



## **Brunswick Wildlife Winter Sparrows**

They're here! By the time of our first heavy frost, a multitude of winter sparrows have arrived in the Lower Cape Fear. Sparrows are often a huge challenge to identify but I love the challenge. And they are as difficult to photograph as they are to identify.

Until you learn to carefully look for details, you may think of them as nondescript. Even with experience, these guys are fast to head for deep grass or a thicket which adds to the challenge. With all species, especially sparrows, the process of elimination is key and birds should be studied in your binoculars as long as possible before referencing a field guide.

Sometimes, when asked about a sparrow, I have to just say "one of the brown species", which narrows it down to any one of approximately nineteen species that may be seen in North Carolina.

Of the nineteen, four are year-round residents and another fifteen overwinter. Seven of the fifteen are uncommon or vagrants from the west. So occurrence narrows the field of possibilities a little.

One resident and two visitors are salt marsh sparrows. Their habitat may be used to eliminate them from an identification puzzle and their uniqueness will be explored in a future article. The list for the process of elimination just got shorter.

The remaining residents (Bachman's, Chipping, and Field) and the remaining winter sparrows (Savannah, Grasshopper, Fox, Song, Swamp, and White-throated) should be studied intensively in field guides and at your feeders. Armed with this knowledge base, you will be more ready for field identification.

Most times birders will get a quick, partial look at a sparrow so remembering field marks is essential. The first step is easy. Sparrows can be placed into two categories: those species that have streaks on their chest and flanks and those that have little or no streaking.

The next step is to mentally record as many details about the face and beak as possible. Finally, there are other field marks such as color (e.g. rufous or dull brown), size and length of the tail, habitat/niche, notched tail, white outer tail feathers, and presence of an eye-ring.

The photos show our three most common winter sparrows, to be used as an identification example. Note the Song and Savannah Sparrows have breast streaks and the Swamp Sparrow has very light streaking.

A very important, basic identification skill is to be able to differentiate Song and Savannah Sparrows. The Savannah generally has a white supercilium (eyebrow stripe) with some yellow near the front of the eye and is not as heavily streaked on its breast as the Song. The Song Sparrow has heavy streaking...likened to stripes of melted chocolate...and the streaks generally converge in the middle forming a breast spot. Finally, the Song has a noticeably longer tail in proportion to its body length when compared to a Savannah.

The Swamp Sparrow, closely related to the Song, has a grayish, faintly streaked breast with buffy flanks. It has a gray supercilium with a dark post-ocular eyeline and whitish throat. Overall the Swamp is darker and more richly colored than the other two.

These photos were all taken near Southport during the winter. Sparrows vary greatly depending on season, age, feather wear, and subspecies so good field guides are essential.

Sometimes a field guide with photos is best and other times one with illustrations may be more helpful so I recommend having at least one of each. For my photographic guide, I use *Sparrows of the United States and Canada: The Photographic Guide* by Beadle and Rising because it has multiple photos of a species that differ by season, age, and subspecies.

John Ennis

*In counting the sparrows that may be found in the Lower Cape Fear, I categorized three species (including the Song Sparrow) as winter species instead of residents. They nest nearby in the state and have nested in our area in the past but may not be currently breeding here.*

