

December's At A Glance photograph shows a sparrow, as characterized by the bird's apparently small size, heavy bill, and generally striped appearance. As with a previously discussed Lincoln's Sparrow photograph (see *Bird Observer* 22:281), because the mystery bird is shown feeding young at a nest, it is fair to assume that it is in adult plumage.

A traditional starting point for identifying an unknown sparrow is to notice the breast pattern—either plain or striped or marked in some way. The pictured bird clearly shows fine streaks across the upper breast, with the markings extending along the sides to the flanks. These features at once eliminate all the plain-breasted sparrows (e.g., Chipping and Field sparrows), along with those with heavy breast markings, such as Song and Fox sparrows. The lack of prominent head stripes removes as possibilities species such as White-throated and White-crowned sparrows. Vesper and Savannah sparrows would both show heavier and more extensive breast streaks and, respectively, a conspicuous eye ring or a bold, white, median crown stripe.

An important structural feature to notice is that the mystery sparrow exhibits a flat-headed, large-billed appearance that is especially characteristic of sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus*. Having reduced the possibilities to the generic level, it is necessary to distinguish between five small grassland or salt marsh sparrows: Grasshopper, Henslow's, LeConte's, Sharp-tailed, and Seaside.

Grasshopper Sparrows in adult plumage have a plain breast and an obvious eye ring. Seaside Sparrows are dusky with blurry breast streaks and have a conspicuous yellow loreal spot between the eye and bill. The other three species all have at least some breast streaking, but the Sharp-tailed Sparrow also has a solid gray crown, a wide supercilium, and a dark ear patch. The choice thus becomes one between Henslow's and LeConte's sparrows. LeConte's Sparrow has streaks on the nape; a broad, buffy supercilium; and a thin, well-defined,



Photo by Hal H. Harrison. Courtesy of MAS.

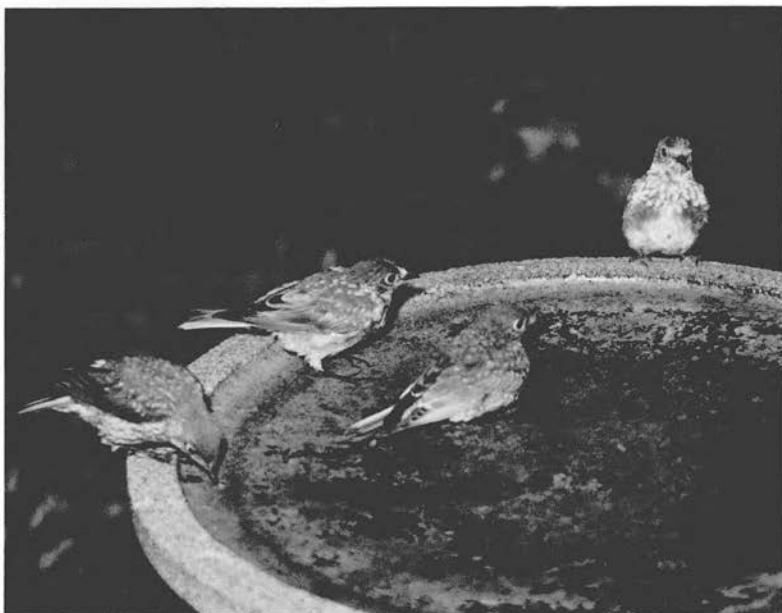
white, median crown stripe. The mystery sparrow has an unstreaked nape, a dull median stripe, and a distinct malar (jaw) stripe. This combination of characteristics makes the mystery bird a Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*).

Always a rarity in Massachusetts, Henslow's Sparrows nested in Lincoln in 1994 for the first confirmed state breeding record in over twenty years.

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Frank H. Wood. Courtesy of MAS.



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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