

Spotted on the Hill

The Song Sparrow

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER VANKEVICH

After covering more than sixty bird species that have been spotted/photographed in the Capitol Hill area, it's perhaps overdue to take a look at one of the more common, noisy and vibrant denizens, the Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). Since this is a political town, I should mention a little birding vernacular. LBJ refers not only to a former President and powerful Capitol Hill leader, but has been used in the bird world for "little brown job," a vague description of an unidentified bird. When one sees a LBJ in a field or in bushes, the first species one should consider is a Song Sparrow.

Song Sparrows are indeed smallish brown birds with a long tail and streaks on a pale breast. Often the streaks will converge into a solid spot on the breast. Both male and females look alike. A similar species that one may encounter here especially in the fall is the Savannah Sparrow which is generally a bit sleeker in form and more yellowish around the face. Two field distinctions between these two birds are that the Savannah Sparrow is generally quiet and more tranquil in movements whereas the noisy and more active Song Sparrow flits nervously to-and-fro between perches. Like many sparrows they feed primarily on seeds and grains and consume more insects during the breeding season.

The Song Sparrow can be found throughout most of North America and is very adaptive, living within the boundaries of human habitat as well as in highly isolated areas such as the Aleutians. Birds that breed in northern habitats may migrate and in more temperate areas such our region, they

are year-round residents and may be seen in even on the coldest of days. This species has been reported on every one of the annual DC Christmas Bird Counts, usually a few hundred in number. According to the National Audubon database, the highest number reported was in 1980 with 1010 individuals. The smallest number was only three individuals in 1936. Why such a disparity in a count circle consisting of a diameter of fifteen miles? In 1936 only two observers were out that day, in 1980 131 birders were out in the field. When looking at field reports such as these, one must be careful to look at several factors especially the number of participants and the weather on that particular day.

As you can imagine by both its common and scientific (*Melospiza melodia*) names, this bird is highly vocal. Males learn several songs which consist of a complex series of loud rapid notes and usually finish with a trill. They will perch on a low branch or bush and use these vocalizations to attract females and also to declare their territory which explains why they can be heard throughout the year. Females make varying chattering sounds to communicate with her mate. They both will make a sharp alarm chip note.

Early knowledge of the Song



Sparrow can in large part be attributed to a largely self-taught ornithologist named Margaret Morse Nice (1883-1974). She was a graduate of Mt. Holyoke College and Clark University. When her husband accepted a faculty position in 1927 at Ohio State University, she found herself living on a sixty acre tract of land consisting of "tangles of trees, weeds and bushes" along the Olentangy River – perfect habitat for Song Sparrows. For eight years she studied

and carefully documented the behaviour of several generations of this species resulting in the 1937 publication of "Studies in the Life History of the Song Sparrow." The work was revised for popular reading in 1939 published as "The Watcher at the Nest." For a little birding trivia, that edition was the first book illustrated by Roger Tory Peterson, an American naturalist and educator who is considered one of the founding inspirations for the environmental movement.

You can read more about Ms. Morse and other ornithological luminaries in "Bird Watching with American Women" (1986) edited by Deborah Strom.

(If you have any interesting birds on Capitol Hill that could be a possible feature for this column, feel free to contact me: petervankevich@gmail.com.) ★

About Song Sparrow. Contact: info@songsparrow.com 1-608-883-2356. Visit Us! 2019 letter. History of our farm. Favorite horticultural links. Email signup. Plants and Supplies. Only on the Web. Peonies. Daylilies. Tree Peonies. Clematis. Hosta. Sun perennials. Probably the most widespread sparrow, song sparrows commonly visit feeders and are responsive to pishing. In winter they may form small flocks, often with other sparrows, including the Lincolnâ€™s, swamp, or zonotrichia . Polytypic. Length 5.8â€“7.5". I love the songs of the sparrow. I remember hearing them while growing up in our homestead at Talkeetna Alaska and their songs comfort me today. White Crowned Sparrow!Â Sparrow - God knows the beauty inside me. He loves me even though I do not have the outside beauty of the other birds. Linda Warren.