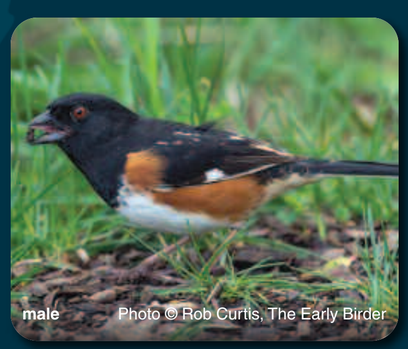
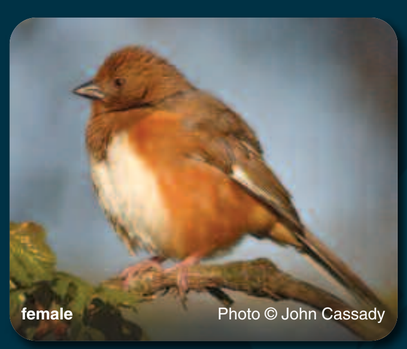
ILLINOIS BIRDS: Volume 4

SPARROWS, WEAVER FINCHES and LONGSPURS


male Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

eastern towhee


female Photo © John Cassady

Pipilo erythrophthalmus

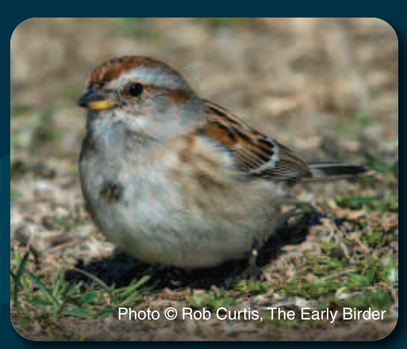


Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

American tree sparrow
Spizella arborea

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

chipping sparrow
Spizella passerina

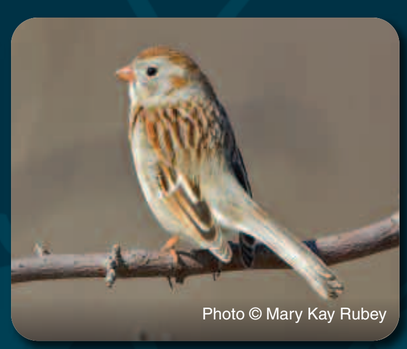


Photo © Mary Kay Rubey

field sparrow
Spizella pusilla

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

vesper sparrow
Pooecetes gramineus

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

lark sparrow
Chondestes grammacus

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

savannah sparrow
Passerculus sandwichensis

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

grasshopper sparrow
Ammodramus savannarum

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Henslow's sparrow
Ammodramus henslowii

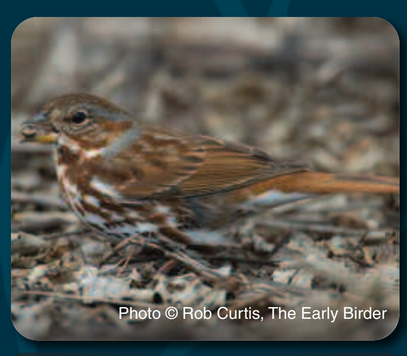


Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

fox sparrow
Passerella iliaca

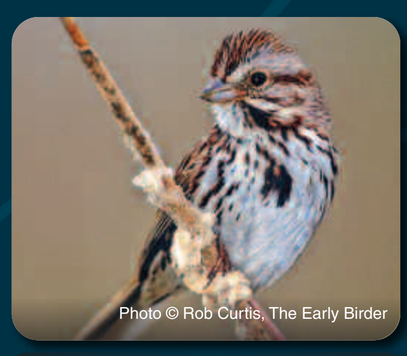


Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

song sparrow
Melospiza melodia

Photo © Brian Tang

Lincoln's sparrow
Melospiza lincolnii

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

swamp sparrow
Melospiza georgiana

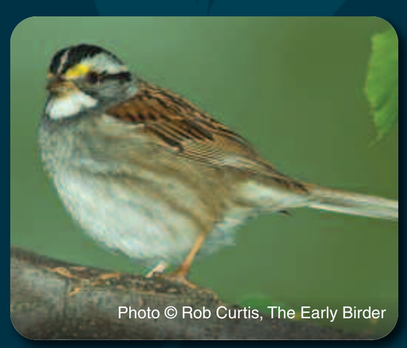


Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

white-throated sparrow
Zonotrichia albicollis

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

white-crowned sparrow
Zonotrichia leucophrys

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

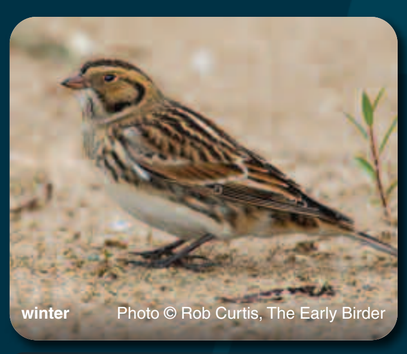
dark-eyed junco
Junco hyemalis

Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

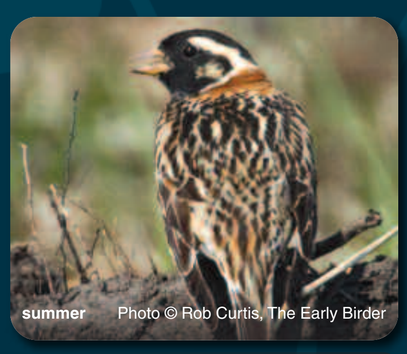
Le Conte's sparrow
Ammodramus leconteii

Photo © Brian Tang

Nelson's sparrow
Ammodramus nelsoni


winter Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Lapland longspur


summer Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Calcarius lapponicus

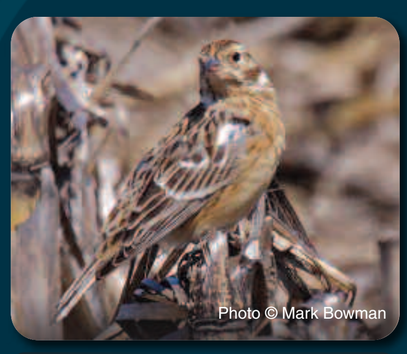
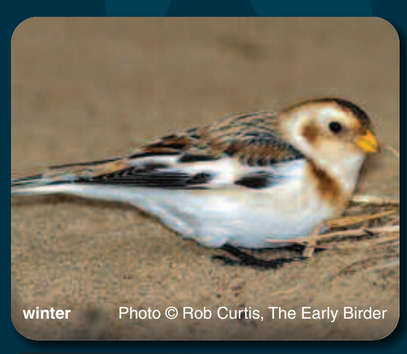
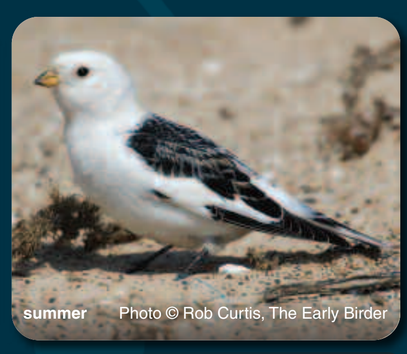


Photo © Mark Bowman

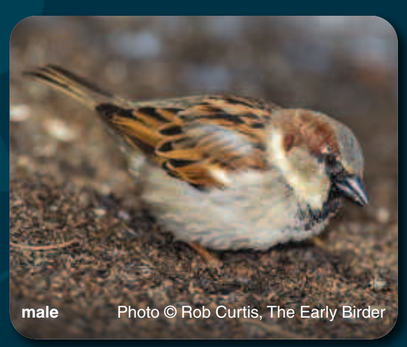
Smith's longspur
Calcarius pictus


winter Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

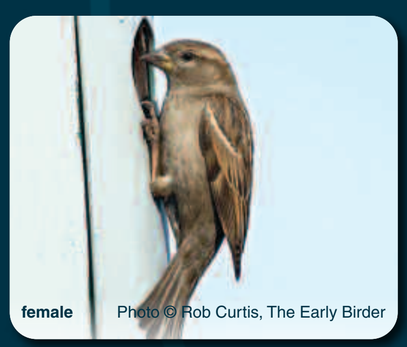
snow bunting


summer Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Plectrophenax nivalis


male Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

house sparrow


female Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Passer domesticus

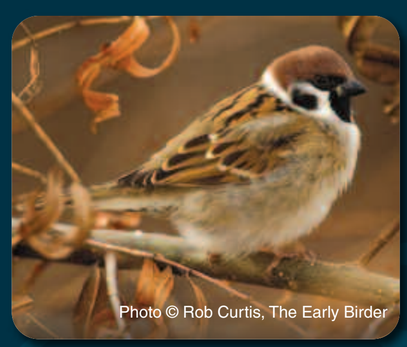


Photo © Rob Curtis, The Early Birder

Eurasian tree sparrow
Passer montanus

This fourth poster in the *Illinois Birds* series from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Audubon Society highlights three families of birds that are generally small in size and not exceptionally colorful. Many of them are secretive by nature and often overlooked. Sparrows, longspurs and weaver finches are found throughout Illinois, though, in a variety of habitats. Three of the six species of longspurs and snow buntings in the world migrate through Illinois and reside here in the winter. Sparrows, juncos and towhees comprise a large and diverse family of birds that are represented in Illinois in all seasons and habitats. Only some of the species from this family are shown on the poster. Weaver finches of Illinois are the house sparrow and Eurasian tree sparrow. These two species are not native to North America and compete with native birds for nesting sites and food. The 23 species depicted on this poster were selected by Dr. Jeff Walk of The Nature Conservancy. More information about these birds and other related topics can be found on the back of the poster.

SPECIES LIST

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Aves
Order Passeriformes

Family Calcariidae
- Lapland longspur *Calcarius lapponicus*
- Smith's longspur *Calcarius pictus*
- snow bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Family Emberizidae
- eastern towhee *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*
- American tree sparrow *Spizella arborea*
- chipping sparrow *Spizella passerina*
- field sparrow *Spizella pusilla*
- vesper sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*
- lark sparrow *Chondestes grammacus*
- savannah sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*
- grasshopper sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*
- Henslow's sparrow *Ammodramus henslowii*
- Le Conte's sparrow *Ammodramus leconteii*
- Nelson's sparrow *Ammodramus nelsoni*
- fox sparrow *Passerella iliaca*
- song sparrow *Melospiza melodia*
- Lincoln's sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii*
- swamp sparrow *Melospiza georgiana*
- white-throated sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*
- white-crowned sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*
- dark-eyed junco *Junco hyemalis*

Family Passeridae
- house sparrow *Passer domesticus*
- Eurasian tree sparrow *Passer montanus*

This poster was made possible by:

Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Education

Illinois Audubon Society
Helping Preserve Illinois Flora and Fauna Since 1897

Funding for this poster was made possible in part by a donation from the Illinois Audubon Society.

ILLINOIS BIRDS: Volume 4

SPARROWS, WEAVER FINCHES and LONGSPURS

DESCRIPTIONS

Length measurement refers to bill tip to tail tip in preserved specimens and varies somewhat from that of live birds.

Family Calcariidae – LONGSPURS

This family includes the longspurs and snow buntings. There are only six species of these birds in the world. While outwardly similar to the members of the Family Emberizidae in which they were previously classified, these birds were recently found to have DNA structures distinctively different from sparrows and were placed in their own family taxonomically.

Lapland longspur

Calcarius lapponicus
Size: 6.25″
Identifying Features: The breeding male has a black face highlighted with a white zig-zag mark and rust-red on the back of the head. The breeding female's coloration resembles the nonbreeding male (few black streaks on sides, patch of rust-red on back of head). All coloration phases include red-brown wing coverts and a triangular white patch on each side of the tail base.
Illinois Range: This species is a common winter resident and migrant statewide.
Migration: These birds start moving through Illinois in late September on their southward migration. Spring migrants begin appearing in late February. They winter as far south as the Gulf Coast.
Illinois Habitat: Open areas, including farm fields, are the preferred habitats. The birds feed on seeds, grains and insects.

Smith's longspur

Calcarius pictus
Size: 6.25″
Identifying Features: The two outside feathers on each side of the tail are white. The lower side of the bird is a light red-brown color. The breeding male has a white spot surrounded with black below each eye. The female and nonbreeding male have a few faint streaks on the breast. Some males have a white patch on the edge of the wing.
Illinois Range: Smith's longspur migrates through central and southern Illinois and rarely winters in the southern part of the state.
Migration: Spring migrants begin appearing in Illinois in early March. Fall migration commences through the state in late October. Most of these birds winter in the southeastern part of the Midwest.
Illinois Habitat: This species is most often found in patches of grasses and weeds within crop fields during migration. Seeds and insects compose the diet.

snow bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis
Size: 6.0-7.0″
Identifying Features: In winter, this bird is mostly white, but it may show some brown coloration. It has white patches on the wings that can be seen when it flies. In summer, the male has a black back, a white head and underparts and a large white patch on each wing.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and winter resident in northern Illinois, occasionally in southern Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants may start leaving as early as January or as late as April. Fall migration starts in late September. The species is at the southern edge of its winter range in Illinois.
Illinois Habitat: It is found in fields, lake edges, roadsides and feedlots or pastures where manure is present. It eats seeds, insects and small fruits.

Family Emberizidae – SPARROWS

The sparrows, juncos and towhees belong to this family of small songbirds. They feed mainly on seeds and have a short, stout, cone-shaped beak. Species in this group are associated with woodland, grassland and aquatic habitats. The taxonomic relationships within this family are not well understood.

eastern towhee

Pipilo erythrophthalmus
Size: 7.0-8.5″
Identifying Features: The feathers on the sides below each wing are rust-colored. The male is black on the throat, head, back, wings and tail. The belly and outer tail feathers are white. The eyes are red. The female has the same color pattern, but she is brown where the male is black. Young birds have streaks on the belly.
Illinois Range: The species is a fairly common migrant and summer resident as well as being an uncommon winter resident in southern Illinois, decreasing northward in the state.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in February. Fall migration starts in September. These birds may winter as far south as the Gulf Coast.
Illinois Habitat: The eastern towhee is found in forest edges, thickets and open woods. It feeds on seeds, invertebrates and small fruits.

American tree sparrow

Spizella arborea
Size: 6.0″
Identifying Features: The American tree sparrow has a single dark spot on the breast and a red-brown cap. Its upper bill is dark, while the lower bill is yellow. Two white wing bars are present.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and winter resident in Illinois.
Migration: Illinois is on the southern edge of this species' winter range. Fall migrants begin arriving in late October. They begin leaving the state in spring as early as February.
Illinois Habitat: It is found in weedy fields, woodland edges, fence rows, thickets and grain fields. Its diet includes seeds, insects and small fruits.

chipping sparrow

Spizella passerina
Size: 5.25″
Identifying Features: The chipping sparrow has a gray breast, rust-red cap, black line through each eye and a white line between the cap and black line. The winter coloration is similar in pattern but not as brightly colored.
Illinois Range: This species is a common migrant and summer resident in the state and uncommon winter resident.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in March. Fall migration begins in August. The species winters from the southern United States to South America.
Illinois Habitat: The chipping sparrow is found in a variety of habitats including mown grass, shrubs, open spaces with trees, forest edges, conifers, thickets, orchards, parks, open woods and river and lake shores. It feeds on insects, seeds and small fruits.

field sparrow

Spizella pusilla
Size: 5.0″
Identifying Features: The rust-red cap and pink bill are good field marks. A white eye ring is present. The breast of the adult is clear, while on the immature bird it is streaked. The immature bird also lacks as much red head coloration as the adult.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and summer resident in Illinois. It is a fairly common winter resident in southern Illinois, decreasing northward in the state.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in late February. Fall migration starts in August. The species winters as far south as the southern United States and northern Mexico.
Illinois Habitat: The field sparrow is found in woodland edges, fence rows, weedy fields, orchards, pastures and roadside thickets. It eats insects, seeds and small fruits.

vesper sparrow

Pooecetes gramineus
Size: 6.0″
Identifying Features: This brown bird has brown streaks on its white belly. The white outer tail feathers are visible when the bird flies. A white eye ring is present. There is a rust-red patch at the leading edge of each wing.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and summer resident and a rare winter resident in southern Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in late March. Fall migration starts in late September. The species typically winters in the southern United States and Central America.
Illinois Habitat: The vesper sparrow is found near roadsides, clover fields, pastures and other open habitats where it feeds on seeds, insects and small fruits.

lark sparrow

Chondestes grammacus
Size: 6.5″
Identifying Features: There is a dark spot at the center of the breast, a chestnut patch on the side of the head below the eye and chestnut and white stripes on the crown. The immature bird has a similar pattern, although duller in color and with a few light streaks on the underside.
Illinois Range: This species is an uncommon migrant and locally common summer resident in sand areas. It is a rare summer resident in the rest of the state.
Migration: Spring migrants begin passing through the state in late March. Fall migration commences in August. The species winters in the southern United States and Central America.
Illinois Habitat: The lark sparrow lives in open habitats such as grasslands, pastures, farm fields and roadsides. This bird feeds on seeds and insects.

savannah sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis
Size: 5.50-5.75″
Identifying Features: There is a white stripe on the crown and may be a yellow spot on the front of the eyebrow. The tail is short with a notch in the center. The underside of the bird has dark streaks.
Illinois Range: The savannah sparrow is a common migrant and fairly common summer resident in the northern half of Illinois. It is an uncommon winter resident in southern Illinois, decreasing northward.
Migration: Spring migrants begin appearing in the state in late February. Fall migrants are seen beginning in August. The species winters as far south as Central America.
Illinois Habitat: Farm fields, roadsides, marshes, grasslands and other open habitats are preferred by this species. It feeds on small invertebrates and seeds.

grasshopper sparrow

Ammodramus savannarum
Size: 5.0″
Identifying Features: The head is flat on top and relatively large compared to that of other sparrows. The tail is sharply pointed when at rest. A light stripe in the middle of the head and a white eye ring are present. Yellow may be seen in front of and below the eye. The breast is light tan with faint streaks.
Illinois Range: This species is a fairly common migrant and summer resident statewide.
Migration: These birds begin migrating through the state in late March each spring. Fall migration may start as early as August. The birds winter in the southern United States and Central America.
Illinois Habitat: The grasshopper sparrow prefers large tracts of open grasslands or prairies. Seeds and small invertebrates make up the diet.

Henslow's sparrow

Ammodramus henslowii
Size: 5.0″
Identifying Features: The top of this bird's head is distinctly flat. There are dark stripes on the breast. The head has dark stripes, and the wings are rust-red.
Illinois Range: Henslow's sparrow is an uncommon migrant and summer resident in Illinois and rare winter resident in southern Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in Illinois in March. Fall migration starts in September. The species winters in the southern United States along the Gulf of Mexico.
Illinois Habitat: Overgrown fields (prairie remnants, pastures, unmown hay fields, grasslands) with tall, dense grasses and a thick layer of ground litter are the preferred habitats for Henslow's sparrow. It feeds on seeds and small invertebrates.

Le Conte's sparrow

Ammodramus leconteii
Size: 5.0″
Identifying Features: A white stripe on the top of the head is distinctive. Prominent dark stripes are present on the back. Dark streaks are seen in the buff coloration on the sides of the chest. The sides of the head are orange, with that coloration extending to the throat as a lighter buff color.
Illinois Range: Le Conte's sparrow is a migrant statewide and an uncommon winter resident of southern Illinois. It does not nest in Illinois.
Migration: Spring migration commences through the state in March. Fall migrants begin passing through the state in mid-September. The species winters as far south as the Gulf Coast.
Illinois Habitat: This bird may be seen in marshes, prairies and grassy fields. Seeds and insects compose the diet.

Nelson's sparrow

Ammodramus nelsoni
Size: 5.0″
Identifying Features: A spot of gray below and behind the eye on each side of the face is surrounded by orange coloration that extends above the eyes and onto the throat and sides. There are faint dark streaks in the chest and side coloration. White stripes are present on the back. The top of the head is gray.
Illinois Range: Nelson's sparrow is a migrant statewide. This species does not nest in Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants move through the state in May. The return migration south starts in August each fall. These birds winter along the Gulf Coast.
Illinois Habitat: This species is found in marshes and wet meadows. It feeds on seeds and small invertebrates.

fox sparrow

Passerella iliaca
Size: 6.75-7.5″
Identifying Features: The back, wings and tail are rust-red. Gray patches may be seen on and near the head and on the back. The breast is white with red streaks that often converge into a spot.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant in Illinois. It winters in the southern two-thirds of the state.
Migration: Spring migrants are gone from the state by June. Fall migrants begin arriving in September. The species winters as far south as the Gulf of Mexico.
Illinois Habitat: Fox sparrows may be found in forest edges, thickets and fence rows scratching in the leaf litter for insects, seeds and small fruits.

song sparrow

Melospiza melodia
Size: 5.0-6.75″
Identifying Features: The body feathers are brown, and the belly feathers are cream-colored. The chest has streaks of dark brown that meet in a central spot. The tail is brown and fairly long. The body, head and wings are striped. Males and females are similar in appearance.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and summer resident in Illinois. It is a common winter resident in southern Illinois, decreasing northward.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in March. Fall migration into Illinois starts in August. The species winters as far south as the southern United States.
Illinois Habitat: The song sparrow is found in thickets, woodlands, roadsides, brushy pastures, fence rows, marshes, ditches and gardens. This species feeds on spiders, insects and seeds.

Lincoln's sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii
Size: 5.0-5.5″
Identifying Features: This bird has brown and tan speckles on its body feathers and stripes on its head. The belly, chest and throat feathers are cream-colored. There are thin, brown streaks on the chest. The side of the face is gray-blue. There is a thin, cream-colored ring around the eye. Males and females are similar in appearance.
Illinois Range: Lincoln's sparrow is a fairly common migrant and rare winter resident in Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in late April. Fall migration begins in September. The species winters from the southern United States to Central America.
Illinois Habitat: Woodland thickets, wet meadows and bogs are the preferred habitats for Lincoln's sparrow. It feeds on insects and seeds.

swamp sparrow

Melospiza georgiana
Size: 5.75″
Identifying Features: The swamp sparrow has dark stripes on the back and rust-red wings. The cap is also rust-red. The throat is white, and the neck and upper chest are blue-gray. Immature birds have a dark cap and more of a dark olive coloration on the neck and upper chest than the adult.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant statewide. It is an uncommon summer resident in northern Illinois, decreasing southward. It is a common winter resident in southern Illinois, decreasing northward.
Migration: Spring migration starts in March. Fall migrants begin passing though in September. It winters as far south as the southeastern United States and Central America.
Illinois Habitat: The swamp sparrow is found in marshes, pond edges, ditches and other shrubby areas around water. It feeds on seeds, small fruits and invertebrates.

white-throated sparrow

Zonotrichia albicollis
Size: 6.5-7.0″
Identifying Features: The gray breast and white-throat patch are distinctive features. There is a small yellow spot on each side of the head between the eye and bill. Two forms of the species exist: one has black and white stripes on the head; the other has brown and tan head stripes.
Illinois Range: The white-throated sparrow is a common migrant and winter resident statewide. It rarely nests in northeastern Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in March. Fall migration starts in September. The species winters as far south as the Gulf of Mexico.
Illinois Habitat: Thickets, brush and the undergrowth of woodlands are the preferred habitats. This bird eats seeds, insects and small fruits.

white-crowned sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys
Size: 6.0-8.0″
Identifying Features: The adult has a black-and-white striped crown. The throat and upper back are gray, while the belly is white. The back is brown, and the bill is pink. The immature bird has brown and white stripes on the head that are not as distinctive as those of the adult.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and winter resident in Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in late April. Fall migration starts in late September. The species winters as far south as northern Mexico.
Illinois Habitat: The white-crowned sparrow is found in fence rows, weedy fields, brush piles, thickets and woodland edges. It eats insects, small fruits and seeds.

dark-eyed junco

Junco hyemalis
Size: 6.0-6.5″
Identifying Features: White outer tail feathers are easily seen when the bird flies. The male has a dark gray back and dark gray hood. The female has lighter gray coloration in these areas. The underside on both sexes is white. The immature bird has streaks on the breast.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common migrant and winter resident in Illinois.
Migration: Spring migrants begin arriving in February. Fall migration starts in August. The species winters as far south as the southern United States.
Illinois Habitat: The dark-eyed junco is found in open woods, edges, fence rows, lawns, shrubs, weedy areas, grasslands and corn fields. It feeds on insects and seeds.

Family Passeridae – WEAVER FINCHES

These "Old World" sparrows are small birds with a short tail and a thick beak. They have a more pronounced ridge on their bill than native sparrows of the Family Emberizidae, an extra bone in their tongue and a vestigial outer primary feather. Both Passeridae species residing in Illinois are not native to North America. See the "Conservation" section on this poster for more information.

house sparrow

Passer domesticus
Size: 6.0″
Identifying Features: The male has a brown back, black throat, gray cap and white patches on the lower cheek. A rust-colored line is present near the eye. The female and young do not have the black patch, gray cap or chestnut line and are brown all over.
Illinois Range: This bird is a common, permanent resident statewide.
Migration: House sparrows do not migrate.
Illinois Habitat: This species can be found everywhere in Illinois except heavily forested locations. It eats insects, grains and other seeds.

Eurasian tree sparrow

Passer montanus
Size: 6.0″
Identifying Features: The male and female of this species resemble the male house sparrow, but they have a smaller patch of black on the throat, a brown crown and a black patch on each side of the head.
Illinois Range: This bird is found along the Mississippi River north from St. Louis to Rock Island and along the lower half of the Illinois River. It is a permanent resident of west central Illinois.
Migration: European tree sparrows do not migrate.
Illinois Habitat: Pastures, weedy fields, wooded parks and urban areas are the habitats where this species can be found. It feeds on insects and seeds.

CONSERVATION

No sparrow or longspur species are listed as endangered or threatened in Illinois. While that news is good, it does not mean that their populations do not face challenges.

Two of the species depicted on this poster, the house sparrow and Eurasian tree sparrow, are exotic, invasive species. Until the mid- to late-1800s, these species did not exist as wild populations in North America. A small number of house sparrows from Europe were originally released in New York City in the mid-1800s and in other states soon afterward. The species can occupy almost any habitat except dense forest, they produce more than one brood per year and, with no natural predators, the population spread tremendously. House sparrows are extremely common birds in Illinois. A few Eurasian tree sparrows were released in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1870. They established a population but were displaced from the city by the arrival of the house sparrow. They adapted to other habitats and now can be found in Illinois, Missouri and Iowa. In Illinois, the Eurasian tree sparrow lives in the west central portion of the state. Both species have similar nesting requirements. They nest in cavities or partially enclosed spaces, including natural and human-made objects. They are aggressive and often take over nesting spaces used by native birds. When these species are in competition for nesting spaces with each other, the house sparrow generally wins. It may be one reason that the Eurasian tree sparrow's population in the United States has not spread widely. The huge number of house sparrows in the state reduces available food for native species, too.

Many native sparrows in Illinois are targets for nest parasitism by the brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). Affected species include the eastern towhee, chipping sparrow, field sparrow, vesper sparrow and song sparrow. Brood parasites are birds that lay their eggs in the nests of other birds (host species). The parasite's eggs hatch and are raised by the host species. The brown-headed cowbird is the most common nest parasite in North America. Many of the host species that co-evolved with brood parasites have reduced the success of parasites through strategies such as building a new nest or pushing the parasite eggs out of the nest. However, if a host species has not co-evolved with a parasitic species, the host may not be able to cope with parasitism. The brown-headed cowbird, prior to European settlement, was found in the western part of our country in open grassland. It followed American bison (*Bison bison*) herds, eating insects from their dung and from the prairie disturbed by their hooves. Because it followed the herd it could not incubate its own eggs and raise its young, so cowbirds adapted by using the nests and parenting abilities of other birds. Because the host parent birds are attending to the parasite young, often few or none of the host's own young survive. Young cowbirds tend to hatch and develop more quickly than most songbirds' young. Often they are bigger too, and they may push others out of the nest. With settlement and the subsequent deforestation of large areas of eastern North America, the range of the cowbird expanded greatly, negatively impacting a variety of native bird species.

Native sparrow populations have fluctuated over time based on available habitat. When grassland and open habitats expand, those species associated with them may be more successful while those species associated with more wooded habitats will decline. When wooded habitats increase, species associated with them increase, and species found in open lands may decline. A good balance of a variety of habitat types is required to maintain a healthy biodiversity. Changes in habitat availability are normally due to human actions.

RESOURCES

More information about Illinois birds is available from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). The Division of Natural Heritage manages and monitors bird populations and provides assistance to landowners regarding establishing and maintaining bird habitat. The IDNR Division of Education provides supplemental resources for educators to use, including the *Illinois Common Birds* activity book, *Illinois Birds* resources trunk available for loan from more than 50 lending locations statewide, *Field Trip Packs* for early childhood educators and the *Biodiversity of Illinois* series of CD-ROMs that are field guides to more than 1,000 species in the state. The Illinois Audubon Society's mission is to promote the perpetuation and appreciation of the native flora and fauna of Illinois and the habitats that support them. Fundamental to this end are the control of pollution, the conservation of energy and all natural resources, a sound ecological relationship between human populations and their environments and the education and involvement of the public in such efforts.

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