

## White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Winter Resident

**Abundance:** Uncommon

**Habitat:** Weedy fields, thickets, hedgerows, brushy open areas, occasional at bird feeders

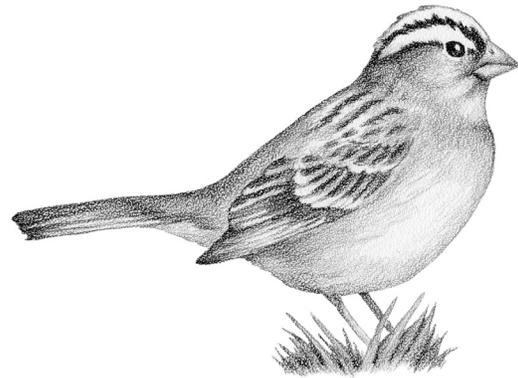
The White-crowned Sparrow is a widespread breeding bird in open areas of northern and western Canada, the Arctic tundra, and parts of the Rockies. It winters throughout the lower 48 states and into Mexico. It has been designated a “locally fairly common winter resident” in the Carolinas each year. However, this has not always been the case.

This sparrow was largely unknown in the Carolinas through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the late 1930s, ornithologist Thomas D. Burleigh, stationed in Asheville, was the first to point out this oversight. He wrote:

It is difficult to understand why in past years it has been almost completely overlooked, for in adult plumage it is certainly far from inconspicuous. The first small flocks usually appeared in the middle of October, and it was the last of April before the last stragglers were gone. In the winter it was noted in smaller numbers, and it was rather local in its distribution then, but there were certain thickets in the open valleys where small flocks could be invariably found each year.

In 1953, a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Carolina Bird Club noted there had been a grand total of only 21 records of White-crowned Sparrows reported from both Carolinas between 1833 and 1938, a period of 105 years. The authors then presented records to substantiate a “conspicuous” increase in the number of White-crowned Sparrow records in the Carolinas between 1938 and 1953, a period of only 15 years. They hypothesized three possible explanations for the increase. First, White-crowned Sparrows may have become more numerous. Second, more birders might be in the field. Third, the birders in the field might be better able to recognize this sparrow. It is possible all three explanations were correct. Today, we know that this species is an annual migrant and winter resident throughout most of the Carolinas.

The White-crowned Sparrow is an uncommon migrant and winter resident throughout the Carolina Piedmont. These birds generally arrive in October and depart by the first week of May. Our earliest arrival dates are 10 and 11 October, and our latest departure date is 19 May. The



latter bird was recorded singing in the background of a video recording of a Field Sparrow feeding its young in the Town of Pineville. We have no reports of this species from June through September. Our peak one-day count is 69 birds tallied on the Southern Lake Norman CBC on December 21, 2003. In the fall and early winter, immature birds with their dusky brown-and-buff crowns often outnumber adult birds with their striking white-and-black striped crowns. The male White-crowned Sparrow is known to sing here in the winter, but it generally doesn't sing its full song until late March and into April.

Elizabeth Clarkson found a White-crowned Sparrow in her garden at Wing Haven in Charlotte on February 24, 1933, and recorded this sighting in her journal. W.W. Neely netted a White-crowned Sparrow in Chester County on March 28, 1937. Neely worked with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service and continued banding birds in the Chester area throughout the duration of World War II. In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson wrote: “I have only one record from my own garden but Mr. H.C. Rucker reports catching 5 or 6 in his quail traps.” Unfortunately, she did not report Mr. Rucker's capture dates. Mrs. M.B. Fryga of the Town of Gramling in Spartanburg County reported sightings between 1947 and 1953. Mrs. Fryga provided some good habitat details:

Our immediate surroundings seem to be very favorable to the White-crowned Sparrows. At the foot of the hill behind our house, there is a small stream which runs through an abandoned pasture. There is also some cultivated pasture around the house. These sparrows seem to feel at home in the vine thickets and cedar hedge near the house and also in the dense growth of Privet Hedge near the stream.

It isn't uncommon to see as many as 12 or 24 of them feeding on the lawn or picking gravel in the drive. They also like to scratch under the shrubbery and in the edge of the thicket. They are usually seen on the ground. We find that the White-crowned Sparrow is very fond of cracked nuts in his diet. Our children enjoy gathering them in the fall to feed our bird friends. ...We found it necessary to put the food at several places around the house so the White-crowned Sparrows could feed in peace. Other sparrows come feed with them but they usually dominate the feeding grounds.

Eugene Hester reported finding White-crowned Sparrows in Statesville from May 7–10, 1950. A total of seven were reported on the Statesville Christmas Bird Count on December 27, 1950. One was reported on the Charlotte CBC on December 30, 1950. A total of five were reported on the Spartanburg Christmas Bird Count on December 27, 1950. A White-crowned Sparrow was a highlight for the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on May 6, 1954. Olin Wearn reported a White-crowned Sparrow visiting his Charlotte feeder on October 11, 1956. One lingered in New London until 10 May for the count in 1958. This bird “had been consistently at the feeder of Mrs. Barrett Crook for more than three months” and was last reported on 17 May.

Dr. John O. Watkins conducted a mark-recapture study of 97 White-crowned Sparrows in Spartanburg, SC, from 1964 to 1967. He captured the birds between 26 January and 2 April. He calculated that 21 (21.6%) of the birds banded in the first part of the year returned to his same feeder station between 8 November and 18 December at the end of the year. He also documented that “on several occasions” two birds trapped within 24 hours of each other during the first part of the year, repeated the event in the latter part of the year. He felt this helped provide support for a previous study that found evidence that the White-crowned Sparrow “has a true personal attachment between mates.” In 1967, Watkins caught 11 birds originally banded there in early 1964, indicating they were 4 ½ years old and were still returning to the exact same wintering location. Later, the successional growth of plants from the weedy field stage to patches of small pine saplings, effectively eliminated the habitat occupied by these wintering White-crowned Sparrows.

Elizabeth Clarkson reported a lingering White-crowned Sparrow present in Charlotte on April 30, 1960. J.P. Hamilton, an area leader for the Charlotte Spring Bird Count, discovered a White-crowned Sparrow while conducting the count May 6, 1967. Olin Wearn who had started birding at Davidson College in the 1920s, found the only White-crowned Sparrow seen on the Charlotte spring count on May 1, 1971. Jack Hamilton found one White-crowned Sparrow on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 3, 1975. Ed Read found a White-crowned Sparrow on that spring count on May 5, 1984. David Wright found a trio of White-crowned Sparrows in Pineville on May 3, 1986. White-crowned Sparrows have been reported in the region each winter since 1990.

The “Gambel’s” Sparrow is a distinctive western subspecies of the White-crowned Sparrow that occasionally shows up in the Carolinas. It has pale tan or white lores with an orange bill, while the lores of our regularly occurring White-crowned Sparrow are dark brown or black, and its bill is pink. On December 14, 1964, Dr. John O. Watkins captured and banded an adult female “Gambel’s” Sparrow at his banding station near Spartanburg. He recaptured this bird again a month later. John Gerwin, an ornithologist with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, captured, banded, and photographed an adult male “Gambel’s” Sparrow at a banding station at a prairie restoration site in Randolph County on October 17, 2015.



*White-crowned Sparrow. (Chris Talkington)*