

Recognizing Juvenile and Winter Chipping Sparrows

by David B. Johnson

The Illinois birder can easily recognize an alternate (breeding) plumaged Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) by its rufous cap, white supercilium (eyebrow), black eye stripe, and dark black bill. Birders can also recognize the bird's grayish unstreaked underparts, cheeks, nape, and rump as well as the thin, elongated body with a long, notched tail and the brown back with prominent wide, darker brown streaks. In addition, birders will notice the two whitish wing bars, connecting brown nape stripe between the back and the crown, and the bird's pinkish legs and feet.

Just as distinctive as the Chipping Sparrow's alternate plumage is the bird's song - a distinctive fast, dry, hard rapid trill. Most beginning birders in Illinois become familiar with this "chippie" trill in their neighborhoods, parks, golf courses, orchards, wood edges, and pine plantations. Birders should be careful; though, not to confuse the highly variable song of the chippie with the similar songs of the Worm-eating Warbler and Dark-eyed Junco.

Once "the trill is gone" and the first brood of juvenile chippies are begging their par-

ents for food, then the birder realizes that these youngsters don't look anything like their parents. My first impression of juvenile Chipping Sparrows from above was that they looked like Brewer's Sparrows, a bird not likely to occur in Illinois. All the fine dark brown streaking through the crown and down the nape along with the lack of any distinct facial patterns certainly can be confusing.

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As illustration 1 shows, the dull black streaking throughout the underparts of a juvenile Chipping Sparrow and the dark eye stripe, though not always distinct, rules out a Brewer's or juvenile Clay-colored Sparrow.

Other features which help to identify a juvenile Chipping Sparrow include the absence of rufous in the crown and the distinctly streaked-appearance

of the crown as if someone ran a comb of fine, dark brown streaks over its head.

The young chippie also has a light orange to pink bill, buffy wing bars, long notched tail, and a brown faintly-streaked rump. The cheeks or auricular area are buffy brown punctuated with a complete, though indistinct, brown eye line.

The eyebrow is buffy. Chippie young have rich brown, buffy backs with dark strong streaks throughout. Their legs and feet are pinkish. No distinctive gray nape is apparent in this plumage.

In Illinois, most Chipping Sparrow juveniles will maintain their plumage into late October; therefore, we don't often get to see a first basic (1st winter) or even a definitive basic (winter) chippie in Illinois, unless there are stragglers. Most birds have migrated out of the state by the time those plumages are acquired.

However, if you've ever birded in the southern tier of United States in winter, you can see first basic or definitive basic Chipping Sparrows on their wintering grounds.

A definitive basic plumaged chippie (see illustration 2) exhibits the following characteris-