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### IV. The Non-Sparrows

Theodore M. Sperry

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13 Feb. 72 Pittsburg Headlight - Sun  
Kenneth G. Simons' col.

## IV The Non-Sparrows.

The sparrows constitute one of our large and common groups of birds, and I have avoided discussing them until we had looked at some of our other common birds first. In this <sup>article</sup> ~~column~~ we want to look at ~~at~~ a group of sparrow-like birds before considering those we <sup>actually</sup> call the sparrows.

Strangely enough, the first of these <sup>which</sup> is one of our commonest birds, ~~is the~~ <sup>is the</sup> one which ~~Wants-to-know~~ had always thought was our only real sparrow. The House Sparrow (its official name) is commonly called the English Sparrow, although it is not a member of the Sparrow Family, and ~~was originally~~ <sup>found</sup> it occurs over all of Europe (except Italy) <sup>in</sup> ~~addition to~~ <sup>addition to</sup> England. The Weaver Finch Family is a large Old World family of birds which includes the remarkable and sometimes notoriously pestiferous Weaver-birds of Africa, and it is to this family that the House Sparrow belongs. It is, therefore, actually a weaver finch - (but don't make the mistake of calling it a House Finch, as this name belongs to quite a different bird of the ~~southwestern~~ United States). The House Sparrow, of course, was introduced from Europe and is ~~not~~ the only member of this family which occurs in the United States, except a small colony of European Tree Sparrows around St. Louis.



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Although Waxes-To-know may think he knows the House Sparrow so well that he need not bother further with ~~it~~ it, perhaps it would be well to take a second look. The various native American sparrows are also streaked brown birds about the size of the House Sparrow, and it takes more description than ~~this~~ just this to separate the various kinds from each other. In breeding plumage the male House Sparrow is rather well marked, with two white wing bars, the top of its head gray (not brown), white cheeks and a black throat. The females, and to some extent the males in winter plumage, are more difficult, with only very dull wing bars, a dingy white throat, and the cheeks, top of head, and back all a dull brown, a dull whitish line over the eye helps a bit, as does <sup>also</sup> their noisy, gregarious behavior, usually in small or large flocks.

In addition to the numerous sparrows of the large family of American sparrows, there are also quite a number which are not called sparrows, but are, nevertheless, still members of this same family. These come in a variety of colors and shapes and are variously known as grosbeaks, finches, (but not weaver finches), towhees, luntings, long-spurs and several other names. The Cardinal, which we listed earlier, is actually a Grosbeak, and hence is a member of the family of American sparrows. Another reddish member of this family is



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the Purple Finch, which visits here only during the winter. The male is described as a "sparrow which has been dipped in raspberry juice". The top of the head, breast and lower back are all a rather bright reddish purple while the back and wings are a streaked brown washed with the same purple color. The wing has two light purplish bars across it. There are also some other purplish birds which could occur here in winter, but they are all so rare that we can forget about them. Although not common, we usually see several Purple Finches each winter, feeding on some winter fruits and berries.

The female Purple Finch won't have anything to do with the male's purple costume, and dresses in a plain streaked sparrow brown, therefore looking almost like any other sparrow. However, the breast is streaked as well as the back, which helps considerably, and there is a rather prominent light line over the eye, which helps more. Finally, there is a dark brown line under each "jaw" which settles the matter if you can see it. Fortunately, the females often keep company with the males, which makes identification much easier, but if a small flock of females are travelling by themselves, a wants-to-know has to stop and think twice before he can decide which sparrows these are.

The bright yellow Goldfinch with its black forehead, wings and tail is one of our easiest birds to recognize during the summer, so one has difficulty in recognizing the dull yellowish brown, with dull black wings and tail, as being the



same thing. They are not streaked, and ~~all of~~ the characteristic marks are still there, but the heavy dark winter coats can sure fool a guy. Actually, the Goldfinches are a rather common winter bird which appreciate a drink of water if one keeps a bit of open water for them during freezing weather. In the summer, the females are considerably duller than the very bright males, but during the winter they are both quite dull.

A ~~very infrequent~~ cousin of the Goldfinch, visiting here rather infrequently during the winter <sup>and spring,</sup> is the Pine Siskin. Similar in size and shape to the Goldfinch, they are brown streaked all over, top and bottom, but the brownish wings have two narrow yellow bars on them, and there is a yellow patch on the base of the forked tail. Their buzzy, warbling song helps to make them fairly easily recognized.

In protected brushy spots, sometimes the Rufous-sided Towhee will remain here all winter. It is about the size of a Cardinal, and has somewhat Robin-like markings. It is even ~~sometimes~~ called a Ground Robin <sup>by some</sup>. However, the reddish color is on the sides only, not on the belly, and the throat and breast are black on the male, brown on the female. The head, back and tail match the breast and throat. There is a prominent white edge <sup>on</sup> the end of the tail, and our winter birds usually show a number of prominent white spots on the back and wings. These spots mark the Canadian and Alaskan race - the so-called Arctic Towhee - which spend their winters with us. We have several of them in some winters, and none at all in others.