

## Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerine*



**Folk Name:** Chippy, Tree Sparrow, Bush Sparrow, Red-headed Sparrow, Social Sparrow

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Very Common

**Habitat:** Wooded residential areas, scattered trees with short grass, parks, golf courses

Greensboro's T.G. Pearson shared this description of the Chipping Sparrow in an essay published in *The Charlotte Observer* in November 1905:

He is the little fellow with the [rusty] brown cap that frequently builds his nest in the cedar or other small trees or houses. The nest is a snug affair of dried-grasses, and is always lined with horse hair. In this beautiful cradle are usually deposited four pale-blue eggs, generally more or less spotted around the larger end. The eggs when hatched produce young with marvelous appetites, and a pair of old birds have been known to carry four nestlings more than two hundred insects in less than a day's time. With a class of students I once watched a chipping sparrow capture thirty-one insects during five minutes' perusal of grass on a hillside in a university campus.

The Chipping Sparrow is one of our four resident sparrows. It is a very common bird and is well known around farms and in neighborhoods, cities, and towns throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is a true "backyard" bird and often visits residential bird feeders. Short grass is a "key habitat requirement." Numbers are bolstered during spring and fall migration when birds that breed in the North move through the region.

This sparrow gets its name from its loud chip that it frequently makes while foraging for food. Its song is a



loud, evenly toned trill, which is easy to learn. Its song is longer, more emphatic, and more mechanical sounding than the somewhat similar trill of a Pine Warbler.

The Chipping Sparrow is a prolific breeder that regularly has two and sometimes three broods during a single breeding season. Some Piedmont observers reported watching the male finish provisioning insects to nestlings at one nest while the female was already off building and laying eggs in another nest. However, there is usually a delay of a few days. Nests are often located in easy to observe locations near homes or in shrubbery beside office buildings, at golf courses, at parks, and along greenways. As such, these birds often fall prey to feral or outdoor house cats. The average clutch size is four eggs. Around the turn of the twentieth century, many of these nests were lined with horsehair. After the development of the automobile but before the age of air conditioning, many Chipping Sparrow nests discovered in yards were lined with human hair gathered from outside of a bedroom window.



Chipping Sparrow. (Jim Guyton)

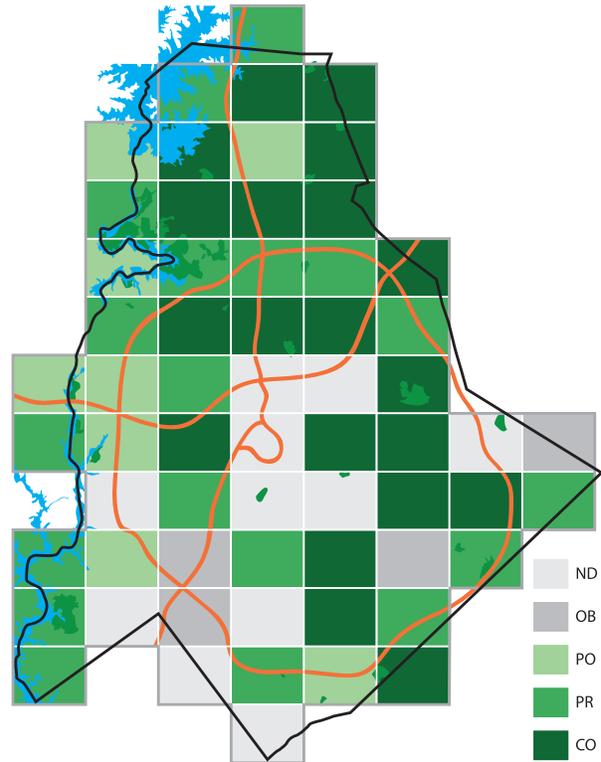


Chipping Sparrow on nest. (Kevin Metcalf)

Nesting can begin as early as March and continue into August. Sara Nooe watched a Chipping Sparrow feeding one young bird near the campus of Queens College on the late date of 27 August in 1944. She reported “[a] drizzling rain was falling, the temperature was around 55°, a near record low for this time of year, and the parent was having difficulty pacifying her one crying youngster.”

Prior to the 1970s, the Chipping Sparrow was designated “scarce in winter” in the North Carolina Piedmont. However, in the South Carolina Piedmont from Chester County southward, it was described as “exceedingly abundant in winter,” and it was “found in the thousands” during the winter there. In the North Carolina Piedmont, it was generally found between the last week of February and the second week of November. Very few were reported there in late November, December, January, or early February.

Over the past 40 years, numbers during these months have increased in the North Carolina Piedmont, and this bird is now a regular winter resident. This change may be due to both the rising average winter temperatures and an increase in lawn and yard habitat, among other factors. Today, this bird is fairly common to very common during the winter in all parts of the Carolina Piedmont. Winter flocks are usually found in fields, open pine woods, and other open areas. Our peak one-day count is a tally of 325 birds recorded on the Chester Christmas Bird Count in 1994.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Widespread* (PR/19, CO/20)