

(Gary P. Carter)



Emberizidae the NEW WORLD SPARROWS

There are currently 172 species of birds classified in the family Emberizidae. Some of these are Buntings found mostly in Europe. The rest make up a group known as the “New World” Sparrows which are not in the same family as the “Old World” or “European Sparrows.” The classification of many of these New World Sparrows is still a work in progress. However, they are all granivorous (seed-eating) and insectivorous songbirds that breed in the Americas. The American Birding Association recognizes 53 species in North America, and 27 of these have been found in the Carolinas. A total of 20 of these 27 species have been documented here in the Central Carolina region. One of these birds, the American Tree Sparrow, is discussed in the Supplementary Bird List. Full species accounts for the other 19 species are presented below.

The identification of sparrows is often a daunting and difficult task, especially for beginning birders. Sparrows are frequently derided as being just “LBJs” (Little Brown Jobs) or “LBBs” (Little Brown Birds), and may even be left unidentified. However, spending time distinguishing between the various sparrows is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of the science and sport of birding. Due to the various complexities of sparrow identification, few descriptions and field marks are provided in the following species accounts. For full identification details, readers are referred to the many specialty articles, guides, and websites on sparrow identification that exist today.

In his early twentieth century field notes, Charlotte’s William McIlwaine despaired about his ability to differentiate between all the varieties of sparrows. He wrote: “I feel sure this was a Bachman’s Sparrow. But oh! The sparrows! The sparrows! The sparrows! I see so many different markings and shades and sizes; and there is no one to tell me.” Years later, he was a recognized regional expert in bird identification. His dogged perseverance at distinguishing between subtle field marks had paid off.

Note: The Harris’s Sparrow is a western vagrant that is occasionally found in the Carolinas. The first Harris’s Sparrow (Zonotrichia querula) ever seen in South Carolina was discovered at a bird feeder in Gramling, Spartanburg County, on January 5, 1962. This bird was photographed by Jay Shuler and Dr. John O. Watkins. South Carolina has had three more reports since that first sighting. As of 2017, there have been nine sightings of Harris’s Sparrow in North Carolina, four of these were seen in the Piedmont. Therefore, observers in the Central Carolinas should be “on the alert,” as it is quite possible a Harris’s Sparrow could appear somewhere in this region. They are often seen in close association with White-crowned Sparrows.