

Lincoln's Sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii

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 active flight. Sparrows may be difficult to identify as most species display a variety of immature, regional and/or seasonal plumages. Head and breast patterns, along with song and habitat are the most helpful in their identification.

The Lincoln's Sparrow is a secretive and unobtrusive species. Found in a variety of wet and grassy habitats in northern and montane areas, these birds inhabit meadows, bogs and riparian thickets. At 15cm, these smaller sparrows are more delicately built with a shorter tail and pointed bill. Various stripes decorate the head: buff-colored malars (below the cheeks), broad, solid-gray eyebrows and a semblance of tiny, buffy eyerings. Their pale grayish body is crisply streaked overall. Fine streaks on the throat, buffy breast and flanks contrast with the solid-white throat and belly, although a central, dark spot may occasionally dot the breast.

The song of the Lincoln's Sparrow is a continuous jumble of husky, chirping trills in various pitches. Composed of a pattern of "jew-jew-jew-jew-je-eeeeeeee-do-je-e-e-e-to" notes, the bubbling quality of their song is reminiscent of a House Wren's. The call is a light and sharp "chip." On the wing, the call is a high and buzzy "zeet." Inconspicuous birds, the males seldom sing during incubation, migration or winter.

The female builds the cup-shaped nests in grassy tussocks or shallow depressions in sphagnum or moss. Assembled of grasses or sedges, the nest is lined with fine grasses and hair. Clutch size varies from 3-6, 19mm, pale green to greenish white eggs, marked in reddish browns. Although the female alone incubates the eggs for 12-14 days, both parents assist in rearing the young. If the female is disturbed while brooding, she may rapidly mouse-run from the nest. However, the female is known to perform broken-wing distraction displays when flushed from a nest with young (what a good mom!). Young birds fledge in 9-12 days post-hatching.

The diet of the Lincoln's Sparrow consists of insects, millipedes, spiders and seeds of grasses and forbs. Young birds are primarily fed insects. Occasionally scratching with their feet under the forest canopy, they expose insects and seeds from beneath the leaf litter. These sparrows also forage by gleaning food from the ground as they walk along the forest floor.

These timid sparrows are meek during migration. Where species ranges overlap, they may be dominated by more aggressive species (such as the Song Sparrow). In winter and during migration, Lincoln's Sparrow prefers thickets, brush piles and woodland margin habitats. These birds winter in southern Honduras and El Salvador. During the breeding season, they range from interior and southcentral Alaska, throughout most of Yukon, Northwest Territories and British Columbia, east across northern Canada to Nova Scotia and south in patches throughout the western and southwestern states.