



Photo by Alfred M. Bailey

Yes, it's another sneaky, streaky brown job! This month's mystery bird's conical bill, overall streaked appearance, and general shape all point to its being some type of sparrow. Because the bird in the picture is feeding young, it is reasonable to assume that it is an adult, not a bird in some obscure juvenal plumage. (Use every bit of evidence you can when trying to identify an unfamiliar bird, not just its appearance! This maxim holds for both photo identification and identification of birds under field conditions.)

Among the useful features to be considered when trying to identify sparrows are the breast pattern and the pattern of the head and face. Since the bird in the photograph is obviously an adult, the fact that it has a streaked breast and flanks is noteworthy. Knowing that the bird is not a juvenile is important because many juvenile sparrows have streaked underparts, even if they are plain-breasted as adults. Besides the prominent ventral streaking, the bird's broad, pale eyebrow stripe, thin, whitish eye ring, and lack of an apparent central spot on the breast are all features of significance for sparrow identification.

Of the various sparrow species that occur in Massachusetts, the best candidates for the mystery bird are Vesper, Savannah, Henslow's, Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed sparrows, Fox, Song, and Lincoln's sparrows. The Fox Sparrow can be eliminated at once because the pictured bird is not nearly robust enough; the markings on the underparts are not heavy and arrow-shaped, and they do not converge into a central spot; and the nuchal collar (nape) is streaked,

not clear gray. Both sharp-tailed sparrow species possess a distinct gray cheek patch bounded not only by the eyebrow stripe above the cheek, but also by a buffy-orange crescent below it. In addition, sharp-tailed and also Henslow's sparrows have stubbier tails than the pictured bird. Henslow's Sparrow also has a large-billed, flat-headed appearance, an unmarked dark nape, and less extensive flank stripes. Although the Vesper Sparrow has an eye ring, it does not have a broad eyebrow stripe and possesses conspicuous white outer tail feathers.

With Savannah, Song, and Lincoln's sparrows left as possibilities, identification becomes easier. Savannah Sparrows have a distinct, white, median crown stripe; a fairly short, notched tail; and no semblance of an eye ring. The choice now becomes one between Song and Lincoln's sparrow. Again, the presence of an eye ring is important because Song Sparrows do not show this feature; also, Song Sparrows have heavy malar (jaw) stripes, bold and blurry breast and flank streaks, and a conspicuous dark spot in the middle of their breast. Lincoln's Sparrow, on the other hand, typically exhibits fine breast and flank streaks overwashed with buff. Although it isn't the case in the picture, Lincoln's Sparrows often elevate their crown feathers when agitated. The bird in the picture is a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*).

Lincoln's Sparrows are uncommon spring migrants and occasionally fairly common fall migrants in Massachusetts. There are a handful of nesting records from the western part of the state, and the species has several times been identified on local Christmas Bird Counts.

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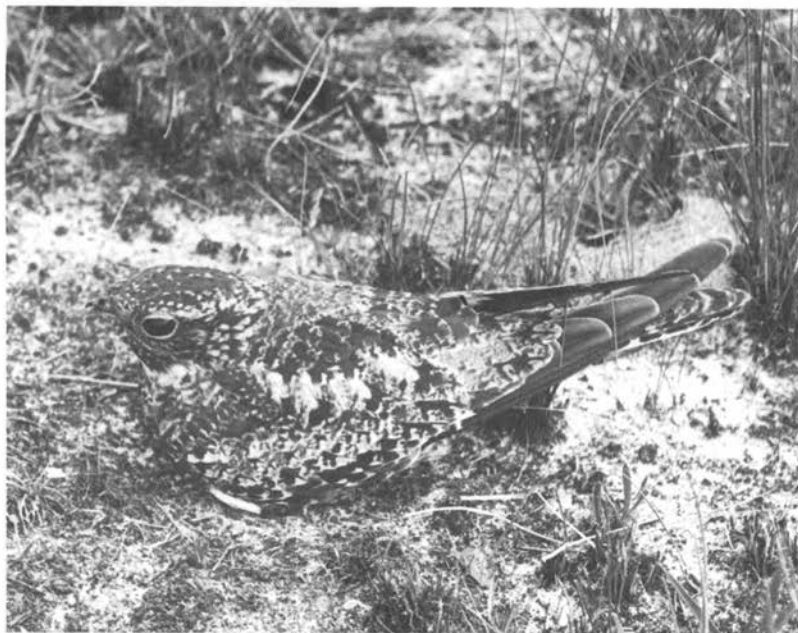
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AT A GLANCE

Photo by Hugh H. Schroder



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