Sparrows—they’re mostly brownish, streaky little birds that are secretive and generally not all that interesting to many casual observers of nature. A number of species have buzzy songs that seem more insect-like than avian, and some can be almost impossible to hear in a stiff breeze. Some members of this group live in nearly impenetrable swamps that are infested with mosquitoes and cottonmouths, while others spend much of their lives living in rugged mountain country. Fair enough, these are some of the stereotypes about sparrows, and perhaps to a small degree some of this may be accurate. So why would we here at *Birding* devote so much valuable page space to a Photo Salon on sparrows, let alone almost an entire issue on them? Well, because much of what you may think you know about sparrows comes from some of these stereotypes, and really, most of them aren’t true.

On the contrary, many members of the family Emberizidae are strikingly beautiful. But it’s more of a subtle beauty that requires a little closer study to fully appreciate. Have you ever really looked at the incredibly intricate markings and coloration of a Grasshopper or Henslow’s Sparrow up close? How about the eye-catching pattern and coloration of a full-breeding-plumage male Chestnut-collared Longspur? Okay, I’ll grant you that California and Canyon Towhees are a bit drab, but how can you not fall in love with the plumage of a Snow Bunting the first time you see one? The point is, for some birders this may be an underappreciated family group that we’d like to showcase for you in this Photo Salon.

We’ve selected a diverse group of photographers once again and solicited their best work. These are all folks who simply enjoy taking pictures of birds. Whether they ever sell these images to the birding magazines or book publishers is of little consequence to them. That’s not what drives them to create the beautiful images you’ll find on the following pages. It’s the love of their subjects and the love of photography that push them to seek out new and better bird images for their files. It’s the prospect of capturing an exciting natural history moment on film (or flashcard) that makes them get up at 3 a.m. to drive 200 miles to that great spot they heard about to photograph something like a Brewer’s Sparrow in beautiful first morning light. As the Photo Editor for *Birding*, I look at literally thousands of images a year, and I can see in the images we’ve selected for the salon the love of bird photography that went into making this series of photographs.

As in our previous salon, on raptors (October 2004), we’ve gathered a broad range of images that depict a wide variety of species from different parts of the country and birds that live in varying habitats. From the remote desert canyons of southeastern Arizona to the open tundra of Churchill, Manitoba, and many points in between, we bring you our latest installment of the *Birding* Photo Salon. We hope you enjoy looking through it as much as we enjoyed creating it.

—Brian E. Small, Photo Editor

**Photography by**

JIM BURNS • LANG ELLIOTT • JOE FUHRMAN • KEVIN T. KARLSON

GARTH MCELROY • ROLF NUSBAUMER • MARIE READ

ROBERT ROYSE • BRIAN E. SMALL • BOB STEELE
“Sometimes you never know where and when you may end up making a pleasing image of a bird. This Green-tailed Towhee photograph, for example, was one that I never really expected to take when I was renting a house in Estes Park, Colorado, a few summers ago. I was with my family for a summer vacation, and every morning I'd hear this towhee singing outside our bedroom window. One morning, I decided to track him down. I found him singing consistently from a low perch, where he was easily approachable. I quickly grabbed my gear, and within 15 minutes I had all the frame-filling shots I wanted.”

“In my home state of New York, Henslow’s Sparrows are rather rare and difficult to find. Not so at Taberville Prairie Conservation Area, Missouri, where I quickly located two or three males in one morning. Photography was rather easy. All I had to do was follow a bird around, photographing it as it perched and sang from atop stems. One individual allowed me to approach as close as fifteen feet, and that’s how I got this shot.” Canon EOS3 camera, Canon 500/4.5 lens, 1.4x converter, Fuji Sensia 100-speed film. Taberville, Missouri; 20 May 1997. © Lang Elliott.
“Vesper Sparrows breed in open, scrubby fields in New England. Unfortunately, this is a rare habitat in the Northeast because most of these fields have been lost to development or succession. In New Hampshire and Maine, wild blueberries are major cash crops that are grown in large, open fields. These blueberry barrens provide the necessary habitat requirements for Vesper Sparrows during spring and summer. This male was photographed early one spring morning in a blueberry barren.” Canon EOS 1D camera, 6D0/600mm lens, 1.4x teleconverter. Gilmanton, New Hampshire; 21 April 2003. © Garth McElroy.

“A mid-winter drive through the empty fields in rural northwestern Ohio might seem at first glance to be a fruitless birding endeavor. That perception can quickly change when a swirling flock of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of birds takes to the air seemingly out of nowhere. Photographing Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs, and Snow Buntings is much like photographing shorebirds. Find a feeding flock, sit quietly on the ground, wait for them to come close, and just hope that one will stop moving long enough to pose for the camera.” Canon EOS 1D camera, 6D0/600mm lens, 1.4x teleconverter. Wyandot County, Ohio; January 2004. © Robert Royse.
Below: “During a 2004 trip to Arizona, Five-striped Sparrow was a prized target, not only as a life bird, but also as a species that I really wanted to photograph. California Gulch, west of Nogales, was everything I’d heard—isolated, desolate, intriguing. An early morning hike into the canyon produced two males on territory, far up the hillside. It wasn’t easy, but I made it up the steep, rugged hillside to get the sun at my back and the favored perch at eye level.” Canon 1D MkII camera, 500mm f/4 IS lens, TC-14E Teleconverter, Fuji Sensia 100 film. California Gulch, Arizona; 9 August 2004. © Bob Steele.

Right: “The male Smith’s Longspur, with its harlequin facial pattern and orange underparts, had long been on my list of ‘most wanted’ songbirds. I had photographed a first-winter Smith’s in New Jersey, but never one of these striking breeding males. An early June trip to Churchill, Manitoba, finally brought me to their taiga nest habitat. After watching a bird consistently return to a nearby song post, I set up my camera and waited. Soon, this beautiful male returned, and I was rewarded with a number of special photos.” Canon T-90 camera, 500mm L-series lens, 1.4x teleconverter, Fuji 100 ISO Sensia film. Churchill, Manitoba; June 1996. © Kevin T. Karlson.

Opposite: “In South Texas and elsewhere, birds are drawn to water. Lark Sparrows are no exception. This Lark Sparrow enjoyed a long bath to clean off the Texas dust and cool off from the brutal Texas heat. The species is common year-round in Texas. An adaptable bird, the Lark Sparrow can be found in a variety of semi-open habitats, and it enjoys eating both seeds and insects.” Nikon F5 camera, 600mm f/4 AF-E lens, TC-14E Teleconverter, Fuji Sensia 100 film. Willacy, Texas; March 2004. © Rolf Nussbaumer.
"After the long upstate New York winter, it is a delight when Savannah Sparrows and other grassland birds return to nest in the fields near my home. Walking the area for exercise every day allows me to notice the local birds’ favorite perches. This Savannah Sparrow often came to a patch of golden field mustard (Brassica rapa) flowers. I photographed it among the flowers, using my car as a blind." Nikon F5 camera, 500mm AF-S lens, 1.4 teleconverter, Provia 100 film. Ithaca, New York; June 2004. © Marie Read.
“Photographing birds that are limited in range and restricted in habitat is always a challenge for the photographer. And so it is with the **Rufous-winged Sparrow**. Within the ABA Area, it is found only in Southeast Arizona, usually in desert scrub. While I was sitting in a blind photographing a Verdin at a nest, this Rufous-winged Sparrow suddenly landed two feet above the nest. Often, when photographing a particular bird, another species unexpectedly has arrived for a good photo opportunity. **Nikon D2H camera, 600mm f4.0 lens, 1.4x teleconverter, tripod. Tucson, Arizona; 30 May 2004. © Joe Fuhrman.**

“This was one of three singing male **Baird’s Sparrows** that I found on territory within a stone’s throw of a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. I watched the sparrows for one morning without shooting, and this individual seemed the most faithful to the fewest number of singing perches. The next morning, I crawled in and lay on my belly and waited for him to make his rounds. He teed up to sing on the same branch of this snowberry bush a dozen times during the course of the morning. **Canon EOS 1V camera, 400 f/2.8 lens, Velvia film, Gitzo tripod. Lostwood NWR, North Dakota; 30 May 2000. © Jim Burns.**