

MAY 15 - 31, 2018 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

SPARROWS-THOSE LITTLE BROWN JOBS



(1) Song Sparrow, *Melospiza melodia*, singing, notice dark brown area beside chin and white throat.
© Dick Harlow

I have been asked to give some pointers on identifying sparrows, otherwise known as those "little brown jobs." I have two in this note and I will discuss a few more in future notes.

Sparrows can be very difficult to identify, consequently the term "Little Brown Jobs." However, if you want to try and demystify all those little brown birds you see flitting about there are certain characteristics you need to take into account.

Two common sparrows we will deal with are the Song Sparrow and the Chipping Sparrow.

Picture (1) is a male Song Sparrow singing to attract a mate. It is a male because females do not T-up and sing. The markings for this bird that are notable are the stripes on the chest that lead to a central dark brown spot or blotch found in the middle of its chest, just before the belly, see picture (2).

If you look at the eye in pictures (1) and (3) you will see a light gray band or off-white eyebrow that leads from the bill over the eye back to the nape of the neck. Also notice the dark brown almost black splotch beside the white throat. These characteristics along with its white throat dark rusty-brown spot in the middle of its chest should key in on this species. All the field guides will tell you that all Song Sparrows have a rounded tail. Looking at picture (2) one would question that characteristic. This simply means that you need to observe several characteristics to determine species.

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(2) **Song Sparrow** ventral view of central brown spot. © Dick Harlow

The Song Sparrow is found throughout the United States, including parts of Alaska as well in Canada. There are many subspecies throughout this range, so the focus should be local; what does our Song Sparrow look like. We are unlikely to see a Song Sparrow from California here in Vermont.

Picture (3) is shown so that you can see the colors of the head, back and sides. Also, although you could see a male singing from a shrub or low bush, these birds tend to be found close to the ground. They will nest on the ground well camouflaged, or in a shrub especially if it is in a thicket or along a stream.



(3) **Song Sparrow**, notice the coloration and markings on its back, head and sides. © Dick Harlow

CHIPPING SPARROW

First, this is a small sparrow. Picture (4), taken in the Spring, you can see that this sparrow is quite striking. Rusty red head cap, clear gray belly and under tail coverts, gray over the eye band and a light dark line through the eye to the nape of the neck. This is a male in spring plumage singing on territory.

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Picture (5) is a Chipping Sparrows that is coming in for a landing on top of a bird box to investigate the occupants. This picture was taken in August a month before molt time.



(4) **Chipping Sparrow**, *Spizella passerina*
© Tringa Photography

Notice the rusty cap in (5) is not as rusty as in (4) and the gray breast and belly have turned almost white due to plumage wear. Both the cap on top of the head, the belly feathers as well as the wing feathers develop feather wear throughout the summer. One of the reasons birds need to molt twice in a season. First just before migration north in spring and again in the Fall before moving south. During the Spring and Summer a great deal of feather wear is caused by stress protecting territory from rivals along with the trials and tribulations of mating and caring for young as well as defending territory.

Again this is a small sparrow, try and visualize the size here. The Song Sparrow in picture (3) is about half again bigger than the Chipping Sparrow.

The best time to focus on trying to identify difficult species like sparrows or warblers is in the Spring. That is when their plumage is bright, colorful and striking. When Fall approaches birds' plumages have seen a great deal of wear and tear; and before they start their Fall molt into Winter plumage they can look quite shabby. Once the molt is completed, some species take on a completely different look which can be confusing unless you have worked on honing-in on these transitional changes.



(5) **Chipping Sparrow**, Fall, plumage is becoming bedraggled © Dick Harlow

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OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

White-tailed Deer – 3

AMPHIBIANS

Leopard Frog

Bull Frog

BUTTERFLIES

Cabbage White

Clouded Sulphur

Silvery Blue

Mourning Cloak

Weather Tidbits

Month of **MAY 15-31, 2018**

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 12.0 mm or 0.47 inches

Overcast Days: 10