

Here's Lookin' At You...*Spizella*?

Even by the admission of the *Birding* editor, this was a difficult quiz. In fact, upon my first glance at the pictures (of course, unlabeled by the photographer, a good friend), I got two of them wrong. I was wrongly influenced by my first thought that the theme was even tighter than it is. I hope that we can all agree that the three birds are sparrows or sparrow-like birds. With further study of the pictures, I note that there are another two (at least) aspects that all three species share. The first of these is leg color (pink), but the one on which I'll focus is the presence of at least a hint of a central crown stripe.

In thinking about previous recent installments of the *Birding* quiz to generate ideas for this answer, I remembered Alvaro Jaramillo's (2006) wonderful essay on little-used but excellent field marks. As Quizmaster for the Colorado Field Ornithologists' (CFO) online photo quiz <cfo-link.org>, I wholeheartedly agree with Al's thesis: There are too many effective field marks not currently on the A-list of the general birding populace. I frequently focus on such field marks in my answers to the CFO photo quizzes. The oddest thing about this phenomenon, I find, is that many of these "unknown" field marks are the sorts of things that are used widely to separate members of certain difficult groups, but that are not used with other taxa for which they might be quite helpful. Leg color of ducks comes quickly to mind; please

see Quiz #198 <cfo-link.org/MrBill/answer.php>. How might we address our inadequate grasp of "unknown" field marks? The simple act of paying attention is a great start.

Allied to the above is our tendency to let go unidentified or misidentified individual birds that do not provide that much-desired "field-guide" profile view. This issue's quiz birds are certainly not providing such views. Although we don't have that field-guide view, the angle that we do have is much better for determining the presence or absence of a particular feature that comes

into play with these three species: the central crown stripe. I wonder if the relatively extensive use of central crown stripes in the identification of sparrows is at least partly because we can often look down on these birds to see such features. How many of us understand that quite a few species that we normally crane our necks to ogle, but which don't typically exhibit a full central crown stripe, sport at least a pale bit on the forehead?

Quiz Bird A

Can we all agree that this is a sparrow? Various features rule out other options—note especially the long tail and the pink legs. In fact, pink legs, by themselves, are a feature that rules out a huge number of ABA-area bird species. But once we're within the sparrow family, the feature is less helpful; that's because most sparrows have pink legs.

Two features on this bird that jump out at me at first glance are the vaguely reddish and streaked crown and the long tail. Both features are consistent with Chipping Sparrow, and given how common that species is over a huge swath of the ABA Area, it would be easy for us to make the snap identification and go onto the next bird. But, as you might suspect, we'll have to go into more detail to test that initial hypothesis.

So, are there features that can help us decide, one way or another? But of course.

Our bird sports a bit of whitish on the forehead that would be the base of a central crown stripe if our bird had that feature (which it does not). This pattern is consistent with Chipping Sparrow. The bill appears to be partly dark and partly pinkish, another feature supporting our snap ID of Chipping Sparrow. The streaked and only vaguely reddish crown, although inconsistent with the features of an alternate-plumage adult Chipping Sparrow, are certainly fine for the species in other plumages. Our bird also seems to have some streaking on the underparts, a feature that ought to rule out Chipping Sparrow, but only if we are

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Quiz Bird A—late July.

certain that the bird is an adult. Recall that juvenile Chipping Sparrows are well-streaked below and that western Chipping Sparrows can hold that streaking deep into fall (into October). Could we have encountered a bird transitioning from juvenal plumage to first-fall (formative) plumage? In fact, if we quickly scan the tail, particularly the bird's outermost right rectrix, we can see that that feather looks pointed, a feature pointing (pardon the pun) a fairly strong arrow at immaturity. Thus, the streaking on the underparts does not do us much good, but it at least does not rule out our initial identification.

While we are ogling the tail, we should also note that the outer rectrices are shorter than the middle ones, making our bird's tail rounded. "Well," you might reply, "if the bird is in the middle of a molt of body feathers, then perhaps the outer feathers are just growing in, artificially creating a rounded tail out of a tail that might otherwise be notched." (And that is typical of the genus *Spizella*, of which Chipping Sparrow is a member.)

Ah, but first-cycle *Spizella* sparrows (like the majority of passerines) do not replace their tails in their molt out of juvenal plumage; they retain those feathers until their second prebasic molt. For those who may have gotten lost along the way, this means that our bird is not a Chipping Sparrow and that we have to study it a bit more to come up with another identification.

The tail shape and length and the vague crown pattern should do the job of ruling out most of the rest of the sparrows, but they leave us a few options within the difficult

genus *Aimophila*. We will start with two of the most distinctive species in the genus: Rufous-crowned and Rufous-winged Sparrows. Although both have longish tails, neither species shows our bird's crown pattern, and Rufous-crowned has a darker bill than our quiz bird. Additionally, Rufous-crowned does not sport the fairly strong whitish tail corners that are relatively obvious in the picture. Bachman's and Botteri's Sparrows have throats the same color as their chests, and our bird shows a contrastingly white throat bordered by dark lateral throat stripes. That should leave us with only Cassin's Sparrow. To provide some confirmatory features, we should continue studying the bird. The perch (a dead flowering stalk of yucca) certainly supports our current identification. More definitive, however, are the pale-fringed and very dark-centered scapulars visible over the bird's left shoulder, a distinctive feature of Cassin's Sparrow.

As the apparent worn condition of the bird's plumage would suggest, particularly given the date of the photo, this **Cassin's Sparrow** is in its first summer (that is, just about a year old), and it retains its juvenal tail and a bit of extra streaking on the underparts. The photograph was taken by Bill Schmoker in Yuma County, Colorado, in late July 2005.

Quiz Bird B

Again we have a long-tailed and streak-crowned sparrow, but this time we cannot see the tail nearly as well. The bird also has pale, unmarked underparts, although there is a vague suggestion of streaking on the flanks. The combination of tail length and (mostly) unmarked underparts should quickly eliminate most sparrow species from contention, leaving us with many of the same options as in Quiz Bird A. At first glance, we may make a snap judgment of Brewer's Sparrow, as many of the easily noticeable features line up in that camp. There are, however, a few features that seem anomalous. For example, the bird is perched in a dwarf willow that appears to be an above-tree-line species—note the small catkins and short leaves. That microhabitat cue is at odds with our snap ID, isn't it? After all, we all know that Brewer's Sparrows inhabits sagebrush desert in the western United States...

Our bird seems to have a trace of a central crown stripe, but we cannot see if that whitish bit continues above the forehead, due to the angle of the bird's head. Although the presence of a full central crown stripe would be a strike or



Quiz Bird B—early July.

two against our snap judgment, just the presence of a whitish patch on the forehead actually does us very little good. Yes, central crown stripes—good ones—are useful features in identifying a few sparrow species, but a quick review of *The Sibley Guide* (one of the few field guides that provides a plethora of non-typical field guide views) should tell us that most sparrow species sport the pale forehead badge of Quiz Bird B. Thus, although I intimated in my introduction that central crown stripes would be a central (again, pardon the pun) feature of our quiz birds, one might have inferred that it was the presence of that mark, rather than its absence.

Various aforementioned characters of our bird, combined with its fairly strong whitish wing bars, should rule out all but that trio of similar *Spizella* sparrows: Brewer's, Chipping, and Clay-colored—plus the unrelated Cassin's Sparrow. At least, our tentative identification is still in the running! And so is Cassin's—as we are ever mindful that *Birding* photo quizzes have the nasty habit, every now and then, of running three different photos of the same species. Indeed, the tail does appear to be rounded, however poorly we can actually see the tip. As noted for Quiz Bird A, however, Cassin's Sparrow sports quite a different back and scapular pattern than that illustrated by Quiz Bird B. In particular, our bird shows distinct dark back streaking, which is almost always created by dark shaft streaks (of variable width by species), rather than by entirely dark-centered feathers.

If we could see the rump color of our bird, we could immediately determine whether it is a Chipping Sparrow, as

that species is the odd man out in that regard among our remaining trio of possibilities. But we cannot see it, so we must look elsewhere to test our original hypothesis. Although Chipping Sparrow exhibits a gray rump in most plumages (but not in juvenal plumage), that gray rump is even more obvious in the species because it contrasts with a fairly reddish back, unlike the brownish-gray or grayish-brown backs of Brewer's and Clay-colored Sparrows. Since our bird does not appear to have any reddish tones in its back—in fact, it has a strong gray-and-black aspect—Chipping Sparrow falls out of the running.

That leaves a duo of species with which many birders struggle, and our bird's strong gray aspect might suggest that Clay-colored Sparrow would be the correct identification, as Brewer's Sparrow is viewed more as a brown bird than as a gray bird.

However, the northern subspecies (*taverneri*) of Brewer's Sparrow (often called Timberline Sparrow) is grayer and more contrasting than nominate *breweri*, thus being even more similar to Clay-colored than is *breweri*.

“Ooh,” you might exclaim, “does that mean that the reference to alpine willows might actually mean more than was suggested when I first read it?”

Perhaps.

Our view of the bird does not provide certainty on critical separating features, particularly the precise face pattern. Given our knowledge of the date of the photo, however, we should be able to rule out both adult Clay-colored Sparrow because of our bird's fairly pale lateral crown stripes (they would be much more blackish in Clay-colored) and juvenal Clay-colored because of the lack of streaked underparts. However, our bird's apparently very strong lateral throat stripes would seem to point away from Brewer's Sparrow and toward Clay-colored, although those stripes are still more obvious than is typical of even that species. I believe that most of that appearance is an artifact of the angle of the picture: Note how the bird's throat is in shadow and that the right side seems to sport a much more extensive throat stripe than the left side. Additionally, the tone of the bird's supercilium matches that of its underparts, which is typical of Brewer's Sparrow and atypical for Clay-colored, whose supercilium is much whiter than the underparts.

This Brewer's Sparrow was photographed above treeline in Grand County, Colorado, in early July 2007 by Bill Schmoker. The most interesting aspect of the occurrence is that it was above treeline, because *breweri* Brewer's Spar-

rows are typical residents of sagebrush, not a community that typically occurs at such high elevation. However, work by Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and canvassing of high-elevation areas of Colorado by many birders has resulted in quite a few records of singing (and apparently territorial) Brewer's Sparrows (*sensu lato*) above treeline, with some of those locales supporting such birds year after year. Additionally, some of these birds occupy willow habitats, which is typical of the much more northerly Timberline Sparrow. The quiz bird's strong gray tones and strongly contrasting upperparts (gray and black) might suggest that the bird is referable to *taverneri*. If at least some of these individuals were found, indeed, to be referable to the population known as Timberline Sparrow, their presence in summer in Colorado would extend far southward the known summer range of the subspecies from the current known southern limit of central or southern Montana. Despite such suggestive pictures as this one, confirmation will require more dedicated efforts, particularly recordings of songs (*taverneri* and *breweri* sing somewhat different songs) and careful measuring of captured individuals.

Quiz Bird C

This bird's strong buffy wash across the chest and down the sides in combination with the apparently notched tail (visible between the bird's legs) might very well suggest Clay-colored Sparrow as an identification, particularly as our bird sports an apparently full central crown stripe. However, more careful study reveals streaking within the buff area and a malar stripe that is not contrastingly white; instead it is the same color as the chest and only slightly darker than the color of the throat. Both of these features argue against our snap judgment, so we'll have to look elsewhere than among the *Spizella*, none of which match this bird's combination of features. Additionally, unlike the previous two birds, Cassin's Sparrow is also immediately ruled out by the noted features. In fact, except possibly for Bachman's Sparrow, those very features should take us straight to another difficult genus, *Ammodramus*. Even the most-heavily marked non-juvenile plumage Bachman's Sparrow would lack the fairly extensive streaking on the chest and sides that is evident on our quiz bird. So *Ammodramus* it is.

Although some individuals of most species of the genus show the general pattern of darker streaking in a sea of buff on the chest and sides, Seaside Sparrow does not. The two

sharp-tailed sparrows (Nelson's and Saltmarsh) can also be quickly removed from consideration as they do not exhibit contrasting central crown stripes. Our bird's apparent pale eye ring might be a good clue, but all remaining options in the genus sport such a feature, some more obviously than others. Baird's Sparrow is much less buffy below and more darkly and heavily streaked there than our quiz bird, leaving us with Grasshopper, Henslow's, and Le Conte's Sparrows. The strength of the streaking on our quiz bird suggests that the first of those species is not correct for the identification of the bird in question. Unfortunately, the field guides also suggest that the streaking might not be strong enough or dark enough for either of the other two possibilities.

As Henslow's Sparrow is a bit more different from the other two species than either is from the other, let us see if we can deal with that one first. Henslow's Sparrow is considerably greener-headed than either Grasshopper or Le Conte's, but we cannot really determine our quiz bird's general head color. However, our angle does permit us a great view of the throat, and our bird just does not sport the con-



Quiz Bird C—mid-October.

trastingly white throat typical of Henslow's. Combine that with the apparently too-strong-for-Grasshopper Sparrow underparts streaking, and our bird ought to be a Le Conte's Sparrow, right?

Well, let's take a closer look at the head and the streaking on the underparts. The precise pattern and coloration of the face are good discriminators for these two species, but again, our angle does not really provide us certain assessment of the various features that might do us right in our

task. Note, however, that the central crown stripe is apparently considerably brighter on the forehead than it is on the top of the crown.

Most field-guide treatments of Grasshopper Sparrow illustrate non-juveniles of the species as being mostly unstreaked below (sporting just some reddish streaking on the upper sides) and certainly few such illustrations indicate the possibility that individuals would be as streaked as our quiz bird appears to be. So, Le Conte's Sparrow it is, eh? However, if we return to the central crown stripe, we should note that Le Conte's Sparrow typically has a solid white one. We would be hard-pressed to call our bird's stripe white, particularly on the top of the crown. Of course, Grasshopper Sparrow is also supposed to have a white central crown stripe. So, have we been barking up the wrong tree? Is the bird not an *Ammodramus* sparrow? If so, what else could it be?

Although many ABA-area field guides do not mention the species, we should consider another option, since our bird doesn't seem to be fitting neatly enough into either of our sparrow holes. That other option would be any of several species of bishops; the Orange Bishop (*Euplectes fran-*

ciscanus) is illustrated in various editions of the *National Geographic Guide* and in *The Sibley Guide*. However, that species sports legs more orange than pink, has an entirely pinkish bill, and lacks even the modest lateral throat stripes of our quiz bird. Now where?

Well, that "where" would be back to Grasshopper Sparrow. One of the major constraints on field guides is the lack of space to treat subspecific, sexual, and individual variability at all well, particularly for polytypic species such as Grasshopper Sparrow. The four subspecies occurring in the ABA Area range from virtually unstreaked to streaking quite similar to that of our quiz bird. The streaking across the chest is noticeably less obvious than the side streaking, and none of the streaking is distinct or black enough for the bird to comfortably fit within Le Conte's Sparrow. Additionally, individual differences in central crown stripe color are extensive, easily encompassing what is shown by this individual. This **Grasshopper Sparrow** was photographed by Bill Schmoker in Yuma County, Colorado, in mid-October 2006.

Literature Cited

Jaramillo, A. 2006. Field marks we haven't met yet. *Birding* 38(6):76-79.