of Louisiana*). George Lowery, Jr. (*Louisiana Birds*, 1974) called it a “weather migrant” in southern half of Louisiana, dropping into the lower parts of the state “in their greatest numbers when severe cold

and particularly snow and sleet blanket their more northern winter range . . .”

Lowery goes on to relate the following: “I shall never forget the severe cold spell of January 1940 in which the entire state was covered with snow. Countless thousands of ground-dwelling birds perished. . . As soon as U.S. Highway 190 was opened, I was in one of the first cars to pass through en route to southwestern Louisiana, for I wanted to observe the effects of the cold on the birdlife in that area. One of my more vivid recollections of what I saw was that of great numbers of Slate-colored [Dark-eyed] Juncos feeding at the edge of the surf on the Cameron Parish beach, this being the only place where the ground was not buried under a blanket of snow.”

Presently, Dark-eyed Juncos are fairly commonly observed each winter throughout most of southern Louisiana – especially north of Interstate 10/12 – and are commonly to abundantly observed throughout the northern half of the state.

Until recently, the Dark-eyed Junco was split into two separate species: the Slate-colored Junco (*J. hyemalis*) and the Oregon Junco (*J. oreganus*), but it was determined that the two forms interbred with such frequency that they should be lumped into one species. Still, Oregon-type junco observations are typically reported separately from “Dark-eyed Junco,” much in the way that “Harlan’s” or “Kridler’s” forms of Red-tailed Hawk are reported.

Oregon-type Dark-eyed Juncos differ from all other forms via pink to reddish sides, and rufous-colored backs. Each winter, a number of Pacific coast-breeding “Oregon-type” junco reports are filed in Louisiana.

Much more rarely reported from Louisiana is the “Gray-headed” form of the Dark-eyed Junco, a southern Rocky Mountain breeder possessing pale, slate-colored plumage and a notably bright reddish patch on the back. To date, only nine “Gray-headed” Junco reports have been filed for Louisiana, the most recent involving an individual observed on 02 March 2000 in Bossier Parish by Shreveport area birders Kathy Johnson, Terry Davis, and others.



Vagrants

Any species of bird considered vagrant refers to those for which only a handful of records exist. In fact many of these species likely have only been documented in the state fewer than ten occasions. This does not suggest however, that the populations of these species is limited in any way as most would be considered common to abundant within their normal range.

First detected in Louisiana (13 December 1952) on the grounds of the Shreveport Municipal Airport by longtime birder Horace Jeter, **Smith's Longspur** (*Calcarius pictus*) has been recorded on only 14 additional occasions in our state; only two of which have occurred away from the Shreveport Airport. On 17 January 1956, D.S. Payne found one at the Natchitoches Airport, and on 17 January 1982, Dudley and Kathleen Harrington and others found two birds during the Reserve-Bonnet Carre Christmas Bird Count way down in St. John the Baptist Parish, near New Orleans. The most recent Shreveport Airport record came on 03 February 2008 of one bird observed by area birder Terry Davis and others.

Smith's Longspur's nesting grounds are limited to a thin band running from northern Alaska eastward through northern Ontario, along the southern edge of the Arctic Circle. Its regular wintering grounds are even smaller, consisting of most of Oklahoma and Arkansas, along with small

parts of Texas, Kansas, and northern Mississippi and Alabama.

Winter/non-breeding-plumaged Smith's Longspurs differ from other longspur species in that their necks and underparts are nearly completely buff-tan in color (vs. grayish or whitish in the other species). The flight call of Smith's Longspur is a typical longspur "rattle," but with sharp "click!" notes interspersed. Field guide author D. A. Sibley (*The Sibley Guide to Birds*, 2000) suggests that its flight song is "reminiscent of [the] rattle of cowbirds."

In late March of 1952 (the same year he found Louisiana's first Smith's Longspurs at the Shreveport Airport), longtime Louisiana birder Horace Jeter found Louisiana's first **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** (*Calcarius ornatus*) at the Logan Plantation airfield in Bossier Parish, just northeast of Shreveport, finding one there on that date, and then two more at the same location in the fall of that year.

In all, Jeter along with fellow Shreveport area birding partner Jim Stewart are responsible for nine of Louisiana's 14 total Chestnut-collared Longspur records, all nine of which came from Caddo Parish. Other Louisiana records for the Chestnut-collared Longspur include one from Madison Parish (John Battalio, 09 January 1988), one from an oil production platform at South Marsh Island Block 147 in the Gulf of Mexico (Brian Gibbons, 25 August 1998), and three from Cameron Parish (George Lowery, 20 November 1966; Steve Cardiff, 11 July 1993 [a breeding-plumaged bird]; Joe Kleiman, 22 March 1995).

Though smaller, and possessing shorter wings and tail than any other longspur, non-breeding-plumaged Chestnut-collared Longspurs are very difficult to identify, in that their field marks equate to a sort of "average" of the field marks of the other three species. The blackish, "Y" shaped mark along the center of an otherwise white tail (somewhat similar to the thinner, blackish "T" shaped mark of the white tail of McCown's Longspur), and its relatively softer "ka-diddle" flight call may assist in differentiating this species in some instances.

With a breeding range situated almost entirely within the U.S. Great Basin (Montana,

Wyoming, and the western Dakotas), **McCown's Longspur** (*Calcarius mccownii*) generally winters west of the 100th meridian in the United States, in the short-grass plains of western Kansas, Oklahoma, the panhandle and Trans Pecos regions of Texas, and into southern New Mexico and Arizona, and extreme northern Mexico.



This species did not become known to science until 1851, when army captain J. P. McCown collected two birds mixed in with a flock of Horned Larks near San Antonio, Texas.

To date, only two records of McCown's Longspur have been accepted for Louisiana. The first is of a bird observed for two days (30 November – 01 December) in New Orleans in the winter of 1979 by Jack Reinoehl. The second record consists of three birds observed in Jefferson Davis Parish on 27 January 1991, tentatively identified by ornithologist Ken Rosenberg, who was conducting fieldwork in the area, and subsequently confirmed by Steve Cardiff, Donna Dittmann, and other ornithologists.

In winter/non-breeding plumage, McCown's Longspur appears the palest and least-streaked of the four longspur species. In flight, its tail is almost totally white, save for a thin "T" shaped blackish area running along the center of the tail and onto the tips of most tail feathers. Its flight call consists of a short but somewhat "musical" rattle, superficially similar to that of the Lapland Longspur.

The **Green-tailed Towhee** (*Pipilo chlorurus*), considered a western U. S. species, occurs on a very rare basis during the winter months in Louisiana. At 7.25-inches, it is the smallest of the U.S. towhees.

In adult form it is a plainly-marked, unstreaked, grayish sparrow, suffused with dull yellowish-green coloration through its wings and tail. The only bright parts on this otherwise dull bird include a rufous crown, white throat, and charcoal-colored malar ("moustachial") line.

"...many of these species likely have only been documented in the state fewer than ten occasions."

Far less vocal during the winter months than the Eastern or Spotted towhees, this cryptically-colored species can be very difficult to detect, especially in dense scrub habitats. Over the past 60 years, only ten or so Green-tailed Towhee records have been filed for Louisiana, seven of which emanated from Cameron Parish. Records from outside of Cameron Parish include one from East Baton Rouge on 06 February 1883, one from northwestern Evangeline Parish on 28 December 2000, and most recently, one from Terrebonne Parish in February 2009.

Left photo:
McCown's Longspur
(Greg Lavaty)

Smith's Longspur
(Greg Lavaty)



Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*), found typically from the arid, grassy/mixed thorn scrub country of the southwestern United States (including the lower Texas coast) has been detected

Cassin's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Green tailed Towhee
(Greg Lavaty)



in Louisiana on only one occasion; a singing male found in Bossier Parish by Shreveport birder Terry Davis, on 10 May 2008, and subsequently viewed by many other birders.

Breeding throughout most of Alaska and northern Canada, the scrub-loving **American Tree Sparrow** (*Spizella arborea*) generally winters no further south than the Ozark region of Arkansas southwestward into the Rio Grande River delta of west Texas. During its winter sojourns, its habitat preferences expand from pure brush country to woodland edges, fallow fields, and agricultural hedgerows.

On only a few occasions, individual “sight record” (i.e. eye-witness accounts lacking hard evidence) birds have been reported from Louisiana. In *Louisiana Birds*, (1974), George Lowery, Jr. himself writes of an American Tree Sparrow that he was “certain that I saw on January 27, 1940, feeding with a horde of other sparrows on the side of the highway near Lottie during the severe cold spell of that memorable winter.”

Of the seven extant reports on file for American Tree Sparrow, only two records have been substantiated by hard evidence (audio, photo/video, or specimen) in Louisiana, 1) two specimens taken from a reported “flock” feeding near a residence nine miles east of Haynesville for nearly a month (Claiborne parish; 04 February – 02 March) in late winter of 1979, and 2) a photograph taken of an expired bird on an offshore oil production platform on 22 April 1998.

Similar in general appearance to non-breeding Chipping and Clay-colored sparrows, **Brewer’s Sparrow** (*Spizella breweri*) is a bird of western North America’s sage brush lands, short-grass prairies, and more occasionally, stunted/open-canopied conifer woodlands. Normally, this species winters in extreme southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, west Texas, and the mountainous regions of Mexico. On occasion a few birds stray eastward during fall migration, and are duly recorded in those eastern states fortunate enough to detect them.

In *Louisiana Birds*, (1974), George Lowery, Jr. wrote, “One was seen on a ridge near the Gulf beach at Cameron on December 6, 1952. Another was reported from Thibodaux on November 19, 1955 by Ava R. Tabor.” As far as we know, these are the

only two recorded instances of Brewer’s Sparrow in Louisiana.

Drabber and more vaguely patterned than non-breeding Chipping and Clay-colored sparrows, Brewer’s Sparrow is further distinguished from the former two species by its ill-defined, dull-gray supercilium (“eyebrow”), and thin but distinct white eye-ring.



The Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) **Lark Bunting**
(Greg Lavaty)

is a bird of the short-grass prairies of the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, and up into south-central Canada. During the winter months, it descends in large flocks into the southwestern United States and northern Mexico; with a few strays reported from points east nearly every year.

Large (to 7” total length) and husky, the male Lark Bunting is unmistakable in breeding plumage, possessing an all black body dramatically punctuated with large white wing patches and tail tip. Females and winter-plumaged males, on the other hand, are dull brownish and heavily streaked, like many other sparrow species. Regardless of plumage and season,

however, both males and females always possess the large white wing patches.

Sparrow expert Jim Rising (*The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, 1996) provides an interesting comment regarding the conservation status of the Lark Bunting: “Lark Buntings are among the least philopatric of the sparrows, appearing and breeding commonly in a place one year, only to be absent there the next. It is thus difficult to assess changes in their populations. Nonetheless, they appear to have been increasing slightly in numbers in recent years in their breeding range, but have declined significantly in numbers in California [fall migration, winter]. They are a species that would benefit from efforts to preserve



Baird's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

shortgrass and bunch grass prairies.”

In Louisiana, a number of Lark Bunting records are on file, the first of which is of a specimen obtained on 04 September 1952 on the roadside of LA 1 near Grand Isle by George Lowery, Jr. In *Louisiana Birds* (1974), Lowery mentions another

specimen taken on 23 December 1973 along the roadside of LA 23 near the community of Triumph (Plaquemines Parish) by ornithologists Bob Newman and Sidney Gauthreaux. More recently, single Lark Buntings have been reported from Calcasieu Parish on 26 April 1997, along the southern shores of Lake Ponchartrain near the Bucktown area of Metairie (Jefferson Parish) from 25 November – 14 December 1997, and in Cameron Parish on 09 April 1999.

Of the six *Ammodramus* species recorded in Louisiana, only **Baird's Sparrow** (*Ammodramus bairdii*) is not a regularly-occurring species. In fact Baird's Sparrow has been found on only one occasion in our state, a single bird observed by Steven Cardiff, Mac Myers, and Matt Pontiff four miles west of Rutherford Beach (Cameron Parish) on 27 April 2003.

Possessing one of the smallest of breeding and wintering ranges of any North American sparrow, Baird's Sparrow nests in the dry, short-grassed, windy hills of the upper Great Basin of the United States and Canada. Its normal wintering range covers parts of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and extreme northern Mexico.

The geographical analog of the White-throated Sparrow is the Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*), which occupies a far-western range (Alaska southward through California), most of which is unoccupied by the White-throated.

A bit larger than the White-throated Sparrow, the **Golden-crowned Sparrow** is a darker, duller bird; somewhat similar to the dull version of the White-throated, but lacking the buff-tan supercillia (“eyebrows”), resulting in a nearly concolor, medium gray face, with a yellowish forecrown and dark, blackish lateral crown stripes.

This far-western species has been recorded on only a few occasions in Louisiana. Most recently, wintering individuals have turned up on Louisiana's southwestern coast, near the town of Cameron, where long time Louisiana birder Mac Myers recorded one on 18 December 1993, followed six years later by an additional sighting from the same vicinity on 18 December 1999 by Peter Yaukey and David Muth.



Brewer's Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)

Birds In Trouble: Do Your Part to Help!

Here in Louisiana, the onset of fall brings with it many changes. One of these changes and perhaps one of our best kept secrets involves the abundance of migratory songbirds that can be found here, both those considered transient migrants that pass through and others considered temperate migrants that spend their winter months along the northern gulf coast. This includes hundreds of different species, many of which are considered part of the sparrow family.

Those individuals in the sparrow family that nest in Louisiana during the spring/summer months are joined by hordes of southbound migrants typically beginning in September/October each year. During this time, sparrow numbers swell across the state, occupying many different habitat types. Finding these birds should require little effort by interested birders. However, as noted, these birds can be difficult to observe as some species are exceedingly shy and others consistently occupy areas of dense cover. These habits not only make birding difficult but also impede life history study of this group and as such, only a scant bit of information is known about sparrows as a whole.

Like many species of songbirds, some species within the sparrow group are in trouble – their

populations are declining. There are many suggested causes for these declines, the most significant of which seems to be habitat loss both in the breeding and wintering grounds. Nest parasitism by cowbirds has been suggested as another causative factor. Direct predation and disease also take their toll. Defining these issues and conducting systematic surveys to determine current abundance and distributions are needed particularly for those species listed as “Species of Conservation Concern”.

Universities, through the support of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state departments of Wildlife and Fisheries, and non-governmental organizations are conducting research on the life histories of many species of songbirds including sparrows. Student biologists at universities across the country are conducting research that have more clearly defined the ranges of these birds, the habitat conditions needed during the breeding season, the factors impacting nesting productivity and nesting success, and many other factors that are important in the survival of these birds. More recently here in Louisiana, some studies have been underway to find out more about this group including Seaside, Savannah, and Bachman’s sparrows. But many questions still exist and further work is warranted.

Seaside Sparrow
(Greg Lavaty)



What Can You Do?

Educate yourself! Become aware of the efforts of conservation organizations that help protect and manage Louisiana’s wild habitats and the songbirds that rely on them.

Keep your cats indoors and make sure that they are spayed or neutered! Each year it is estimated that cats kill hundreds of millions of birds.

Apply affective techniques that prevent birds from flying into your glass windows both at home and at work. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of birds die annually by flying into plate glass windows. This is particularly the case when habitat is reflected by large panes of glass, or when transparent glass allows views of habitat on the other side of a building or home.

Participate in local Christmas Bird Counts! Each year around Christmas, many small groups of people at the local level join in the counting of birds over a one day period. Much of our understanding about bird distribution particularly in winter comes from these efforts.

Help with habitat restoration! Several of the organizations below have volunteer corps that help make the numerous projects initiated each year a success. These organizations are always looking for new volunteers.

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program

www.btnep.org
800 259-0869

Louisiana Ornithological Society

www.losbird.org

Louisiana Bird Resource Center

www.lsu.edu/biirdcenter

Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries

<http://www.wlf.state.la.us>

The Louisiana Nature Conservancy

www.nature.org/Louisiana
225 338-1040

Louisiana Wildlife Federation

www.lawildlife.org

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

www.gcbo.org 979 480-0999

American Bird Conservancy

www.abcbirds.org 888 247-3624

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

www.fws.gov/birds

It is illegal to harass or kill all species of songbirds. Report violations to the appropriate agencies.

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

1-800-442-2511

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

1-337-291-3114

Become a volunteer and help with coastal restoration. The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program maintains a volunteer program and is always looking for new members. Call us at 800 259-0869 or visit the web site <http://volunteer.btnep.org/>

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