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## News, Notes, Comments

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**MANY FIELD BIOLOGIST INTERNS** are needed to operate constant effort mist-netting and banding (MAPS) stations in Washington, Oregon, California, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Internships begin **21 April, 23 April or 1 May** and end 8 August, depending on location. Applicants should have substantial birding experience; internships include an intensive, two-week training course in the above-mentioned monitoring techniques. Applicants with good field vehicles are especially needed. A per diem reimbursement, ranging from approximately \$438 to \$617 per month (depend-

ing on location), and housing provided. For further information and application materials, interested persons should contact

**Eric Feuss,**  
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**P.O. Box 1346**  
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**(415-663-1436; FAX 415-663-9482,**  
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Please pass this announcement on to anyone who might be interested in such a position.

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## Books

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**A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada.**

J. Rising. 1996. Academic Press, New York. 365 pp., including 27 color plates. \$39.95 U.S. (hard cover), \$19.95 U.S. (paperback).

When I was a graduate student, another birder once asked me what I was studying for my dissertation. "Sparrows," was my answer. The birder looked at me quizzically for a moment, then responded, "Well, I guess somebody has to study them."

The fact that we were surrounded by the colorful and exotic avifauna of southwestern Arizona probably helped fuel my companion's confusion. Why study sparrows when such fantastic birds as trogons, orioles and hummingbirds are around? In fact, sparrows form an excellent group to study, especially for banders. They provide several logistical advantages—they usually remain close to the ground, where they can be caught in mist nets, they eat seeds that help lure them into traps, and they nest in locations where their young can be banded. For an ecologist, there are other plusses—wintering sparrows eat food (seeds) that can be quantified more easily than other kinds of foods (what do swifts eat, anyway?); many sparrows show one style of social organization in the breeding season (territoriality) and another in the winter (flocking); and since some species in the southern U.S. are permanent residents, researchers do not need to consider what is happening to their wintering habitat in Guatemala,

Jamaica or some such place. Sparrows as a group, however, present two major problems: many species are hard to observe, and most are dull and primarily brown, making identification a pain, compared to their more brightly colored and visible relatives.

These two problems would be reduced with a good field guide to the sparrows and their allies. This must be the golden age for sparrow-lovers, because no less than three books covering the identification of sparrows, finches and their relatives have been published in the past few years, including those by Clements et al. (1993) covering finches and goldfinches, Byers et al. (1995) on sparrows and buntings of the World, and Rising's 1996 subject of this review. Rising covers many of the same species as Byers et al. (1995), but with a greater emphasis on North American species. All three books have fine sets of color plates illustrating the species in detail. The main question I sought to answer in reviewing Rising's book was, "Is this book valuable for banders?"

The organization of Rising's book is straightforward. A beginning set of chapters introduces the format for the book, and answers the question, "What are sparrows?" A set of line drawings covers the topography of a "typical" sparrow, defining morphological features of a standing or flying bird. The "What are sparrows?" chapter includes an introduction to the conservation and taxonomic relationships of the group, among other topics.

Rising also discusses the use of subspecies designations to help identification of sparrows with marked geographic variation.

The remainder of the book consists of species accounts and plates. Each genus is introduced briefly, with the relationship between the genus and other sparrows summarized. Species accounts follow, with sections on identification (including a plumage description for distinctive age classes), voice (mostly songs), habits (behavioral notes), habitat, breeding information, range, history, geographic variation, measurements, and references. The references listed in each account are not comprehensive; instead, they are mainly the works that proved most useful in compiling the account.

Each species account is illustrated by a line drawing by David Beadle (who also did the plates), and usually includes both a range map showing breeding and wintering ranges, and an abundance map from the Breeding Bird Survey. The abundance maps were taken (with permission) from Price et al. (1995). Many accounts contain line drawings of spread tail patterns, showing geographic, sex or age class differences. A unique feature in the accounts is a number of charts that summarize important information—e.g., distinguishing marks of Chipping, Clay-colored and Brewer's sparrows (*Spizella passerina*, *S. pallida*, and *S. breweri*); measurements of subspecies of both juncos, Savannah (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), Song (*Melospiza melodia*), Bell's and Sage sparrows (*Amphispiza belli* and *A. nevadensis*, see below); field marks for winter longspur identification. The drawings of tail patterns and the charts might be especially helpful to banders.

Species limits generally follow the latest American Ornithologists' Union check list, but Rising was able to anticipate changes made in the last few supplements. Thus, Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed sparrows (*Ammodramus nelsoni* and *A. caudacutus*, respectively) are given separate accounts, as are Eastern and Spotted towhees (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus* and *P. maculatus*). Rising also anticipated some moves not yet taken by the A.O.U. Bell's and Sage sparrows have separate accounts, and Rising split the Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) into three species. On the other hand, Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) was not split, although information is provided for the "Timberline" Sparrow (*S. "taveneri"*).

Rising includes all species documented north of the Mexican-U.S. border. In addition to the regularly occurring species, there are short accounts for Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor*), Yellow-faced Grassquit (*T. olivacea*), Worthen's Sparrow (*Spizella wortheni*), and a slew of Alaskan specialties of the genus *Emberiza*.

The most successful part of the book is its plates, which show plumage variation in much greater detail than standard field guides. In some cases there is an abundance of information—13 Song Sparrows are shown on one plate, while 21 Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) cover two others. Even morphologically "plain" species (those without many subspecies) get extensive coverage. There are five figures each for Botteri's and Cassin's sparrows (*Aimophila botteri* and *A. cassinii*) together on one plate, with each species shown in both fresh and worn plumage. An important part of the coverage of each species is the provision of good illustrations of juvenal plumages, which can be particularly confusing for birds in the hand.

Even with all these portraits, some significant variation is not illustrated. The melanistic race *nigrescens* of the Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) is not pictured, although it is mentioned briefly in the text. The rufous phase of Cassin's Sparrow is not mentioned at all. Admittedly, the rufous Cassin's is quite rare, but it has shown up in distant locales, such as the Farallon Islands.

Most of the plates are quite successful, capturing both the morphology and the "feel" of real, live sparrows. I particularly liked plate 24, comparing winter-plumaged longspurs in flight, since I rarely see longspurs any other way. The Vesper Sparrows (*Pooecetes gramineus*) are appropriately pudgy, and the Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*) is much better than the inkblot in the National Geographic Society field guide (Scott 1987). I felt that the towhee plates were the least successful. The California and Canyon towhees (*Pipilo crissalis* and *P. fuscus*) seem too garish for the subtle beauty of these birds. (Perhaps "subtle beauty" is a bit strong, but I did my dissertation on Canyon Towhees, so I really like them.) The summer plumage Green-tailed Towhee (*P. chlorurus*) seems flat-faced, as if it ran into a window with its head turned to the side. Shapes and colors are better on most other species. Most of the flying birds are portrayed with their tails spread and pointed downwards. This helps to show off the

tail pattern, but is distracting for species that don't normally fly that way. No flight pattern is given for the Song Sparrow, which does drag its tail downward in flight.

The text is less successful than the plates, and could have undergone a more careful edit. Sections are missing from some accounts—there are no body masses given for Brewer's Sparrow, Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*), and Yellow-eyed Junco (*Junco phaeonotus*), even though the source cited by Rising for most of his body mass data contains masses for all these species. Eleven species accounts lack any references, and the References sections of many other accounts omit many significant papers. (In fairness, Rising does mention at the start that these sections were not intended to be comprehensive.) There are scattered misspellings (e.g. "empasis," page 4; "females along incubate," instead of alone, page 28; and *Junco phaeonotus* is misspelled "*phaenotus*" throughout. In the account of Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*, page 94), the American Tree Sparrow (*S. arborea*) is said to have a "dark upper mandible and a yellow mandible." The introductory paragraph for White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*, page 205) ends by saying they have a "...brown or rusty brown." Brown what?

The treatment of subspecies names is inconsistent sometimes even in the same account. English names for subspecies are sometimes capitalized, sometimes not, sometimes not even given. For example, in the Red Fox Sparrow (*Passerella [iliaca] iliaca*) account, English names are usually capitalized, but in the Sooty Fox Sparrow (*P. [i] unalaschcensis*) account, they are not. In the Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*) account, no English names are given for any subspecies except Dusky and Cape Sable, which are capitalized. The Savannah Sparrow account on pages 140-141 gives all possible permutations of capitalization and treatments in the span of five paragraphs.

The writing is sometimes unnecessarily vague, or terms poorly defined. What does Rising mean when he says that Canyon Towhees "breed closely" (page 40)? The same presumably as "incubates closely," which is used several times. I assume that both terms mean that females do not flush unless the nest is almost stepped on, but it would have been nice to have this defined. I can visualize a "rounded tail,"

but what is a "double-rounded tail" (page 176)? Why the hesitation in saying that Saltmarsh Seaside Sparrows "apparently sometimes respond to pishing." In the Eastern Towhee, juvenal plumage is said to be held for "rather a long time." Compared to what?

Finally, in the introductory chapter, the History sections of the species accounts are described by the following: "The empasis [sic] in this section is 'now and then,' since the available information is variable, the reader will find these reports in only some of the accounts." I am still not sure what this means; however, most of the History sections contain information on who first collected and described the species, its status at that time, and current population trends. Combined, these sets of information could be called "then and now." The latter part of the quote is also puzzling, as the History section is included in all the species accounts except for the accidental grassquits and *Emberiza* buntings.

Perhaps inevitably, the maps are not as accurate and current as they might have been. Bachman's Sparrows (*Aimophila aestivalis*) have not bred in Indiana or Illinois for at least 25 years. They also do not breed commonly where shown in Kentucky, Virginia or Missouri. Swamp Sparrows do not breed in central or southern Indiana, or in southern Illinois. In Arizona, Cassin's Sparrows sometimes breed well north and west of the range indicated, although this species is particularly erratic. Chilton (1997) points out some additional problems in the Canadian portion of some range maps.

Two sets of maps are particularly confusing. The same range map is given for both Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed sparrows, without indicating which species is found where. The map for both junco species shows the breeding range for Dark-eyed Junco in one color, Yellow-eyed Junco in another, and "zones of intergradation" in a third. The zones of intergradation are far beyond the range limit of Yellow-eyed Junco. I assume that the intergradation must be among various Dark-eyed Junco subspecies, not between the two species. Chilton (1997) assumed the opposite in his review (and pointed out that such interspecific zones would clearly be in error).

So, would I buy this book to help with my banding? Yes, in spite of the problems with its text and maps. The plate illustrations of juvenal plumages, the line drawings of tail patterns, and the charts alone are

worth the price. This book will help with many identification problems. For example, a few years ago there was a debate in the banding literature about the differences between juvenal and first-year winter plumage of White-throated Sparrows. These plumages are illustrated clearly on Plate 19 (illustrations 44c and 44d), which would have cleared up the confusion that started the series of letters. I would confirm the text's natural history information and range descriptions before using them. This will be possible to do by consulting the relevant "Birds of North America" accounts when the latter have all been published. In the field, this book will be quite useful to the sparrow-lovers out there.



## LITERATURE CITED

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- Price, J., S. Droege, and A. Price. 1995. The summer atlas of North American birds. Academic Press, NY.
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## Recent Literature

### BANDING HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHIES

**Ben B. Coffey, Jr. elected Fellow in the American Ornithologists' Union.** J. A. Ferguson. 1992. *Migrant* 63:25-38. 5340 Canewood Ave., Memphis, TN 38134 (Biographies to 1991 of the late Ben Coffey and his widow, Lula, both prominent contributors to ornithology in Tennessee, surrounding states and parts of Latin America through their work with banding, sound recordings, Christmas bird counts, breeding bird surveys and training others in bird identification. Their best known banding project was their major contribution to a co-operative effort to locate the wintering grounds of Chimney Swifts. Five of the 13 bands recovered in the Amazon basin of Peru in 1943 that documented the first known winter location were theirs. A major heron banding project provided considerable data on post breeding dispersal northwards and subsequent wintering locations farther south, as well as incidentally documenting Mexican wintering grounds of Anhingas breeding in the southeastern U.S.A.) MKM

**Articles and tapes by Ben B. Coffey, Jr. and Ben and Lula Coffey.** M. G. Waldron. 1992. *Migrant* 63:33-38. 1626 Yorkshire Dr., Memphis, TN 38119 (Lists of publication 1931-1987 and tapes 1986-1992, some undated.) MKM

**In memoriam Nathaniel R. Whitney, Jr., 1923-1997.** L. M. Baylor. 1997. *S. Dak. Bird Notes* 49:57-59. 1941 Red Dale Dr., Rapid City, S.D. 57702 (Biography of prominent South Dakota physician and amateur ornithologist, best known as the author of two books on South Dakota birds, co-author of a book on birds of the Black Hills, and for his research on the White-winged race of the Dark-eyed Junco. His research included banding, and he served on the board of the Inland Bird Banding Association.) MKM

### BANDING EQUIPMENT AND TECHNIQUES

**Misuse of data from mist-net captures to assess relative abundance in bird populations.** J. V. Remsen, Jr. and D. A. Good. 1996. *Auk* 113:381-398. Mus. Nat. Sci., 119 Foster Hall, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge, LA 70803 (The authors used models to show that by changing parameters such as proportional use of vertical height categories, frequency of bird strikes with respect to home range size and overlap, number of flights, mean flight distance, and capture rates can produce different relative abundances for species with identical realized abundances. These results preclude quantitative comparisons of relative abundance for different species or species in different habitats. These results are applicable not only to mist-net use, but also to