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Photo Quiz

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April 2005 Quiz

Glenn Coady

Imagine you are walking through your favourite local patch and up from the ground pops a secretive, unfamiliar passerine such as this quiz bird.

The initial impression is that of a small, bull-necked, ground-dwelling bird, with a short, conical bill, and a back dappled in dark chestnut, drab brown and pale whitish-buff. Intuitively, most birders would correctly categorize the bird as belonging to the family Emberizidae, one of 33 Ontario emberizine sparrows and their allies.

Many of the members of this family can be easily excluded from consideration. The three Ontario species of towhee all have tails much longer than this bird. The Green-tailed Towhee's overall green and grey plumage is certainly not a match. Likewise, the dark, uniform head colour of both the Eastern Towhee and Spotted Towhee eliminate them as candidates.

The three Ontario species of longspur (Lapland Longspur, Smith's Longspur and Chestnut-collared Longspur) should all show dark central tails with some visible white in the outer tail feathers. None of them would show a uniformly grey auricular area, as does the quiz bird, in any plumage. Snow Buntings, with their long black primaries and white wing patches, can

also be quickly dismissed.

The four species of *Zonotrichia* sparrow (White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow and Golden-crowned Sparrow) all have a much different structure than the quiz bird, with longer tails, longer primary extension, a more pot-bellied appearance, and prominent white wing bars. The Dark-eyed Junco's uniform grey head and white outer tail feathers easily rule it out.

The five Ontario members of the genus *Spizella* (American Tree Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow and Brewer's Sparrow) all have longer tails and longer primary projection than the structure evident in our quiz bird. Also, they all have prominent lighter edging to the greater and median secondary coverts, resulting in two discernable wing bars. None of them show the flank streaking which is clearly seen on our quiz bird.

Two species with bright, immediately striking, harlequin head patterns (Lark Sparrow and Black-throated Sparrow) can be quickly dismissed. Likewise, the overall darker Lark Bunting with its white-tipped tail and large whitish area in the outer greater secondary coverts.

The large size, long tail, and rufous and grey head and back of

the Fox Sparrow quickly eliminate it. The Swamp Sparrow's grey supercilium, rufous crown, and prominently rufous wings are inconsistent with our bird. The Lincoln's Sparrow's combination of grey supercilium, buffy submoustachial area, and prominent malar stripe rule it out as well. Besides their much longer tails and less elaborately patterned backs, the Song Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Vesper Sparrow always demonstrate obvious malar stripes as well, and their head pattern is not nearly this colourful.

Cassin's Sparrow is a much drabber bird with a much longer tail, a streaked crown and an indistinct supercilium, and, therefore, is also a poor fit. Bachman's Sparrow's grey-edged rufous back feathers are unlike our quiz bird with its buff-edged, chestnut back feathers. Its plain, buffy flanks also lack the distinct streaks we see on the quiz bird.

Most observers would have quickly discerned that our quiz bird's short, spiky tail, very short primaries, relatively large, flat-headed appearance and intricate pattern and colouration would place it in the genus *Ammodramus*, and indeed we have already eliminated all but the five Ontario sparrows of that genus (Grasshopper Sparrow, Baird's Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow).

Grasshopper Sparrow lacks the bright, extensively orange supercili-

um of the quiz bird, instead demonstrating a buffy-yellow supraloral area and a much greyer rear portion to the supercilium. Its underparts are a plain, unmarked buff-ochre, lacking the flank streaks seen on our quiz bird.

Baird's Sparrow's head colour is a much paler ochre than the bold orange found on our quiz bird. It would show a more prominent malar stripe and would lack the grey auriculars of our quiz bird.

Henslow's Sparrow differs from our quiz bird in its olive-green head colour and bright rufous-edged tertials and greater secondary coverts, giving the general impression of much more rusty wings.

To the surprise of few, we have come to a choice between the very similar Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Let's examine a few useful characters in separating these two species. Both species have grey auriculars and a grey nape patch. These grey areas are more extensive and a slightly colder lead grey in Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. The grey nape patch in the Le Conte's Sparrow is finely speckled with purplish spots giving it a more plum cast than the larger, colder grey nape patch in Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Looking at our quiz bird, this character likely favours Le Conte's Sparrow.

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows tend to show more obviously contrasting, fine bright white (rather than buff) streaks on an overall dark-

er back. Le Conte's Sparrow shows wider buffy edges that contrast less with its chestnut-centred back feathers. This character would also seem to favour Le Conte's Sparrow.

Le Conte's Sparrow is more likely to have grey extending into the lores, whereas Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is likelier to exhibit bright orange lores similar to the supercilium. Our bird's greyish loreal colour is once again more in keeping with Le Conte's Sparrow.

The tertial feathers in Le Conte's Sparrow are usually dark chestnut-centred with wide whitish-buff edges. In Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, the tertials are chestnut-centred with finer rufous edges.

This feature favours Le Conte's Sparrow as well.

Most importantly, Le Conte's Sparrow has two lateral chestnut crown-stripes surrounding a fine white median crown-stripe. Alternately, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow has two lateral chestnut crown-stripes surrounding a prominent grey median crown-stripe. We can clearly see a bit of the fine, lighter median crown-stripe of a Le Conte's Sparrow in this quiz bird.

All of our useful field characters are pointing to the same conclusion, and indeed this bird is a **Le Conte's Sparrow** which I photographed at Point Pelee National Park on 13 May 1988.

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OFO Annual Convention and Banquet Point Pelee National Park 10 and 11 September 2005

Plan now to attend the OFO Annual Convention at Point Pelee on 10 and 11 September 2005. This weekend of birding and presentations, with new and old friends, is always great fun. Saturday's events will include Ron Scovell's popular book sale, and an evening banquet and special featured speaker at the Roma Club in Leamington.

On both Saturday and Sunday, experts will lead groups of convention participants to several of the very productive early fall birding locations in Point Pelee National Park and nearby areas. During our 2003 convention there, 156 species were observed on the field trips.