

Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca*



Folk Name: Bull Sparrow, Chuck

Status: Winter Resident

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

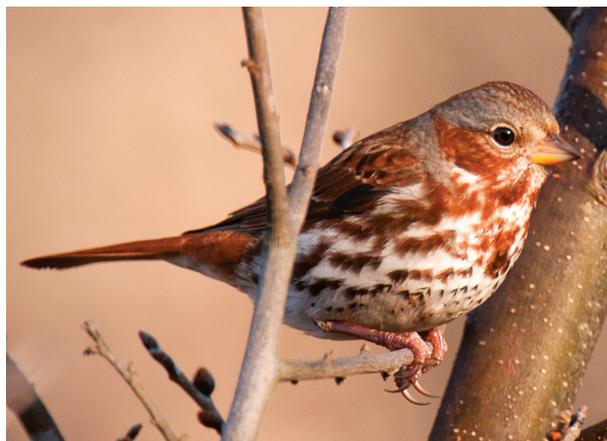
Habitat: Thickets, evergreen understory, woodland edge, shrubby areas in wooded neighborhoods

The Fox Sparrow is one of our largest sparrows, averaging 7 inches long. It gets its common name from the rusty-red fox-like coloring—especially on its wings, rump, and tail—and its rusty triangular spots in streaks on its sides and breast. This sparrow also has a noticeably stout almost conical-shaped bill. The Fox Sparrow is highly variable in its coloring and taxonomists have designated an astounding 18 different subspecies of this bird in North America.

The Fox Sparrow is an uncommon to fairly common winter resident throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It normally arrives in November and departs by March. Arrival and departure dates for this species may be influenced by the severity of the winter in regions to our north. More birds are seen here during severe winter seasons, and they often arrive here earlier than they do during mild winter seasons.

Our earliest arrival date on record in the Central Carolinas is 18 October, and our latest departure date is 29 April. We have no records of this sparrow in the region from May through September. Our peak one-day count is a tally of 74 birds recorded on the Charlotte CBC in 1960. Numbers may peak here in mid-March as these sparrows gather together in small flocks feeding heavily prior to their long flight to their northern breeding grounds.

On February 28, 1928, after returning from a long bird walk “up Briarwood Creek, across Myers Park golf course and up to the old Alexander’s mill,” Charlotte’s William



Fox Sparrow. (Jeff Lemons)



McIlwaine wrote: “just next door in that little pine thicket I saw another flock of white-throats scratching among the leaves, and with them several larger sparrows with conspicuously rufous wings and tails—fox sparrows. And so it is, we go off to find something, we know not what, and lo, the treasures are right among us.” McIlwaine later noted this species as a “winter resident” and that it was “fairly common” in the city. He recorded their last date seen in the spring of 1930 as 25 March.

In 1953, Kitty Stewman observed a group of wintering Fox Sparrows near her home east of Wadesboro and shared this description:

The sun shone on the brown leaves and red-brown birds and made a pretty sight. The birds scratch with both feet at once and made the leaves and dirt fly almost a yard. With eight of them carrying on at one time the spot was a whirlwind of leaves. ... [In snow] they can excavate rapidly by jumping and scratching and soon reach the bottom of the hole. There they feed off of insects and seeds.

In December 1955, Mrs. Y.D. Moore of Armstrong Park in Gastonia shared this curious anecdote: “The Fox Sparrow is a weather prophet. His breast is red, like a fox, and the only times I’ve ever seen him is the day before a snow comes. Then he appears, flashingly announces snow, and he’s never wrong in his prediction.”

Fox Sparrows can be regular visitors at backyard bird feeders. Beginning in 2000, Penny Soars of Huntersville recorded arrival dates at the feeders in her yard in the middle of “suburbia” for seven consecutive years that

ranged from 10 November through 25 November. On December 11, 2004, Larry Barden found three Fox Sparrows in a glade at the Evergreen Nature Preserve in central Charlotte. One of them was actively singing. He reported that the spot is a dependable location to watch Fox Sparrows feeding. Anne Olsen in Union County reported a flock of Fox Sparrows in her yard on her

farm in Union County, NC, on February 24, 2015. She remarked: "I counted at least 14. They were at the edge of the woods busy stirring up leaves. This is the first I have seen Fox Sparrows this year. The snow this morning and the cold weather may have brought them out of hiding or they may be migrating through. The most I have ever seen other years was 5 in one day."