

A “SOOTY” FOX SPARROW IN CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK CITY

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On 13 May 2010 in the early morning, I was birding on the wood chip path on the east side of Strawberry Fields in Central Park, New York City. Near the north end of the path, I noticed three sparrows feeding at a bend in the path about 70 feet away. Two were White-crowned Sparrows, the third I recognized as a Fox Sparrow. However, this sparrow was not the usual “Red” form that we see in the East. It was much darker and without the obvious red color of the “Red” Fox Sparrow. I had seen the “Sooty” form of the Fox Sparrow in Seward, Alaska, and thought the bird in front of me could be this form. Since I was not familiar with the other Fox Sparrow forms, I could only say that this bird was not a “Red”, but one of the forms found in the West.

After I had observed the bird for about two minutes, Andrew Rubenfeld joined me and also saw the bird and agreed it was not a “Red”. The Fox Sparrow at one point came within twenty feet of us, then flew off. Importantly, Andrew put out word of our finding via a chain of communications: he told Stephanie Seymour and Rob Fanning, who were nearby, they called Karen Fung. She sent out emails to the New York birding lists. Thus many birders were alerted and were able to view and photograph the bird. The bird was seen later in the morning and afternoon, and remained at least through the following day.

In size, the bird was slightly larger than the White-crowned Sparrows. Its behavior was typical of sparrows, initially feeding on the ground with White-crowned Sparrows. In a subsequent viewing in the afternoon it was scratching and feeding in dry leaves underneath a bush.

The bird had a dark, gray-brown head with no obvious pattern, no streaking on the head. Its crown was very slightly rufous. A small part of the chin was clear and white. The breast was heavily streaked, with the streaking converging onto a central area. The streaking extended to the belly. Its back was a plain, dark brown. The tail was dark brown, but with a slight rufous on the tail and rump; the slightly rufous tail was only apparent in the afternoon when viewing conditions were brighter. The wings were plain and about the same color as the back, but it had one white feather edge at the bend of the folded wing, on both left and right sides. The eye was dark. It had a thin eye ring (in photographs a break in the rear is visible). The bill was a uniform gray. Overall, it was a very dark bird. See Figure 2, page 242.

This bird comports well with descriptions of the “Sooty” Fox Sparrow in field guides (Sibley 2000, Peterson 2008). The lower mandible is usually described as having yellow at the base, but apparently “Sootys” with all gray bills are also seen (Patterson 2007). The “Sooty” Fox Sparrow breeds along the

coast from the Aleutians to northwest Washington State. They winter mainly on the coast from central British Columbia to southern California.

The Fox Sparrow Complex

There are 18 subspecies of Fox Sparrow generally recognized (Weckstein 2002). These can be grouped into four races, with the potential of the complex being split into four corresponding species: “Red” Fox Sparrow (*iliaca* group, the usual Fox Sparrow in the East), “Sooty” Fox Sparrow (*unalaschensis* group), “Slate-colored” Fox Sparrow (*schistacea* group), and “Thick-billed” Fox Sparrow (*megarhyncha* group).

Beadle and Rising (2002) consider Fox Sparrows as comprising four species. The issue of splitting is too complex and unsettled for a full discussion here. On the one hand, morphology and mitochondrial DNA analysis suggest four species (Zink and Weckstein 2003). On the other hand, there is some interbreeding between the groups, especially between the “Slate-colored” and “Thick-billed” groups. Further, microsatellite analysis showed clear separation of the “Red”, “Sooty” and “Thick-billed” groups, but less distinct separation of the “Slate-colored” group from the others (Zink 2008). More research is needed. The AOU last considered, and did not approve, the potential split in 2003 (Banks 2004).

Other non-*iliaca* Fox Sparrow Reports

There is at least one prior “Sooty” Fox Sparrow sighting reported from New York, a bird seen 7 May 2005 in Vermontville, Franklin County (Peterson 2005) as reported in *The Kingbird* season highlights. In the Northeast, there is at least one “Sooty” sighting, from New Hampshire 9-12 December 2009 (Chase 2009). However, a recent analysis has raised the possibility that this was the subspecies *altivagans* (Brinkley 2010). This subspecies breeds in western Canada and winters in California, and has been grouped with either *iliaca* or *schistacea* by various authors. Interestingly, on 12 May 1971, a Fox Sparrow was collected at Fire Island, Suffolk County and identified as *altivagans* (Buckley 1973). A possible “Slate-colored” Fox Sparrow was reported in New York in December 2003, but the sighting was not accepted by the NYS Avian Records Committee (NYSARC 2006), which considered it unidentifiable to subspecies on the basis of the documentation. On 5 December 1996, a non-*iliaca* Fox Sparrow was seen in Storrs, Connecticut, and was either *unalaschensis* or *altivagans* (Szantyr 1997). Given these uncertainties, a closer examination of the Central Park bird seems warranted. A thorough analysis of this, and other northeastern North American records of western Fox Sparrows is in preparation.

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Figure 2. Fox Sparrow, Central Park, *New York*, 13 May 2010, © Lloyd Spitalnik. Stephen Chang presents a case that this bird is an example of the western North American “Sooty” Fox Sparrow (subspecies group *unalaschensis*) in this issue, pp. 203-205.