Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada *Glenn Coady*

Our present photo quiz features a small passerine with a stout, conical bill. Combined with the drab, streaked plumage, comprised of a mixture of various shades of brown, we are quickly able to discern that this is one of the 34 species of the family Emberizidae (the New World sparrows and their allies) on the Ontario checklist of birds. The superficially similar female House Sparrow, of the family Passeridae, is easily eliminated from consideration by the prominent moustachial stripe and coarsely streaked crown of our quiz bird. The female House Sparrow has a plain, drab brown crown and lacks any moustachial stripe at all.

Our view of the quiz bird gives us an excellent view of the head, back, wings and tail, but not much of a look at the pattern of the belly or breast of the bird. This works well to our advantage, as many of the members of the Emberizidae are easily separated by the proportions of the wings and tail, as well as patterns found on the head, back, wings and tail.

Most easily eliminated, are the members of the genus *Pipilo* (the Towhees). Unlike our quiz bird, towhees have very long tails and short wings. Both the Eastern Towhee and the extralimital Spotted Towhee show bright rufous flanks and butterscotch undertail coverts. The accidental Green-tailed Towhee would show green wings and tail.

The two sparrows of the genus *Aimophila*, Cassin's Sparrow and Bachman's Sparrow (both accidental in Ontario), are easily eliminated as well. Both of these species have longer, rounded tails, quite unlike the short, notched tail seen on our quiz bird. They also have short wings, quite unlike the long wing tips seen on this bird.

The five sparrow species of the genus *Spizella* (American Tree Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, the accidental Brewer's Sparrow and Field Sparrow) are all quite different from our quiz bird as well. The Spizella sparrows are small, slim sparrows that have relatively longer tails, shorter wings, and entirely clear breasts and flanks as adults (unlike the visible flank streaks on our quiz bird). They also have less stout bills than our quiz bird.

The monotypic Vesper Sparrow, of the genus *Pooecetes*, has a thin but quite distinct eye-ring, which is lacking on this bird. The Vesper Sparrow also lacks the bright rufous edging to the median coverts, greater coverts and tertials, that are so evident on this bird.

The monotypic Lark Sparrow, of the genus *Chondestes*, has a much more harlequin head pattern than our bird in all plumages. It also has a long, rounded tail that shows obvious white in the corners, even when it is not spread at all.

Certainly no one is likely to mistake this bird for the accidental Black-throated Sparrow, of the genus *Amphispiza*, with its strikingly contrasting black and white head pattern and uniformly smooth gray back and nape.

Clearly, our bird lacks the broad, white edging to the greater coverts, that is visible on all plumages of the sexually dimorphic Lark Bunting, of the genus *Calamospiza.*

Our bird is not a good candidate for an Ontario Savannah Sparrow. Although they have fairly short, notched tails, similar to this bird, Savannah Sparrows (genus *Passerculus*, though some authorities prefer to merge them into the genus *Ammodramus*) usually show a distinct, yellow supraloral area, which strikingly stands out from the rest of the head. They lack the bright rufous edges to the greater coverts and tertials, like we see on this bird.

The five sparrow species of the genus *Ammodramus* (Grasshopper Sparrow, the accidental Baird's Sparrow, the rare Henslow's Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow) can all by eliminated on the basis of structure alone. All of these species appear to have relatively larger heads, flatter crowns, spikier tails, and much shorter wingtips than our quiz bird. The greenish head of the Henslow's Sparrow, and the orange patterns in the heads of Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, render them easily ruled out.

Our bird clearly lacks the rusty crown, back and tail, as well as the gray rump, of the Fox Sparrow (genus *Passerella*).

The three sparrow species of the genus *Melospiza* (Song Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow and Swamp Sparrow) are all quickly ruled out on the basis of structure as well, as these species all have rounded tails and very short, rounded wings.

The four sparrow species of the genus *Zonotrichia* (White-throated Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow and the extralimital Golden-crowned Sparrow) all have generally more striking head patterns than our quiz bird. They also all lack the nearly complete dark frame around the rear portion of the auriculars, that we see clearly on this bird.

This bird is not consistent with the unstreaked adult Dark-eyed Junco, in which males are largely pale gray overall, and females gray and brown. Even on a folded tail, we would expect to see a whiter outer tail in the genus *Junco*.

It is obvious that this bird is not a Snow Bunting (genus *Plectrophenax)*, because it lacks the extensively white greater coverts and secondaries of that species.

Therefore, having eliminated all the other Ontario Emberizidae, we have determined that this must be a member of the genus *Calcarius*, or one of the longspurs. A good look at the very ample hind claw on our bird certainly proves consistent with that diagnosis. Other general traits that are most consistent with the longspurs are: its stocky build; the short, notched tail; the long primary projection; the very broad, bold supercilium.

In separating the longspurs, it is useful to keep in mind that the two longspurs that are accidental in Ontario (McCown's Longspur and Chestnut-collared Longspur) are both short distance migrants, with concomitantly shorter wings, with less primary projection beyond the tertials (usually 3 primary tips visible beyond the tertials on the folded wing). The two breeding longspurs of Ontario's tundra coast (Lapland Longspur and

Smith's Longspur) are longer distance migrants, with longer wings and more primary projection beyond the tertials (usually 5-6 primary tips visible beyond the tertials). Our quiz bird shows 6 primary tips visible beyond the tertials, so it is clearly one of the two Ontario breeding species. Also note that we see virtually no white in the outer tail feathers, a feature much more consistent with Smith's Longspur and Lapland Longspur than with either of the more extensively white-tailed McCown's Longspur or Chestnut-collared Longspur. Field guides have traditionally over-emphasized the usefulness of the extent of white in the outer tail for field identification of longspurs.

Smith's Longspur has a thin, pale eye-ring and a less prominent supercilium than does the Lapland Longspur. Our quiz bird has a very bold, blond supercilium, and lacks an eye-ring, a feature which favours an identification of Lapland Longspur. Lapland Longspurs have broad rufous edges to the greater coverts and tertials, whereas Smith's Longspurs have narrower, paler brown edges to the greater coverts and tertials. Lapland Longspurs have a more prominent dark frame around the auriculars, that is unbroken posteriorly, whereas Smith's Longspurs have both a finer frame around the auricular (that is broken on the posterior edge) and a finer malar stripe. Smith's Longspur tends to be longer tailed than Lapland Longspur. Lapland Longspur tends to have much broader and darker flank streaking than Smith's Longspur. In the Lapland Longspur, the spacing of the primary tips beyond the tertials is more even than for the Smith's Longspur, which exhibits more staggered gaps. The Lapland Longspur has a decidedly stouter bill than the Smith's Longspur. The belly of the Smith's Longspur has a much buffier ground colour than the white belly of the Lapland Longspur. For all of the differences listed above, our quiz bird is entirely more consistent with the pattern expected for the Lapland Longspur, rather than that of the Smith's Longspur.

This early migrant **Lapland Longspur** was photographed in late September 1995 in Port Perry, Ontario, by Mike McEvoy. Based on the lack of any rufous tone in the nape, this bird is very likely a female.

Analyzing longspurs from dorsal views, like this one, is often much less challenging than trying to identify them from ventral views. I would advise readers to also review the photo quiz that Bob Curry, presented in the April 1996 issue of *Ontario Birds*, to analyze another female Lapland Longspur viewed from a ventral perspective.

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