



Sparrows In Winter

Rich Stallcup

EVEN THE COMMON SORTS of sparrows bring joy and light to many people, who feed and care for them through the short, gloomy winter days. These little songbirds are perky, scrappy, and really beautiful if you take time for a close look. As an added "bonus," when early spring rolls around you get to see them eat your new lawn and vegetable garden.

Uninteresting and unchallenging? Maybe to some, but those people are only seeing the surface. Looking deeper, there is complexity, mystery and wonder.

The "Crowned" Sparrows — *Zonotrichia*

White-crowned Sparrows: There are five subspecies of White-crowns in North America, and four of them are common members of California's avifauna. Except for one, all these forms are migratory — racking up at least 1000 miles annually (and some much more). Nuttall's White-crown (*Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli*) — which looks much like the Puget Sound form and probably used to be part of it — discovered eons ago that the coast of central California, from Mendocino to Santa Barbara, was a good place to live year-round. Mild winters, fog-shaded summers, chaparral, and nine-grain crusts from tofu sandwiches in the parking lot at Point Lobos aren't hard to take at all — especially when those long, exhausting flights can be avoided. Nuttall's are the dingiest White-crowns, with yellow bills and brown backs with black stripes, and they are never found more than a couple of miles from the ocean or large estuaries. Most live their whole lives within or very near the territory in which they were born.

Puget Sound White-crowns (*Z. l. pugetensis*) nest from British Columbia to northwestern California and winter from central California into Mexico. The first migrants in fall usually pass central California in mid-September, and large numbers arrive by the end of the month, many to spend the winter. These, too, have yellow bills and brown

backs with black stripes, and although generally "brighter" than Nuttall's, they look a lot like them. Unlike Nuttall's, *pugetensis* is common inland as well as along the narrow coastal strip.

Gambell's White-crowns (*Z. l. gambelli*) have orangy bills, and their backs are pale gray with purplish stripes; they are easy to tell from the yellow-billed, brown-backed types above. Gambell's nest in Alaska and Canada and winter all over the western states (but are outnumbered by *nuttalli* and *pugetensis* along the outer California coast) and west Mexico.

The white eyebrow (tan in hatching-year birds) of the three races listed above begins at the base of the upper mandible. In the following two, it begins at the eye. Once a person becomes familiar with the "white-lored" forms (Nuttall's, *putensis*, and Gambell's), a good view of either of the other two will be a pleasant surprise. In fresh plumage they are much prettier than their field-guide portraits.

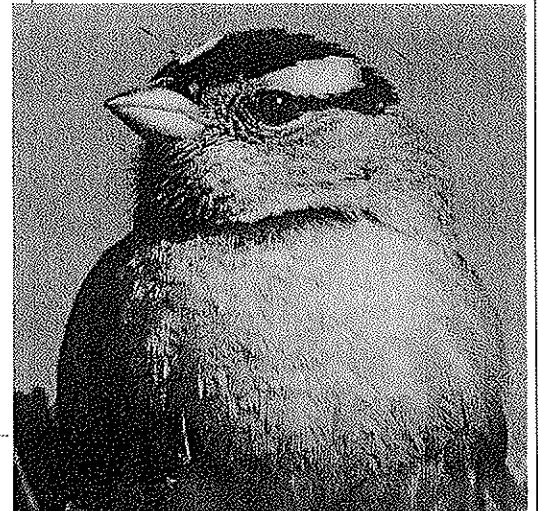
The "Mountain" (*Z. l. oriantha*) and the "Eastern" (*Z. l. leucophrys*) White-crowns cannot be told apart except by song or range, so silent, out-of-range examples must remain unnamed. These excellent, pink-billed, black-lored birds are not expected in California west of the high Sierra Nevada, where *oriantha* nests.

White-crowned Sparrows: a black-lored type (below) and adult Nuttall's (right).



In late September and October, young Golden-crowned Sparrows arrive to join their White-crowned relatives for the winter. Beginning birders may have trouble telling them from young White-crowns (yellow-billed types), since their bodies look exactly alike. Here's what to look for: Golden-crowns have undivided brown crowns and grayish bills. Young White-crowns have a narrow, tan, *median* crown stripe that divides into two toward the back, with darker, reddish-brown *lateral* crown stripes. Their bills are colored yellow, orange, or pink.

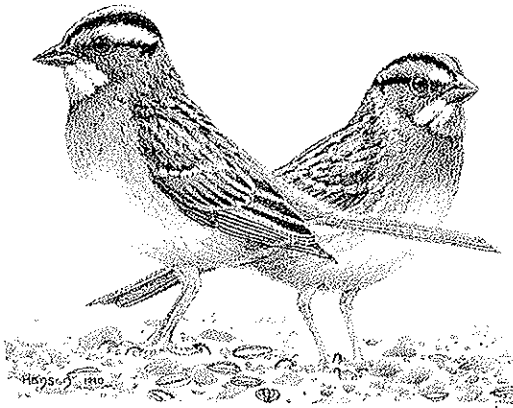
White-throated Sparrows have bigger, flatter heads and thicker necks than either White- or Golden-crowns, and their wing coverts are reddish, allowing you to recog-



nize them from behind. Because of a slight habitat difference along the coast, White-throated Sparrows here are more often found in flocks of Golden-crowned Sparrows than of White-crowned Sparrows.

Crowns of Crowned Sparrows: White-crowned Sparrows with brown and tan head stripes are less than one year old. Once they molt (during their first winter through spring) to black and white stripes, they will always have "adult" crowns. Golden-crowned Sparrows are different, in that individuals showing gold, black, and gray crowns just before they head north in late April will return the following late September with dull brownish crowns — looking much like the young of that year.

F O C U S 3 2



White-throated Sparrows (above). Winter sparrows and friends at a feeder (right).

For Golden Crowned Sparrows, “breeding” and “winter” plumages are more useful terms than “immature” and “adult.” All White-throated Sparrows in their first winter have brown and tan crown stripes, but they do not all molt them to black and white! A significant percentage of the *adult* breeding population has brown and tan crown stripes: this is a polymorphic species. Isn’t all this strange?

Song, Lincoln, and Swamp — Melospizas

THE A.O.U. *Checklist of North American Birds* lists 31 sub-species of Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*), and while we do not recommend offhand racial identification in the field (“Hello, rare-bird alert?, I want to report a Los Coronados Island Song Sparrow at my feeder in Milpitas”), birds at extreme ends of the geographic cline are *not* much alike. Dark gray-brown forms in the Aleutians are as big as Rufous-sided Towhees and could be mistaken here for Fox Sparrows, whereas desert Song Sparrows are small, pallid, and barely streaked below. Bay Area types are fairly normal-looking, except for two that live in northern tidal marshes, which have heavy black streaking and extra big bills. Juveniles of *M. m. gouldii*

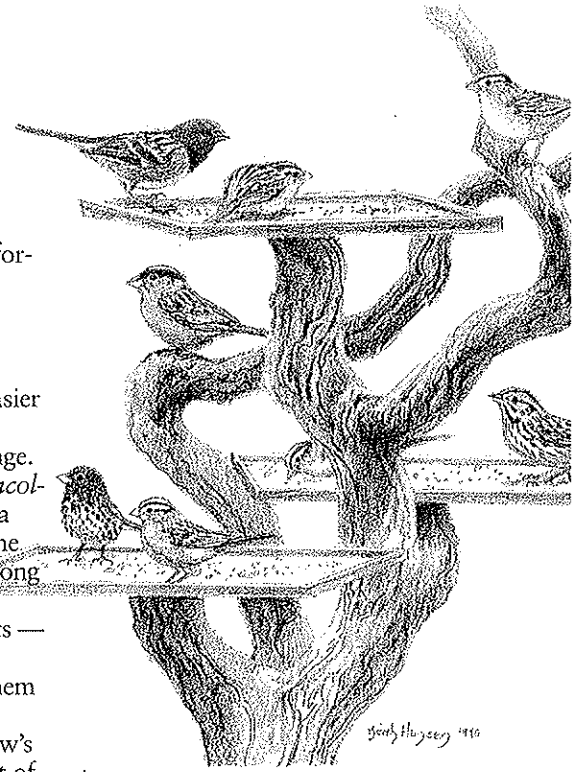
(the breeder in central coastal California) have buffy upper breasts and malar stripes, are slightly streaked below, and are often mistaken for Lincoln’s Sparrows.

Real Lincoln’s Sparrows are easier than Song Sparrows, because they look the same throughout their range. Once properly introduced to *M. lincolni*, you will always recognize it at a glance. Swamp Sparrows, rare in the west, look and act like “normal” Song Sparrows but lack heavy ventral streaking. Their dorsal wing coverts — bright rusty — and (in immatures) crown and throat patterns make them very like brown-crowned White-throated Sparrows. Swamp Sparrow’s call is distinctive: it sounds like that of Black Phoebe. So, if you are looking over a vegetated wetland and hear but do not see a Black Phoebe . . . !

Fox Sparrow — Passerella

THESE ARE ONLY 18 sub-species of Fox Sparrows (*Passerella iliaca*) but they all fall into one of three groups — the gray, brown, or red group. Those that nest in the central Sierras have gray heads, brown bodies, and reddish tails: they are in the gray group. The all dark-chocolate ones, common along the coast here in winter, come from British Columbian forests and are in the brown group. Rarely, in fall or winter, a Fox Sparrow from the red group is found. Most of these will be *P. i. zaboria* from central Alaska, though one seen on Point Reyes in June 1992 was thought to represent the nominate race *P. i. iliaca* from somewhere in northeastern Canada.

HAVING FOLLOWED this discourse through the musical generic names of some dozen or more winter sparrows, why not buy a bag of bird seed at the supermarket: sparrows like the bulk kind better than more expensive, special kinds. Scatter it in an open area on a board or stump near cover. Soon you will have a lot of new feathered friends — bright-eyed featherballs of controlled energy. Watch them, wonder, and learn where they came from, let them keep



the deep-winter blues away . . . and protect them from cats! If you only get House Sparrows, quit your job, pack up your family and stuff, and move.

Farallon Patrol Log

THESE ARE THE SKIPPERS and vessels of the Farallon Patrol — the corps of expert sailors who volunteer to carry PRBO staff and supplies across the Gulf of the Farallones — that made runs to the island during the summer and early fall of 1992. Special thanks to the Farallon Patrol for scheduling extra visits to the islands in support of PRBO’s Farallon Research.

JUNE 6	Oscar Cook	<i>Sampaquita</i>
JUNE 17	Tom Charkins	<i>Kumbaya</i>
JUNE 27	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
JULY 4	Ron Levine	<i>Nausicaa</i>
JULY 11	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
JULY 18	Oscar Fisher	<i>Leaping Warrior</i>
JULY 22	Tom Charkins	<i>Kumbaya</i>
AUG 1	Bill Maloney	<i>Paloma</i>
AUG 15	Peter Schultz	<i>Hansiatic</i>
AUG 19	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
AUG 29	Mary Buckman	<i>Shantung</i>
SEPT 12	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
SEPT 26	Bob Mehaffy	<i>Carrick Lee</i>