

FINCHES AND SPARROWS  
Dr. Charles H. Blake

The paper appearing below, contains some of Dr. Blake's remarks at the 1970 annual meeting, workshop sessions. The sessions were based on Prof. Merrill Wood's A Bird-Banders Guide To Determination of Age and Sex of Selected Species. College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa. Editor.

I first called attention to a point which is becoming more and more evident; that molt is a very labile phenomenon. This is illustrated by Merrill's remarks on the Cardinal in which he agrees with Art Wiseman that perhaps most Cardinals in the north do not completely molt the wing and tail quills at the postjuvinal molt. In North Carolina, on the other hand, I have never encountered a case in which the quill molt was incomplete. It seems to be quite clear that there may be geographical variations in the molt and as certainly some individual variation. My observations on the spring molt in White-throated Sparrows suggest that while the head molt seems to be complete the extent of body molt is greater the earlier the bird starts to molt. It is also becoming evident not only in some of the Finches and Sparrows but also in Tanagers that, at least, where there is a fairly extensive body molt in spring there is likely also to be a partial or sometimes a complete tail molt. For example, it is not uncommon to find an Indigo Bunting in the spring with very worn central rectrices and the rest of the tail quills fresh.

Merrill says that the Blue Grosbeak was omitted by accident. It is, of course, extremely similar to the Indigo Bunting but the wing length is about 15 millimeters greater. Naturally, the beak is also much heavier. It is apparent that the Blue Grosbeak does not ordinarily molt the outer primaries in the winter or spring of its first year of life.

It is well-known that the Indigo Bunting does this in the males. The distinction between old and new is very clear, if one views the wing rather edgewise, then the contrast between the new blue outer vanes and the brown margins of the old ones is conspicuous. Sometimes this is the only way in which one can distinguish an SY male from an older male. A small portion of SY males seem to have a complete head and body molt, although most do not.

Cardinals can be sexed when the first breast feathers of the first winter plumage break their sheaths at the tip. Except in rare cases the pink that may occur in the breast of females is restricted to the median edge of the pectoral pteryllae but the first feathers produced by this pterylla are much more lateral than these pink feathers.

One of the characters which will distinguish the House Finch from

the Purple Finch is the streaking of the under-tail coverts in the former species. The streaks are always rather numerous occurring in both the shorter and longer feathers, while in the Purple Finch they occur only in the juvenile plumage in any numbers. Once actually seen the bill shape is diagnostic, the culmen in the House Finch being markedly curved.

The gape in the male Purple Finches usually turns red at the time of molt. In this species and in the Cardinal the fall molt, either postjuvinal or postnuptial requires 10-12 weeks.

The extent of red on the crown of adult males is not a safe character to distinguish Purple and House Finches. The outer vanes of the primaries are reddish in adult male Purple Finch but grayish buff in the House Finch.

A very few male Pine Siskins have an ill-defined black cap.

Beyond this point I had relatively little to say because I gave the participants an opportunity to look at a number of the more critical comparisons among the Sparrows, such as the comparison of juvenile Field, Chipping, and Clay-colored and between the White-throated and the Song Sparrow. In the latter pair, the diagnostic point that one can trust is the wing length, that of the juvenile Song Sparrow being apparently always some 4 or 5 millimeters shorter than the White-throated Sparrow.

A good many Rufous-sided Towhees require Size 2 bands. The eye color is usually fully red by January. Females in winter and spring cannot be aged by color of primaries or primary coverts.

There are some inland Sharp-tailed Sparrows.

Slate colored Junco: iris color can be used for aging to about the end of November. Birds with no brown in plumage are fully adult males.

Chipping Sparrows: beak may be largely pink until late spring.

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WHY NOT BE A DISCOVERER?

Some banders handle certain species in quantity that others seldom get, or in a season when others cannot get them, and are hereby able to collect needed data on the determination of age and sex. Sometimes a bander is lucky in getting only one or two of a species which might just give the needed information, if the bander is a careful observer. How far into autumn or winter or spring can HY or SY birds be accurately detected by (1) skull ossification, (2) swollen or brightly colored gape, (3) mouth color, (4) iris color or (5) some item only known to you? This data should be sent "written up" to the EBBA NEWS editor. You can make a contribution to knowledge. Prof. Merrill Wood, 811 North Allen St., State College, Pa. 16801