

Fox Sparrow

Passerella iliaca

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.

There are many races (subspecies) of Fox Sparrow in North America, each with distinctive plumage. Where populations of subspecies overlap, interbreeding may occur. The resultant intermediate forms are very difficult to distinguish in the field. Alaska is predominantly inhabited by the "red taiga" race, which is the most brightly marked of all the Fox Sparrows. At 18cm, these rather large sparrows

dwell among brushy habitats within woods: the undergrowth of mixed coniferous-deciduous woodlands, forest margins, thickets and scrub. The "red taiga" subspecies displays variegated rufous and gray upperparts (back, crown, and cheek patches). In contrast, the nape, rump and eye-ring are solid gray.



Although the white belly is offset by rufous streaks, (giving the appearance of a small, spotted-breasted thrush) the flanks are heavily streaked with black. Other distinctive features include the yellow lower mandible, notched tail and whitish wing bars on the rufous-streaked wings.

Described as the richest and most melodious of all the sparrows, the song of the Fox Sparrow is a halting, low, rich warble. Composed of mainly clear whistles, the song lacks repeated notes and trills. It consists of "weet, weeto, teeoo, teo, tzee, tzer, zezer, reep" notes. Their call is a very hard and sharp "smack." A high, sharp rising "seeep" call is used during flight.

It is believed that the female Fox Sparrow builds the cup-shaped nest on the ground or in low shrubs. Assembled of grasses, mosses, lichen, shredded bark, leaves and rootlets, the nests are lined with fine grasses and rootlets, fur, feathers and finely shredded bark. A clutch consists of 2-5, 23mm pale green to greenish white eggs, marked reddish brown.



Although the female alone incubates the eggs for 12-14 days, both parents rear the young birds. Adults are known to perform a broken-wing display to lure potential threats away from the nest. Young birds fledge in 9-11 days post-hatching.

Although adult Fox Sparrows are known to consume a variety of food items: seeds, buds, berries, insects, spiders and millipedes, young birds are fed exclusively insects. These sparrows forage by scratching at the ground with both feet (much like a Towhee) and gleaning food from the forest floor.

Fox Sparrows spend the winter across the southern and southeastern United States. They breed in the far north from the Seward Peninsula in Alaska east to Newfoundland.

