

# For the Birds

## Not Just Another Sputzie!

The family of sparrows and their allies in Kinnickinnic Township.

By T. Andersen

Growing up with a mom that loved birds didn't necessarily mean she knew the names of all the birds that came to her feeders. She knew, however, that she did not like English Sparrows. She called them Sputzies. It wasn't meant to be a flattering moniker.



English Sparrow (Spatz)

TA Photo

Sputzies, as my mother called them, most likely got that moniker sometime after they were introduced to this country in the mid-1800's. A German friend tells me that spatz is German for sparrow. House sparrows (English Sparrows) have spread throughout the United State and beyond. *They are not in the same family as the other sparrows found in this article.* Often found around farmyards and common in towns.

Turns out there are a whole lot more "Sparrows" out there than just the "invasive" *Sputzie*. A few years back I set a goal to photograph all the different Sparrows found in the United States. Of particular interest to me were the ones that I might find here in Kinnickinnic Township. Turns out there's a whole passel of them and they're very interesting birds.

At least 20 bird species in the Emberizine Family (Sparrows & their allies) can be seen in Kinnickinnic Township. The "regulars" as I like to refer to them are Clay-colored Sparrows, Chipping Sparrows, Field Sparrows, Grasshopper Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, Vesper Sparrows, Lark Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Swamp Sparrows. With the addition of the Eastern Towhee (also in this *family* of birds) I've found these 9 species *nesting* in Kinnickinnic Township. With the help of my intrepid birding pal (my niece, Beth Schmit) we managed to capture some good photos.

The Clay-colored Sparrow is quite common in our area. Grassy areas with a few shrubs or small trees will attract them.



Clay-colored Sparrow

TA Photo

Chipping Sparrows are very common and are often found near homes and nesting in landscaping bushes. We have had Chippers nesting in or near our yard here in Kinnickinnic Township every year for close to 30 years.



Chipping Sparrow

TA Photo

The Field Sparrow has one of the prettiest songs of all the sparrows. Fairly easy to identify if you are able to get a look. The pink legs are a clue but the totally pink bill sets it apart! They can be a bit secretive but after chasing this little fellow around, he finally was kind enough to sit on the bench beside he seemed to ask, "Were you looking to get a picture of me?"



Field Sparrow

TA Photo

The Grasshopper Sparrow is a grassland species and is very much at home in our restored prairies in the Township.



Grasshopper Sparrow

Courtesy Beth Schmit

Savannah Sparrows are one of my favorites. Found in grassy areas and very much at home in restored prairies. They are often seen singing on fences along the road. The yellow facial markings usually stand out. I've noted Savannah Sparrows in my wanderings all across the country from Washington State to Pennsylvania.



Savannah Sparrow

TA Photo

The Vesper Sparrow can be found in open grasslands and especially on field edges



Vesper Sparrow

TA Photo

The beautifully marked Lark Sparrow is one of the largest sparrows. It's an open grassland bird and a possible nester in Kinnickinnic Township. Nesting yet to be determined.



Lark Sparrow

Courtesy Beth Schmit



Song Sparrows are very common and are found from coast to coast across the United States. There are a lot of regional differences in color and plumage. It is our most widespread species of sparrow.



Song Sparrow

TA Photo

This sparrow might be a little harder to find. You'll need a swampy area to spot it.



Swamp Sparrow

TA Photo

Formerly called the Rufous-sided Towhee, the Eastern Towhee is a sizeable member of the Sparrow group. Forest edges near fields and grasslands are their habitat. They visit bird feeders often. It's fun to watch them foraging on the ground kicking back the grass to uncover morsels of food. They have one of the prettiest calls and it sounds like, "Drink your Tea hee hee". I still prefer the name Rufous-sided Towhee to Eastern!



Eastern Towhee

TA Photo



The female Eastern Towhee

TA Photo

The Lincoln Sparrow is a secretive little bird. I see them every spring when they are migrating through.



Lincoln's Sparrow

TA Photo



When American Tree Sparrows migrate through it is quite possible to see dozens of them in a flock feeding at bird feeders



American Tree Sparrow

TA Photo

The adult male Harris's Sparrow is quite a handsome bird. They migrate through just nicking our neck of the woods.



Harris's Sparrow

Courtesy Beth Schmit

This first year returning Harris's Sparrow shows a different plumage from the full adult birds.



Harris's Sparrow (Immature)

TA Photo

Were I to name my favorite sparrow, it would be the White-throated Sparrow. They bring me spring every year. They are one of the prettiest sparrows. They do nest in northern Wisconsin so I can visit them there where I can hear them sing, "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody". In Canada, it's, "Oh Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada".



White-throated Sparrow

TA Photo

The White-crowned Sparrow is another migrant that comes through the Township every year. Birds feeders here in the Township will get a celebrity stop by White-crowned Sparrows early in the Spring and then again when they migrate back through in the fall.



White-crowned Sparrow

TA Photo

The Fox Sparrow is big. It might best be described as robust! They are often seen under bird feeders when they migrate through.



Fox Sparrow

TA Photo

Dark-eyed Junco's are migrants that can often be found here in the winter. Bird feeders are a strong attraction for them.



Dark-eyed Junco

TA Photo

The Snow Bunting is another favorite for me. We see them throughout the winter but mostly in the early spring. They prefer wind swept open ground. Perhaps it reminds them of the Tundra where they head to breed. This bird was perhaps the most accommodating I'd ever seen. Normally they are seen in small flocks out on the snow-covered road edges. Once approached in camera range, they scatter about a block down the road. I drove by one of my favorite viewing areas on a February day and this one was sitting on a fence post. I searched for my camera, and it wasn't there! I drove home, about a mile, got

my camera and returned. The bird was still there, and I finally got my Snow Bunting picture! Better to be lucky than smart, I guess.



Snow Bunting

TA Photo

The importance of good habitat for these species of birds and others couldn't have been more obvious to me. Last year I initiated a simple study of a plot of ground (about 30 acres) that had been converted from annual corn or bean crops to a grassland prairie. During the prairie's second year I did a bird count. I (wow) documented 52 species of birds frequenting and/or nesting on this prairie. Sure enough, all the sparrows showed up either migrating through or nesting. *MOM WOULD BE PROUD OF ME!*



The Transformed Kinnickinnic Township Prairie

Tom Andersen is a 30-year resident of Kinnickinnic Township often seen driving down our township roads at slow speed, camera at the ready.

