



October 13, 2023

Let's Talk Sparrows!

As the temperatures drop and the leaves begin to fall, the forests and prairies come alive with sparrows. Although they may be more muted in their color than other songbirds, and even confusing in their many shades of brown, many sparrows are quite beautiful in voice and plumage and right now is a great time to observe them.

Around 20 species of sparrows can be found in Iowa throughout the year. Twelve species, like Song, Field, and Swamp Sparrows, spend the summer in Iowa and nest in our forests, prairies, wetlands, and agricultural lands. Some of these species may also be seen in lower numbers in winter, but most migrate to the southern US or Mexico for winter.

But for several species, like American Tree Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos, Iowa is “south for the winter.” Still others, like White-throated, LeConte’s, and Lincoln’s Sparrows are only seen for a few weeks each year as they migrate through the state, breeding north of us, and wintering south of us. Outside of the breeding season, sparrows tend to flock together and seeing large numbers of individuals is common for certain species. Late September into October is an excellent time of year to see the wide diversity of the sparrow family in Iowa as breeding birds begin to leave and migrants and wintering species arrive.



Dark-eyed Junco: Photo credit Aaron Brees

One of Iowa's most recognizable sparrows is the **Dark-eyed Junco**. A common visitor to backyard bird feeders, this little black and white bird calls Iowa home from October through May. A distinctive marking of the species is the white outer tail feathers that become visible in flight.



Another winter sparrow is the **American Tree Sparrow**, which forms winter flocks that frequent shrubby edges of grasslands and forests. Look for their reddish-brown crown and eye line and the black dot in the center of their un-striped chest. [Photo Credit: Aaron Brees]

American Tree Sparrows can sometimes get confused with **Chipping Sparrows**, which spend the summer in Iowa. But notice that chipping sparrows have white and black stripes surrounding their red head stripe, and lack the dot on their chest. [Photo Credit: Doug Harr]



During migration we see many White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows in Iowa. White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows can sometimes be tricky to tell apart, but are usually quite different than the other species; the white color on their heads sets them apart. Notice that the White-crowned Sparrow has bold white and black head stripes and a clear chest, while the White-throated Sparrow has white and brown head stripes with yellow eyebrows and a white bib under the chin.



White-crowned Sparrow (left) and White-throated Sparrow (right). Photo credit Doug Harr

Undoubtedly, the most confusing group of sparrows to identify are what I call “the little brown ones with stripes”, of which there are many. One key area to look at to help with identification of these species is the face. Look for eye stripes, head stripes, eye rings, and colored areas as well as bill shape and color to help distinguish them. Also look at the placement and thickness of stripes. It can take practice and looking at many individuals to grow confident, but even if you aren't

sure what species you're looking at, you can still enjoy their beautifully patterned feathers.

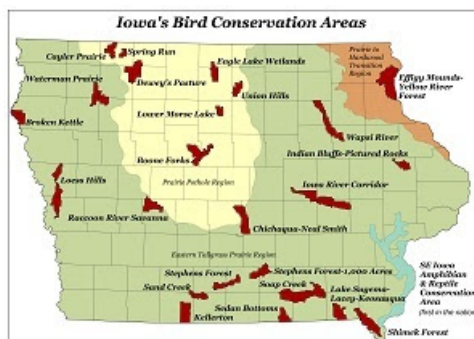


Clockwise from top left: Henslow's Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, Leconte's Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow. Photo Credit: Clayton Will

Song can also be a helpful tool to sort out the different sparrows. Song Sparrows for example, are the classic soundtrack of summer in Iowa and can be found in many different habitats, from urban settings to forest edges. Their song starts with several clear whistled notes followed by a variety of musical buzzing and trills. [Click this link to listen to a song sparrow call.](#)

Henslow's Sparrows, which favor large prairies, sound like a short buzzy hiccup or sneeze. [Click this link to listen to a Henslow's Sparrow call.](#)

Always remember that time of year and habitat can also be good clues to help narrow down the options of any bird species you're trying to identify. And if all else fails, try to enjoy whatever little brown bird you see or hear, even if you can't name it!



Besides your own backyard a good place to look and listen for sparrows year round is one of Iowa's 24 Bird Conservation Areas. Each large landscape encompasses many acres of excellent bird habitat including several public properties you can visit and explore! Happy Birding!