

American Tree Sparrow

Spizella arborea

The family *Emberizidae* encompasses a variety of widespread species, including sparrows, juncos, towhees, longspurs and Emberizid buntings. Sparrows are generally small, brown-bodied birds with streaked backs and conical bills for eating seeds. They feed on or near the ground but each species has its own habitat preferences. The word "sparrow" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon for "flutterer," in reference to their agile flight. Sparrows may be difficult to identify as most species display a variety of immature and seasonal plumages. Head and breast patterns, along with song and habitat are the most helpful in their identification. As a member of the genus *Spizella* (meaning "finch"), the American Tree Sparrow has a fairly long, notched tail and a chippy song.



American Tree Sparrow

photo: Steve Kaufman

So named for their resemblance to the Eurasian Tree Sparrow (the Latin name "arborea" means "tree"), the American Tree Sparrow actually prefers open areas with sparsely scattered trees, tundra and low willow thickets. A larger sparrow, these 16cm birds appear relatively "fluffy," with long tails and round heads. In breeding plumage, they display a gray head, throat and nape and a rufous crown and eyeline. The most diagnostic feature is the dark central spot on the gray breast. Rufous and black lines streak the back and scapulars. The underparts are grayish-white while the buffy sides are streaked in rufous. Their bicolored bill

(dark upper and yellow lower mandibles) and dark legs are also distinctive. Two white wing bars highlight the streaked wings.

Beginning with several clear notes, the song of the American Tree Sparrow progresses to a variable, sweet and high warble. The song is composed of descending notes "swee, swee, ti, sidi, zidl, zidl, zew," that are buzzy at the end. Their unique call is a soft and jingling "teedleoo." During flight, the call is a high, sharp "tsiiw."

The female builds the cup-shaped nests in brushy habitats on the ground in a shallow depression, in grassy tussocks or at the base of low shrubs. Compactly constructed from grasses, forbs, mosses, inner bark and rootlets, the nests are lined with feathers and fur. The clutch consists of 3-7, 19mm pale bluish or greenish white eggs, marked in dark brown or black. A close sitter, the female alone incubates the clutch for about 12-13 days. Young birds fledge in another 8-10 days and are reared by both.

American Tree Sparrows feed on a variable menu of food items: the seeds of grasses, sedges and forbs, buds and catkins of willow and birch, insects, and a few spiders and berries. These sparrows both drink and bathe in water but in winter, obtain moisture by eating snow. Young birds are fed insects but the parents are known to initially masticate their food. These sparrows forage by gleaning food from the ground and foliage.

Fairly common, the American Tree Sparrows winters in flocks among weedy fields, marshes and groves of trees throughout most of the United States. Males tend to winter further north than females. Their breeding range extends throughout most of mainland Alaska, Yukon and Northwest Territories, south to northern British Columbia and east to northern Nova Scotia.

