

Three long-tailed, pot-bellied, diminutive sparrows in the genus *Spizella*—the Chipping, Clay-colored, and Brewer’s sparrows—are challenging to identify in their fall and winter (basic¹ and formative²) plumages. Fortunately, the existing bird identification literature nicely describes differences among these species in their fall–winter plumages—especially field marks on the birds’ faces as seen in profile. But birders are always looking to push the envelope. In this article, bird ID enthusiast Nick Lethaby presents a little-known and poorly described field mark that may actually be diagnostic for many tricky birds in this *Spizella* trio. To see this mark, though, you have to look at the bird from behind! And you need to appreciate the effects of plumage wear, age differences, and geographic variation.

Over the years, the North American birding community has become well acquainted with “the *Spizella* challenge.” The key is to get a good look at the bird’s face in profile, as here (this is a Clay-colored Sparrow). For sure, that’s a great way to identify these lookalike sparrows, even in fall and winter (note that this image is from September). But has the conventional wisdom about *Spizella* ID forced us into a particular way of seeing these lookalike sparrows? In this article, we take a look at the sparrows from behind—and get a new perspective on an old ID challenge. *Death Valley, California; September 2009. Photo by © Bob Steele.*



Hind-neck Pattern

An Additional Aid in Identifying *Spizella* Sparrows in Fall and Winter

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The identification challenge posed by fall and winter Chipping, Clay-colored, and Brewer’s sparrows is a well-known problem that has been addressed several times in the birding literature. General introductions and overviews are provided by Kenn Kaufman (1990, rev. 2011) and Peter Pyle (1997), and additional details are provided in *Birding* magazine articles by David Simon (1977) and Peter Pyle and Steve Howell (1996). This earlier literature summarizes nu-

¹This article follows the revised Humphrey–Parkes plumage terminology proposed by Steve Howell and colleagues, and presented by Howell to the ABA membership in the October 2003 and December 2003 issues of *Birding*. See p. 52 for a discussion of the term “basic plumage.”

²A formative plumage is any plumage (almost always only one such plumage) present in a bird’s first plumage cycle (approximately its first year of life) but lacking in all subsequent plumage cycles. For the purposes of this article, the formative plumage of *Spizella* sparrows is the plumage that comes after the juvenile plumage; it is molted in during the late summer or early fall, and held at least into late winter.

merous features useful in separating these species—including the presence of streaking on the sides of the gray neck collar, which separates non-juvenile Brewer's from other *Spizella* sparrows.

While studying this feature, I started to appreciate quite distinctive differences in the pattern of streaking at the *center* of the hind-neck—a region of the bird not well displayed on birds in profile, the way they're so often photographed and illustrated. In subsequent discussions with other birders regarding photographs of difficult birds, I learned that I was not the only person to notice these differences. However, there appears to be no previously published, broadly accessible material documenting these differences. So it is my goal here to digest what I and others have noticed about the differences among these three sparrows in their formative and basic (fall-winter) plumages.

Brewer's Sparrow

The crown is uniformly streaked, with some birds showing an ill-defined paler median stripe. The collar in particular is covered by a broad band of medium-long black streaks on gray-brown ground color, as if the crown pattern extends to the back. This pattern is exhibited even by Brewer's Sparrows that show unstreaked sides to the gray neck collar. This individual, photographed by Peter Gaede on September 29, 2013 at Santa Barbara Island, California, is typical.

Clay-colored Sparrow

On this species, the crown is obviously divided by a central pale line; two narrow lines of fine, short, black streaking continue from the sides of the crown to cross the gray collar. The black streaks may be set in a cold brown wash. The gray collar is clearly visible between



Brewer's Sparrow. Photo by © Peter Gaede.



Clay-colored Sparrow. Photo by © Jay Carroll.



Chipping Sparrow. Photo by © Nick Lethaby.

these two lines of streaking. This individual, photographed by Jay Carroll in November 2011 in San Luis Obispo, California, shows how distinctive this mark can be.

Chipping Sparrow

Not surprisingly, the geographically widespread Chipping Sparrow shows variation in this trait. Many individuals, like the one depicted here, show two solid dark lines ex-

tending down from the lateral crown-stripes (often starting to show rusty by late fall) across the gray collar. These solid dark lines typically show a rusty-brown wash to either side that somewhat obscures the gray collar, which is darker in tone than the collar of Clay-colored and Brewer's. Other individuals show a pattern much more similar to Clay-colored, such that two narrow lines of fine black streaking set in a rusty ground color extend across the gray collar. This

bird was photographed by the author on October 9, 2013 at Prisoner's Harbor on Santa Cruz Island, California.

Variation: 1. Juveniles

In all three species, juveniles (seen from early summer through mid-autumn, although this is geographically variable) have extensively streaked under-parts, and all can show streaking on the hind-neck. Birds in full juvenile plumage are extensively streaked over much of the body and are obviously juveniles; on such birds, the hind-neck differences described above are probably not safe for separating species. Less obvious are individuals that have retained some juvenile feathers but otherwise have molted mainly into their formative plumage. If these retained feathers include some on the hind-neck, then such an individual would show a hind-neck pattern reminiscent of a Brewer's Sparrow. Although such an individual would typically show other remnants of juvenile plumage, such as streaking on the breast sides, the possibility of retained juvenile plumage should be considered in individuals that clearly show features associated with a different species.

Variation: 2. Subspecies

As previously noted, Chipping Sparrows are geographically variable. Taxonomy is not fully agreed upon, but geographic variation in overall darkness of the bird is widely acknowledged; this variation could affect the prominence of hind-neck streaking in adult Chipping Sparrows in basic plumage. The descriptions in this article of the Chipping Sparrow's hind-neck patterns are based on my field experience in California.

Perhaps less well known is the marked geographic variation in Brewer's Sparrows. "Timberline" [Brewer's] Sparrows (subspecies *taverneri*) are fairly distinctive in their alternate (breeding) plumages, and Klicka et al. (1999) have proposed full-species rank for the taxon. In a nutshell, alternate Timberlines are intermediate in many respects between Clay-colored and nominate (*breweri*) Brewer's sparrows. Differences are muted in fall and winter, however, with the result that migratory and wintering ranges of Timberline Sparrows are poorly known. A challenge for enterprising birders will be to determine the variation, if any, in hind-neck pattern in formative and basic Timberline vs. nominate Brewer's sparrows.

Clay-colored Sparrows, unlike Brewer's and Chipping sparrows, are "monotypic," having no named subspecies. But beware of the possibility of overlap between Clay-colored at the "soft" end of the spectrum vs. Timberlines at the "sharp" end.

Variation: 3. ID Resources

I have found it challenging to detect nape patterns of museum specimens due to variation of preparation by different preparators, some making it difficult to examine and interpret hind-neck plumage in detail. The great majority of photographs are of birds in profile—which totally makes sense, given that the classic field marks are best depicted from that angle. Unfortunately, such photos can distort or obscure the hind-neck characters discussed above.

It's been said many times before, but it always bears repeating: Given the variation shown in many other features by these species, it is not recommended that observers treat the differences presented here as infallibly diagnostic. I hope my observations stimulate conversation in the broader birding community. I certainly welcome feedback from observers on the frequency with which obvious individuals of a particular species show a nape pattern associated with another species.



Discuss this article and your own observations and experiences online: aba.org/birding

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