

ON THE WILD SIDE

Get to know all the little brown birds

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I have a very busy feeder in my garden and I know most of the birds that visit, but I admit that I relegate some of the birds to a large collection I call the “little brown birds.”

My mother, Jane Shulenberger, on the other hand, studies them carefully when she visits and occasionally reports a new visitor to the yard, so I asked her to jot down some hints about how she sorts out the little brown birds.

These are her notes:

Most of us are acquainted with the sociable house or English sparrows. The male bird is quite handsome with a gray patch on his head, a black bib and white jowls. The female is a bit more subdued and is streaky brown. They are often in chattering groups.

The fox sparrow visits for a few days during migration time and is usually alone. Larger than a house sparrow, the fox sparrow sports a long rufous tail and can be found walking through the garden flicking leaves in search of food.

The song sparrow, my favorite, will also probably be alone. It sits on fences, head thrown back, whistling a few bars of “America.” It has a noticeable brown button on its brown and white striped vest, and a rather long tail that it flicks.

The white-crowned and white-throated sparrows are ground birds that appear in late summer to spend the winter. The white-throated is easily identified by its white throat and a small yellow mark near the eye. Both have striped heads, but the white-crowned sparrow has definite white stripes while the stripes of the white-throated Sparrow are dull. Their call is a repetitious “Sam Peabody.” If you hear the song really clearly, it is probably a white-throated Sparrow.

In the summertime, field sparrows are found on high posts in pastures. They



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN EBERT-ZAWASKY

This Carolina wren is just one of a variety of “little brown birds” that you might see in your backyard.

have pink bills and white eye rings. Their variable song is strong.

While driving along a back road, you might see a small flock of brown sparrows with clear white spots on their tails rising and then going back down to the ground. These are vesper sparrows. Their song is two long and two short whistles.

The chipping sparrow spends lots of time walking over golf courses and parks. A small sparrow, the male has a rufous cap, a stripe through his eye and a clear gray chest. In the fall they are found in small flocks on the ground and will all be “chipping” in one pitch.

Other small brown birds in this area are heard before they are seen. House wrens live near houses or in the forest. They are small puffy birds with a plain brown back and grayish white underparts. They hold their tails up and sing with a descending warble and a “churr.” The Carolina wren is slightly larger than the house wren and also has an erect tail. It is brown above and buffy below with a prominent white eye strip. The song is loud and clear, and comes in a few versions. If you have a Carolina wren in your yard you will know it because you will hear it.

A little brown bird always found on a tree trunk is called a brown creeper. Smaller than a sparrow and camouflaged with the bark, it begins at the bottom to search under the bark for food with its curved slender bill, using its small tail to help it climb. It moves up to the top of the tree, then flies to another tree and starts over.

Identifying little brown birds can be a challenge, but it is fun. Thanks Mom.

You can see from Mom’s notes, that bird identification includes not only what the bird looks like, but also where it is, what it is doing and what its song sounds like.

The Land Preservation Society of Norton encourages you to make your yard “bird friendly” and register it as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. We also encourage you to walk our land, looking for birds and other wildlife as you walk. We love to receive reports about sightings on our land. Visit our web site <http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/>

For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: <http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>

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