



A juvenile Swamp Sparrow, attracted by my pishing, perched just outside my SUV window



Field Sparrows, while found foraging with visiting sparrows, are year-round residents of the Lower Cape Fear

## **Brunswick Wildlife Carolina Birding on such a Winter's Day**

The whining had gotten loud and unbearable. Ditto the sniveling and gnashing of teeth. Unfortunately, I was the one making the disgusting noises, bemoaning a missed birding festival on the Outer Banks and having to endure many rainy days since.

I finally forced myself out into the gloom of another drizzly day...horrible light for photography...but at least the whining was gone. All the leaves were brown and the sky was gray, I went out birding on a winter's day.

It wasn't the mamma of all birding trips...or even the pappa...but one of those days when the quality of observations more than made up for the small quantity of species. For me, quality always trumps quantity.

My only goal was to eventually arrive at Brunswick Town and find Rusty Blackbirds. Some doofus (me again) forgot to fill my tank before the trip so I drove past my intended turn at Governors Road to gas up. As it turned out, serendipity was riding shotgun. My first birding stop, only because it was on my revised route, was the new Town Creek Elementary School. It turned out to be a good site for sparrows.

I drove the road in front of the school and watched a large flock of sparrows cross the road from left to right in front of me. They came out of good sparrow habitat...the tree line and its grass border running down to the road. The flock included well over 100 Chipping Sparrows plus a few other sparrow species like Savannah, Field, Song, and White-throated. I believe it was the largest Chipping Sparrow flock I have ever seen.

Unfortunately I did not get photos or a better feel for the size of flock because I could not outflank them. I kept herding them with my SUV down the road and into the woods. At least driving is better than walking because a vehicle acts as a blind. A walking birder is repeatedly punished as the little guys dive into the grass and dense tree cover.

I collected my first nugget of quality at the school...hearing a White-throated Sparrow singing its beautiful song. Hear for yourself courtesy of Cornell's Macaulay Library: <http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/15610>.

Governors Road through the county to NC 133 and Brunswick Town was the next leg of my trip. On the unpaved portion of the road, about a mile from the intersection with Funston Road and the farms, I stopped and "pished" at one of my regular sparrow sites. This site has lots of brush, grass, and pine tree cover on one side of the road plus a brushy field where the trees have been harvested on the other.

Pishing? Pete Dunne in his book *The Art of Pishing* defines pishing as "an onomatopoeic term applied to the orally produced noises made by bird watchers to lure songbirds out of cover." Dang! I've wanted to use "onomatopoeic" since senior English class!

Pishing noises generally mimic a scolding bird like a wren or titmouse. Dunne also includes a range of other bird attracting sounds like squeaks, chips, and imitations of actual bird sounds in his definition. I recommend his book if you want to be serious about attracting birds in the field, especially since it includes a teaching CD you can keep in your car.

My pishing quickly yielded another large flock of chippies plus Savanna and Field Sparrows. A curious Swamp Sparrow posed just outside my window looking for the pishing source.

Savannah Sparrows are often found in winter sparrow flocks. Always check the wire fences around Funston Farms for Savannahs (and other species) like the one in the photo. They are generally identified by a white supercilium (eyebrow stripe) with some yellow near the front of the eye and a white median crown stripe.

A quick stop at Orton Pond yielded an Osprey that still had not migrated south plus a couple of Anhinga. Also 35 Ring-necked Ducks had moved into their winter quarters.

Finally at Brunswick Town, I found another large flock of chippies and a small flock of five Rusty Blackbirds. Waiting for me at Brunswick Town was my best quality experience for the day. I had stereo Hermit Thrushes!

One was about fifty yards to my left and another about the same distance to my right, taking turns singing their beautiful flute-like song at each other. I then realized I had one about 25 feet slightly above and in front of me, "chupping" at me instead of singing. Maybe he was the conductor of the symphony.

The thrush's song is also worth a listen: <http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/111136>.

John Ennis



House Wrens are one of the three species of wrens that overwinter in our area



A few overwintering Savannah Sparrows were with each sparrow flock