

## Short Notes

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**Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) with symmetrical white wing patches**  
-- While banding birds at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento County, on 6 November 2000, I captured an oddly-marked Song Sparrow that nicely illustrates how reliance on specific field marks in bird identification might lead one astray. The bird, a robust, dark reddish individual, had uncharacteristic symmetrical white patches on its wings (Figure 1). These distinct white patches partially covered three of the central primary coverts and nearly all of P3 through P6 of the primaries. In the hand the bird was clearly a Song Sparrow with characteristic dark malar stripe, gray eyebrow, whitish throat, and streaked back, flanks, and breast. It was slightly more robust than the locally resident subspecies (*M. m. mailliardi*), with dark rusty shading, dark back, and grayish white underparts with blurry streaking. These characters suggest the Pacific Northwest race (*M. m. morphna*), a regular wintering form in the Sacramento Valley (Tim Manolis, pers. comm.).

However, after we released this bird and it flew a few feet away to land on the ground, it looked like anything but a Song Sparrow. As it stood on the ground, lit by the morning sun, it displayed a dark head and back, dark wings

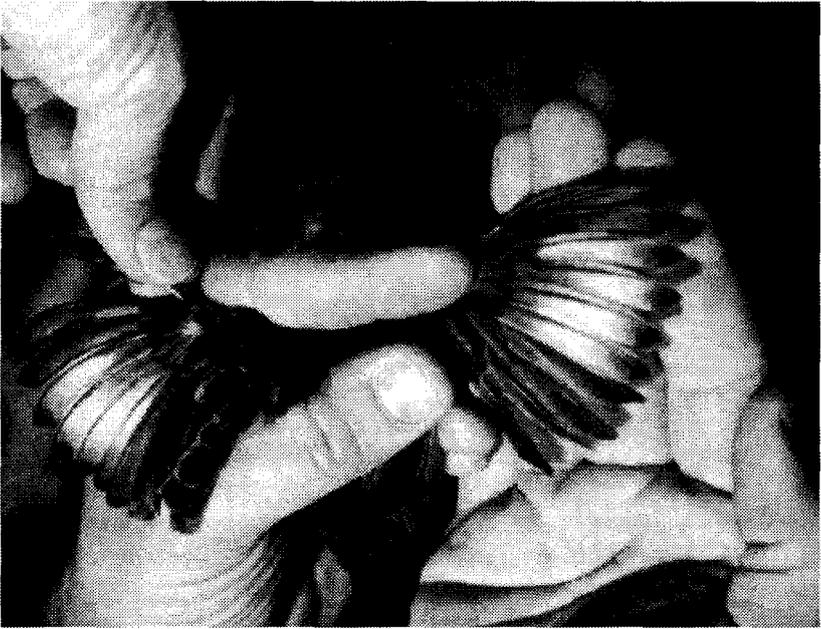


Figure 1. Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), mist-netted at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento Co., 6 November 2000. *Photo by Stan Wright*

with bright, distinct white wing bars, slightly streaked flank with whitish underparts. Before it flew into the nearby brush it opened and closed its wings a couple of times flashing the bright white spots. When finally it did fly, it displayed bright white flashes with each wing beat. Despite the fact that I just had this bird in my hand the thought rushed through my head, “are you sure that was a Song Sparrow?” Had I only seen the bird for an instant, perhaps from a greater distance, as often is the case while birding, I would have thought that it was something unusual and searched through the field guide for a match, perhaps arriving at something like Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) in winter plumage. With the advantage of having had this bird in hand and being able to carefully inspect it, I could clearly see that it was a Song Sparrow exhibiting partial albinism.

This event strongly emphasized for me how important it is when identifying fast-moving or distant birds that an overall “gestalt” impression based on behavior, shape, and size may be the best tool to use rather than just one or two field marks. Also, sometimes it may be fine not to label a bird to species. I think it is human nature, and perhaps especially for birders, to put an identification on every sighting. One thing I have observed from capturing birds and inspecting them in the hand is that there is a lot of variation among individuals and that the characters often relied upon to identify a bird to species may not always be absolute. -- *Stan Wright, Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District, 8631 Bond Road, Elk Grove, CA 95624.*