



The Bedford Audubon Society

Kwik-Key

**To Sparrows of the
Lower Hudson Valley**

By:

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Sparrow Photo Courtesy of and Copyright by Rick Paris

Introduction

Ornithology, the study of birds, can be very complicated in certain families of birds. Sparrows are just one of the many families that give bird watchers a great deal of trouble. Sparrows are a family of birds known as *Emberizidae*. They are ground-dwelling birds with short, conical bills. All sparrows feed on seeds in the winter and mainly insects in the summer. Their nests are typically cups of grass found in shrubby areas or on the ground. Some species flock, others do not; some have specific habitat requirements and some do not. By looking for certain characteristics, one will find that it can be quite easy to identify sparrows.

This booklet is designed to help anyone with identifying sparrows in the Lower Hudson Valley. It is geared towards people with rudimentary knowledge of birds and is not overly technical. This "Kwik Key" format makes it easier for quick identification; however, it is not fool-proof. This guide is not intended for single-handed identification. CD's of sparrow songs as well as field guides are also available at many birding stores and online. [There is also a list of field identification tips for sparrows;](#) see *Things to Look For* on page 3. A glossary of terms is available on page 10.

Note: Dickcissels and House Sparrows are not members of the family *Emberizidae*. Not only do Song Sparrows have a dark central breast spot with breast streaking but so can the Savannah Sparrow and Lincoln's Sparrow. There is a tan variant of the White-throated Sparrow which has tan crown striping, not white and a buffy washed breast, not clean white.

Things to Look For

- The bird's *general color*
 - The color of its crown
 - The color of its bill
 - The breast markings
 - The presence or absence of throat patches
 - Any other distinct characteristics, behavior, etc.
 - The habitat the bird is in
 - The tail feather coloration
- Dickcissel
 - American Tree Sparrow
 - Field Sparrow
 - Chipping Sparrow
 - Grasshopper Sparrow
 - Henslow's Sparrow
 - Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
 - Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow
 - Seaside Sparrow
 - Savannah Sparrow
 - Vesper Sparrow
 - Lark Sparrow
 - White-throated Sparrow
 - White-crowned Sparrow
 - Fox Sparrow
 - Song Sparrow
 - Lincoln's Sparrow
 - Swamp Sparrow
 - Dark-eyed Junco
 - House Sparrow

Kwik-Key to Sparrows of Westchester County

Step 1. When was it observed?

- a. Summer (June - August)..... Go to Step 2
 - b. Winter (December-February)..... Go to Step 8
 - c. Spring/Fall (March-May, September-November)..... Go to Step 12
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Step 2. What color striping is on its head?

- A. Rusty-red and gray..... Go to Step 3
 - B. Yellowish orange and dark gray..... Go to Step 4
 - C. Black and white with white throat patch; yellow lores..... **White-throated Sparrow**
 - D. Rusty-red and white..... **Chipping Sparrow**
 - E. Indistinct..... Go to Step 5
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Step 3. What color is its bill?

- A. Pink..... **Field Sparrow**
 - B. Dark; has white throat patch..... **Swamp Sparrow**
 - C. Dark; has black throat patch..... **House Sparrow (male)**
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Step 4. What habitat is it living in?

- A. Inhabits salt marshes..... Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow
 - B. Inhabits grassy fields..... Henslow's Sparrow (rare)
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Step 5. What habitat is it living in?

- A. Grassy fields..... Go to Step 6
 - B. Other..... Go to Step 7
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Step 6. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. Light colored, notched tail..... Vesper Sparrow
 - B. All dark, notched tail; yellowish tint on crown..... Savannah Sparrow
 - C. Buffy washed breast; short tail; lacks malar stripe..... Grasshopper Sparrow
 - D. Usually dark central breast spot; unnotched tail..... Song Sparrow
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Step 7. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. Inhabits shrubby areas; breast streaking..... Song Sparrow
 - B. Inhabits salt marsh; dark overall; yellow lores; white throat.. Seaside Sparrow
 - C. Inhabits urban areas; lacks breast streaking..... House Sparrow (female)
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Step 8. What color striping is on its head?

- A. Rusty-red and gray..... Go to Step 9
 - B. Black and white; white throat patch..... **White-throated Sparrow**
 - C. Rusty-red and white; lacks central breast spot..... **Chipping Sparrow**
 - D. Rusty-red and white; central breast spot..... **Lark Sparrow (rare)**
 - E. Orange and dark gray; inhabits salt marsh..... **Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow**
 - F. Yellow and dark; yellow breast; white throat..... **Dickcissel (female)**
 - G. Same as F; black "V" on throat..... **Dickcissel (male)**
 - H. Indistinct..... Go to Step 11
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Step 9. What color is its bill?

- A. Dull colored; breast streaking; unnotched tail..... **Song Sparrow**
 - B. Dull colored; lacks breast streaking; black throat..... **House Sparrow (male)**
 - C. Bicolored; dark central breast spot; lacks breast streaking.... **American Tree Sparrow**
 - D. Pink..... **Field Sparrow**
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Step 10. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. Breast streaking; dark central breast spot..... **Song Sparrow**
 - B. Lacks breast streaking; clean look..... **Swamp Sparrow**
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Step 11. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. Inhabits salt marsh; darkish overall; yellow lores..... Seaside Sparrow
 - B. Inhabits grassy fields; dark breast streaking..... Savannah Sparrow
 - C. Rusty-colored; has small rusty breast spots..... Fox Sparrow
 - D. Pink bill; dark gray overall; flocks on ground..... Dark-eyed Junco
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Step 12. What color striping is on its head?

- A. Rusty-red and gray..... Go to Step 13
 - B. Rusty-red and white (Note: Becomes drab by mid-September).... Chipping Sparrow
 - C. Rusty-red and white; bold central breast spot..... Lark Sparrow (rare)
 - D. Black and white..... Go to Step 14
 - E. Yellowish orange and dark gray..... Go to Step 15
 - F. Yellow and dark; white throat patch and yellow breast..... Dickcissel (female)
 - G. Indistinct..... Go to Step 17
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Step 13. What color is its bill?

- A. Bicolored..... American Tree Sparrow
 - B. Pink..... Field Sparrow
 - C. Dark; has white throat patch..... Swamp Sparrow
 - D. Dark; has black throat patch..... House Sparrow
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Step 14. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. White throat patch; yellow lores..... **White-throated Sparrow**
 - B. Lacks white throat patch; pink bill..... **White-crowned Sparrow**
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Step 15. What habitat is it living in?

- A. Grassy fields; Rufous-edged tertials; breast streaking..... **Henslow's Sparrow (rare)**
 - B. Marshes..... **Go to Step 16**
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Step 16. What are its distinct characteristics?

- A. Yellowish underparts; indistinct breast streaks..... **Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow**
 - B. Yellowish underparts; distinct breast streaks..... **Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow**
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Step 17. What type of breast marking does it have?

- A. Distinctly streaked..... **Go to Step 18**
 - B. Finely streaked; white throat patch..... **Dickcissel (first winter)**
 - B. Rusty-spotted; Inhabits woods; rusty overall..... **Fox Sparrow**
 - C. Nonexistent; Inhabits grasses; buffy wash..... **Grasshopper Sparrow**
 - D. Dark "bib" contrast with white belly; pink bill; Dark overall..... **Dark-eyed Junco**
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Step 18. What are their distinct characteristics?

- A. Inhabits salt marsh; darkish overall; yellow lores..... **Seaside Sparrow**
- B. Inhabits brushy areas; buffy wash on streaked breast..... **Lincoln's Sparrow**
- C. Inhabits grassy fields; lacks buffy wash on breast..... **Savannah Sparrow**
- D. Distinct dark breast spot; unnotched tail..... **Song Sparrow**

Glossary of Terms

Crown:	The top of the head between the forehead and the back of the head.
Lore (lôr):	The space between the eyes and the bill of the bird.
Malar (ma/l?r:	The feathers along side the lower jaw.
Nape:	The back of the neck.
Primaries:	The outermost set of flight feathers
Secondaries:	The long flight feathers located closer to the body and directly next to the primaries.
Tertial (tûr/sh?l):	The feathers that rest on top of the secondaries.

Acknowledgments

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 - Sibley, David A. The Sibley Guide to Birds. New York: Chanticleer P, 2000.
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