



Photograph by M. G. Smith

Little brown birds with conical bills! Much like gulls, perched hawks, and sandpipers, birds displaying these characteristics often initiate a form of low-level birding paralysis in beginning birders — and sometimes in more experienced observers, as well.

When one of these conical-billed brown jobs is more or less streaked below and has a relatively short, notched tail, it could be the female or immature of the otherwise familiar Indigo Bunting. It is especially heavy-billed and streaked below, female or immature Purple Finch or House Finch are possibilities, and if the bird has a sharply pointed conical bill and yellow wing bars, then Pine Siskin would be a good bet. Unfortunately, the conical-billed mystery bird in the photograph shows none of these helpful characteristics.

Having ruled out finch and bunting possibilities, we are left with the probability that the bird in the picture is a sparrow of some sort, especially since sparrows represent the largest and most diverse group of conical-billed species regularly occurring in Massachusetts. Operating on the assumption that the bird is a sparrow, it makes sense to notice the pattern of the bird's head, underparts, and wings, as well as the overall shape of the bird.

A first cut when examining sparrows is to determine whether or not they possess obvious wing bars and whether they have plain or distinctly streaked underparts. April's mystery bird clearly has unmarked underparts and two distinct wing bars. The absence of breast streaking at once removes all of the streak-breasted sparrows (for example, Vesper, Savannah, Song, or Lincoln's).

The combination of clearly defined wing bars and plain underparts further reduces the possibilities to sparrows such as American Tree, Chipping, Clay-colored, Field, White-throated, and White-crowned. The female House Sparrow could be a possibility, but its shorter tail, chunkier appearance, and more obvious single wing bar serve to eliminate it.

Now that the possibilities have been limited to only six likely species, we need to examine the head more carefully. Most obvious is the plain, light-colored bill. Chipping Sparrows tend to have dark bills, or bills with only a pale lower mandible. Plain-breasted adult Chipping Sparrows also have a solid rusty cap, a prominent white stripe over the eye, and a black line through the eye. Clay-colored Sparrows are slim and pale with a finely striped crown and a white median crown stripe, and a brownish cheek patch outlined with thin blackish lines. American Tree Sparrows also resemble the mystery bird, but they have a decidedly black upper mandible, a distinct dark spot in the middle of an otherwise plain breast, and a rusty cap. Note the barely visible pale area immediately above the bill on the mystery sparrow. Field Sparrows possess a well-defined white eye-ring and a pale gray face, both of which are lacking in the mystery photograph.

This reduces the choice to one between White-throated Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow. White-throated Sparrows, as their name implies, have a distinct white throat patch, as well as variable amounts of dusky streaking on the mid-breast or flanks; adults also exhibit yellow lores (a yellow patch between the eye and the bill). Since the mystery bird seems to lack all of these features, and because it has a plain pale (in real life, it would be pink) bill, it would seem that the bird is a White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*). But why doesn't it have a striking black-and-white head pattern? The answer is that immature White-crowned Sparrows in their first-winter plumage have a tan-and-brown head pattern that shows much less contrast than does the black-and-white pattern of adult birds.

Although they don't nest in the eastern United States, White-crowned Sparrows are uncommon spring and variably common fall migrants in Massachusetts. They are uncommon or rare in weedy fields or at feeders in the winter.

AT A GLANCE

Photograph by Hal H. Harrison



Can you identify this bird?

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

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