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## Birds of Barrington:

### WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

For many people in northern temperate zones, the primary place they watch birds in winter is at feeders outside their homes. The sight of an active band of feathered visitors—chickadees, cardinals, woodpeckers, and others—flying back and forth for seeds and suet, brightens the bleakest winter day.

One species that frequents home feeders but is perhaps less familiar to many is the White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*). This particular member of a very large and diverse bird family, the sparrows, comes to the Barrington area only for the winter. White-throats breed farther north, in northern parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota and throughout Canada. They begin their southward migration in fall, appearing in the Barrington area in October, and can be found locally until May, as those which have wintered farther south pass through on their way to northern breeding grounds.

The White-throated Sparrow was one of the first species I identified on my own when I began watching birds at our feeder in Northern Virginia over 40 years ago. I had thought then that it was nigh impossible to distinguish one type of sparrow from another. As far as I could tell, they were

all “little brown jobs!” But here was a bird, mostly hopping on the ground as it picked up seeds, that sported a nifty cap of black and white stripes and a clean white throat. Between its eyes and beak there was a small but conspicuous patch of yellow; I found out later that that part of the bird’s anatomy is called the lores. When I leafed through the plates of sparrows in my Peterson field guide, there it was: the White-throated Sparrow!

I developed an affection for the species, both because it was one of my first on-my-own identifications and because I grew to recognize and love its song. It whistles four loud, clear notes in minor key and on two pitches, the first on a lower one and the following three a bit higher. Bird books tell you that the notes sound like “Oh Canada, Canada, Canada!” or “Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody!” but I have never understood either translation. The last three notes do not strike me at all as having three syllables, but perhaps they are depicted that way because they are longer than the first note. I prefer simply to emulate the song with my own whistled notes; it’s easy to do.

In late December one year, when I was walking with my husband in a Chicago park, we stopped abruptly when we heard the song of a

White-throated Sparrow. Unlike many birds, it will sing occasionally in winter. One of my most memorable aural experiences with the bird occurred when I was walking in New York’s Central Park very early one May morning. White-throated Sparrow song literally reverberated in the Ramble, the wilder section of the park with enormous granite outcroppings, ponds, glades, and giant oaks. I stopped to listen and a fellow birder walked by and observed that it sounded like tryouts for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir of White-throats! Whenever I hear a White-throated Sparrow chorus, I remember that time.

Enjoy the White-throated Sparrows while they are here. If you don’t feed birds, you can look for White-throats in fields, edges of woods, even suburban landscaped areas where they will look for grass and weed seeds and fruits of sumac, grape, blackberry, and dogwood.

If you see some sparrows that look mostly like what I have described, but which have more of a tan-and-black rather than white-and-black head, you are seeing the same species but a slightly different color morph. They still will have the white throat that gives the bird its name, and yellow lores. Hopefully, they will sing, too, and make the identification certain and give you several moments of unexpected listening pleasure. 

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PHOTO: LINDA M. BARRETT

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