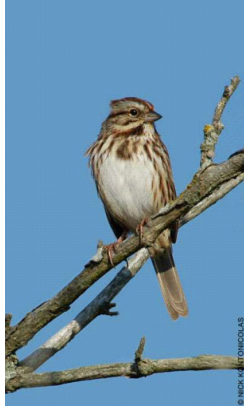


BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Linda de Kort

THE SONG SPARROW, MELODIOUS AND HEARTY



As October arrives, many of the songbirds have left our valley. Some stopped for a while and raised a brood or two, some just passed through on their way to or from their breeding grounds. But there is one sparrow that will reliably stay here all year round in Western Montana, our resident Song Sparrow. Sparrows can be difficult to identify because of their general brownish color. The easi-

est way to tackle this family is to learn to identify common sparrows first. The Song Sparrow is certainly one of the most widespread of this family. Sparrows belong to the family *Emberizidae* which are characterized by their cone shaped bills for eating seeds. Sparrows originated in South America and spread first into North America before crossing into eastern Asia and westward. This could explain why there are fewer sparrow species in Europe and Africa when compared to the Americas. The *Emberizidae* family also includes the North American birds known as juncos and towhees.

The Song Sparrow, *Melospiza melodia*, is a stocky little bird with a length of 6.25 inches and is found in open brushy habitat where moisture is available. It is visually recognized by its coarsely streaked breast and large breast spot. It also has two thick brown stripes (malar stripes) on the sides of its whitish throat. It has a grayish-white eyebrow and the crown is dark brown separated by a lighter stripe in the center. Its back is brown with black streaks and its underparts are whitish. It has a long brown rounded tail and its legs are pinkish brown. Both male and female look alike and the juveniles are similar to the adult but drabber with less distinct face and head stripes and may lack the distinguishing central spot. The song sparrow can also be distinguished in flight by its habit of pumping its tail up and down.

It lives up to its name by being one of the most persistent and vocal singers throughout spring and summer. To hear an example of its melodious song, log on to FlatheadAudubon.org and click on "local birds" then "bird songs." You will likely recog-

nize the three short notes followed by a trill. The song has been variably interpreted as "Madge-madge- madge-put-on-your-tea-kettle-ettle-ettle" and also as "Hip-hip-hip-hooray-boys-spring-is-here." One bird may have many variations on this theme; it will repeat one variation many times before switching to another. Song Sparrows learn their songs from birds in neighboring territories. They choose territories close to or replacing the bird that they have learned from. Like other songbirds, the male Song Sparrow uses its musical and complex song to declare its territory and to attract its mates. It has been demonstrated that the female Song Sparrow is attracted to the male whose melody best matched the adult bird she learned the song from. So she is looking not only for the buzz and trill but also for the indication that this guy is going to pass on some good "learning" genes to her offspring as well.

Like most North American breeding birds, the Song Sparrow uses increasing day length as a cue for courtship. But other factors such as local temperature and food abundance are important also. In Montana, nesting is generally from the second week of May through the first week of July. Their nests will be built low in the grass or shrub and often on the ground under a tuft of grass. Their open cup nests are made from grass, stems, leaves and strips of plant bark. They are lined with fine grass and rootlets. The female will lay 2-5 bluish green eggs with brown spots and will incubate the eggs for 12-14 days. The hatchlings are helpless with patches of black down but they will fledge in 12-16 days. In a good year, the female may have another brood or two.

These steadfast little brown birds will stay with us through the winter. You will see them feeding on the ground by bird feeders and scratching in leaf litter with both feet, searching for seeds and insects. You will occasionally hear their husky "chimp" call. Winter is an excellent time to observe the subtle but elegant markings of this loyal little resident and to appreciate its hearty vitality.



Jeannie Marcure