

WINTER SPARROWS OF THE SOUTHWEST IFO

December 6-11, 2012

Three species of sparrows bounced in and around the saltbush lining the edge of a manmade stream at Sweetwater Wetlands in Tucson: small Lincoln's Sparrows with deep rusty and gray crown patterns and ochre-washed breasts, long-tailed Song Sparrows in a diversity of individual and sub-species plumages from pale gray to dark brown, and White-crowned Sparrows in contrasting adult and immature plumages. Our weekend of watching sparrows and longspurs was off to a great start!

The workshop took place during one of the warmest December's on record, and the chill of early morning soon gave way to warm sunshine. We took our time studying the sparrows we saw, noting plumage variation and their sizes and shapes. While watching "Gambel's" White-crowned Sparrows, we discussed other characteristics in addition to loreal coloration that help distinguish between sub-species and intergrades. Walking around the wetlands, Yellow-headed Blackbirds flew overhead while Orange-crowned Warblers foraged in saltbush and Abert's Towhees scratched in the gravel and a Cooper's Hawk waited for any one of them to make a mistake.

Across the road at Roger Road Waterwater Treatment Plant we fruitlessly sought Swamp Sparrows for a trifecta of *Melospizas*, but instead were treated to a family of Harris's Hawks and a gorgeous male Wood Duck. Then off to the Santa Rita Mountains, where a stop at a drip in Continental yielded many Yellow-rumped Warblers and a patient Rufous-winged Sparrow that allowed us within 15 feet. A drive through the mountain pass gave us a chance to review agaves, yuccas, and sotols as Black-throated Sparrows, Canyon Towhees, Rock Wrens, and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers foraged in a mixed flock on the hillside. Once in the grasslands around Sonoita, the mixed flocks transitioned along with the habitat to more White-crowned, Brewer's, Savannah, Vesper and Lark Sparrows. Then on to our bed and breakfast lodgings and the first classroom session focusing on identification. Dinner followed at a local restaurant where the good food was surpassed by the good company of our birding group and we all enjoyed a wonderful evening.



"Red" Fox Sparrow photographed by Vicki Sandage.

Saturday we stayed close to home, and the San Pedro River RNCA was the first stop of the day. The feeders in and around the San Pedro River house were busy, with the most unusual bird in the area being an Eastern Phoebe. The grasslands were rather quiet, but a dark "Taiga" Merlin was spectacular in the scope, and just as amazing to watch flying away. Then off to Brown Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains seeking Rufous-crowned Sparrows. In our morning of eastern rarities, were we not to be slighted on the sparrow list and a "Red" Fox Sparrow gave us glorious views with its rich rusty brown back blending into the bright rusty red tail and red triangles speckling the breast.



Botteri's Sparrow photographed by Vicki Sandage.

After enjoying the Fox Sparrow, we sat by a small pond and watched as sparrows, towhees, phoebes, and Pyrrhuloxias came in to drink while a Sora skulked around in the reeds. Then walking up canyon, the typically ever-present Rufous-crowned Sparrows eluded us, though the closely related Canyon Towhees seemed curious of our efforts. Driving around the mountain front, our last stop of the day proved fruitful, as an overwintering Botteri's Sparrow popped up in a close agave and gave a rare winter glimpse of this skulky species. In the afternoon we reviewed more ID characteristics followed with a detailed presentation on vocalizations, commencing with general terms then applying them to sparrows and longspurs.

It was back to the grasslands on Sunday, and San Rafael Valley was our destination. We scanned the roadside fence looking for Baird's

Sparrows among the Savannah and Vesper Sparrows. After two passes we found the ideal location where over the next half hour several Baird's Sparrows sat up and provided excellent scope views – lady luck was sending us "Baird's" apparently as another "Baird's" drove by while we scoped our birds.



As the Baird's Sparrows settled into the grass we studied the nuances of Savannah and Vesper Sparrows and in the process experienced a dazzling display of nature. Before us appeared a Red-tailed Hawk chasing a meadowlark through the grass, and as the meadowlark tried to flee a Prairie Falcon sped right by forcing the meadowlark down into the grass to be pursued by the jumping and pouncing Red-tailed Hawk! They seemed to be working in tandem, though it was obvious there was no intent to share the prey. After watching the Prairie Falcon fly away we went down the road chasing after flocks of Chestnut-collared Longspurs, with one of the flocks numbering nearly 200 birds. After excellent scope views of males and females, we carefully walked through the grass with longspurs on either side, but invisible to us in their winter plumage until they would flush, sometimes from just a few feet away!



Prairie Falcon and Red-tailed Hawk photographed by Vicki Sandage

As we departed the valley for Patagonia, a solitary Rufous-crowned Sparrow popped up in a small ravine and gave us solid looks at the flat head and long tail on this overall darkly plumaged species. In Patagonia, we spent time at the Paton's before returning home. The feeders here provided us with detailed views of both tan- and white-striped White-throated Sparrows among the other Emberizids present. A Broad-billed Hummingbird and Lazuli Bunting helped complete another grand day in the field. We wrapped up the evening with a classroom session on natural history and conservation issues facing our sparrows and longspurs.



Green-tailed Towhee photographed by Vicki Sandage

Before we knew it, Monday was upon us and we packed our bags and left the bed and breakfast lodgings, but with a fun-filled day in Sulphur Springs Valley in store, it made our departure much easier. Our first stop was Whitewater Draw, but mixed flocks of Lark Buntings and Brewer's, Vesper, Savannah, White-crowned, Chipping, and Black-throated Sparrows pulled us over for views along the way. At Whitewater Draw the sound of Sandhill Cranes provided a constant backdrop as we walked the banks and trails. A pair of male and female Ruddy Ground-Doves were a treat, as well were a Virginia Rail and female "Prairie" Merlin, both who watched us as we watched them from barely 20 feet away. Towhees hid within the brush, but both a Green-tailed Towhee and a Swamp Sparrow came out to perch on a sunlit branch for quick but close views. More Swamp Sparrows foraged in and around the cattails, keeping us looking for the perfect view of them.

As we headed north we counted Red-tailed Hawks in "Hawk Alley" (another name for Sulphur Springs Valley) as we passed them by. On the north end of the valley we enjoyed a beautiful lunch in the Cochise Stronghold and followed it with a short hike watching mixed flocks of "Oregon" and "Pink-sided" Dark-eyed Juncos, Chipping Sparrows, Mexican Jays, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, and an abundance of Ruby-crowned Kinglets. We spent time in the agricultural fields of Kansas Settlement seeing mostly Vesper, Savannah, and Brewer's Sparrows and continuing to count Red-tailed Hawks. Wrapping up the day, we stopped in Willcox at the Cochise Lake ponds and viewed ducks, both Ross's and Snow Geese, and many Ring-billed Gulls. From there we headed home, counting the last of the 72 Red-tailed Hawks we saw in the valley on the highway out of town. What a day, what a weekend, and what a great time with a great group of birders!



Brewer's Sparrow photographed by Vicki Sandage

Our weekend workshop wrapped up successfully with 23 species of sparrows and longspurs and 116 species total (full species list at www.aplomado.com/IFO_sparrow_workshop.html). The next **Winter Sparrows of the Southwest IFO** will be held *December 5-10, 2013*. More information is available at events.aba.org/2012sparrows.