

Golden-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia atricapilla

The large, handsome Golden-crowned Sparrow is a common bird of weedy or shrubby lowlands and city edges in winter along the Pacific coast. Though it's familiar to many during winter, Golden-crowned Sparrows vanish for the summer into tundra and shrublands from British Columbia to Alaska, where little is known of its breeding habits. Gold-rush miners took cold comfort from this bird's melancholy song, which seems to reflect the bleak beauty of its surroundings.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

These are large, long-tailed sparrows with small heads and short but stout, seed-eating bills.

Color Pattern

In summer, adult Golden-crowned Sparrows are streaked brown above and smooth gray to brown below, with a black crown and bright-yellow forehead. Winter and immature Golden-crowned Sparrows are duller, with brown replacing black on the head and less obvious yellow on the crown.

Behavior

Golden-crowned Sparrows feed on seeds and insects on the ground and in low vegetation. They whistle their slow, mournful-sounding songs from high perches and nest in dense, low vegetation. In migration and winter, they gather in loose flocks and mix with other sparrows, especially White-crowned Sparrows.

Habitat

Golden-crowned Sparrows are most visible during migration and winter, when they frequent forest edge, shrubs, chaparral, and backyards of the West Coast. They nest much farther north, in low, shrubby areas of tundra or at the edges of boreal forests.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 5.9 - 7.1 inches
- Weight - 1.1 - 1.2 ounces

