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Wayne Hoffman

Richard Sawicki

Cynthia Thompson

Mary Carrington

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Golden-crowned Sparrow Appears in Florida

WAYNE HOFFMAN, RICHARD SAWICKI, CYNTHIA THOMPSON,
AND MARY CARRINGTON
National Audubon Society,
115 Indian Mound Trail,
Tavernier, Florida 33070

On the morning of 20 June 1990, Mr. and Mrs. S. Lindsfold of Islamorada heard an unfamiliar bird song in their backyard, and quickly located an unfamiliar sparrow. They identified it as a Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) and took several photographs. Mr. Lindsfold called Richard Sawicki, who observed the bird at leisure with Cynthia Thompson shortly after noon, and confirmed the identification. Wayne Hoffman (hereafter WH) observed it the morning of 21 June and took several photographs. Mary Carrington (hereafter MC) observed it at mid-day of 21 June. The bird remained in the Lindsfolds' yard throughout the day on the 20th and the 21st, but was not seen thereafter. This seems to be the first report of a Golden-crowned Sparrow in Florida and is certainly the first documented occurrence in the state.

While in the Lindsfolds' yard, the Golden-crowned Sparrow fed on bird seed that had spilled from the cages of their captive parakeets. It usually remained low in the open shrubbery around their porch, and often entered the porch to approach the spilled seed. It occasionally sang the characteristic song, consisting of three pure, whistled notes. When MC observed the sparrow in midday, 21 June, it sat quietly in the shade and appeared to be suffering from heat stress, as it engaged in continuous gular fluttering.

The sparrow was in adult plumage (Fig. 1). The strong head pattern is quite diagnostic. Very heavy black stripes passed above the eyes and extended onto the back of the head, where they nearly met. Between the stripes, the bird had an intense yellow forehead patch extending from the base of the bill back just beyond the eyes. Behind this yellow patch, the space between the black stripes was occupied by an occipital patch of pale gray. The cheeks and sides of the neck were gray, a few shades darker than the occipital patch.

The upper parts were tawny brown, with heavy blackish stripes on the back, rufous in the wing-coverts, and a suffusion of gray on the edges of the rump. The flanks were warm brown, fading to gray on the throat, breast and belly.

The bill was heavy and conical. It was dark above and dull pinkish on the sides of the mandible. The feet were quite pink, brighter than in the illustrations in most of the several field guides examined. Only a photograph in the Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding (Farrand 1983) shows this pink color adequately. In our experience, North American field guides have not done an adequate job of illustrating foot colors of sparrows, perhaps because most illustrators have worked primarily from museum skins.

Golden-crowned Sparrows nest in western North America from Alaska south through British Columbia to extreme northern Washington and southwestern Alberta. They winter from southern Alaska to Baja California and are casual in winter east to Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico; a scattering of winter records are documented east of the Mississippi River (AOU 1983). These eastern records are mostly in the northern states, east to New York, Massachusetts (and Nova Scotia). In the southeast records are available for southern Louisiana and southern Alabama (AOU 1983). This record is highly unusual and difficult to explain. The dates, in late June, are long after normal migration, in a season when the bird should have been nesting in the lush, cool rain-forest zone of the northwest coast.

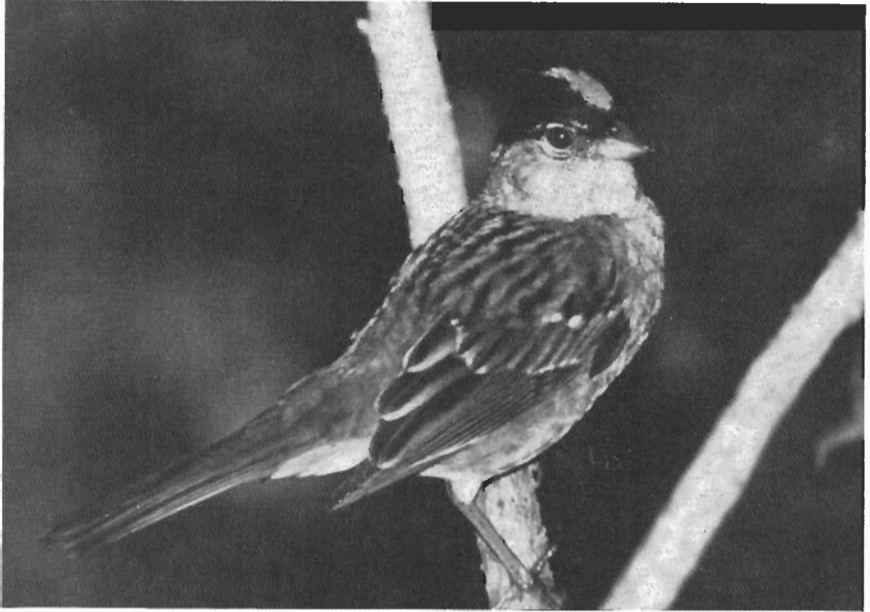


Figure 1. Golden-crowned Sparrow photographed in Islamorada, Monroe County, Florida, on 21 June 1990.

People in this species' range rarely keep local wild birds as pets, so transport as a captive is unlikely. WH, however, examined the plumage, claws, feet and bill carefully for signs of injury, abrasion, abnormal growth, or unusual wear. The plumage was clean and showed no abnormal wear. The primaries, secondaries, and rectrices were in good condition with minimal wear, and with none of the tip damage common in caged birds. The plumage of the upper back, wing coverts, and underparts was moderately worn, as is typical of brush-dwelling sparrows in summer. The white of the wing-bars was partially obliterated by wear, but otherwise this wear did not affect the plumage pattern. On the forehead, just in front of the eyes, a crease or line is evident in some of WH's photographs. This crease resembles the type of feather damage often seen in caged birds that struggle to escape through cage wire, but on the Golden-crowned Sparrow it was very minor and appeared very recent. We suspect this crease may have been acquired by the bird attempting to steal seeds from the parakeets' cage. The claws, feet, and bill all appeared completely normal, without any evidence of unusual abrasion, injury or abnormal growth. The photographs also showed no evidence of abnormalities to the bill or feet. One photograph shows the bird head on, with its bill open. The bill edges (tomia) lack the chips and abrasions one might expect on a sparrow if it were biting at cage wire. Ship-assisted vagrancy is not impossible, but the idea of a sparrow riding a ship through the Panama Canal seems extremely unlikely. We conclude, therefore, that this Golden-crowned Sparrow most likely made its way unassisted across North America and appeared of its own volition in Islamorada.

LITERATURE CITED

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**A Yellow-faced Grassquit in Florida, With Comments on
Importation of This and Related Species**

P. WILLIAM SMITH¹, SUSAN A. SMITH¹, AND WAYNE HOFFMAN²

¹South Florida Research Center, Everglades National Park, P.O. Box 279,
Homestead, Florida 33030, and

²National Audubon Society, 115 Indian Mound Trail, Tavernier, Florida 33070

On the morning of 7 July 1990, the Smiths were driving on an unimproved section of Biscayne Drive (SW 288th Street) through a citrus grove west of 207th Avenue in unincorporated Dade County, Florida (25°30'N, 80°32'W), about 5 km northwest of Homestead. As they approached, a tiny bird flew along the adjacent telephone line and stopped to sing a simple, single-pitched, insect-like trill. From their travels in the Caribbean region they recognized the bird as a male Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris olivacea*). Eventually they studied the grassquit leisurely through a 40x Questar, both on the wire and ground. The small finch was about 10 cm in length. Its upperparts, including most of the crown and forehead, were olive. Its eye-line was a bright orange-yellow, heavy in front of the eye, arching over and becoming thinner and whiter behind the eye. There was a thin black line above the eye-line, meeting over the bill, and a black loreal stripe through the eye. The dark eye itself had a whitish partial eye-ring below. The grassquit's throat was bright orange-yellow, framed in dull black; the black extended in a line up to the base of the bill. Its cheeks were largely olive, concolor with the crown and back, and showed a few black flecks. The breast was dull blackish, slightly pale-flecked, and stood out against its grayish olive flanks and belly. Its underparts became still paler toward the vent. The tail was essentially concolor with the adjacent body, but was slightly browner. Its legs were blackish, with paler toes. The bill was blackish and relatively large and conical, giving the bird a somewhat flat-headed appearance. No abnormal wear was evident either on the plumage or the toes.

After its initial discovery, the Yellow-faced Grassquit sang repeatedly for several minutes, and then flew into the adjacent citrus grove for a short period before it returned to sing from a section of wire about 100 m farther west. This behavior continued regularly for the first two days and ultimately covered a span of about 300 m along the telephone line. As more birders arrived, the bird became increasingly shy. The grassquit first moved its primary singing post to a sprinkler head within the citrus grove, about 100 m south of the road, and later sang from bare, low branches in an adjoining avocado grove. We observed the bird to feed in the weedy grasses between the rows of trees and also at grassy spots on unpaved roads around the grove, sometimes singing directly from the ground. By 11 July the frequency of song had decreased and the bird had become increasingly difficult to locate. We are not aware of any sightings after 12 July.