

THE BASIC BIRDER BACKYARD BIRD NEWS APRIL 2017

One of my favorite spring birds is the White-throated Sparrow. They don't stick around for the summer, but are very plentiful while they are here. And, unlike a lot of our migrant birds that seem to just zip through, the White-Throated Sparrows are here for a month or more.

They may start showing up as early as March, but most pile in about the middle of April. The flocks don't start thinning out again until the middle of May.

These fun little native sparrows readily come to our feeders. But what I really like best about them is their singing. And boy, do they sing! Even when they're hiding in the brush, their "Oh Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada" song rings out. It's a unique and unmistakable sound. White-throated Sparrows are also simple to identify. They have a bright white throat. For once, the bird's name actually describes it and is easy to remember! Of course, there's more to describe about their appearance. They have striped heads and a yellow spot between their bill and eyes. A gray face and breast, and streaky brown back, wings and tail complete their attire.

So, we've got the ID down. But then, of course, we've got to complicate it. White-throated Sparrows come in two color forms, called morphs. Unlike most birds, where the brighter birds are males, both male and female White-throated Sparrows can be either morph.

The White-crowned morph has crisp black and white head stripes, and the yellow face spot is quite bright. Tan-crowned birds have much less distinctive brown and tan head stripes, and the yellow spot is fairly dull. Their breasts may also be streaked a bit instead of solid gray. Why the different color forms? Nobody knows, but the birds sort it out. The white crowned birds are more aggressive, no matter which sex they are, and almost always mate with tan-crowned birds. And so the two color forms continue.

White-throated Sparrows are easy to attract to flat feeders, stocked with white proso millet. However, they don't stray very far from cover. All year round they prefer low to the ground, brushy habitat. If your yard has bushes or low evergreens they'll like it just fine. We'll often see them at the same feeders with our Dark-eyed Juncos, but the Juncos head north several weeks earlier.

Like most native Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows hop on the ground, with both feet, rather than walking. It's fun to see them do their two-footed backward kick in the leaf litter as they hunt for food. They mostly eat seeds during the winter, but when they return to Canada to nest, they eat lots of insects.

They nest across most of Canada, in forests, still preferring brushy edges. They usually nest on the ground in heavy thickets. Once nesting season is over, we'll see them again, starting in September. They'll be here in abundance through October and many will stay well into November. Occasionally one will winter here at someone's feeders, but most go farther south in the U.S. They're just as fun to watch in the fall, but they don't sing nearly as much. Their singing in the fall is softer and sounds quite thin compared to their spring exuberance.

White-throated Sparrows may not be as flashy as some of the Neo-tropic migrants that arrive in

May, but they're here early, and stick around to entertain us. Watch for them, and you might also spot some of our less common native Sparrows mixed in with the flocks. Fox Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows and Harris Sparrows are some of our "passing through" migrants you may be able to see and enjoy.

APRIL BIRD NOTES

WATER – WATER –WATER

Our warmer weather in March brought lots of birds back to our area rather early. Geese and ducks in particular were appearing ahead of normal because of lots of open water.

American Robins and Eastern Bluebirds arrived by mid-March. (And yes, they got snowed on!)

Common Grackles and European Starlings will be at our feeders soon. Switch to safflower seed, nyjer and white proso millet in your feeders that they can eat from. You can put black oil sunflower and mixes in caged feeders or small feeders that they can't cling to. Thankfully, they don't bother our feeders as much once they're done nesting.

Don't forget to have your Oriole and Hummingbird feeders out by May 1st.

You can track the Hummingbird and Oriole migration at: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/maps/Maps.html>

By the way, our weather has no effect on our Neo-tropical birds' arrival dates. The weather man in Central and South America doesn't tell them to leave early!

Enjoy your birds!
Ellen S. Montgomery