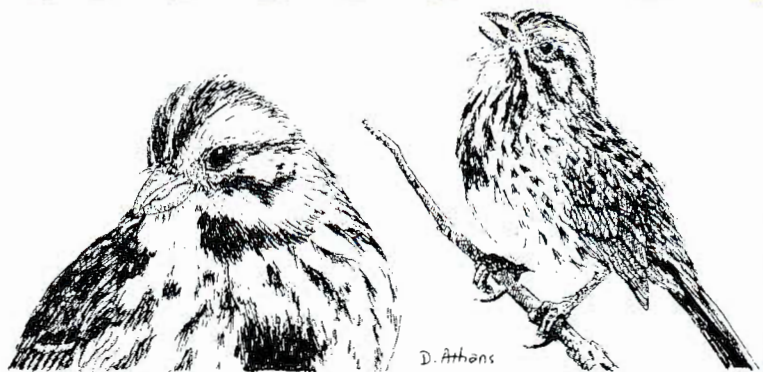


# Field Notes



*Song Sparrow drawing by David Athans.*

## The 1998 Spring Migration

By Paul R. Clyne

Birders lamented the poor spring 1998 migration, but some groups and selected species appeared in good to outstanding numbers. The May passage of flycatchers, thrushes, and vireos was poor, while most dabbling ducks fared quite well, shorebirds exhibited good diversity for spring, and sparrows appeared in healthy to astonishing numbers. The Illinois Spring Bird Count on 9 May netted some remarkable tallies even among species otherwise under-reported. Those figures—including a surprising number of record high counts—are included in the Spring Bird Count summary in this issue, but are omitted below unless submitted by individual contributors.

The preceding mild winter over interior North America accounted for the lack of migrations of the hardiest waterfowl, gulls, and northern raptors, and winter finches. The February passage of half-hardy migrants, however, was excellent, with notably early passages of Sandhill Cranes, Killdeer, American Robins, early sparrows, and blackbirds.

March temperatures generally averaged below normal for the first few weeks. The most severe winter storm of the decade in northeastern Illinois on 8 March, including the heaviest snowfall there since 1990, created a bottleneck that led to the phenomenal numbers of mostly routine migrants in the last half of the month.

April weather was pleasant for gardening, but not conducive to spurring birds out of the tropics. Southerly fronts were weak and short-lived. Many birders surmised that the meager movement of passerines by late April would result in spectacular passages in May, but this proved to be wishful thinking. The nice weather promoted early leafing of trees and shrubs, which only added to the difficulty of locating what few birds were present.

Most passerines, except for sparrows and selected species of warblers, appeared in barely adequate to disturbingly poor numbers. Thrushes as a group were abysmal; none of the vireos attained better than par, and few warblers reached normal numbers. The better high counts reported here for some species disguise the fact that day-to-day counts remained well below normal. Cool weather in the first week of May played some role, but on other dates weather conditions seemed appropriate

for significant influxes without yielding the expected results.

Three theories exist for the unusual spring migration of 1998. Weather conditions may have allowed migrants to continue unhindered to their breeding grounds, resulting in reduced numbers of birds en route. El Niño may have deflected many passages eastward as well as delayed migrants. The spring droughts and devastating fires over much of Central America in late April and May may have substantially impacted the survival of neotropical migrants.

The first of these theories might account for some reduced bird populations on a local level, but cannot explain a statewide dearth of migrants. The El Niño theory may explain the abundance of White-crowned Sparrows in northeastern Illinois and the appearance of western vagrants such as five male Cinnamon Teals (including hybrids—see seasonal highlights) and two male Black-throated Gray Warblers (see seasonal highlights), but is otherwise difficult to evaluate from the Illinois data; for example, no Harris's Sparrows were reported. The Central American catastrophe theory best accounts for the high numbers among species that winter largely north of central Mexico, as well as the low numbers among those which winter or migrate heavily through the southern two-thirds of Central America.

Each theory has merit and we can only hope that the first two played a greater role than the third. The forthcoming breeding season summaries from North America should provide tangible evidence on the impact of the Central American wildfires on more northerly breeding bird populations.

The foundation of this summary is the detailed information on migration limits and populations as submitted directly to the compiler (or indirectly via the Illinois Department of Natural Resources) by field observers across the state. Reports communicated to local coordinators of taped bird-alerts, reports posted on e-mail, and reports transmitted by word of mouth to another observer are not included.

Migration limits and maximum counts are provided, where available, from each of the three subsections of Illinois—North, Central and South—as mapped out in Bohlen's (1978)