

Common Inland Sparrows of the Southeastern United States

Some general pointers:

- Learn how to recognize similar groups of species. Some sparrows can first be identified to genus, then to species. *Spizélla*, *Ammódramus*, and *Melospíza* are important genera to learn.
- Before going out into the field, study up! Know differences in shapes, behaviors (ex. flushing), habitat, seasonality and field marks.
- Sparrows may give two or more different types of call notes that can sound similar and are good clues for where to look. They may also sing out of the breeding season.
- In the field, examine individuals for differences related to age, molt, feather wear, and geographic variation. Plumage can vary with posture. Many sparrows can show a darker spot in the middle of the breast, even if this is not a “normal” field mark.
- The following species are the most common SE US sparrows inland; the genus notes refer to adult members of the genus found in this region.
- Measurements are from Beadle and Rising’s *Sparrows of the United States and Canada: The Photographic Guide*. 2002.

Zonotrichia sparrows are **large** with **long**, square-tipped tails, rounded to peaked heads, medium-sized bills, **striped heads** (except Harris’s) & **unstreaked chests** (but see White-throated). They are usually terrestrial and are found individually or in groups in **brushy areas**. White-throated is common in winter in N FL, White-crowned less common but more widespread and prefers more open habitats.

- 1) White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicóllis*) – 5.9-6.7” **Chunky** with a **long tail**. Have varying amount of **yellow in supraloral**. **White & black or tan & dark brown head stripes** reach brown back (nape not gray); grayish chest shows faint streaking in tan morph. **White throat** bordered by darker line. Tan morph & immature have diffuse chest streaks and dark lateral throat stripe. Commonly give high-pitched “tseet” call from brush piles.
- 2) White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucóphrys*) – 5.5-6.7” More **slender** body than White-throated with long tail. **Gray nape, pinkish bill**. Adults have **black & white stripes on head**; immatures’ stripes are brown and tan. Adults are **unstreaked gray below**; juveniles are often slightly brownish below or on face.

- 3) Bachman’s Sparrow (*Peucaea aestivalis*) – 4.9-6.0” **Large**. **Rufous coloration above, long tail, unstreaked breast and largish bill**. Also know as “**pinewoods sparrow**.” Widespread, year-round FL (rare in S FL) residents best found in spring in frequently-burned pinewoods where perches in the open (if you’re lucky) singing “here, kitty, kitty, kitty.”

Spizélla sparrows are **small** with **long, notched tails**, rounded heads, and **small bills**. Adults have **unstreaked chests**. They are mostly terrestrial and usually found in groups in brushy areas or open woods. Pay attention to lores, eye ring, and other facial marking as well as overall color.

- 4) Chipping Sparrow (*Spizélla passerína*) – 4.7-5.5” **Dark eyeline** (including **dark lores**); **long, notched tail**; streaked brownish **cap** is rufous in spring; usually grayish overall look; gray rump hard to see. Common around **feeders** in winter in N FL.
- 5) Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizélla pallida*) – 5.0-5.5” **Pale lores; brownish ear coverts** contrast with pale supercilium, gray nape & pale malar that’s offset by dark mustache and lateral throat stripe; slightly **buffier** than Chipping. Rare in winter and on migration in FL.
- 6) Field Sparrow (*Spizélla pusílla*) – 4.7-5.5” **Dainty**-looking, with **small pink bill**; pale **eye ring**; variably **rufous** wash, especially on head and sides of chest. Prefers thickets or brushy areas, not cleared, grassy fields. Rare breeder in N FL. Uncommon in N FL in winter.

Ammódramus sparrows are **small** with **short tails, flattish heads, and medium to large bills**. All except Grasshopper have streaked chests and/or sides. They are terrestrial and usually found individually in grassy **fields**. They are **poor fliers** and are often hard to get a good look at unless they perch up on a shrub. All 3 species are winter visitors mainly to N FL but see Grasshopper.

- 7) Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammódramus savannárum*) – 4.1-5.1” Overall grayish-yellow look. Unstreaked below. Faint eye ring; Usually has at least some **orangish-yellow on face**; pale **median crown stripe**, dark **post-ocular stripe**. Flight often stronger than Le Conte’s or Henslow’s. Rare local breeder in S-Cent. FL.
- 8) Le Conte’s Sparrow (*Ammódramus leconteii*) – 4.1-4.9” **Pale yellowish** overall (more yellowish than Grasshopper); **fine streaking on chest and sides** (sometime only on sides), pale **median crown stripe**; **silver auriculars**. Uncommon.
- 9) Henslow’s Sparrow (*Ammódramus henslowii*) – 4.8-5.2” The “**red bird with green head**,” has distinct **streaking on chest and flanks**. Fairly common but secretive. Pale eye ring.

10) Savannah Sparrow (*Passérculus sandwichénsis*) – 4.5-6.” **Pattern of alternating streaks on head**. Similar to Song Sparrow in pattern, but with **shorter tail** (usually noticeably notched) may show white on outer feathers; usually **finer streaking** below (think chocolate sprinkles), usually **yellow supraloral**, and smallish bill. When flushed, usually fly farther (20 to 50+ m) than *Ammódramus* sparrows and frequently perch in plain view. Usually in groups. Can be found with Song Sparrow near brushy areas or with *Ammódramus* sparrows in open fields. Frequently give weak “tsip” call note. Common and widespread. Plumage variable in color.

11) Vesper Sparrow (*Poocétes gramineus*) – 5.3-5.9” **Large and stocky** with a big, round head and longish tail. Usually bold **eyering**. **Streaking on chest & sides** often blurry. **White outer tail feathers** most visible in flight. Rufous shoulder (‘**bay wing**’) often not visible. Pale malar connected to pale post-auricular may forms a “**V**.” Found in open habitats, often with short stubble. Usually perch high when flushed. Common in winter in N to Central FL.

Melospíza sparrows are **medium sized & chunky** with **medium to long tails**, and medium bills. All except (usually) Swamp are **streaked below**. They are usually found individually (but rarely in small groups) in shrubby or marshy areas, and sometimes in more open areas. Winter visitors.

- 12) Song Sparrow (*Melospíza melódia*) – 4.7-6.7” Usually **heavier streaking** below (melted chocolate sprinkles) than on Savannah Sparrow, **grayish supercilium** often paler in front, whitish malar rarely may appear buffy, plus above mentioned differences to Savannah Sparrow. Listen for the distinctive “**jump**” note. Common N to Central FL.
- 13) Lincoln’s Sparrow (*Melospíza lincólnii*) – 4.5-5.8” Smaller, shorter tailed than Song. **Dainty** appearance also due to thin bill and **fine dark streaking on sides over buffy wash**. **Buffy malar** and broad gray supercilium. Often allows a quick view before hiding. Uncommon.
- 14) Swamp Sparrow (*Melospíza georgiána*) – 4.7-6.0” **Rufous crown is variable** and may be brownish with a paler median crown stripe. **Grayish face** with dark post-ocular stripe, **whitish throat, rufous wings, buffy flanks**. **Long tail**. May have diffuse streaking on chest and sides. Often common in thick foliage in **marshes** (not swamps). Common N to Cent. FL.

15) Fox Sparrow (*Passerélla iliáca*) – 6.0-6.7” **Large** and very **reddish**, especially on the tail, rump, wings, and auriculars. Large **reddish spots** or streaks **on chest**. Grayish top of head and nape. Rare winter visitor to N FL.

The Seaside Sparrow (*Ammódramus marítimus*; 9 subspecies - one, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow extinct), the Saltmarsh Sparrow (*Ammódramus caudácutus*; 2 subspecies), and the Nelson’s Sparrow (*Ammódramus nélsoni*; 3 subspecies) are not covered.

By Adam Kent