

SPARROW IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP AT THE 1964 ANNUAL EBBA MEETING  
Reported by Jane Pickens Church

Dr. Jeff Swinebroad's excellent workshop deserved far prompter reporting than it has received. Many of us who had felt quite at home with the more common sparrows in first fall or winter plumage were astonished (or dismayed) when faced with two or three other varieties in the same grouping which, while uncommon in the east, could accidentally be found in our area. It would be extremely easy to overlook a rare-to-our-area sparrow during Operation Recovery, for example, on a busy day.

Dr. Swinebroad had assembled study skins and then grouped them in such a manner that each species bore some resemblance to the others in the group. The workshop participants moved from table to table studying the skins and making individual notes on what to look for for a positive identification. Baird's, Seaside, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows made up one group; we all think we know the latter two but these were in juvenal plumage - I was frankly appalled at how greatly some species resemble others when juvenal, subadult and adult plumages are shown together. Other tables held the following: Tree, Fox, Ipswich and Field; Chipping, Clay-colored and Brewer's; Le Conte's, Sharp-tailed, Henslow's and Grasshopper; Savannah, Vesper, Lincoln's and Song; Pine-Woods, Rufous-crowned, Rufous-winged and Cassin's. The Swamp Sparrow was represented in four plumages - juvenal, immature, first breeding and adult. Had all these sparrows been represented in all possible plumages I imagine that many banders would have felt that it was time to turn in their permits!!! There would have been well over sixty possibilities which puts sparrows almost in the same class with "confusing fall warblers."

Once a sparrow has been identified to species, it must if possible be aged. In many cases plumage characteristics are insufficient and "skulling" is mandatory. This takes practice (and good eyesight) and Dr. Swinebroad suggested practicing on known adults. Since many sparrows have completed the ossification by the end of October "skulling" is not safe later - if the skull is unossified the bird is an immature, but if it is ossified it is not necessarily an adult. Ageing by noting the brood patch must be done cautiously - on Swamp Sparrows this character is good only until the first part of August.

Much more sparrow information is needed by banders. There is no one place where the soft part colors are listed for all species. The Bird Banding Manual has had only a few species sent in by contributors. All banders should, if possible, jot down the leg, eye, bill, and foot colors of the sparrows they band and recheck them when the birds return. Someone will need all this information someday for a comprehensive paper.

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