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A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada by James D. Rising

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REVIEWS

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A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada.—James D. Rising. 1996. Academic Press, San Diego, California. 365 pp. \$28.95 paper. ISBN 0-12-588971-2.

Sparrows of the United States and Canada. The Photographic Guide.—David Beadle and James D. Rising. 2002. Academic Press, San Diego, California. 328 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN 0-12-588975-5.—Emberizine sparrows elicit mixed and often contradictory feelings among North American bird enthusiasts. Avian researchers have used several species as preferred model systems that have provided important insights into such issues as migration physiology, environmental endocrinology, avian song development, and behavioral ecology. For birders, sparrows represent an identification challenge, but they often get “little respect,” being dismissed as merely “LBJ’s” (“little brown jobs”). Most of these birds typically offer only fleeting glimpses as they disappear into the vegetation, so frustration may prevail as well. James Rising and David Beadle are among those rare people who find aesthetic beauty and personal satisfaction in these birds. Jim Rising, first as a young mid-westerner, and David Beadle, as an experienced birder and artist new to Canada from England, accepted the intellectual challenge represented by this difficult group. Rising later became a leading researcher on emberizine biology. Both of these men here seek to pass on their experience with and enthusiasm for North American sparrows, and thus become the unofficial “biographers” of species in this fascinating and widely distributed group.

The first guide (hereafter, Rising guide) is authored by Rising, and illustrated by Beadle’s exemplary drawing and paintings. The second, more recent guide (hereafter, photographic guide) is co-authored by Beadle and Rising, and illustrated with a remarkable gallery of photographs. Apart from the illustrations, the two guides are otherwise quite similar, and are reviewed here on the basis of their respective strengths, and on how they differ from one another.

Both books are most fundamentally guides to the field identification of North American sparrows. However, the Rising guide also provides a more detailed synopsis of life history information than does the photographic guide, thus the basis for the phrase “natural history” in the former’s title. The two guides cover only those emberizine sparrows and allies that occur in the continental United States and Canada. The Rising guide provides accounts for 62 species (and coverage of several other distinctive, intraspecific forms), while the photographic guide extends coverage to an Asian vagrant to Alaska, the Yellow-throated Bunting (*Emberiza elegans*), and to a proposed split from the Fox Sparrow, the Thick-billed Fox Sparrow (*Passerella megarhyncha*), native from SW Oregon to south California. Both guides follow the current taxonomic and nomenclatorial decisions of the A.O.U.’s Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (CCN), with two major exceptions: three (Rising guide) or four (photographic guide) additional *Passerella* species are recognized (as in Thick-billed Fox Sparrow mentioned above), based on Robert Zink’s work, and Bell’s Sparrow (*Amphispiza belli* s.s.) is split out of the Sage Sparrow (previously *A. belli* s. l., here *A. nevadensis*). I am not sure that taxonomic innovation is appropriate in publications designed as popular natural history guides. It is clear that Rising is persuaded by Zink’s findings, but the cynical view is that the authors also chose to anticipate the likely future decisions of the CCN and thus avoid having their guides become taxonomically “outdated” soon after release, a fate often suffered by earlier field guides to birds.

Although the “preambles” of the two guides address similar concerns (e.g., “What are sparrows?”) and share the same illustrations (sparrow topography), the differences in these pages are more significant and reflect their respective emphases. As befits its

broader scope, the Rising guide provides an informative, unreferenced summary of emberizine sparrow biology in a separate chapter. The photographic guide, in contrast, features a discussion of identification problems, and a useful synoptic overview of the 19 emberizine genera represented north of Mexico. This is followed by four pages of habitat photographs, which, although pleasing to look at, may be of dubious value in a guide to identification.

The species accounts and illustrations constitute the “working” parts of these guides. These accounts focus on species with one major exception: there are five full accounts in the photographic guide (subheadings in the Rising guide) for the Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) (one each for “Slate-colored,” “White-winged,” “Gray-headed,” “Pink-sided,” and “Oregon” juncos). In the Rising guide, a page devoted to each major genus, as a lead-in to the accounts of its constituent species, is a valuable innovation. Here there are remarks on number of species in the genus, on shared characteristics among them, and on current knowledge about relationships within the group.

Although there is much that is similar in the corresponding accounts in the two guides, differences in formatting, emphasis, and substance are especially significant. The Rising guide presents information on each species under 10 headings and in two maps (range map, BBS relative abundance map), while the photographic guide uses 12 headings and one (range) map. The text in the photographic guide has been revised where appropriate, but otherwise it is very close to (in some cases, the same as) corresponding passages in the Rising guide. Major differences in text are associated with two unique headings (“Breeding,” “History”) in the Rising guide, and with three (“Molt,” “Hybrids,” “Conservation Status”) in the photographic guide. The brief description of nest, eggs, incubation, and parental roles in the nest cycle under “Breeding” in the Rising guide fills out each account, but this information is widely available elsewhere. In contrast, Rising’s remarks on the taxonomic history (“History”) of each species bring together scattered historical and background information, often from obscure sources, and provide interesting reading. This section is an innovative and useful contribution to modern readers who are often unfamiliar with older ornithological literature.

Identification using these guides depends on the combination of effective description in the text that focuses on sexual, seasonal, and geographic variation, and excellent annotated illustrations. Field-visible plumage sequence in most emberizine sparrows is fairly simple, often involving only a contrast between Juvenal versus adult plumages. Sexual variation is important in a few species, but not in most. Geographic variation is often significant, however, and is well characterized by Rising. The subject of molt is addressed explicitly only in the photographic guide, but this is not a drawback in the Rising guide since information on the timing of plumage acquisition is provided. Plumage descriptions are made more readable, and comparisons across species are facilitated, by the liberal use of bolded topographical headings in both books. One unfortunate distraction in the descriptions is the confused use of the familiar word “back.” A distinction is implied in the illustrations of sparrow topography between the “mantle” (upper back between scapulars) and “back” (evidently lower back). This distinction is not applied in the text, where we usually see “back” being used as a substitute for “upperparts” or “dorsum.” In turn, the recently redefined word “mantle” (e.g., Cramp 1977) is used in the text merely as a synonym for “back” as commonly applied. Perhaps the real issue here surrounds the word “mantle,” and the problems that arise when an old, established usage is jettisoned, and the word is co-opted to serve a new role in avian topography. “Mantle” traditionally is used in reference to species such as gulls and terns in which back, scapulars, and upper secondary coverts are distinctively colored (e.g., Coues 1903:101, Thomson 1964:828). Roger Peterson popularized this usage in his field guide descriptions of gulls and terns. A century ago, Coues (1903:100) remarked that the distinction between upper back and lower back is “not practically useful” in plumage descriptions. These guides bear out this observation.

Range maps are provided in both guides for all species that breed in the continental United States and Canada. The only apparent exception is Worthen's Sparrow (*Spizella wortheni*), which is a Mexican species with only one old historical record in New Mexico. There is no mention of this record (type specimen) in the photographic guide, thus leaving the reader to wonder why this Mexican species but not others was included in the guide. Rising evidently believes that the species formerly bred in the United States (Rising guide), but this is speculation (e.g., listed as a vagrant in A.O.U. 1998). The maps in the photographic guide are especially well executed, and updated from those in the Rising guide. However, the latter guide provides a valuable bibliographic resource by collecting citations used to delineate distributions in a special section.

Illustrations are the foundation of any good identification guide. Beadle's paintings and drawings in the Rising guide are excellent. They realistically portray the shapes and postures of the birds, and clearly show details of color and pattern. For the first time, age, sex and significant geographic variations among sparrows are covered in a single source. The portrayal of juveniles alone represents a major contribution. The photographic guide's approach to illustration is very different from that of the Rising guide. An array of well-chosen photographs covers the same plumage variation, including three of hybrid *Zonotrichia*. Again, the Juvenal plumage of most species is represented. As many as 18 (Song Sparrow [*Melospiza melodia*]), 19 (Savannah Sparrow [*Passerculus sandwichensis*]), or 23 (Dark-eyed Junco [*Junco hyemalis*]) photographs illustrate variation in the most geographically variable species. Two to five photographs per species represent even the Asian vagrants.

Overall, these two books are valuable additions to the genre of taxon guides to groups of birds. Although there is significant textual duplication, the differences are worth emphasizing. Together, they provide a useful summary of natural history for bird enthusiasts, and an excellent array of illustrations that address plumage variation. Although some typographic errors appear in the texts, they are relatively few. Birders have a choice of guide, depending on whether one prefers paintings or photographs. Anybody who is particularly fascinated by this interesting and challenging group of birds will want to own both guides. I recommend them highly.—**Jon S. Greenlaw**, 2813 SW 43rd Lane, Cape Coral, Florida 33914.

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