The Birds of the Greater Rockbridge County, Virginia Area

Towhees, Sparrows, and Juncos

Richard A. Rowe

Department of Biology
Virginia Military Institute

Accidental – A bird outside of its normal range (breeding or winter) or outside of its normal migration route
Rare – A bird that is within its normal breeding or over-wintering range or its normal migration route, but should not be expected to be seen in the area on a yearly basis
Unusual – A bird that is within its normal breeding or over-wintering range but is not reported on a regular basis in the county (1-5 sightings per year)
Common – A bird that is regularly seen within the area but may not be present in large numbers or may have a restricted distribution (Locally Common)
Abundant – A bird that is found in large numbers within the county but may have a restricted distribution (Locally Abundant)

Transient – A bird that is seen in the area during migration or as a wandering sub-adult
Year-round – A bird that is present in the area throughout the entire year and is usually a breeder
Summer breeder – A bird that migrates into the area and breeds during the summer
Winter migrant/resident – A bird that migrates into the area and over-winters and then leaves in the spring

Locations

BB = Brownsburg and Bustleburg area including Route 252
BQ = Barger's Quarry
BRP 1 = Blue Ridge Parkway between mileposts 28 and 45 (Route 56 and Route 60)
BRP 2 = Blue Ridge Parkway between mileposts 45 and 64 (Route 60 and the James River)
BRP AO = Blue Ridge Parkway and Apple Orchard Mountain (mileposts 76 to 78)
BS = Big Spring
CT = Chessie Trail
GP = Goshen Pass
KD = Kendal Retirement community
LEX = Lexington
LM = Lake Merriweather at Goshen Pass
LR = Lake Robertson
LT = Locher Tract
MF = McCormick's Farm
MR = Maury River
NM = North Mountain
OFRP = Old Farm Road Pond
PQ = Quarry at the Ponds
RB = Rockbridge Baths area
RC = Rockbridge County in general
SR = South River
WL = Willow Lake

Notes:
Cameron's Pond, which was located near the current Rockbridge County High School, drained naturally in 19??.

Womeldorf Farm ponds are located just outside of Lexington in the new, Pond's housing development.
Lake Robertson and Lake Merriweather were created after Murray published his account of the Birds of Rockbridge County.

Passeriformes: Emberizidae

Towhees, Sparrows, and Juncos
(All photos: Towhees, Sparrows, and Juncos)

Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*):

Occurrence: Summer resident/breeder with migrants through the area and a few over-wintering individuals
Dates: April through October, although individuals can be found year-round
Location: RC
History: Towhees are found throughout the county and at all elevations. It is not uncommon to find individuals throughout the winter (winter of 2009-10 and 2002-03 in Lexington). Towhees have been reported on 37 of 84 CBC. Murray reports that Towhees occur from 22 February to 24 October with six winter (December and January) records. He reports nests with eggs between 22 May and 7 July.
Status: Abundant during spring and summer and uncommon during the winter, but should be seen in the area
Photo: Blue Ridge Parkway on Apple Orchard Mountain; upper photo, male, 13 April 2010; lower photo, female, 22 May 2008.
For additional photos: Eastern Towhee

Bachman's Sparrow (*Peucaea aestivalis*)

Occurrence: Former breeder in the area but no longer present.
Dates: 14 and 24 April
Location: RC
History: Murray reports three sightings of Bachman's Sparrow in the area: 14 April 1939, 24 April 1948, and a third sighting with no date. The 24 April date coincided with a VSO meeting. A number of VSO members saw and heard the bird. There are no recent reports.
Status: Accidental (absent) and not expected.

American Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*):

Occurrence: Winter resident/migrant in the area
Dates: December through February
Locations: LEX, GP, CT, RC
History: Tree Sparrows are winter residents that are seen most winters (61 of 84 CBC) but their numbers vary. The average number seen on the CBC is 2.1 birds with 25 seen in 1995 and 200 noted in 1962. They were almost always reported on the CBC prior to 1979, but recently there have been very few sightings on the CBC. Recent

records are on 13 February 2000 in Lexington and Goshen Pass, on 6 February 2010 in the northern part of the county, 9 -10 February 2010 near Fairfield, 15 February 2010 in the southern part of the county, 10 March 2010 near Rockbridge Baths, and 4-5 January 2012 at Old Farm Rd. Pond. Murray notes that Tree Sparrows are common between 9 November and 9 April.
Status: Uncommon winter resident that could be seen.
Photo: Old Farm Rd Pond, 5 January 2013
For additional photos: American Tree Sparrow

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*):

Occurrence: Summer resident/breeder with a few individuals seen during the winter months
Dates: March through October
Locations: RC
History: Chipping Sparrows can be found in open areas throughout the county and at all elevations. The earliest record is 11 February 2010 at our feeders in Lexington. Chipping Sparrows have been reported on four CBC (2011, 2008, 2003, and 1992). While individuals have been found in December and February, the average arrival time is mid to late March. Murray considers Chipping Sparrows to be an abundant summer resident present from 14 March until 4 November. He reports nests on 24 April 1948 and 25 July 1845.
Status: Abundant summer resident/breeder and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Lexington, 13 June 2009.
For additional photos: Chipping Sparrow

Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*)

Occurrence: Accidental
Dates: Late April – early May
Location: WL
History: A single individual was found by Alex Merritt on 28 April 2011 at Willow Lake and represents the first record for this species in the County. The sparrow was in a mixed flock of Chipping Sparrows and Palm Warblers when it was first located. The sparrow was still present on 1 May 2011 and was in a mixed flock of Goldfinches, House Finches, and Chipping Sparrows that were feeding on dandelion seeds. This sighting was accepted as a Category 1 record by VARCOM, and it represents the first record for the Mountains and Valley region of Virginia.

Status: Accidental species and not expected in the county.
Photos: Willow Lake, 1 May 2011
For additional photos: Clay-colored Sparrow

Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident/breeder
Dates: Year-round
Locations: RC
History: Field Sparrows can be found throughout the area and at all elevations. During the late fall and winter, Field Sparrows tend to form small flocks. I have records of Field Sparrows in December and January through March and April. They have been reported on 68 of 84 CBC with an average of 30 individuals seen each year. The highest, recent count was 171 individuals seen in 2004. Murray reports nests with eggs as early as 7 May and as late as 5 September.
Status: Abundant year-round resident and should be seen in the area
Photo: Lexington, 12 January 2010.
For additional photos: Field Sparrow

Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

Occurrence: Summer resident/breeder
Dates: Mid March through mid November
Locations: RC
History: There been several recent sightings of Vesper Sparrows in the area. One individual was seen near Rockbridge Baths on 11 April 2009, three individuals were seen at Willow Lake on 29 March 2010, one individual was found at Sky Farm on 1 April 2012 and one individual was found near Bustleburg on Hyde Road on 11 July 2012. Murray reports that Vesper Sparrows are a common summer resident and breeder. He reports nests with eggs or young found in May. Murray also notes that Vesper Sparrows are abundant as transients through the area. The status of this species in the area is unclear. Recent sightings suggest that breeding individual may be present.
Status: Uncommon summer resident and could be seen.
Photo: Hyde Rd, 11 July 2012
For additional photos: Vesper Sparrow

Lark Bunting (Calamospiza melanocorys)

Occurrence: Accidental
Dates: 11 February 1932
Location: LEX (Cameron's Pond)
History: Specimen collected by Murray at Cameron's Pond on 11 February 1032
Status: Accidental and not expected in the area.

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sanwichensis*):

Occurrence: Transient during spring and fall migration
Dates: September through October and late February through mid May
Locations: OFRP, BS area, BRP at JR, RC
History: Savannah Sparrows have been reported along the Blue Ridge Parkway at the James River (11 April 2001), at Old Farm Pond (9 October 2010), and on two CBCs (2009 and 1977). Murray considers Savannah Sparrows as an abundant transient passing through the area between 21 February and 20 May and 8 September and 14 November.
Status: Common transient through the area and should not be expected to be seen.
Photo: Old Farm Road Pond, 9 October 2010.
For additional photos: Savannah Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*):

Occurrence: Summer resident/breeder
Dates: Mid April through October
Locations: LEX, RB, BB, RC
History: Grasshopper Sparrows are found in the pastures and grassy areas of the county. The earliest arrival date is 20 April 2002 near Brownsburg. Murray reports that Grasshopper Sparrows are a common summer resident with an occurrence range of 12 April to 20 October.
Status: Common summer resident/breeder and should be seen in the area
Photo: Rockbridge County, 21 June 2011.
For additional photos: Grasshopper Sparrow

Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta*)

Occurrence: Accidental
Dates: 17 October 1928
Location: LEX (Cameron's Pond)
History: One individual was observed at Cameron's Pond on 17 October 1928 by Murray.
Status: Accidental and not expected.

Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*):

Occurrence: Transients through the area during spring and fall migration and in small numbers during the winter.
Dates: November to early April
Locations: LEX, CT, MR, LR, RC
History: Fox Sparrows migrate through the area and are commonly seen in the early spring. The earliest arrival date is 2 November 2010 along the Chessie Trail near South River and the late departure date of 9 April 2009 in Lexington. Sightings of Fox Sparrows are more common in late February and March. Fox Sparrows have been reported on 38 of 84 CBC. Murray reports that they are transients passing through the area between 22 February and 6 April.
Status: Common during migration especially in the spring and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Locher Tract, 12 March 2012.
For additional photos: Fox Sparrow

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident/breeder
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: Song Sparrows can be found throughout the area and at all elevations. They have been reported on 81 of 84 CBC with an average of 51 individuals seen each year. The highest, recent count was 157 individuals reported in 2004. Song Sparrows were one of 21 species recorded in the first Lexington area CBC in 1922. Murray notes that nests with eggs have been found on 30 April and reports a nest with large young on 4 September 1948.
Status: Abundant, year-round resident and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Hyde Road near Brownsburg, 6 January 2010.
For additional photos: Song Sparrow

Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolnii*)

Occurrence: Transient during spring and fall migration
Dates: September through November
Locations: There are a few recent records of a Lincoln's Sparrow in the area with a number of sightings in October, 2012. One individual was seen at a bird feeder in southern parts of the county on 14 May 2005, 3 April 2007, and between 12 and 14 May in 2010. One individual was seen near Rockbridge Baths on 13 October 2009 and another individual was seen along the Chessie Trail near South River

on 15 October 2010. In 2012, individuals were reported in Brownsburg, 7 October 2012; near Lexington, 13 October 2012; and at McCormick's Farm, 13 October 2012. Murray reports individuals were seen on 18 October 1933, 21 and 29 September 1933, 28 September 1936, 22 November 1936, and 18 May 1936.
Status: Perhaps a common migrant during the fall
Photo: McCormick's Farm, 13 October 2012
For additional photos: Lincoln's Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*)

Occurrence: Transient during migration and winter resident
Dates: March to May and September to December
Locations: GP, OFRP, LEX, LR, WL
History: Swamp Sparrows have been located at Goshen Pass (19 March 2009), near Lexington at Old Farm Pond (9 October 2010), at McCormick's Farm, and at Willow Lake. They have been reported on 28 of 84 CBC with a highest count total of 89 in 1974. Recently, the highest count total is 5 individuals reported in 2000.
Status: Common transient during migration and could be seen in the area.
Photo: Willow Lake, 3 November 2012.
For additional photos: Swamp Sparrow

White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*):

Occurrence: Winter resident and migrant through the area
Dates: Early October through late April
Locations: RC
History: White-throated Sparrows are a winter resident and can be found in all areas of the county during the winter. The earliest arrival date is 5 October 2010 and late departure dates are 28 April 1996 in Lexington and 29 April 2000 at the Blue Ridge Parkway and the James River. White-throated Sparrows have been reported on 82 of 84 CBC. The yearly average is 200 individuals, but for the last ten counts the average is 411 individuals. The maximum number of individuals reported was 1,008 in 1979. Murray notes a 28 September to 25 May occurrence range.
Status: Abundant winter resident and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Lake Merriweather, 6 December 2008.
For additional photos: White-throated Sparrow

Harris' Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*)

Occurrence: Accidental winter migrant
Dates: 1974 and 2009-10
Locations: BB
History: This species has only been reported twice in the county. During the winter of 2009-10 an individual was located mixed in with a flock of White-crowned Sparrows at a farm near Brownsburg. The winter of 2009-10 had heavy snow and the Harris' Sparrow remained in the area for several months.
Status: Accidental and not expected.
Photo: Hyde Rd, January 2010 (Courtesy of Brenda Tekin)
For additional photos: Harris' Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*):

Occurrence: Winter resident and migrant through the area
Dates: October through early May
Locations: LEX, BB, CT, LR area, GP, RC
History: White-crowned Sparrows are often found in around farms and hedge rows during the winter throughout the county. The recent earliest arrival date is 5 October 2010 near Fairfield the latest departure date is 1 May 2011. They have been reported on 65 of 84 CBC with an average number seen of 21. The highest count was 164 individuals reported in 1964. Recently, the highest count is 85 individuals reported in 2003. Murray reports that White-crowned Sparrows arrive on 2 October 1950 and depart as late as 15 May 1945.
Status: Common winter resident and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Sunrise Stables, 5 December 2009.
For additional photos: White-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident and migrant into the area
Dates: Year-round with migrants arriving in early November and departing in late April
Location: RC
History: Juncos are considered to be a winter resident in the area, but breeding individuals can be found at higher elevations in the county. It is possible that there is a small, permanent population in the area that moves up into the mountains during the spring to breed. The earliest arrival date for the winter

residents is 4 November 1999 along the Chessie Trail. The winter residents depart in mid to late April (latest date in Lexington is 17 April 2000). Juncos are often seen at higher elevations (above 3000 feet) throughout the summer. Courtship and mating have been observed on 23 April 2004 on Apple Orchard Mountain and other sightings from that and other locations have been made in June and July. Juncos have been reported on 83 of 84 CBC with a yearly average of 316 individuals reported. The highest recorded count was 1,158 individuals in 1979. Murray reports that winter residents arrive 8 October and depart 1 May. He notes that breeding birds can be found above 2800 feet and reports a nest in Amherst County on 6 July 1933.
Status: Abundant winter resident and common summer resident/breeder above 3000 feet in elevation and should be seen in the area.
Photo: Lexington, 16 January 2009.
For additional photos: Dark-eyed Junco