

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*



Folk Name: Hedge Sparrow

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common to Very Common

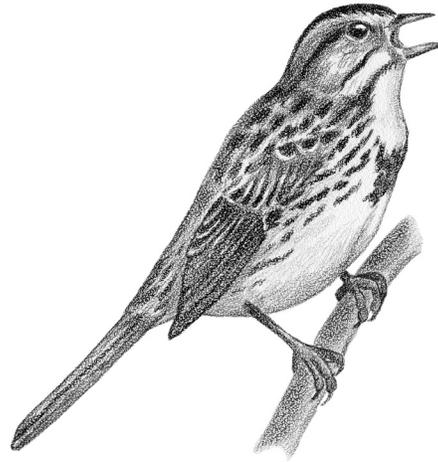
Habitat: Brushy thickets, shrubby areas, residential areas, parks, farms

The Song Sparrow is one of the most common sparrows in the Carolinas. Today, it is a common year-round resident throughout most of the North Carolina Piedmont and it also breeds in the upper Piedmont of South Carolina. This sparrow is especially noticeable during breeding season around towns, cities, schools, parks, yards, farms, and hedgerows. Unfortunately, Song Sparrow nests in these areas are often the target of feral cats. This sparrow is also regularly parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird.

In the nineteenth century, the breeding range of the Song Sparrow was very different than it is in the Carolinas today. Song Sparrows nested primarily from the state of Virginia north into Canada. Sometime between 1885 and the early 1900s, the Song Sparrow began to breed in the mountains of North Carolina, and a small population appeared along the coast. In 1910, Frank Sherman, noted ornithologist and entomologist, wrote a paper titled “Peculiarities in the Distribution of North Carolina Birds.” In it, he discussed this sparrow’s odd breeding situation at that time: “Until about 1900 the Song Sparrow, which is a delightful singer and a favorite in regions where it nests, was known in this state only as a winter resident, leaving for the north at the approach of the nesting season,” but nesting was confirmed in the mountains in 1892, 1895, and 1902, and by 1914, it had become “one of our most



Song Sparrow. (Jeff Lemons)



commonest nesting birds throughout our mountain region.” Around this time it was also found nesting at four discrete locations on “the very verge of the ocean itself,” but surprisingly, nowhere in between.

From the 1920s through the 1960s this sparrow continued the slow expansion of its breeding range from the mountains eastward into the Piedmont of North Carolina. It expanded into upstate South Carolina as well, where it was first found breeding at Saluda Gap in Greenville County on May 25, 1931. Statesville’s Grace Anderson reported the first nesting of Song Sparrows as far east as Iredell County in North Carolina in 1933. Additional nests were found there in 1934 and annually thereafter. After the organizational meeting of the North Carolina Bird Club in 1937, Anderson wrote:

I was delighted to hear Dr. J.J. Murray call the Song Sparrow his favorite bird in his speech before the statewide meeting of bird lovers in Raleigh. The Song Sparrow has not until recently had his name on the list of permanent residents for Statesville. Three years ago a member of our Audubon Club heard his song through the summer. Investigation disclosed a nest in the shrubs of a nearby stream-crossed meadow. It was thought that the pair had a quixotic turn of mind that year, but in 1934 more nests were reported elsewhere in town. To date, the birds are permanent residents and on the increase.

Through the misty gloom of the past months I have heard his delicious melodies making summer of our discontent. With field glasses I have watched him in his music hall—an old maple sprout that

thrusts a spear through the honey-suckle hedge—feet aslant a twig, feathers windblown and mist laden, trilling his sweet repertoire.

In 1931, William McIlwaine reported: “This bird does not nest around Charlotte.” He added: “Heading for Blowing Rock in summertime I would always expect to hear the Song Sparrow first around Lenoir.” In 1941, Charlie Sellers reported Song Sparrows were not nesting in Charlotte, but reported they were “nesting commonly 40 miles north in Iredell County.” In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson reiterated: “We have no nest records so far” in Mecklenburg County.

Finally, on July 18, 1951, a full 18 years after the first nest was discovered in Iredell County, a nest was discovered in Mecklenburg County, just 30–40 miles away. Rhett Chamberlain reported:

Norman Chamberlain watched a Song Sparrow feeding a fledgling over a 35-minute period in a city garden in Charlotte, ending a search of several weeks during which as many as three birds were heard singing simultaneously. Singing birds had been heard in the same area (Sugaw Creek at Morehead Street) by several observers during the previous summer. This Charlotte record narrows the gap in the rapidly extending breeding range of the Song Sparrow, which by last summer had reached Milledgeville, in Baldwin County, Georgia. The previous most southern point in Piedmont North Carolina was Statesville.

Song Sparrows were first counted on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count in 1952. Joe Norwood observed several singing birds in Salisbury in May and June of 1956 and stated he thought they were nesting there as well. Song Sparrows have been counted on the Charlotte SBC annually since 1958. Paul Sykes Jr. published a paper on the eastward expansion of this sparrow in the North Carolina Piedmont in 1966. In it, he provided full details on nesting records as far east as Guilford, Vance, and Wake counties.

By the early 1980s, the Song Sparrow was “a reasonably common” nesting bird as far south as Rock Hill, SC, but it was not found breeding in towns to the south. One nest confirmed in Lancaster County held five young on May 3, 1984. In 2003, data compiled during South Carolina’s Breeding Bird Atlas study indicated the Song Sparrow was a breeder in the upper Piedmont “as far east as western Lancaster County” and “as far south as Anderson and upper Laurens Counties.” Ornithologist John Cely noted: “They nest in brushy areas, thickets, and woodland edge but have also adapted well to school campuses, suburban yards, farms, and other such locations that feature shrubbery and hedgerows.”

Data collected by volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate the Song Sparrow is currently a fairly widespread breeding bird in the county. One volunteer reported a pair of Song Sparrows nested for six consecutive years along a 100-foot stretch of Linda Lake Drive along the dam. The male generally arrived on territory in early to mid-March and began singing. The nest was usually placed in a 4-foot-high patch of juniper or in the lower boughs of a Crape Myrtle tree.