

# Sparrow Identification Made... Easy?

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*“You can’t think and identify sparrows at the same time”*



## Passerellidae

**135 species, 30 genera in the Americas**

**29 species, 14 genera in LA**

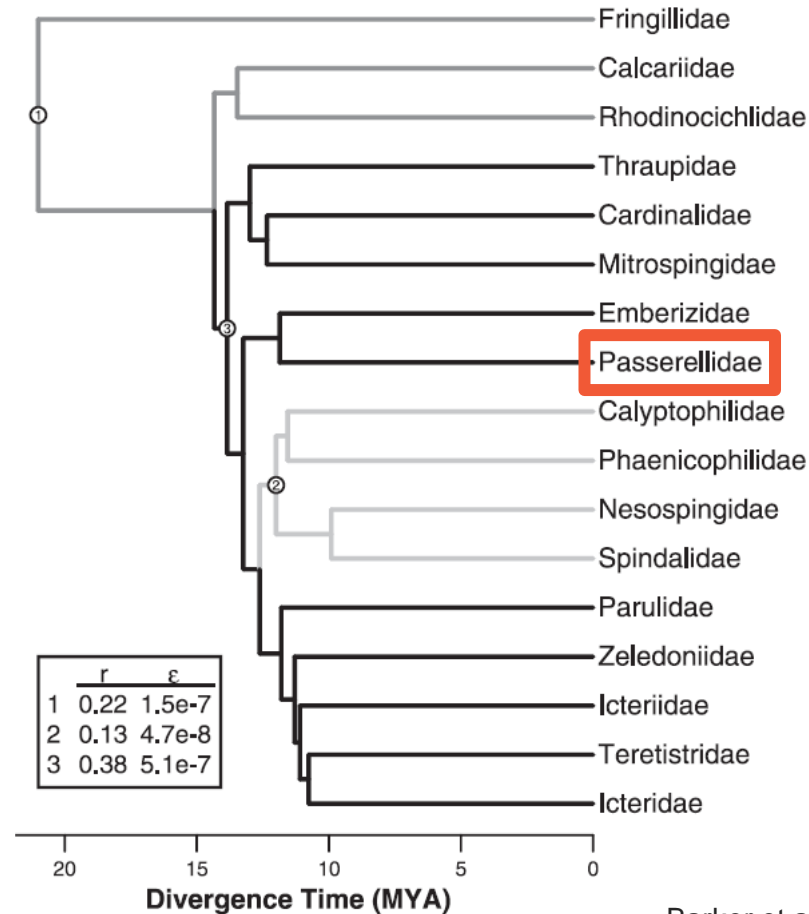


# Passerellidae

Family name proposed in 2013 and adopted by American Ornithological Society in 2017

Part of a radiation of 9-primaried oscines 10-14 million years ago.

Other members of this clade include tanagers, cardinals, warblers, Old World sparrows, blackbirds, etc.



## Not a Sparrow

female Red-winged Blackbird

*Agelaius phoeniceus*

family Icteridae



## Not a Passerellidae

House Sparrow

*Passer domesticus*

family Passeridae



## Vagrant to Louisiana

Cassin's Sparrow (3)

Lark Bunting (14)

Brewer's Sparrow (2)

American Tree Sparrow (1)

Golden-crowned Sparrow (3)

Baird's Sparrow (1)

Green-tailed Towhee (35 records)

Spotted Towhee (>40 records)



# The Easy Sparrows



Lark Sparrow



Dark-eyed Junco



Eastern Towhee



# The Harder Sparrows – 18 species, 10 genera

## Identification groupings

- Stripe-chested vs plain-chested
- By genus (shape)
- Two-color system

## Other important tips

- Learn voices (mostly calls)
- Learn habitat associations
- Learn seasonality and micro-distributions (within LA)

## Winter Sparrow Detections

Species	Number Counted	% of Detections
Savannah Sparrow	9397	54.3%
Swamp Sparrow	2805	16.2%
White-throated Sparrow	2061	11.9%
Chipping Sparrow	1441	8.3%
Dark-eyed Junco	463	2.7%
Song Sparrow	455	2.6%
White-crowned Sparrow	361	2.1%
Eastern Towhee	121	0.7%
Vesper Sparrow	47	0.3%

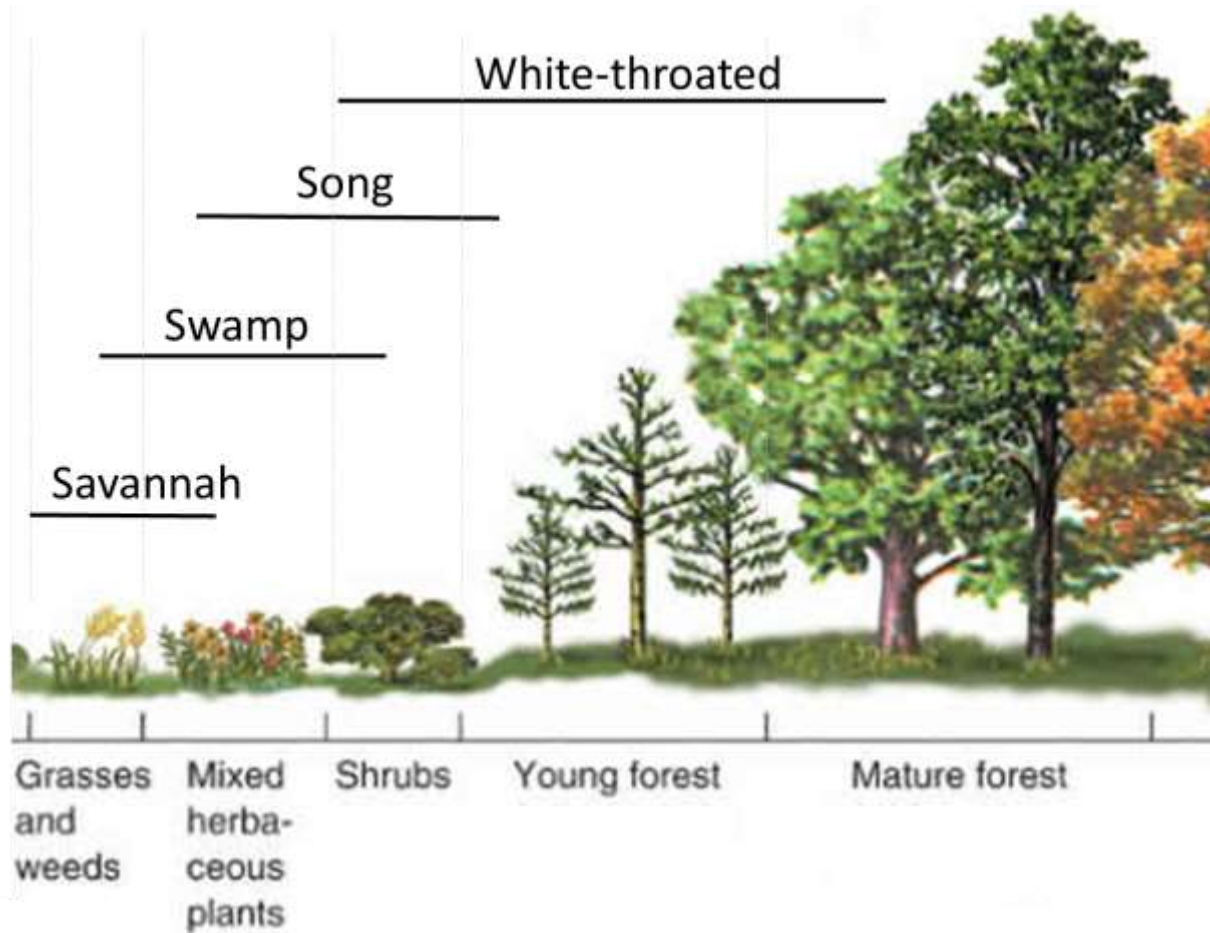
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## Chipping



Open canopy forest



## Streak-chested



Vesper

Savannah

Henslow's

LeConte's

Nelson's

Seaside

Fox

Song

Lincoln's

## Plain-chested



Bachman's

Chipping

Clay-colored

Field

Grasshopper

Swamp

White-throated

Harris's

White-crowned

## Juvenile sparrows are **TYPICALLY** stripe-chested

They molt out of this plumage **BEFORE** arriving in LA (some 1<sup>st</sup> winter birds retain “shadows” of streaks)



## Important Genera

***Spizella*** – Chipping, Clay-colored, Field

***ex. Ammodramus*\*** – Henslow's, LeConte's, Grasshopper, Nelson's, Seaside

***Melospiza*** – Song, Swamp, Lincoln's

***Zonotrichia*** – White-throated, White-crowned, Harris's

Vesper (*Pooecetes*)

Savannah (*Passerculus*)

Fox Sparrow (*Passerella*)

Bachman's Sparrow (*Peucaea*)

\* now split into *Ammodramus*, *Centronyx*, and *Ammospiza*

**Key Genera: Vary in tail length, bulk, relative bill size, head shape**

*Spizella*



*Melospiza*



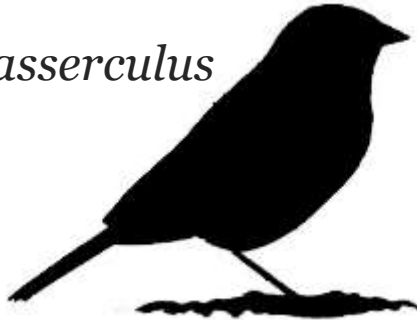
*Zonotrichia*



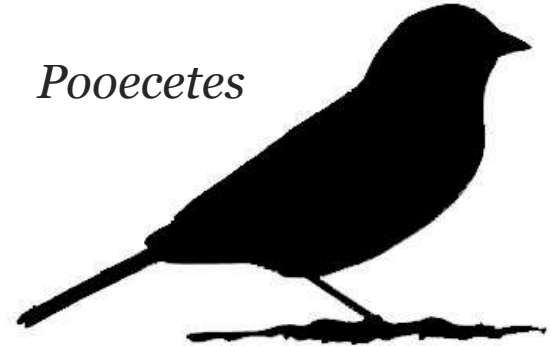
*ex. Ammodramus*



*Passerculus*



*Pooecetes*





## Two-color System to Sparrow ID



**What two colors dominate?**

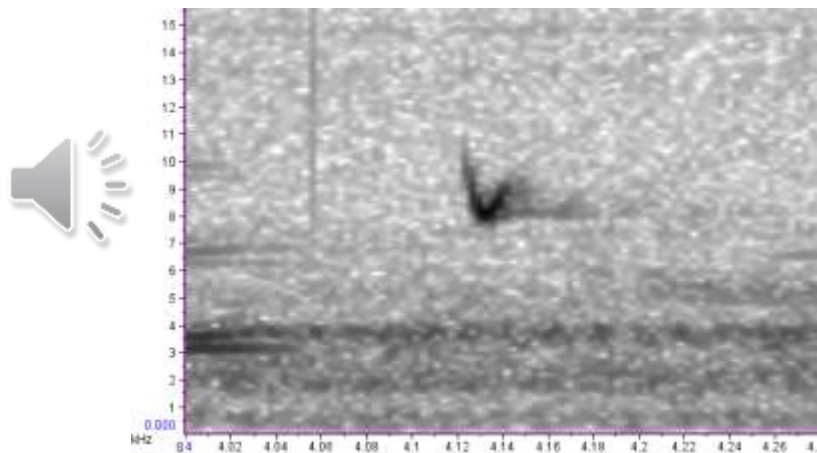
## Call Types: Chip and Flight Calls

- Sparrows have two types of calls in their repertoire: a “chip” call and a “flight” call.
- Both calls are given from the ground and in short-distance flights.
- Some species prefer one over the other on the ground.
- Flight calls are also given during nocturnal migration and often at dawn and dusk.

# Chip and Flight Calls

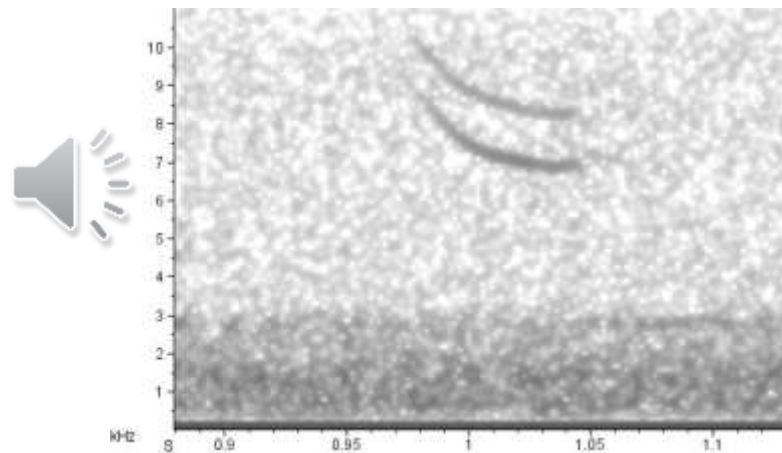
## Chip

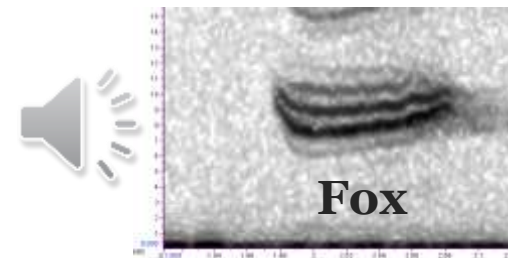
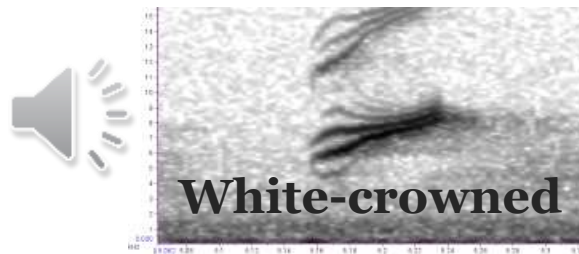
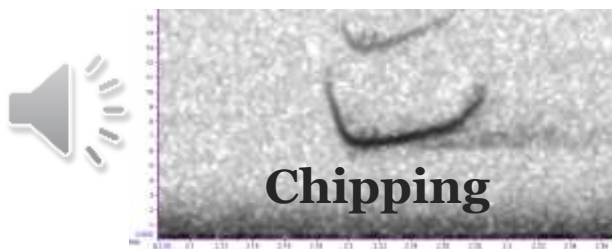
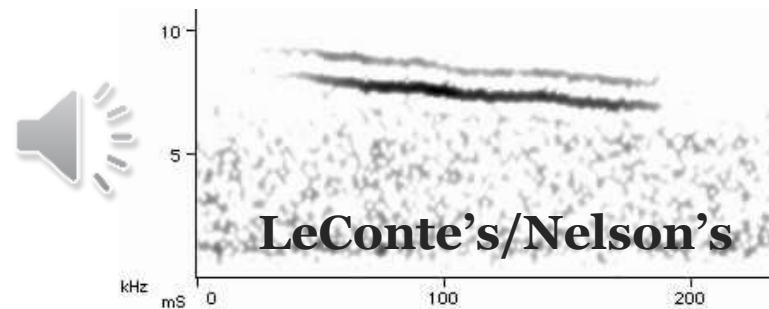
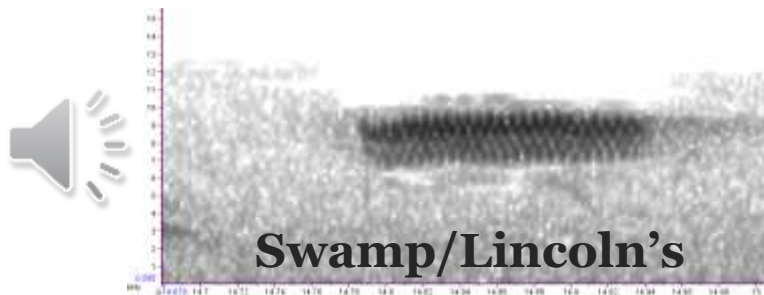
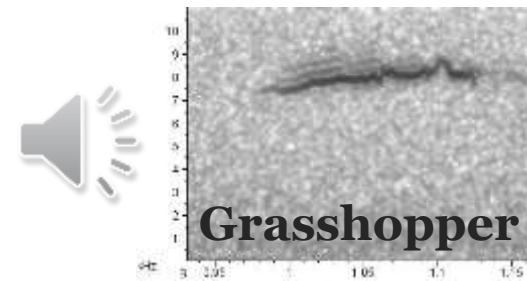
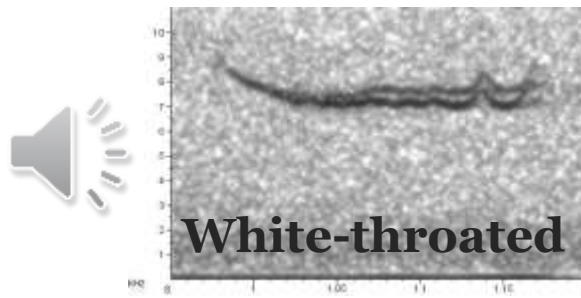
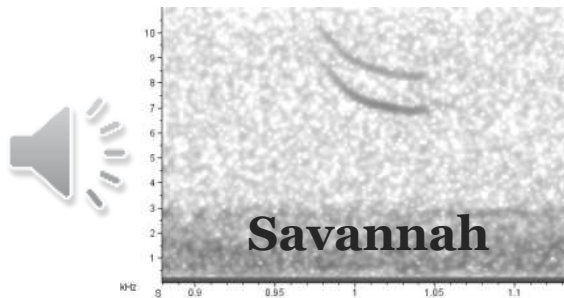
- Lower frequency (3-8 kHz)
- Short: 20-50 ms



## Flight

- High frequency: >7 kHz
- Long: 80-200+ ms





## Deeper Dive into Species Identifications

- 1.** Review the “Big Five”
- 2.** Challenging Species Comparisons
- 3.** Habitat Specialists
- 4.** It’s a Trap!
- 5.** Attracting Sparrows





## Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus*)

Streaked

Flight call – very likely

Chip call – uncommon

White and brown

Geographic cline in darkness



- A continuous spectrum
- Tan to brown
  - Fine to heavy streaking
  - Pale to bright lored







1<sup>st</sup> winter



## Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza*)

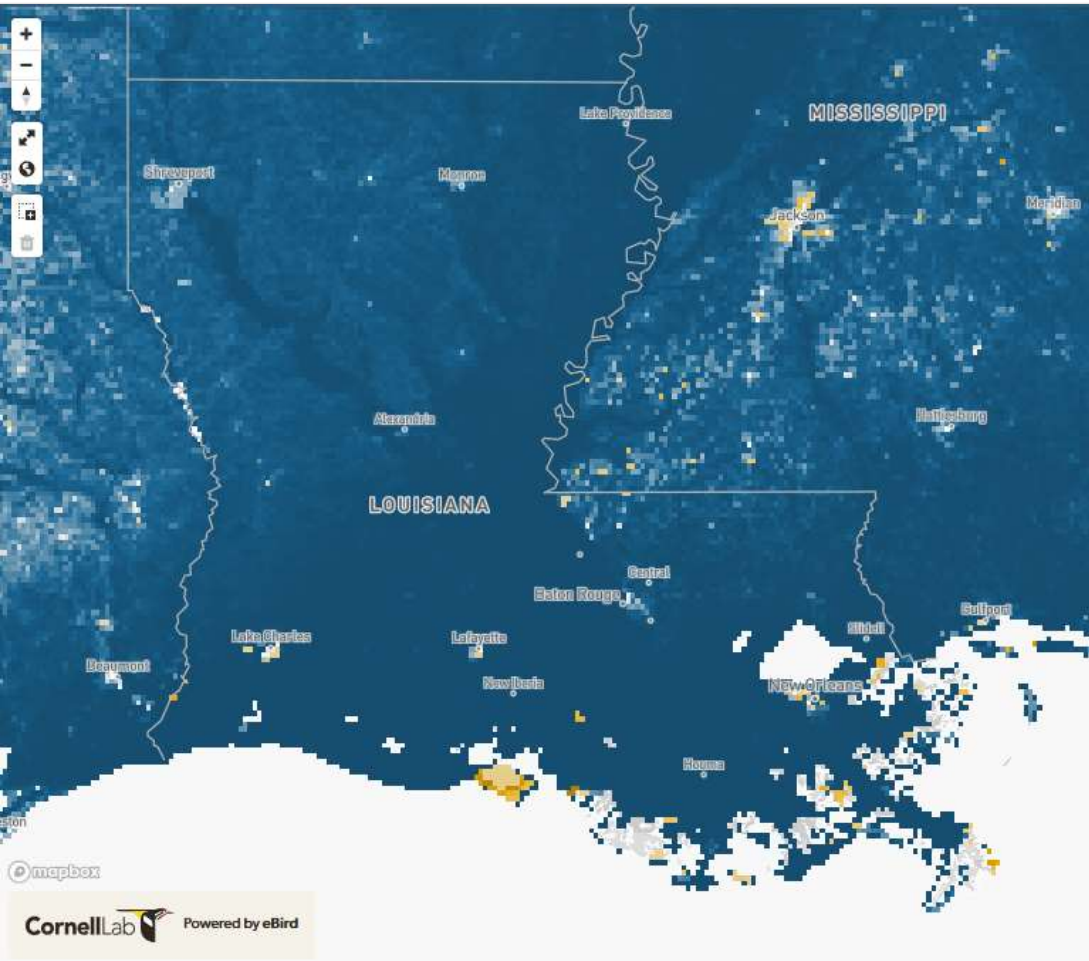
Unstreaked

Flight call – dawn/dusk

Chip call – very common

Gray and rufous

1<sup>st</sup> winter with olive in face and  
sometimes pale streaks



## Swamp Sparrow

1<sup>st</sup> winter



## White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia*)

Unstreaked

Flight call – common, esp.  
dawn/dusk

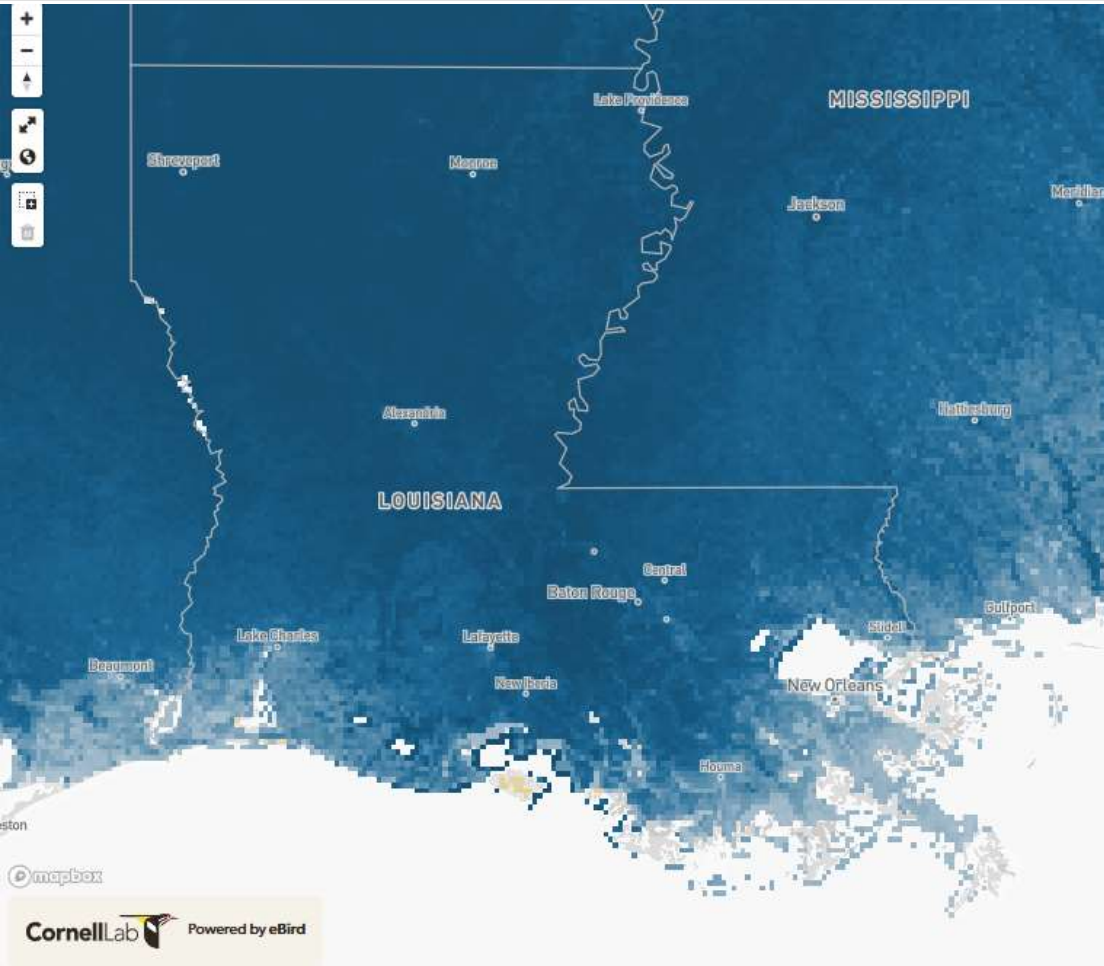
Chip call – common

Gray and dull reddish-brown

Variable by morph (tan vs white),  
age, and sex

Some 1<sup>st</sup> winter birds also have  
faint streaks





# White-throated Sparrow



## Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella*)

Unstreaked

Flight call – common

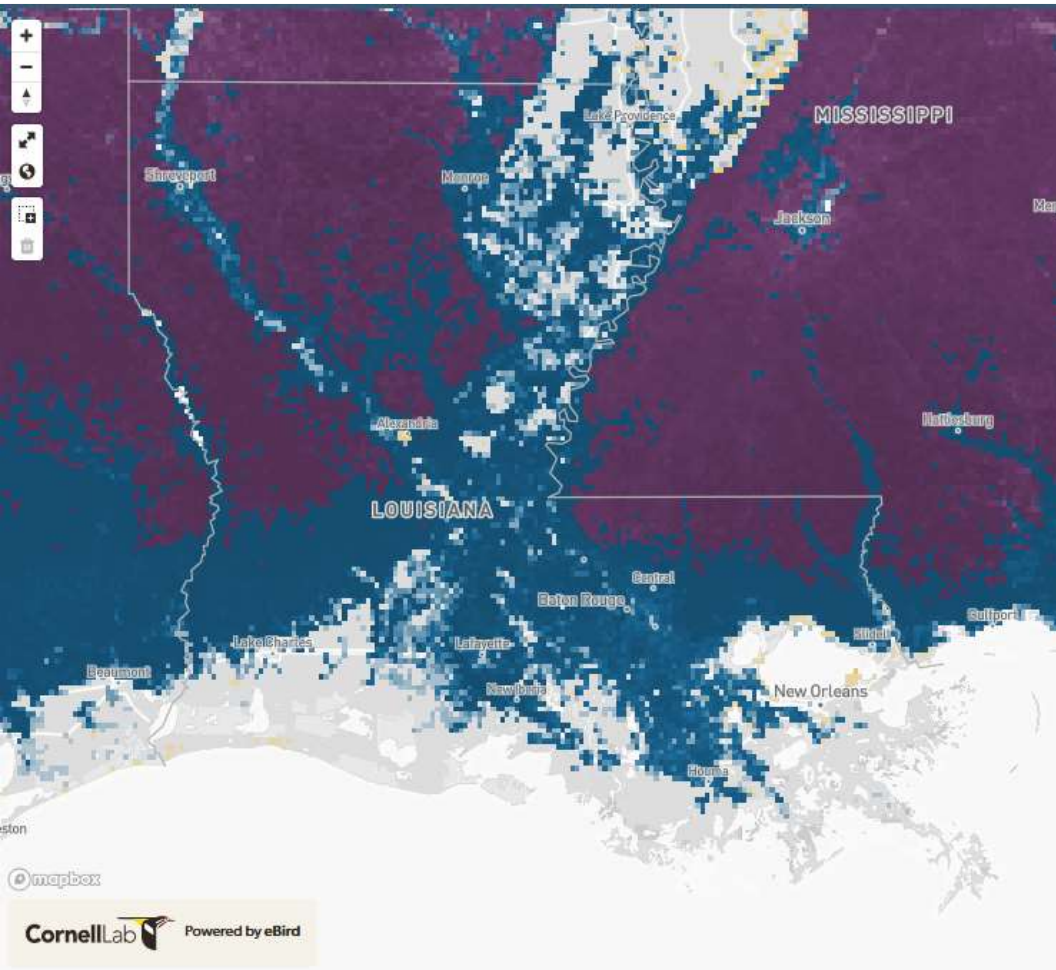
Chip call – common

Pale gray and light brown

Variable in crown, also has a pre-alternate molt

Breeding season  
(alternate plumage)





# Chipping Sparrow



## **Song Sparrow (*Melospiza*)**

Unstreaked

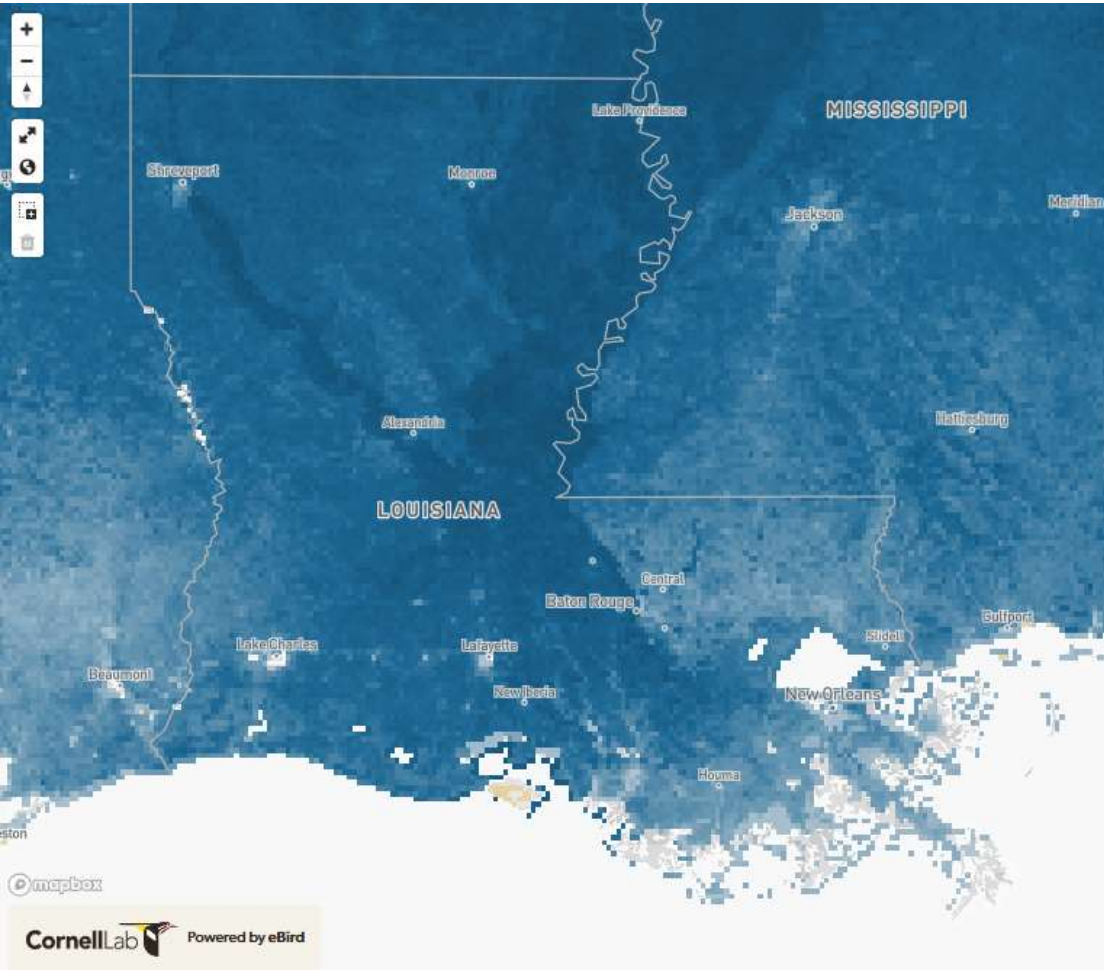
Flight call – rare

Chip call – common

Off-white and reddish-brown

Geographically variable, but not  
so much in LA

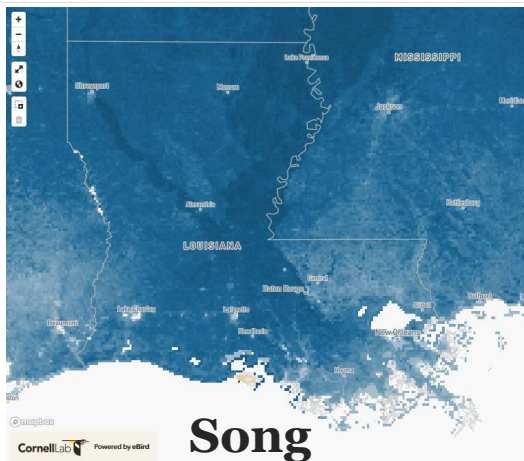




# Song Sparrow

## Song vs Lincoln's (*Melospiza*)





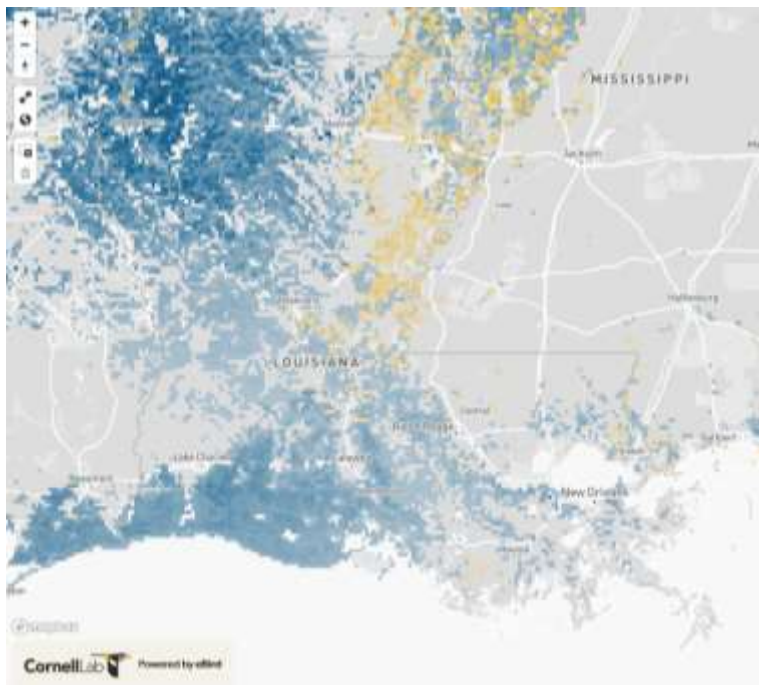
## Chipping vs Clay-colored (*Spizella*)



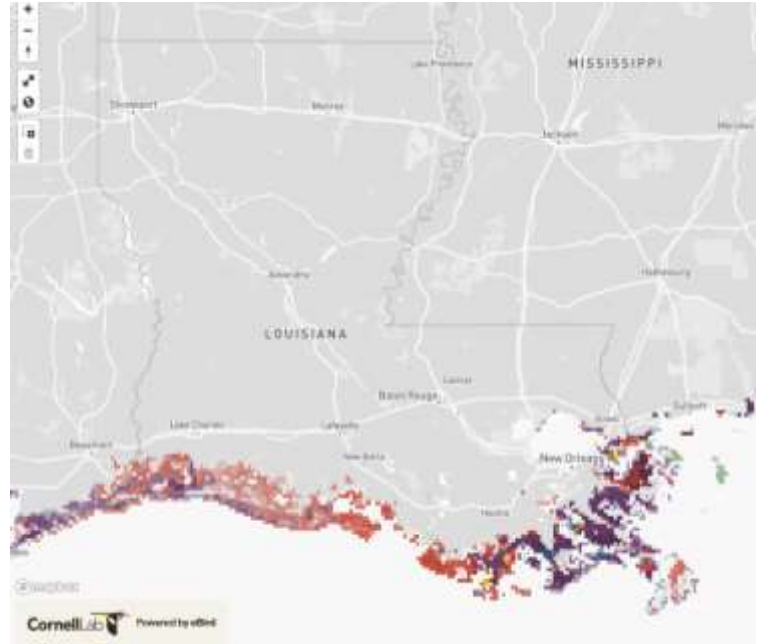
## LeConte's vs Nelson's (*Ammospiza*)



## LeConte's vs Nelson's (*Ammospiza*)



## Seaside Sparrow (*Ammospiza*)



## Henslow's Sparrow (*Centronyx*)





## Bachman's Sparrow (*Peucaea*)



Brian E. Small/Vireo





**It's a  
Trap!**

## Trap #1



## Trap #2



## Trap #3



## **Name 5 common sparrows, and 5 hard-to-find species of the same genus**

- **Swamp**
  - **Savannah**
  - **White-throated**
  - **Song**
  - **Chipping**
- **Lincoln's**
  - **None!**
  - **Harris's**
  - **Lincoln's**
  - **Clay-colored**

## How to Find Sparrows

- Winter (Nov-Mar) offers the most variety
- Leave the car and “beat the bushes”
- Know how to pish and squeak
- Best activity on cool, calm mornings, especially when sunny
- It may be getting harder to find them...why?



## Sparrow Population Changes (BBS 1966-2022)

Species	%/year	Species	%/year
Eastern Towhee	-1.6	LeConte's Sparrow	-1.6
Bachman's Sparrow	-1.6	<b>Seaside Sparrow</b>	<b>1.2</b>
Chipping Sparrow	-0.7	<b>Nelson's Sparrow</b>	<b>0.9</b>
Clay-colored Sparrow	-1.2	Fox Sparrow	-0.4
Field Sparrow	-2.3	Song Sparrow	-0.7
Vesper Sparrow	-0.8	Lincoln's Sparrow	0.0
Lark Sparrow	-1.2	<b>Swamp Sparrow</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Savannah Sparrow	-1.6	White-throated Sparrow	-0.7
Grasshopper Sparrow	-2.8	White-crowned Sparrow	-0.3
Henslow's Sparrow	-1.9	Dark-eyed Junco	-1.0



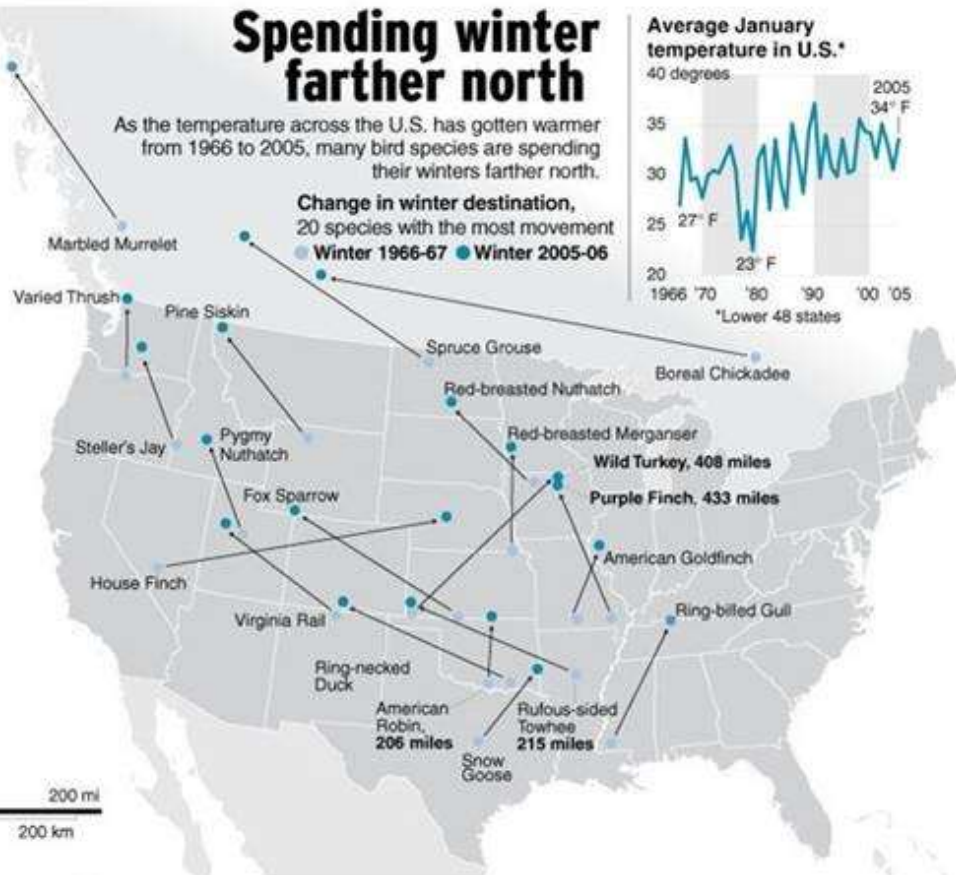
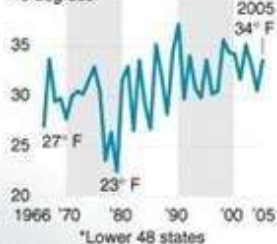
## Spending winter farther north

As the temperature across the U.S. has gotten warmer from 1966 to 2005, many bird species are spending their winters farther north.

**Change in winter destination,**  
20 species with the most movement  
● Winter 1966-67 ● Winter 2005-06

Average January temperature in U.S.\*

40 degrees.



**Species**

**North (mi)**

Fox Sparrow

287

Lincoln's Sparrow

165

Dark-eyed Junco

116

White-throated Sparrow 109

Lafayette to Alexandria = 79 mi

Lafayette to Arkansas = 190 mi



# Sparrow Conservation





**Prescribed Fire – Bachman's & Henslow's**

## Coastal Restoration – Seaside & Nelson's



## Louisiana Coastal Land Loss

1 football field per 100 minutes  
size of Delaware lost since 1930  
>\$1.5 billion annual investment in LA



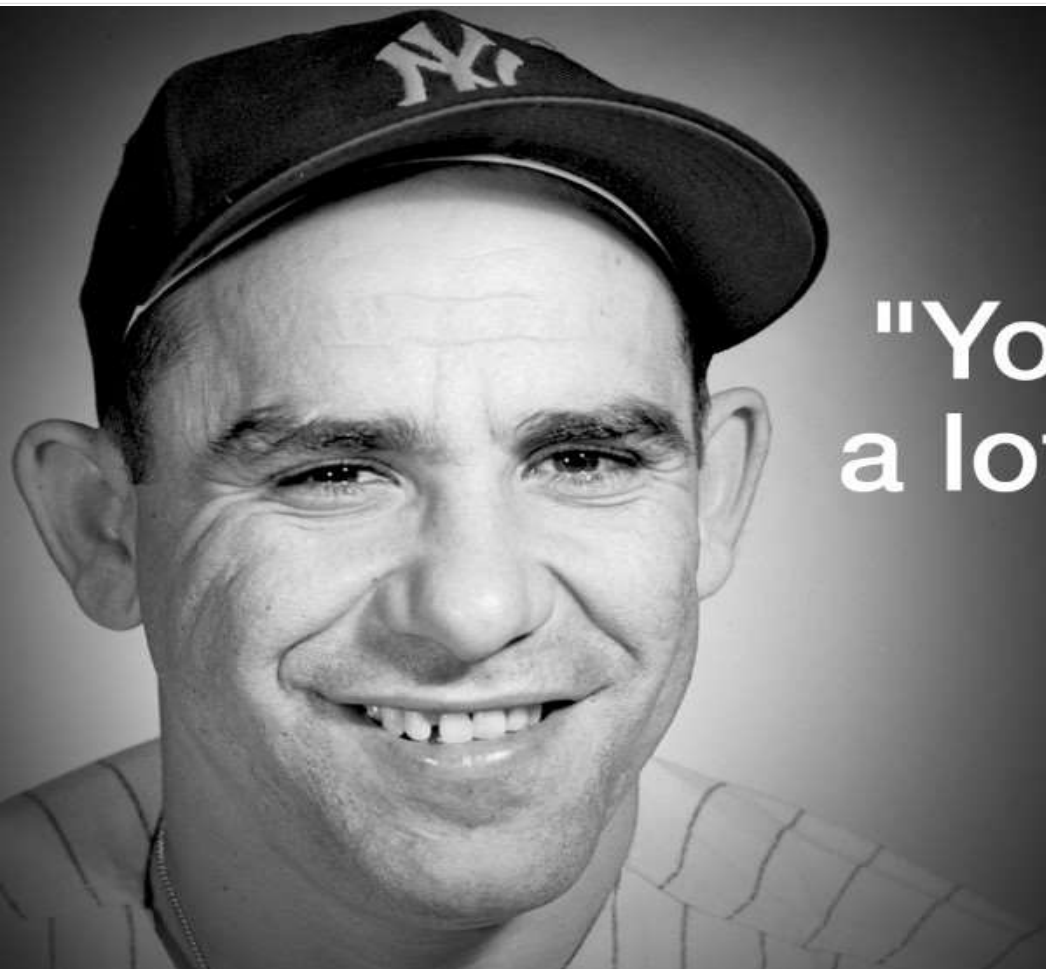
# Reduce lawns, create meadows and hedgerows



## Feeding Sparrows

- Black oil sunflower
- White millet





**"You can observe  
a lot by watching"**

**— Yogi Berra**





## Questions?

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Thank you to Phil Stouffer for giving me the chance 20+ years ago to learn about Henslow's Sparrows. It's been downhill ever since!