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SPECIAL BULLETIN

OF THE

ILLINOIS STATE LABORATORY

OF

NATURAL HISTORY.

CHAMPAIGN, ILL.

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THE HEAD OF THE ENGLISH SPARROW

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BY S. A. FORBES,

DIRECTOR OF LABORATORY.

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SPRINGFIELD:  
THE H. W. ROKKER PRINTING HOUSE.  
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FEMALE.



MALE.

THE HEAD OF THE ENGLISH SPARROW.

ILLINOIS STATE LABORATORY  
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THE HEAD OF THE ENGLISH SPARROW.

By a law "providing for the payment of bounties for killing English sparrows," passed by the Thirty-seventh General Assembly of Illinois, it is made the duty of the Director of the State Laboratory of Natural History to prepare a bulletin of information to enable clerks of counties, townships, villages, and cities, in this State, to distinguish the heads of English sparrows from those of other birds; and it is made the duty of such clerks to preserve as evidence to be used in a prosecution for misdemeanor the heads of any other birds presented to them by persons applying for the bounty.

The fact that the descriptive bulletin called for by this law thus becomes liable to use as legal evidence in a prosecution leading to

a considerable fine, has made it seem necessary that the description published should be very precise and full, more so, in fact, than would be needful for any ordinary purpose. I have consequently given in the first paragraph of the matter following a comparatively general description, intended to satisfy the inspector's judgment in any ordinary case, and have made the remainder sufficiently critical and comprehensive, it is hoped, to help to a decision of more difficult or important cases.

I have further endeavored to guard against possible error by bringing the sparrow's head into comparison with heads of other birds at all likely to be mistaken for it, taking into account in selecting species for such comparison the fact that only such birds need be contrasted as are to be found in some part of Illinois during the months of December, January, February, and March.

The accompanying figures will no doubt be a valuable aid to the recognition of sparrow heads, but they must be used with a certain discretion, as the colors of the head vary greatly in both area and pattern; and in cases of noticeable difference the detailed description should be carefully applied.

Even that description, although drawn up from a comparison of a large number of heads, will be found to answer imperfectly to here and there a specimen; but this must be said of every full description ever made or possible of any natural group of animals. The individuals of a species vary indefinitely around a common center of average characters, and experience only will enable one to avoid occasional errors of judgment.

#### DESCRIPTION.

The head of the English sparrow may best be told, off-hand, by its heavy, square look, its very thick, regularly conical bill, its brown general color, without fine streaks, but either varied by a black throat and a large chestnut patch on each side (male), or else (in the female) with the throat paler than the rest of the head and with a dull buffy stripe running backwards from the eye, and with no chestnut at the sides. It never shows any yellow, or any white excepting a narrow line above the eye of the male.

More particularly, the head is thick and heavy, forming with the thick conical bill a fairly regular pyramid, the top of the head slightly arched in all directions and the sides

considerably flattened. Its greatest breadth with the feathers pressed close is about three fourths of an inch, and its greatest depth (from the top to the under side) very nearly the same as the breadth; while its greatest length from the tip of the bill to the back of the skull is nearly twice as much.

The bill is a thick symmetrical cone, with the upper and lower lines slightly arched (the upper one the more so), the sides a little flattened and nearly straight, and the tip rather sharp. Its width at the base, across the corners of the mouth, is very nearly one third of an inch,—a trifle greater than its depth (from above downwards) and almost exactly equal to the length of the under side of the bill measured from the middle of the arch at its base to the tip of the lower jaw.\* The nostrils are at the very base of the upper part of the bill and are, in fact, nearly concealed by a few small bristly feathers. In color the bill is very commonly darker above than beneath, the upper half being dusky except at the corners of the mouth, where it is usually pale or yellowish; and the lower

\* A pair of fine-pointed dividers and a finely graduated rule will be indispensable to any accurate use of these distinctions. These are the only instruments needed by the inspectors of sparrows' heads.

half being pale, varying from yellowish behind to bluish white at the tip. Occasionally, however, a specimen will be found with the bill wholly black, and much more frequently one with the bill wholly pale. The length of the upper line of the beak (one half inch) is equal to the distance from the nostril to the hind angle of the eye.

In the *male* the top of the head may vary from plain ashy gray or drab to an ashy brown, the color being lightest in front. The chestnut patch upon the side of the head extends backward from the eye, becoming broader to the rear, and is often divided by a light line running backward through the middle of it, and may be more or less generally mixed with gray. There is a black patch surrounding the eye and extending to the bill, and usually arching upwards over the base of the latter as a narrow black line. A black patch on the throat, usually more or less mixed with gray, extends from the beak backwards to the breast; and there is commonly an irregular white line above the eye, where one would look for an eyebrow. The side of the head and neck below the eye,

between the chestnut patch and the black throat, is a dusky gray, approaching "Maltese."

In the *female*, on the other hand, the side of the head below the eye is but little lighter than the top, the buffy stripe behind the eye is bordered below by a darker color, and the throat is pale, usually some shade of dusky gray, both throat and top of head being without noticeable streaks.

From all birds except those of the sparrow or finch family this bird may be distinguished by the regularly conical form of the bill; and from birds with similar bill occurring in the winter months, it may be further distinguished by the following negative characters:

The top of the head is never russet or chestnut or red-brown, and is never distinctly streaked, or marked by any sort of a central stripe. The head never shows anywhere any red or any shade of yellow, the throat and neck are never streaked with darker, and when the sides of the head and neck are marked with chestnut patches, the throat is always more or less black.

S. A. FORBES,  
*Director of Laboratory.*