



White-crowned Sparrows: new to Britain and Ireland

Roger A. Broad and Ray G. Hawley

The White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, previously unrecorded in Britain and Ireland, occurred twice during May 1977. The first was at Fair Isle, Shetland, and the second, just eight days later, at Hornsea Mere, North Humberside. The two records are complementary; in the first case, trapped within moments of its discovery, the emphasis was placed on the description of the bird in the hand, while the second relied entirely on field observations.

Fair Isle individual

At 10.00 GMT on 15th May 1977, J. Potter came upon a strange, large, bunting-like bird with a prominent black-and-white striped head pattern, at the mouth of the double dyke trap on Fair Isle, Shetland. It was quickly driven into the catching box, which was secured while R. A. Broad and M. A. Peacock were called from the bird observatory nearby. They returned together to collect the bird. A brief glimpse in the catching box confirmed what had been anticipated from JP's description, and the bird was tentatively identified as one of the Nearctic sparrows. It was taken back

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235. White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, Shetland, May 1977 (R. A. Broad)

to the observatory, where it was thoroughly examined and positively identified, with the aid of Godfrey (1966), as a White-crowned Sparrow. It was ringed, measured, photographed and a full description recorded before it was released at Shirva. In the hand, and later, at moderate ranges in the field at Shirva, it was seen by many observers, among whom were RAB, Miss A. D. Cook, MAP, JP, J. Watt and D. Bell, who had also seen the species previously in California and Washington, USA. The bird remained around Shirva for much of the day, feeding in the open on recently cultivated and seeded ground, in the company of several House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. Side by side, the White-crowned Sparrow was considerably larger and more bulky and had a proportionately longer tail than the House Sparrows. The following day, it was relocated in the same general area, when it was observed for the last time.

The following description was taken in the hand:

UPPERPARTS Strongly contrasted head pattern; bold white central crown stripe from base of bill broadening towards nape where a few silvery grey feathers admixed; wide glossy black lateral crown stripe from nostril to nape; broad white supercilium from just anterior to eye to nape and meeting lateral crown stripe in front of eye; nape mainly warm dove-grey, but a few feathers with brown tips; mantle strongly striated, feathers

with broad mid-tan shaft streak and greyish white fringes; rump uniform olive-brown; uppertail-coverts similar to rump, but longer feathers a little warmer and browner. **TAIL.** Central feathers longest, all feathers grey-brown, with warmer light brown fringes, especially on central pair, most narrowly tipped white and outer pair sullied brownish white on outer web and tip of inner web. **WINGS** Primaries and secondaries mid

brown; 3rd, 4th and 5th primaries narrowly edged white on outer web; inner primaries and secondaries narrowly tipped off-white; tertials a little darker than secondaries, with pale chestnut-brown fringes to outer webs and whiter fringe at tip of inner web; primary coverts as primaries; greater coverts a little warmer than secondaries, with bold white tip to outer web forming a wing-bar; median coverts as greater coverts, but white tip continued narrowly onto inner web of inner feathers forming second wing-bar; lesser coverts greyish brown; scapulars as mantle, but a little warmer; underside of flight feathers silvery grey; underwing-coverts off white; narrow tract of white feathers from carpal joint along leading edge of wing. **UNDERPARTS** Narrow line of white feathers forming incomplete eye-ring below eye and extending up as far as eye-stripe; ear-coverts and lores uniform grey; chin greyish white;

throat, upper breast and anterior flanks uniform dove-grey; posterior flanks above thighs buff-brown; belly silky white, merging into greys of breast and anterior flanks; vent region ochre-buff; undertail-coverts more buff than around vent, and longest feathers with darker centres. **BARE PARTS** Bill pinkish orange, a little darker at tip of upper mandible. Eyes dark brown. Legs dark straw-brown; toes and soles a little darker; claws grey. **MEASUREMENTS** Wing 88mm; bill 13mm; tarsus 23mm; tail 75mm, central feathers 8.5mm longer than outer feathers; weight 28.1g. **WING FORMULA** 1st primary 10.5mm shorter than primary coverts; 4th longest, 2nd -3.5mm; 3rd -0.5mm; 5th -1mm; 6th -3mm; 7th -6.5mm; 8th -10mm; 9th -11mm; 10th -12.5mm; emargination on 3rd, 4th, 5th and slightly on 6th.

Hornsea Mere individual

At about 14.15 GMT on 22nd May 1977, R. G. Hawley, I. G. Howard and D. P. Sharp were observing birds at the southwest end of Hornsea Mere, North Humberside, when DPS drew attention to an unfamiliar bird. It was perched about 2m above the ground on the lowest branch of a black poplar *Populus nigra*, one of a belt of trees with reedswamp and mere behind and rough, permanent pasture in front. At first, the bird was watched for about 15 seconds, preening and apparently sunning itself, before it flew down to the ground, where it was hidden from view by grasses. After a few moments, it returned to the poplar, from which, after a few more seconds, it flew away low through a gap in the trees and was not seen again by the above observers.

In full sunlight, and at a distance of about 20m, the following main features were apparent. In size, it was thought to be a little larger than a Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* and the head and bill appeared bunting-like. When perched, it sat rather upright, and the loose plumage of the underparts gave the impression of a body slightly too large for the size of the head. It appeared weak and fluttering in flight, with short, broad wings and a tail that was a little more than ample, but the most striking feature was the head, which was mostly white with black crown and eye-stripes and a pinkish bill. The underparts were pale grey, except on the belly and vent, which were white. The upperparts, including the tail, were grey-brown, and the wings, which were of a similar colour, showed reasonably striking, double white wing-bars.

A little later, about 15.00 GMT, the bird was seen by R. J. Walker and G. C. M. Yates in a group of crack willows *Salix fragilis*, on the edge of a reedswamp some 100m from the original position. It was observed down to approximately 8m as it moved about in the vegetation, and was continuously in view for over one minute, although, for part of the time, it was in light shade. During the following minute or two, it was seen briefly on two

occasions before it was finally lost to view in the vegetation. Several subsequent attempts to relocate it were unsuccessful.

The field notes from the two independent sightings were generally in agreement, although during the second, closer encounter it was possible to add some finer details. The following description is a summary of the individual notes:

HEAD All white, except for black stripe through eye, faint in front of eye, narrow immediately behind eye, then broadening towards nape; very narrow black band at forehead forming start of two black head-stripes, one on each side, narrow close to eye but lifting and broadening to rear of eye; at nape, black crown and eye-stripes apparently not meeting in any precise way, although this feature seen only briefly and feathers may have been ruffled. **UNDERPARTS** Throat, cheeks and ear-coverts pale grey (RGH) or brownish-grey (GCMY), grading into paler grey on breast and flanks; belly and undertail-coverts white; small dark patch (probably a feather gap) at vent noted on one occasion. **UPPERPARTS** Mantle pale grey tinged brown, with dark streaks a little broader than shaft (RGH) or honey-brown, streaked black or blackish (GCMY);

scapulars similar to mantle although a little browner, feathers with broad dark central area, GCMY noted these formed a noticeable feature: a bold, open-ended, V-line, reminiscent of an immature Little Stint *Calidris minuta*; feathers with dark centres and pale honey or buffish fringes; lower back, rump and uppertail-coverts unstreaked, uniform earth-brown, with warmish tone. **TAIL** Uniform earth-brown, a little darker than rump. **WINGS** Similar to tail, but tips to median and greater coverts almost white and forming striking double white wing-bars, clearly visible in flight; at close range, tips to tertials had dark centres and light buffish edges (GCMY). **BARE PARTS** Eyes dark; bill with pearly lustre or sheen, pink, tinged orange-yellow, darker at base; legs pinkish brown.

The bird was totally unfamiliar to the five observers, but, after discussion, they all agreed that it was one of the New World 'sparrows'. Only on reaching home was it possible to check the literature and positively identify the bird as a White-crowned Sparrow.

236. White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, USA, May 1978 (David Tomlinson)



Distribution of the species

The White-crowned Sparrow is a widely distributed breeding species in the New World, where it mainly frequents woody shrubbery and thickets in more open situations. It occurs from northern Alaska eastwards through much of Canada to Newfoundland and south in the United States to central Arizona and northern New Mexico. It is migratory and in winter may be found south to central Mexico, the Gulf coast of the United States and Cuba (Godfrey 1966).

Other Nearctic passerines in Britain in spring 1977

In the week between the discoveries of the two White-crowned Sparrows, two other Nearctic passerines were recorded in northern Britain: a male Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata* on Fair Isle on 18th May and a Slate-coloured Junco *Junco hyemalis* in Inverness-shire on 19th May (Rogers *et al.* 1978). Later, in mid June, a Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina* was discovered in song at Paisley, Strathclyde (Byars & Galbraith 1980). The meteorological conditions at the time of this exceptional spring arrival have already been discussed by Elkins (1979).

Summary

Two White-crowned Sparrows *Zonotrichia leucophrys* were discovered in 1977, the first on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 15th May, and the second on 22nd May at Hornsea Mere, North Humberside. These records are the first and second of this Nearctic species in Britain and Ireland.

References

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