

# State's First Confirmed Nesting White-throated Sparrow

by Christine Williamson

On 20 July 2001, at approximately 5:15 p.m. while riding my bicycle home from work, I rode the east side of the University of Chicago's Gleacher Center one-half block east of Michigan Avenue at the Chicago River (on the upper level. There is also a river level terrace at this site). I passed a raised planting bed on the east side of the Gleacher Center, south of the building's entrance and heard chip notes of two or three White-throated Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*). I did not stop to investigate, as I had an appointment immediately after work.

I heard the birds in the landscaped bed that was contained within a smooth, polished perimeter of stone (probably granite) approximately two feet high. The bed was landscaped with low, clipped yew bushes (about three feet high) in the center in a linear swath about 50 feet long and about five feet wide. The perimeter of the bed was planted intermittently with a two-foot high flowering, deciduous shrub. The plantings in the center of the bed are dense. The edges of the bed are narrow and are covered with wood chips. The bed's smooth, raised, vertical sides may be a deterrent to rats, a predator for nesting birds in urban settings. I didn't see any of the evidence of underground rat warrens in this bed (tunnel openings, raised earth over rodent tunnels, etc.), which are typical in landscaped beds in downtown Chicago that are not raised above ground level.

I returned to the site on 31 July at 8:15 a.m. and met Ken Wysocki there. He reported seeing two adult White-throated Sparrows and at least one juvenile. He also told me he had seen an adult White-throated Sparrow carrying food — a moth — into the bed before I arrived.

I pished for about 30 seconds and heard numerous chip and distress calls of White-throated Sparrows. As we stood near the raised bed, a juvenile White-throated Sparrow flew awkwardly into view about two feet away from me. I could see it very well without binoculars. After about a minute, two adult White-throated Sparrows walked into view. Both the adult and juvenile White-throated Sparrows foraged on the ground in the wood chips of the perimeter, with the adults slightly back under the bushes and the juvenile in the open.

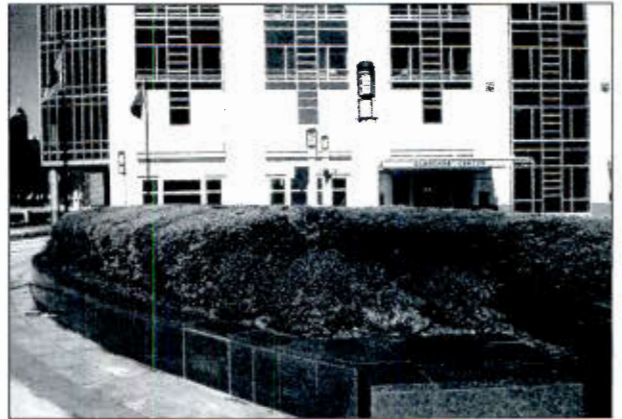


Figure 1. A close-up of the Gleacher Center taken from the south; the hedge present is the spot where young White-throated Sparrows were found the summer of 2001, confirming the first breeding record of this species in Illinois. Gleacher Center is along the north bank of the Chicago River between Columbus Drive and Michigan Avenue. The entire neighborhood is elevated; to get to the river, one must walk down a large flight of stairs. Photo by Ken Wysocki.

Another bird of similar size and color to the juvenile White-throated Sparrow was probably farther back in the yew bushes, and I heard a separate White-throated Sparrow chip note not given by the three White-throated Sparrows in view. I did not get a clear view of the fourth bird.

## Description of Juvenile

The juvenile White-throated Sparrow was very slightly smaller than the adult birds. The juvenile had warm, rusty brown on its back. The head was a dark, gray-brown with an indistinct central crown stripe and a fairly narrow dirty-white eyebrow. The cheek was a dark gray and the throat was pale, dirty-white. The bill was dark. The chest was heavily streaked to about mid belly and the rest of the belly and undertail coverts were pale. The flanks were also heavily streaked. The bird had tiny, ragged tufts of dark gray down poking through its wing coverts, around its nape, and on the crown of its head. The bird's tail feathers did not appear to be completely formed. The bird's flight was very hesitant when it first came into view, reminding me very much of that of a juvenile American Robin I had watched being driven from its nest a bit too soon by a