

An Invasion of Chipping Sparrows in Spring 2013

By *Vernon M. Kleen*

Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*) typically arrive at my home feeding (banding) station in early April. Until the 2013 March 31 arrival, the earliest had been 6 April. The median arrival date (for 13 years) is 12 April and the latest is 26 April.

Each year, on 1 January or soon thereafter, banding begins in my suburban backyard with birds captured in a single, walk-in, all-purpose, ground trap on my back patio. My yard consists of a small concentration of medium-height trees and considerable lawn. Typical birds captured in the walk-in trap early in the season are Mourning Doves, Northern Cardinals, Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) Juncos and House Finches. By late March the species composition includes Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and migrant sparrows (American Tree, Song and White-throated). Then, in April, the Chipping Sparrows and other species arrive.

Banding conditions and operations at home in 2013 were nearly identical to those of years past; therefore, there was no apparent reason why the trap should have been any different for attracting Chipping Sparrows than any other year. Until 2008, the highest number of Chipping Sparrows banded in an entire year (all methods combined – including mist nets) was 21; in 2008 that highest number for a complete year increased to 57. In spring 2013, the number captured in that single backyard trap, from 31 March to 19 May was 141. And, for the record, another 66 were banded (captured in mist nets) at the local Bird Banding Station (11 miles away) between 3 April and 11 May.



Chipping Sparrow.

*Shirland, Winnebago County.
19 April 2010.*

Photo by John Longhenry

During the period of March 31 through May 19, only 62 other birds of 9 species were captured in the trap (7 of which were return birds of previous years – and one of these was a Chipping Sparrow); therefore, 72% of all unbanded birds captured in the trap this spring were Chipping Sparrows.

After two Chipping Sparrows were banded 31 March, the next capture date was 8 April (7 birds), then 1 or more near daily through 30 April. May bandings included 8 birds between 10 and 19 May. The maximum number banded on a single date (27) occurred on two consecutive days, 19 and 20 April; another 14 were banded on April 21st (for 68 in a three-day period). Interestingly, on these latter dates birds were entering the trap even when

there was no evidence of food (primarily millet) in the trap.

Throughout this period, several birds were captured multiple times. At least 19 birds were recaptured the day after banding; 10 more were recaptured two days after banding. Two birds were recaptured 7 days after banding and one was first recaptured on the 28th day after banding. Ten birds were captured as repeats the same day as banding, another 17 were captured as repeats at least two times after initial banding and one bird was recaptured five times after banding, the last time 25 days later.

The 66 birds captured in mist nets at the local Bird Banding Station do not provide nearly as interesting a story, however, they do add to the suggestion of a Chipping Sparrow invasion in 2013.

It's interesting to note that spring arrived early in 2012 with several 80-degree days in late March followed by an extended cold spell in April. Spring in 2013 was very wet, cool and late – basically, just the opposite. To add to the scenario, a record-setting, late-season, snowstorm dumped 17 inches of wet snow in Springfield (central Illinois) on 25 March 2013.

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