

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

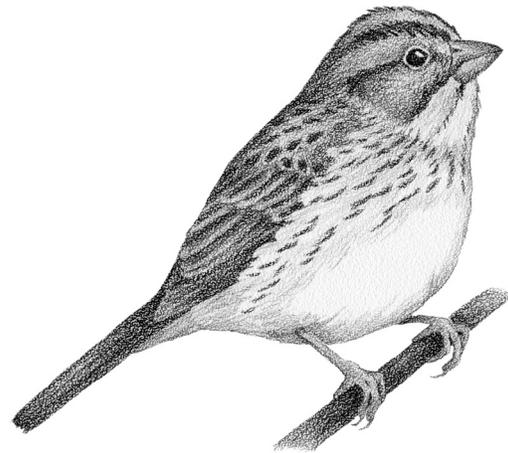
Habitat: Open wet fields, damp thickets and brush piles, hedgerows

The Lincoln's Sparrow is "so exceedingly shy" that it is seldom seen, and in dense vegetation, it may often slip past observers entirely unnoticed. When it is seen, it is often viewed clearly for just an instant, making it a very difficult bird to identify. North Carolina zoologist Harry LeGrand may have put it best when he said: "Lincoln's Sparrow is the classic indicator of birder coverage." The better the coverage by experienced birders in the field, the more Lincoln Sparrows are identified. It takes active effort to chase one down and "pull one out" from the weeds. Squeaking, spishing, and playback of recorded calls seem to work well to encourage an inquisitive bird out of hiding, and it will often emerge with its crest raised in alarm.

It is believed the Lincoln's Sparrow was overlooked by birders for many years. It is a regular migrant and winter visitor in the Carolinas. In South Carolina, the first one was officially confirmed after a tower kill specimen was collected in Kershaw County on November 7, 1961. In North Carolina, state ornithologists wrote that the Lincoln's Sparrow had "seldom been observed" in that state as of 1959. Over the past 50 years, birders have become more sophisticated in their sight identification of sparrows and have focused more actively on searching out these birds. As such, many more reports of Lincoln's Sparrows have been recorded in both states.



Lincoln Sparrow at Four Mile Creek Greenway on April 16, 2012. (Phil Fowler)



In the mid-1980s, a Briefs for the Files editor in *The Chat* noted: "This species is certainly not rare in many areas of the Carolinas in fall, particularly the mountains and western Piedmont." Three years later, another wrote: "This species, formerly considered very rare in the Carolinas in winter, has been seen with some frequency in recent winters, in part because of more intensive field work in its primary habitats, brush piles, hedgerows, and clear-cut fields."

In the Central Carolinas, most of our records of Lincoln's Sparrow have been recorded during spring and fall migration. They are often seen in areas with good numbers of Song Sparrows or Swamp Sparrows. Charlotte birder Taylor Piephoff recommends listening for "a dry chip note where sparrows are common" as this note is different from "the high-pitched cheep of a swamp or the nasal chimp of the song" and sounds a bit more like that of the Fox Sparrow. Spring dates have ranged from 25 March through 9 May. Singing males have very rarely been reported during the late spring. We have no reports from June through September. Fall dates have ranged from 5 October through 29 November. Our peak one-day count is a total of six birds.

Most Lincoln's Sparrows winter from Mexico south to Guatemala. However, small numbers winter in the Carolinas each year. We have only about a dozen reports of individual Lincoln's Sparrows lingering in this region during the months of December, January, and February. Many of these winter birds were found by participants on Christmas Bird Counts and several have been photographed.

Hilton Pond in York County provided attractive habitat for the Lincoln's Sparrow for a good decade. Bill Hilton

Jr. banded a Lincoln's Sparrow there on April 17, 1983. This bird was recaptured on April 24, 1983, and the size of its cloacal protruberance indicated it had become reproductively active prior to migrating north to its breeding grounds. Hilton saw one in the same location on May 5, 1984. Hilton banded others there on April 12, 1986; October 12, 1986; April 24, 1990; and May 2, 1992. It was another 10 years before he banded his last Lincoln's Sparrow there on November 1, 2002. None have been seen since.

McAlpine Park in Charlotte has been a good spot to find this sparrow over the years. Many individuals have

been seen there in spring and fall, and park staff maintain suitable habitat there for this bird. Ricky Davis found a Lincoln's Sparrow at McAlpine Park on October 19, 2008. Davis reported: "It was in a marshy/brushy edge of the swampy pond adjacent to the big pond. It popped up right alongside several Song Sparrows and a Northern Waterthrush!" Taylor Piephoff found one at McAlpine Park with many Swamp and Song Sparrows on October 23, 2010. This bird was seen on the east end of the beaver pond. Based on his personal field work, Piephoff noted that "this area has produced more Mecklenburg County Lincoln's than any other spot over the years."