

## Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*



**Folk Name:** Bay-winged Bunting, Grass Finch

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Very Rare to Rare

**Habitat:** Pastures, meadows, short-grass fields

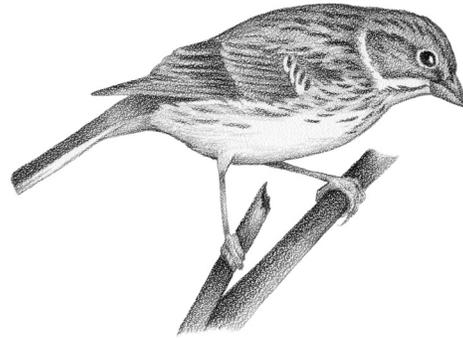
At 6 ¼ inches, the Vesper Sparrow is one of our largest non-resident sparrows. It has a narrow but distinct white eye-ring, streaked breast, and white outer tail feathers which are especially visible when the bird is in flight. It has longish wings and a relatively short tail. Along with its large size, its white outer tail feathers make it stand out when one is sorting through mixed flocks of little brown sparrows feeding in a field. The Vesper Sparrow feeds solely on the ground like the Savannah Sparrow and Field Sparrow. Its call note has been described as *ZINK*.

From a distance, this bird could possibly be confused with the similar-sized American Pipit which also has white outer tail feathers and is typically seen on the ground. The pipit walks when searching for food, while the Vesper Sparrow hops like other sparrows do when feeding. The pipit also habitually wags its tail and this sparrow does not.

Scientist Leon A. Hausman shared this description of the Vesper Sparrow song on its breeding grounds and how this bird was given its common name:

As one walks along a country road one frequently sees a small brown-streaked sparrow sitting on top of a fence post, bush, or large stone, singing a song which attracts the attention at once. It is a song which is often sung when other birds are still, that is, the hush of the very early evening, or late afternoon. Because the song is sung at this time—that is at vespers—the singer has been named the Vesper Sparrow. The song goes like this: vesper, vesper; sweetly-sweetly-sweetly-sweet. This doesn't look like much on paper, but listen: the first vesper is rather low; the second vesper is higher; the last collection of sweets drops down again. Notice that the two first notes are rather deliberate, but the rest of the song is hurried. Once your ear has caught the plan and cadence of the song, you will recognize it ever afterwards, and you will be astonished at the number of Vesper Sparrows that you will hear in the country on every side.

The southeastern limit of the Vesper Sparrow's breeding range is in North Carolina's mountains. It is currently a very rare breeding bird in the state with a few nests at widely scattered sites on grassy balds, farm fields, and pastures in a few mountain counties. At the turn of



the twentieth century, it was a more widespread breeding bird in the state than it is today. In 1999, David Lee with the North Carolina State Museum wrote: "It apparently expanded its distribution eastward into the Piedmont and Coastal Plain as a result of agricultural practices [and forest clearing] around 1900. Its distribution within the state appears to have [now] reverted to its ancestral one."

The Vesper Sparrow is usually found in the Central Carolinas during spring or fall migration although some are documented here during the winter months. It is generally found here from October through April. Our earliest arrival date on file is a bird sighted on 13 September in a field at Ann Springs Close Greenway in York County in 2001. This bird was seen by several observers and noted as quite "surprising" for showing up that early. Our latest date is a bird found by Kevin Metcalf and photographed by Barry Rowan at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on May 2, 2015. We have no other acceptable records from May, June, July, August, or September. Our peak count is an estimate of 40 to 50 birds seen in Cleveland County on February 2, 1986.

The status of the Vesper Sparrow during the winter months has also changed in this region over the past century. Leverett Loomis recorded this bird, then often called the "Bay-winged Bunting," as "exceedingly abundant" during the winter months in Chester County in the late 1800s. Loomis shared this report after snow blanketed the ground for a period of more than two weeks during the winter of 1876–1877. He noted: "great suffering among birds that find their living chiefly upon the ground. Vesper Sparrows and others became so famished that children and dogs ran them down and captured them...their weakness was not due to cold, but to exhaustion from want of food." Wayne also described this bird as "exceedingly abundant" during winter months in the South Carolina Coastal Plain. Wayne also wrote: "While in many respects essentially a field species, it commonly resorts to trees along the margins of fields

during the [early] morning and [late] afternoon.”

In 1919, the authors of *Birds of North Carolina* designated the Vesper Sparrow “a common winter visitor in open fields in most parts of the State,” and they repeated that statement in their second edition in 1942. Both William McIlwaine and Charlie Sellers recorded the Vesper Sparrow as “common” in Charlotte during the winter throughout the 1930s. In 1939, Charlie Sellers recorded a fall arrival date of 20 October. In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson reported this sparrow as a common winter resident from 15 October through 10 April. In 1949, the authors of *South Carolina Bird Life* also declared this sparrow a “common winter resident...throughout the State.”

By the late 1960s and 1970s, its winter status had changed to a rare winter visitor. In 1965, Elizabeth Clarkson revised her designation for Mecklenburg County to “transient and scarce in winter.” After Doug Pratt found a Vesper Sparrow on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count on December 28, 1974, the count compiler designated the find as “a noteworthy sighting as it is seldom seen in winter.” By 1980, it was described as “fairly common in southeastern South Carolina in winter, but to the north and inland it becomes uncommon, scarce, or locally absent at midwinter.” By 1990, ornithologists noted it was “sharply declining” and “now is found in winter in North Carolina only sparingly from Cleveland County east to Carteret County.” Today, it is very rare to rare in most areas in winter and a “sparse and local winter resident” elsewhere.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, “impressive” Vesper Sparrow counts in the Piedmont were a total of 12 tallied by participants on the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count held on December 19, 2004, and a total of 13 recorded on the same Christmas count held on December 16, 2007. A recent astounding count total was a one-day York County Christmas Bird Count of 34

birds in 2004. An excellent single flock count of “10 plus” was reported by Monroe Pannell in Catawba County on March 24, 2012.

One interesting location for this bird during migration has been in the sparsely vegetated ball fields at Randolph Middle School, in a residential area of east Charlotte. Ken and Alan Kneidel found Vesper Sparrows on the fields there annually between the last week of March through as late as 17 April. On March 24, 2016, Ken Kneidel wrote: “Vesper Sparrow today on athletic fields of Randolph Middle School. A regular visitor around this time for 16 years. As usual, just over the right field home run fence of the large baseball field.”

Loss of grassland habitat and changes in farming practices have contributed to a steep decline in Vesper Sparrow populations throughout the United States over the past half century. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate the species is declining at a rate of at least 0.9% annually.



*A Vesper Sparrow spotted March 28, 2015, at Randolph Middle School in Charlotte. (Jeff Lemons)*