

First Record of Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) for British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile. Revised: October 2016.

Introduction and Distribution

The Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) is a small passerine found breeding in brushy woodlands and over-grown fields in eastern North America from northwest and southeast Montana, northern North Dakota, central Minnesota, north-central Wisconsin, north-central Michigan (Carey *et al.* 2008). It is also in southern Manitoba around Winnipeg, southern Ontario, southwestern Quebec, southern Maine; and southern New Brunswick, south to northeastern Colorado, western Kansas and Oklahoma, central and southern Texas, and along the Gulf Coast to southern Georgia (Carey *et al.* 2008).

The Field Sparrow is a short distance migrant that winters from Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, southern Michigan, northern Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, south to southeastern New Mexico, into western Mexico in northern Coahuila, central Nuevo León, northern Tamaulipas, the Gulf Coast, and in southern Florida (Carey *et al.* 2008). In Eastern Mexico, the Field Sparrow is found in the winter in the northeast corner on the Atlantic slope from eastern Coahuila and Nuevo Leon to central Tamaulipas (Howell and Webb 2010). The core of the Field Sparrow's winter range in the United States has been determined by examining Christmas Bird Count Data; and this has shown that the center of winter abundance extends from the eastern area of the Carolinas and south Virginia, west through Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and central Texas (Sauer *et al.* 1996).

The Field Sparrow is a rarity throughout the mid-west with records of birds found north and west of its normal breeding range with scattered records from the region's various states and Provinces (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is also a rare to casual vagrant to parts of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Along the West Coast, the Field Sparrow is an accidental vagrant. In California, there are 12 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). There are no records for Oregon (OFO 2012) or Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). This species was only recently added in the fall of 2014 to the avifauna of British Columbia (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Field Sparrow is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a small, slim species that has a long notched tail tip measuring 15 cm with a wingspan of 20 cm, and weighing 12.5 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is similar

looking, but smaller in size, to an American Tree Sparrow (*Spizelloides arborea*) which measures 16 cm with a wingspan 24 cm, and weighing 20 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). With good views, the Field Sparrow is different enough not to pose any identification confusion with any of the slightly smaller “*Spizella*” sparrow species that normally occur in British Columbia. These include Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) which measures 14 cm and weighs 10.5 grams, Brewer’s Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) which measures 14 cm and weighs 12 grams, and Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) which measures 14 cm, and weighs 12 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult birds have a pinkish-rusty cap; sometimes with a faint, grayish median stripe (this is more prominent on western birds). The bill is pink and small. The side of the head is light gray with a distinct white eye-ring and a small rusty eye-stripe (that is less prominent in western birds). The eye is brown. The nape is a pinkish-rusty colour with the back a rusty-brown colour with dark streaking. The rump is normally unstreaked, but sometimes with light-brown streaks. The wings are brown with rusty coverts and two whitish wingbars. The tail is moderately long, dark brown and has a notched tail tip with light gray edging to the feathers. The underparts are gray with a rufous wash on the breast and flanks (the rufous wash is less prominent on western birds). The legs and feet are pale-brown or pinkish-yellow.

First fall birds hold this plumage from July to October. These birds strongly resemble adults, but usually have some indistinct streaking on the breast and sides.

Juvenile plumage is held from May to October. Birds at this age are similar to adult birds, but lack rusty colour. The crown is dull gray to brown, and there are light dusky streaks on the breast and flanks.

The song of the Field Sparrow is a series of from two to several clear, plaintive, run-on whistles that accelerate and ascend into a trill. This makes a “*swee-swee-swee-swee-wee-wee-wee-wee*”. The call note is a high-pitched “*tsip*”, “*zweep*” or a sharp “*chip*”.

With good views this species should not pose any identification issues for any keen observers in British Columbia.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Field Sparrow is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only one recent record of an adult bird found and photographed by Ken Wright, and relocated at day break the next morning by Rick Toochin on the north side of Fury Creek near the river mouth along the shoreline of Howe Sound October 30-31, 2015 (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). In eastern North America, the Field

Sparrow migrates in the late fall from mid-October into mid-November with the peak migration period occurring around late October (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Field Sparrow at Fury Creek fits perfectly into the most likely time a lost, wandering bird would turn up in British Columbia as it occurred at the end of October which is the peak migration period for the species. In California, there are 9 fall records that fall between the dates October 2 to November 15 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). California also has three wintering birds ranging from dates of November 25 to April 13 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). This species is extremely rare in the spring with only one record between the dates of April 19 to May 9, and only two summer records between the dates June 17 to July 17 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Though there is only a small sample of records to analyze, so far the fall period is by far the better time to look for this species on the west coast. Observers should be on the lookout for overshoot birds in late spring from late May into mid-June, an established time period for eastern vagrants (Roberson 1980). There is a hypothetical record of an adult bird singing on May 22, 1963, by Adrian Paul in Kleena Kleene (Paul 1965). The record could be valid, but unfortunately details of the observation are lacking in the account so that this record was not included in the Birds of British Columbia, Volume 4 (Campbell *et al.* 2001). There is a very good chance that there will be future Field Sparrow records in British Columbia. This species is possible anywhere in the province.



Figure 1: Record #1: Field Sparrow at Fury Creek on October 30, 2015.
Photo © Ken Wright.



Figure 2: Record #1: Field Sparrow at Furry Creek on October 30, 2015.
Photo © Ken Wright.

Table 1: Records of Field Sparrow for British Columbia:

1.(1) first winter plumage October 30-31, 2015: Ken Wright and Rick Toochin (photo) Oliver's Landing, north side of Furry Creek (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.).

Hypothetical:

1.(1) adult singing May 22, 1963: Adrian Paul: Kleena Kleene (Paul 1965)

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