

Auspex

I moved to eastern Massachusetts in the long-ago summer of 1983, and as soon as I'd found a place to live, it was off to Long Wharf to squint out over Boston Harbor for the Arctic seabirds that I knew had to be there. They weren't, and in the next weeks and months of that summer and fall my romantic notion of New England's birds—still gleaned largely from Brewster and Griscom—suffered constant and massive revision. Instead of kittiwakes and murrelets, my days were filled with mockingbirds and cardinals, descendants of the pioneering individuals that had moved north from their "resident" ranges in the 1950s to colonize—to conquer—latitudes where for a century they had been known only as vagrants. Not American Three-toed but Red-bellied Woodpecker, not Boreal Chickadee but Tufted Titmouse: Those were the birds of my daily walk through the shaded neighborhoods of Cambridge.

The past half-century's push of classically southern species north has not been limited to the East Coast, of course. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Lesser Goldfinches now breed in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Common Black-Hawks are nearly regular in Colorado, and what should have been the astonishing record of a Verdin in Washington state seemed to many of us "just" another data point in a now familiar pattern of northward ex-

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ploration by species as different as Short-tailed Hawk and White-eared Hummingbird. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and Reddish Egrets no longer raise eyebrows in San Diego, and White-winged Dove seems unstoppable on its steady march toward the Arctic Circle.

In the southwestern U.S., a large number of species once deemed vagrants from the south are now regular in smaller or larger numbers. A scant decade in to this 21st century, visiting birders in southeastern Arizona simply expect to see White-eared Hummingbird and Black-capped Gnatcatcher at the right localities in the right season, and re-

cent years have seen more frequent reports of such species as Purple Gallinule, Northern Jacana, Plain-capped Starthroat, and Rufous-capped and Crescent-chested Warblers, all potential colonizers of the region from farther south in North America.

Farther south in North America? Yes, North America. Historical accident, national chauvinism, and convenience have left birders with a restricted—an impoverished—definition of the continent. Geographically, North America reaches from the Darién of eastern Panama to the Arctic Ocean; zoogeographically, North America—the Nearctic—is somewhat more narrowly defined, but still extends south to the southern edge of the Mexican Plateau. "Southwestern North America," the region of origin for each of our three quiz subjects, does not stop at El Paso, and the American Southwest *sensu lato* is full of birds that might, just might, make that pioneering flight north of the international border.

The first challenge, of course, is finding them. The four counties that make up the birder's Southeast Arizona are, famously, the most eagerly birded 22,000 square miles in North America. But of that entire area—three times the size of New Jersey—only a handful of small, discrete sites are birded intensively, or even regularly. There are dozens of small mountain ranges, hundreds of canyons, thousands of mesquite washes, and millions of acres that never see a birder—but that certainly see birds. And it isn't just that the late-summer ornithopilgrims stick close to the traditional route; not even the most ambitious resident birder is likely to strike off into terra incognita when specialties and rarities await, guaranteed, just off the pavement in Miller or Madera.

But there's another complication for the birder seeking southern wanderers in Arizona or New Mexico. In most of the U.S. and Canada, even the most unexpected vagrants from the south are immediately identifiable; that first odd zebra-backed woodpecker in Massachusetts, the funny little

crested gray bird half a century ago in upstate New York, even that peacock-colored hummingbird at an Iowa feeder—all readily diagnosed by flipping the pages of the field guide *du jour*. But when the potential *novum* originates from south of the border, no amount of riffling through the plates of the standard “North American” guides will help; indeed, if the stray in question has a close relative or a look-alike among the regular north-of-the-border species, it is likely to be overlooked or innocently misidentified, written down and written off as an aberrant individual of a familiar species. How often has that already happened in the case of each of the birds that follow?

Quiz Photo A

Trogons and owls and hummingbirds bring hundreds of thousands of birders to southeastern Arizona each summer, but it's the sparrows that keep us coming back. Nearly every species of emberizid found in the western U.S. and Canada occurs here at some point in the year, and certain groups attain a diversity in Arizona unmatched anywhere north of the border. Among them is the ragbag genus *Aimophila*, represented (as currently understood) in Arizona by no fewer than five breeding species. Cassin's and Rufous-crowned Sparrows are relatively widespread in the southwestern U.S., but Botteri's, Rufous-winged, and especially Five-striped count among the most highly prized Arizona specialties for visiting birders.

At first glance, and at second, those five species aren't especially similar to one another, and in fact the genus *Aimophila* is now generally admitted to be polyphyletic, combining taxa that are not each other's closest relatives; but it is a convenient grouping, and dissimilar as they may be in plumage, the five Arizona species currently assigned to the genus do share some obvious structural characters. All of them are medium-sized to large sparrows, with long, rounded or graduated tails, short wings, flat crowns, and outsized bills. They also share a behavioral peculiarity that endears them to birders visiting during Arizona's late-summer high season: *Aimophila* sparrows are monsoon breeders, in most years delaying their nesting until the rains of July and August, when these normally shy birds perch up in the open to fill their favored habitats with song and birders' optics with easy views.

Our quiz bird, singing away in August, looks very much like an *Aimophila*. This is a large sparrow indeed, as the juniper leaves prove, and its long tail is clearly graduated, the

outer feathers noticeably shorter than the central ones. The wing is short, with stumpy primaries that hardly extend beyond the folded secondaries; the wingtip barely reaches the ends of the uppertail coverts. The uniformity of the upperparts is typical of a number of *Aimophila* sparrows, and the flat crown and very large bill, with essentially no “stop” on



Quiz Photo A—August.

the forehead, clinch the identification at the genus level. From here, it should be easy.

And it is easy, by sparrow standards, so long as we keep an open mind. Our bird's superior size, relatively plain upperparts, and big bill rule out the sweet-faced and diminutive Rufous-winged Sparrow. The head pattern is wrong for Five-striped, and far too well defined for the blank-faced Cassin's or Botteri's Sparrows. Four down—leaving us with Rufous-crowned Sparrow, a bulky, round-tailed, somber bird with a warm-colored cap, strong eyeline, broken eyering, and notably heavy lateral throat stripe—all features conspicuous on our quiz bird.

But what's it doing singing from inside a big juniper? Rufous-crowned Sparrows are notoriously terrestrial, liking nothing more than to shuffle around sunny boulder-strewn slopes; when they do sing from a perch, it tends to be from the top of a short tree or bush. Our puzzled second look turns up several other anomalous features: The bill is huge, the wings and mantle are warmer in tone than the soft brownish-gray of Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and the lores show a smudgy dark spot. Of course, if we were observing this bird in the field, we would also notice its song: Where Rufous-crowned Sparrow utters a long, jumbled, chipper-

ing stanza, like a House Wren inside a tin can, this bird, a **Rusty Sparrow** (*Aimophila rufescens*), sings a cheerful, repetitive *chirp chirp-ee cheer*, the pause between the first and second notes of the phrase recalling the stuttering incipit of a Dickcissel.

The photo is of a Rusty Sparrow of the race *mcleodii*, in many respects the least distinctive of the seven generally recognized subspecies; unlike its brighter, more heavily marked conspecifics to the east and south, *mcleodii*—which breeds within 100 miles of the U.S. border in northern Sonora—shows relatively little red on the flight feathers of the wing, and its dull rusty crown is not usually outlined by black lateral stripes, both features making it more closely resemble a large Rufous-crowned Sparrow. But in addition to overall size and voice, a *mcleodii* Rusty Sparrow in Arizona or New Mexico should be distinguishable on the basis of its unstreaked back, long and heavy bill, and darker, more complex face pattern, including distinctly blackish lores. Though it occupies a wide altitudinal range, Rusty Sparrow in northwest Mexico is said to be most frequently encountered in pine-oak woodland with scattered brambles.

In a 1998 article in *Birding*, Rusty Sparrow topped the list of the six most likely additions to the ABA-area list from southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico; the species is also listed as a likely colonizer in an American Bird Conservancy fact-sheet on the effects of global warming <abcbirds.org/newsandreports/globalwarming/Arizona.pdf>. Recent surveys by Aaron Flesch (*Studies in Avian Biology* 37) did not locate this species at any of his study sites within 75 miles of the U.S. border. Still, any apparent “Rufous-crowned” Sparrow encountered at unusually high elevation or issuing unusual vocalizations should be examined closely as a possible Rusty Sparrow.

Quiz Photo B

Its uncharacteristic location notwithstanding—out in the open, in good light, the entire bird visible at once—we can confidently begin with the assumption that this is a wren. The long, bright white supercilium rules out a number of plainer-faced species, and the bird’s generally buffy tone, stout bill, and long tail bring to mind the familiar genus *Thryothorus*.

Seen well, as this one is, wrens in the U.S. and Canada pose few identification problems. But this bird falls through the identification cracks: It’s too pale and too plain-winged for the plump Carolina Wren, too well-marked on the face

and too short-tailed for the long and lanky Bewick’s Wren. Rather than the heavily barred white of Bewick’s Wren, the outer tail feathers—only the leftmost is clearly visible on the bird’s undertail—are cinnamon barred with black. The fine black lateral throat stripe and narrow streaking on the auriculars and side of the neck are also unlike Bewick’s Wren. What have we here?

The future is now. In August 2008, a **Sinaloa Wren** (*Thryothorus sinaloa*) like this one set up housekeeping in Patagonia, Arizona. First detected by its song, a loud, var-



Quiz Photo B—January.

ied series of bubbling and trilling phrases that Michael Retter compares to the song of a Song Sparrow sung by a Carolina Wren, the bird lingered for weeks in the dense trees bordering Sonoita Creek, permitting the fortunate an occasional glimpse of a first ABA-area record (*not*, as was so often trumpeted, a first North American record).

Like Rusty Sparrow, Sinaloa Wren has long loomed large on the novelty-obsessed birder’s horizon. The species was among the top six in the 1998 *Birding* survey, and an individual had in fact been reported from Arizona ten years earlier; more recently, Flesch recorded successful breeding by Sinaloa Wrens within 35 miles of the U.S. border in three consecutive years.

Any odd *Thryothorus* in the U.S. should be identified with care. Visually very similar to Sinaloa Wren, Happy Wren (*Thryothorus felix*) is also a conceivable stray to Arizona from Sonora; deep in the dark thickety fastnesses they favor, these fidgety birds rarely give the sort of view granted by the quiz photo, making it hard to assess the pattern of their faces, the amount of barring in their remiges, or the

precise shade of their underparts. One character that is relatively easy to see and reliably useful is the contrast between the tail and back: muted on Happy, but notably strong on Sinaloa Wren. The bright rufous tail and cold brown upperparts of the latter species are nicely visible in Howell and Webb's *Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, but not mentioned in the text.

Quiz Photo C

While it might be possible to overlook either of our first two quiz birds as a more common congener, this last creature resembles nothing in our “North American” field guides. Inconspicuously hitching up the tree trunk, it looks at first glance like an enormous Brown Creeper or an odd-plumed woodpecker with a slender scythe of a bill. It's neither, of course, but rather a woodcreeper, representative of a large group of Neotropical suboscines once accorded their own family but now assigned to the ovenbirds, or furnariids. No member of this relatively uniform group has ever been recorded north of the Mexican border—but one, **White-striped Woodcreeper** (*Lepidocolaptes leucogaster*), is almost certainly on its way.

For a furnariid, White-striped Woodcreeper is downright distinctive, a slender, thin-billed bird with a long, spiky tail and brightly black-and-white-lined breast neatly set off from a gleaming white throat. The eponymous stripes result from the complex patterns of the breast feathers: Each white feather is edged with blackish chestnut, creating broad “ski tracks” when the feathers are aligned. Experienced tropical birders know that even such unmistakable



Quiz Photo C—October.

plumage features can be difficult to evaluate in the dark forests these birds frequent; fortunately, like most of its relatives, the White-striped Woodcreeper tends to be vocal, uttering a loud, sweet, descending trill—often enough, the only thing that gives this otherwise inconspicuous bird away in the dim pine and oak woods of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental.

Sedentary in most of its known range, White-striped Woodcreeper was only a runner-up on the 1998 *Birding* most-likely list. The single individual photographed seven years later in extreme northern Chihuahua was within 48 miles of adding not just a new species but an entirely new family to the U.S. list. Altitudinal movements and apparent post-breeding dispersal are now thought to be in this species' seasonal repertoire at the northwestern extreme of its range. Who knows? White-striped Woodcreeper may just be the Tufted Titmouse of the next generation.