

# Fox Sparrow

*Passerella iliaca*

Typically seen sending up a spray of leaf litter as they kick around in search of food, Fox Sparrows are dark, splotchy sparrows of dense thickets. Named for the rich red hues that many Fox Sparrows wear, this species is nevertheless one of our most variable birds, with four main groups that can range from foxy red to gray to dark brown. Since they breed primarily in remote areas, many people see them in winter when the birds move into backyard thickets.

## Keys to Identification

### Size and Shape

Fox Sparrows are large, round-bodied sparrows with stout bills and medium-length tails.

### Color Pattern

Though highly variable, Fox Sparrows are generally rust-brown above with a mix of rust and gray on the head, and heavy brownish splotches on the flanks and the center of the chest. The bill can range from yellowish to dark gray.

### Behavior

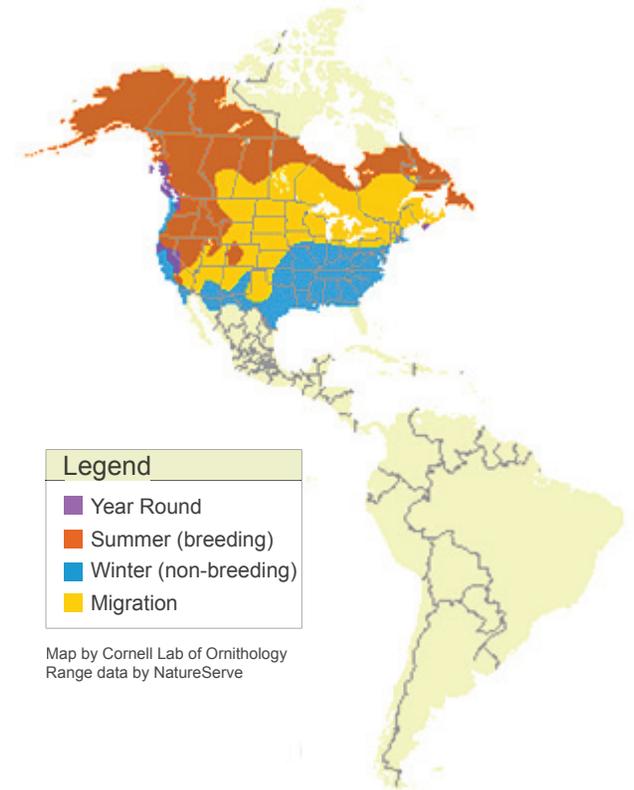
Fox Sparrows spend a lot of time on the ground, using their sturdy legs to kick away leaf litter in search of insects and seeds. They rarely venture far from cover, and they frequently associate with other sparrows. In spring and summer, listen for Fox Sparrows' sweet, whistled song from scrub or forest; also, pay attention for a sharp smack call.

### Habitat

Fox Sparrows breed in coniferous forest and dense mountain scrub. They spend winters in scrubby habitat and forest, when they are most likely to be seen kicking around under backyard bird feeders.

## Cool Facts

- Fox Sparrow fossils from the Pleistocene (about 11,000 years ago) have been found in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and at the La Brea tar pits in California.
- The oldest Fox Sparrow on record was at least 10 years and 4 months old. It was caught and re-released by a California bird bander in 2003.



Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
Range data by NatureServe