

## November 2008: Meditations on Fall Sparrows

For most people, LBJ is a nickname for our thirty-sixth president, but for bird-watchers, it's short for "little brown job." Anyone who's ever watched the tail end of a tiny sparrow disappear into a bush never to be seen again will understand the usefulness of this acronym. To call something an LBJ is not a dismissal, but more often a frustrated acknowledgement of the challenges of telling apart the different species of sparrows.

We don't register the fall influx of sparrows like we do the spring return of songbirds--bright oriole, jewel-like hummingbird, lipstick red cardinal, warbler in fresh yellow and blue breeding plumage. The drab coloring of sparrows, especially those in "off-season" plumage, effectively camouflages them in this season in which everything seems cloaked in browns and greys. Flocks of sparrows scatter and swirl roadside in uncanny imitation of dead leaves stirred by the wake of a passing car or chilly gust--living incarnations of autumn. A walk through a field flushes dozens of sparrows glutting on the late harvest of seeds from the bent, dried grasses. Their simple chip notes punctuate brush piles and the edges of yards buried in fallen leaves. Scuffles in the leaves beside the trail or crashing around in the underbrush turns out to be, after much careful searching, a traveling group of white-throated sparrows vigorously kicking the leaves in search of a meal.

Over the course of the year, with some effort, luck, good binoculars, and a reliable field guide, you could potentially find twenty species of sparrow in Maine. Fewer than half a dozen, however, are common possibilities during the winter--including the American tree sparrow, which shifts south from its sub-Arctic breeding grounds to winter in these relatively warmer climes. Maine is a tree sparrow's Florida. Just as we like to (somewhat erroneously) regard the robin as a harbinger of spring, the appearance of the tree sparrow is a reliable indicator that winter's cold breath is on our necks.

Fall, then, is a significant transitional period during which many sparrow species pass through Maine, migrating southward from their breeding grounds in the Canadian boreal forests. For those with an interest in and attention to detail, learning to tell one kind of sparrow from another is a great lesson in patience. Being able to observe a mixed flock of sparrows gleaning hayseed in a mown field can be as useful as hours spent studying a bird book. Of course, many bird-watchers prefer to spend their time focusing on something a little more interesting than a bunch of LBJs. Tromping through dried up goldenrod and

timothy after a bunch of nearly invisible brown birds isn't as dramatic as hawk watching on a mountain summit or scanning the nearest pond or river for the arrival of "winter" ducks. But for those who like a more subtle type of challenge, it can be rewarding in its own weird way.

From years of fall birding on the Maine coast, I have learned, for example, how to distinguish the buff breast and light lore (the space between the bill and eye) of the clay-colored sparrow from the grey breast and dark lore of the chipping sparrow. The defined edges of the streaking on a Lincoln's sparrow's breast have become more obvious to me in comparison to the song sparrow's longer, heavier streaks. The Savannah sparrow's "tseep" as it flits from the top of a stone on Beech Hill has impressed itself in my sound memory, as has the distinct song of the Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow in Weskeag Marsh--the sound of a drop of water hitting a hot frying pan. And I now know that the bird with the clear breast and jaunty black- and white-striped crown is the same species as the one with the rusty cap--the former is a full adult white-crowned sparrow, the other is a first-fall bird.



Savannah Sparrow on Beech Hill Preserve, Rockport; photo by Brian Willson

This all sounds a bit arcane, but I think anyone can understand the pleasure of learning more about something that one loves. And I love those LBJs, the mysterious sparrows. I love getting a long, close look at one and being able to really appreciate the intricate patterns of sepia, umber, charcoal, and buff in their feathers, as well as details--pink bill of the field sparrow, lark sparrow's black breast spot and patterned face, rufous wing feathers of the swamp sparrow. Or eavesdropping on a first year white-throated sparrow singing a "practice" song to itself, a weak echo of the true song that will resonate through the misty Maine woods next spring. Or flushing the one hold-over song sparrow in the office yard the morning we get our first dusting of snow, inordinately pleased the bird has lingered to keep the lawn "alive" as the grasses and trees around us have faded and diminished. My idea of this form of "brown study" is not a melancholy or philosophical one, but more a fascinated intensity--there is so much to see when we take the time to observe closely something we normally overlook.

One of the few lines from Shakespeare that I remember well (with apologies to my professors; I was an English major) contains a sparrow. As Hamlet heads off to his inauspicious fencing match with Laertes, his friend Horatio senses doom and tries to talk him out of it. In response, Hamlet declares, "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (Act 5, Scene 2). By this I think he means that the fate of each of us, even a creature as humble as a sparrow, is guided by something greater than individual choice: what will be, will be. This brief moment from great English literature seems particularly appropriate this time of year (in addition to its inclusion of a sparrow and an unintended pun on "fall"). The inescapable cycle of the seasons pulls us all--humans and sparrows alike--into winter. Aside from migrating south, there's nothing we can do about it. (And even in Florida, we're still at the mercy of Mother Nature.) So we may as well enjoy the ride, and perhaps try to take notice of a few of those LBJs while we're at it.

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