

Name That Bird! by Mark Pendleton



Photo #1



Photo #2



Photo #3

As I sit down to write this, there's a niggling thought in the back of my mind that maybe I promised to use another reader's photo(s) in the next *NTB!* column. If I did, and you're that reader, I apologize! Please send me the photo(s) again and I will do a special number of *NTB* for the MVAS Webpage.

Photos 1 and 2

Sara Kay took the first set of photos at the Bosque del Apache NWR last November.

*****Spoiler Alert!*****

If you want to identify the birds in the photos yourself, cover the panelist's responses below.

Panelist 1: Panelist 1 was absolutely certain these birds were female Red-winged Blackbirds. In fact, this MVAS member (all panelists are members) wrote: "If these aren't female RWBL, I'm not as good a birder as I like to think I am."

Panelist 2: This panelist agreed. These indeed are female Red-winged Blackbirds. The lower bird in the photo showing two birds may be an immature female. Most adult females exhibit the plumage seen in the other two photos; immature (first year) males appear as if they're molting between that plumage and the full adult male plumage.

Panelist 3: Panelist three was in agreement. So, our panelists are unanimous: These are female Red-winged Blackbirds.

Although female Red-winged Blackbirds very much resemble sparrows, there are differences between them. In general, Female "red-wings" are larger and chunkier appearing than most sparrows. They also are more streakier all over than most sparrows. For example, Red-winged Blackbirds range in size from about 7 to 9.5 inches (18-24 centimeters) while the size range for a Song Sparrow is 5-7 inches or 13-18 centimeters. Sparrows are shorter, with shorter tails. Both Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds eat seeds plus some insects and other bugs, but on the whole, Sparrows tend to eat more seeds. So, sparrow bills tend to be shorter and broader. Female "red-wings" Habitat can be another clue. Female Red-winged Blackbirds can often be found in marshes, where their "chack" calls will frequently alert you to their presence before you see them. Song and Swamp Sparrows are often found along the shores of marshes, but "red-wings" are more often in the marsh itself.

As with many birds that look similar, it's not just one characteristic that tells them apart, but a whole suite of traits that taken together that distinguish them. So a female Red-winged Blackbird will look larger and chunkier, have a longer tail, plus a relatively longer and sharper bill than sparrows. Also, many times she will have faint reddish shoulder patches that remind you of the male's. Then, if you hear or see a male Red-winged Blackbird nearby, that will help you to identify the female.

Photo 3

The next photo comes from C.J. Goin. He took it on the morning of January 11th this year. Here, the same spoiler alert applies:

*****Spoiler Alert!*****

If you want to identify the bird in the following photo yourself, cover the panelist's responses below.

We have another unanimous decision about this bird. All three panelists agreed that it was a Swamp Sparrow.

At first glimpse, the reddish cap may suggest a Chipping Sparrow. But look again. A Swamp Sparrow is a bulky lone skulker in marshy dense cover. Chipping Sparrows are dapper and

petite appearing beside “Swampies”. Chipping Sparrows are more often than not seen in groups and are more likely to be in open park-like habitat than Swamp Sparrows. Also, Swamp Sparrows have a more richly patterned face than “Chippers” and their eye-line doesn’t extend through the eye to the bill as the Chipping Sparrow’s does.

In New Mexico, we see Swamp Sparrows during migration and in the winter. If you’re fortunate enough to spot one, you can be forgiven for thinking it might be a Song Sparrow. Both birds have a similar shape and can be found in similar habitats. Song Sparrows, however, have a heavily streaked chest and breast with most also sporting a central breast spot or splotch.

If you get out and go birding at this time of year, you will very likely find both of these species. Look for them in similar habitats—marshy patches with dense undergrowth. With a little bit of perseverance, you should spot both Red-winged Blackbirds (females and males) along with Swamp Sparrows.