

# Tough Love:

## II. *Emberizidae*

How do you recognize a serious birder? What are the diagnostic field marks of a *real* birder? It's not just the high-end binocular, utilized these days by all sorts of hobbyists and professionals with few if any links to the birding community. It's probably not the field guide, either, as likely to sit unused on the homemaker's kitchen window sill as to be found in the serious birder's back pocket. And a host of other accessories—comfortable footwear, a JanSport fleece, the dog-eared *DeLorme's* on the back seat of a mud-splattered Subaru—are suggestive, but hardly definitive.

So how do you know? The key is to focus not on plumage but instead on vocalizations. Just listen. A real birder invokes *The Patagonia Picnic Table Effect* without a hint of self-consciousness. Serious birders speak of *vagrants* and *transients* as though they were good things. For real birders, terms such as *blockbusting* and *The 700 Club* have purely ornithological connotations. Serious birders routinely employ cutesie argot, e.g., *juvie*, *scaps*, to convey precise quantitative information. And, of course, there are the names that we birders assign to the objects of our devotion. We say *Yellow-bellied Sapsucker* or *Rose-breasted Grosbeak* without sniggering. No translation is required for *Butter Butt* or *Peregrine Popcorn*. We lapse effortlessly into shorthand: *peeps*, *baypolls*. We cut corners: *dickey birds*, *LBJs* ("Little Brown Jobs").

It is understood by the real birder that the LBJ is a joke, a self-mocking shibboleth. It is a pleasant diversion on the road to a serious destination: correct identification. In the end, there are no LBJs. In the end, instead, it is either a Bachman's Sparrow or a Botteri's. (And the real—and really pedantic—birder even insists on "correct" pronunciations: *BACK-minz*, *bo-TARE-reez*.) In the end, after the cold front has passed through, we get serious about scouring the weedy wet meadow for a rare *Ammodramus*—a Le Conte's Sparrow perhaps, or maybe a Baird's. In the end, we find that we've memorized millimeter-scale differences among several species of *Spizella* sparrows in non-breeding plumage.

In the real birder's code of conduct, the *de jure* LBJ is plainly illegal: Every sighting must lead to an official, checklist-compliant identification. But *de facto* LBJs are cheerfully tolerated. Consider the evidence. The serious birder wouldn't dare report a Brown Towhee; the real birder is always careful to distinguish between the two species of sharp-tailed sparrows. But what of Timberline Sparrow or Cape Sable Sparrow, of the *other* other sharp-tailed sparrow? What of the multiple races of Fox Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow? They're not worth the trouble—yet. And what of wildly polymorphic taxa such as Song Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco? No splits are rumored, so—no dice.

Believe it or not, the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list* was never intended to serve as a field identification manual. Yet the real birder all too often finds himself being jerked around—pointlessly so—by the latest pronouncements of the AOU. True, Belding's Sparrow does not carry the AOU imprimatur; but that does not negate its ecological and morphological distinctiveness. And Bell's Sparrow does not currently bear the AOU seal of approval; but listing it as a catchall Sage Sparrow is tantamount to labeling it an LBJ.

In approaching the matter of sparrow identification, the real—the really good—birder is willing to cast off the shackles of official nomenclature. The serious—the seriously competent—birder is unencumbered by the strictures of checklist status. Not a one of the forms, morphs, and races cited below is tickable. But each one is identifiable. Each one *should* be identified. In the end, after all, there are no LBJs.



The hill country of coastal Marin County, California, is desolate: tall grasses and low shrubs mainly, interspersed with a few cypresses. Here there is little of the drama of the immediate shoreline, where fog banks collide with steep sea cliffs. But there is interstitial beauty here, in this land of poison oak

and perennial lupines, of occasional Rock Wrens and Wren-tits, of resident **Nuttall's Sparrows** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli*)—among the most range-restricted of North American birds.

The juncos of central New Mexico's ponderosa pine forests are classy: mainly mouse-gray, with a bright splash of russet on the mantle. Taking a closer look, we notice a bicolored bill and we discern a reddish tinge to some of the wing feathers. Now let's listen to the song: tripartite and tinkling. A northern race of the Yellow-eyed Junco? Yes, once upon a time; but now a southern race of the Dark-eyed Junco. In any event, a **Red-backed Junco** (*Junco hyemalis dorsalis*).

Discrete variation within a species does not necessarily compel a trinomial designation. Case in point: the stunning **white-and-black morph** of the White-throated Sparrow, the basis for which is a simple chromosomal inversion. White-and-black morphs always mate with tan-and-brown morphs (which do not carry the inversion), thus guaranteeing a stable polymorphism in the species. The two morphs also employ different mating strategies: White-and-black males are promiscuous, whereas tan-and-brown males are monogamous. And white-and-black individuals are socially dominant to their tan-and-brown congeners.

The **Dusky Seaside Sparrow** (*Ammodramus maritimus nigrescens*) became extinct on 16 June 1987. What went wrong? Some commentators have argued that the AOU's 1973 downgrading of the taxon from full-species rank was partly to blame. The bird was "just a subspecies", and enthusiasm for the recovery effort flagged. In recent years, however, federal agencies have awakened to the importance of conserving genetic diversity below the species level: About half of the ABA-area avian taxa currently protected under the Endangered Species Act are subspecies.

At high elevations in the Ruby Mountains of northeastern Nevada, one might find Black Rosy-Finch, Himalayan Snowcock, and an odd sparrow. Could it be a Timberline Sparrow (*Spizella breweri taverneri*)? Several details are right: The bird inhabits stunted willows at treeline; its song is wiry and indeterminate; it is dusky and coarse-streaked. Is it an out-of-habitat and strange-sounding Brewer's Sparrow in aberrant plumage? Or does this **unidentified high-elevation Spizella** represent an undescribed intermediate population?

Rotting and dying, it assaults the senses. Yet the Salton Sea—forsaken long ago by developers and vacationers—re-

mains a hotbed for halophilic organisms, among them the **Large-billed Sparrow** (*Passerculus sandwichensis rostratus*). It wanders to the coast on occasion and sometimes all the way to Arizona, but most ABA-area sightings come from the actual Salton Seashore and its immediate environs. "Inland" ag fields and cattail marshes are too chichi for this survivalist sparrow, at home among the obsidian outcroppings at water's edge and in the *Atriplex*-dominated moonscape just beyond.

The 1995 split of the sharp-tailed sparrows seemed straightforward enough: Nelson's in North Dakota, Saltmarsh in New Jersey, and never the twain shall meet. For practical purposes, anyhow: A narrow zone of overlap was restricted to the sparsely populated and seldom-birded Maine coast. Out of sight, out of mind. But we have since learned that the contact zone is much broader, that hybridization is occurring, and that the taxonomic status of the **Acadian Sharp-tailed Sparrow** (*Ammodramus nelsoni subvirgatus*) is unclear.

Inyo County, California, is a place of extremes: Mount Whitney at 14,495 feet above sea level, Death Valley at 282 feet below sea level; ageless bristlecone pines in the Sierra, ephemeral wetlands in the Mojave desert. The threatened **Inyo California Towhee** (*Pipilo crissalis eremophilus*), a county endemic, has gotten in on the action, too. It finds

food on sparse, sun-stricken desert slopes, but it breeds in shady—even cool—willow thickets in protected washes and ravines.

The upper Ohio River valley in early April is unpretentious, understated, lovely. Redbud rolls over the hillsides; coltsfoot spreads into waste places; and mourning cloaks flirt with the sunspecks. And on the not-yet-shady forest floor, **Red Fox Sparrows** (*Passerella i. iliaca*) kick and scratch in the leaf litter. They are on migration now, but their pace is leisurely and they are

frequently given to song: a repeated series of unhurried, rich, piping half-tones and quarter-tones.

A paradox: The Song Sparrow is one of the most variable "species" in North America, yet it is one of the least likely to be split. How come? Because much of the variation is clinal, and gene flow is presumed to be continuous throughout its extensive range. Be that as it may, the brobdingnagian **Aleutian Sparrow** (*Melospiza melodia maxima*) is striking, almost startling, and certainly outside the realm of experience for any first-time visitor from the Lower 48. "Just another Song Sparrow"? "Just an LBJ"? Not for the real birder.

— Ted Floyd



Inyo California Towhee (*Pipilo crissalis eremophilus*). Argus Mountains, Inyo County, California; 20 February 2005. © Bob Steele.