

A GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) IN DELAWARE COUNTY: NEW YORK'S FOURTH

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On the morning of 30 December, 2018 I left my Livingston Manor home for Delaware County to scout for our CBC on 5 January. The snow had started a little earlier in the morning and continued as I headed to my car. I debated whether I should wait until the snow stopped. There is a long climb on Route 206 going over the mountain prior to Downsville and I was afraid of getting stuck. I decided to try to make it. Per my usual, I left just prior to sunrise to reach Downsville early, when the birds would be most active.

My ride was largely uneventful. By the time I arrived in Downsville there were a couple of inches of snow under clear skies. I drove down River Road and looked for birds feeding by the edge of the fields and road such as Horned Larks, Snow Buntings or Lapland Longspurs. Other than some Mourning Doves and a Red-tailed Hawk it was very quiet. After a mile or so I turned around and headed back toward the usually-productive Bridge Street. I was hoping to find American Tree Sparrows for the CBC as I hadn't seen any for a few weeks.

Driving with my window down, I come upon the intersection with Depot Road. I heard sparrows in a tangle to my left. I pulled to the roadside and noticed movement in the vegetation. There was a mix of sparrow species present. In all, there were approximately a dozen birds made up of Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated Sparrows and American Tree Sparrows. As I watched them, a large sparrow flew to a branch adjacent the American Tree Sparrows.

Initially, its size and structure appeared to be an immature White-crowned Sparrow but something didn't look correct. The face was more uniform brown and lacked the gray nape of a White-crowned Sparrow and the bill was bi-colored, not pink. The stripes on the crown didn't look correct, either. The stripe through the eye wasn't as prominent as on a White-crowned Sparrow. As I was looking at the head stripes the bird lowered its head slightly and I could see the small patch of gold between the stripes. I then realized I was looking at a first-year Golden-crowned Sparrow. Upon checking my Sibley Guide I felt confident of the ID.

I then called my friend John Haas and told him I was 99 percent sure I was looking at a Golden-crowned Sparrow. I told him to meet me for observation and to bring his camera, as my photographs were inadequate. John confirmed he would meet me. Knowing John's trip was an hour, I searched my phone for west coast bird photographer blogs to find pictures of Golden-crowned Sparrows in different plumages. I found one blog that had many pictures of this species including many of first-year birds. I became sure the bird I found was a Golden-crowned Sparrow. When John arrived we were able to locate the bird within

approximately 15 minutes in a bush next to a porch on Depot Street where the owner had put out seed on the railings. John was able to get good pictures of the bird.

At this point we called Tom Burke and Gail Benson to inform them of the find. We also contacted Shai Mitra and Patricia Lindsay. John sent them his pictures for feedback. Shai also had a work colleague review the photos, as he is very familiar with west-coast bird identification. After approximately an hour, Tom called to tell us the bird looked good for a Golden-crowned Sparrow. They were all on their way up. The bird left at this point and we attempted to relocate it prior to everyone's arrival. Once everyone arrived we searched until dusk but were never able to find the bird again that day.

I decided not to disclose the bird's location that evening, having not been able to speak with the area residents. I wanted to give them the opportunity to decide if they were willing to host a large number of birders and photographers on their tiny street before I made the location public. As word leaked about the bird many people were understandably frustrated the location wasn't made public. The next morning, I met with two of the homeowners on Depot Street. I spoke with the woman who owned the aforementioned porch and the bush where we had seen the bird the prior day. I also spoke with the couple across the street as they had many bird feeders. I knew if the bird favored the bush across the road many people would be in front of their property. Finally, I spoke with the homeowner on River Road directly across from Depot Street as it was the property on which I discovered the bird originally.

I explained what species the bird was and where its normal range was. I explained it was only the fourth record of this species in New York State, and the first since November 1995. It was also the only inland record of this species in New York. All the previous accepted records had been from Long Island. I explained once the location was made public they could expect anywhere from 20-50 people at once on their street looking for, or viewing the bird. They were thrilled about the bird and had no objections to making the location public.

Later that day, John posted the information on the New York listserv and mentioned my blog site so people could stay informed on the bird. The next morning I called the local police department and started my conversation with "This maybe one of the stranger calls you may ever get..." I explained they may start getting calls from nearby residents concerning people walking up and down River Road and Depot Street with binoculars, scopes and camera equipment. The officer asked me about the bird and thanked me for the call.

In the days and weeks ahead, as expected, many birders came to see the bird. For the first month, the bird had a regular morning routine. It was almost always in the presence of White-throated Sparrows. They roosted overnight in the tangle where I first discovered the bird. Amazingly, you could be there at first light and swear there wasn't a bird in the tangle, but then it was alive with sparrows. Often the bird would first be found in the tangle or weeds around it. After it was done it would fly, along with the White-throated Sparrows, to Depot Street and could be

found on the porch railing eating seed or in the bush next to the railing. Sometimes it would feed on the ground near the porch as well. For the bird's entire stay it was extremely hard to find after 11:00 a.m. Where the flock went is a mystery.

During its stay it was almost always found in the vegetation on River Road across from Depot Street or in the yard with the porch on Depot Street. A couple of times it was also located on Bridge Street. The last time the bird was seen, to my knowledge, was by me on 6 April on Bridge Street. It had been two weeks since I had last seen the bird. It was a pleasant surprise to find it once again. Based on the date, I knew it was likely this would be the last time seeing the bird. I believe over 200 people saw the bird. People from Buffalo to the Adirondacks were among them. I also met people from New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Upon reflection, this was likely the most exciting and satisfying birding experience I've had. Yet, it wasn't only due to the bird. It was because of the many birders I met whom I'd only known previously through seeing their eBird reports.

Spending time with many other birders. Finding out where they were from. In some cases, helping them find the bird and seeing their excitement. Those were the best moments associated with the discovery.

I received zero complaints from residents about birders trespassing or creating disturbances. Everyone behaved well and I'd like to extend my thanks to those who saw the bird in a respectful manner. Additionally, this experience showed the town of Downsville what birders can do for their local economy as many used the hotels, restaurants and gas stations during their visit.

Almost everyone I spoke to in the community heard about the bird. The local paper even did a story about it. Most of all, I realized how lucky I am to be part of the New York State birding community. Hopefully one day I can share another rarity.

As I conclude this, the CBC is a little over a month away. I better start scouting.

