

Master Naturalists are learning about and interpreting the nature of Cook County by creating rapid color guides (RCG). By partnering with The Field Museum, we are publishing full color, easy to read nature guides for all residents of Cook County and beyond. This year we are creating a series of “nature in your neighborhood” rapid color guides as well as many that will help to increase the knowledge of, and access to local nature in Cook County. These are useful resources for local residents, making nature more easily interpreted by the novice naturalist, as well as seasoned biophiles.



Sparrows Don't Get No Respect By Mark Vaughan

As the late comedian, Rodney Dangerfield used to say, “I don’t get no respect.” Likewise, sparrows face such disrespectful comments like, “it is only a sparrow,” or worse, they are described as “LBJs,” short for, Little Brown Jobs.

Thus, began my project. During an Illinois Master Naturalist training session at the world renowned Field Museum of Natural History, conservation ecologist Tatzana Wachter mentioned the Field Rapid Color Guides. These guides are produced and offered on-line by the museum. The wheels started turning in my head, “Why not produce a color guide for sparrows?” After a bit of background research in the various bird guides, there are 19 sparrows that reside or traverse the Chicago region. Some are common year-round residents while others are transient as they migrate through with the seasons.

The next step was to search my photographic archives. I determined I had quite a few which met my needs for the guide. Some photos were not readily available so I compared my travel plans and seasonal bird locations. Quickly I could snap shots of the American Tree Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow and Swamp Sparrows. I was still missing a few images and I received help from Jaculin Bowman at Naturesjoyphotography.com. I also received some missing images with the assistance from Matthew A. Young, collection management leader from the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The final missing image came from my college friend, Chuck Tuttle a fellow bird nut. With all the images now complete it was time to start on the captions and labels.

The first determination was to define “common” and “uncommon.” “Common” was used for sparrows that are routinely observed year-round or seen frequently during seasonal migrations. These bird labels are lettered with black. “Uncommon” birds are rarely observed during the calendar year or are only seen during very abbreviated periods during migration. These birds are labeled in red print. The proper common/uncommon designation was determined by a majority opinion from the three major reference guides.

Some comments about the House Sparrows are necessary. This species is in the finch family rather than a sparrow. It is an invasive species and is not protected by the migratory bird safeguards. There are several plusses and minuses that deserve mention. On the positive side, they eat prodigious amounts of harmful insects and weed seeds. On the negative side, they are very aggressive and out-compete native birds for both food supplies and nesting sites. House sparrows can be killers when they compete with less aggressive like bluebirds and chickadees.

This guide will help identifying those “LBJs” next time you are out on a hike or watching sparrows around your bird feeder: [Rapid Color Guide: Common Sparrows](#)

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To my wife, Paula Grist for arising prior to 5 am for a drive to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge to capture a picture of the Swamp Sparrow at dawn.

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Next to photographer Jaculin Bowman and Chuck Tuttle for sharing some of their fantastic photo successes and finally to Macaulay Library’s Matthew A. Young at the Macaulay Library for providing three missing images needed to complete the project.