

White-crowned sparrows appear here in wintertime

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

When you see a mature White-crowned Sparrow, there is little doubt about how it got its name.

The bright white streak down the center of the top of its head is clearly evident and immediately catches your attention.

Black stripes sit just above another band of white that forms an eyebrow extending to the rear of the head.

A second black stripe stretches from the base of the beak to the eye then from back of the eye to the rear of the head.

This zebra-like appearance is easily seen with the naked eye if you're reasonably close to the bird.

Immature White-crowned Sparrows show the same striping but the bright white found in adults is replaced with a more



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



White-crowned Sparrow's head has a zebra-like appearance.

dull, buff color.

Other field marks that you can use to identify this sparrow include a yellow beak, a brown back with streaks, and a plain gray breast and belly area.

They measure from 6.5 to 7.5 inches in length and have a wing span of about 10 inches. They can be seen scratching on the ground to expose seeds, fruits

and insects.

White-crowned Sparrows are found throughout North America at one time or another.

In Washington, they can be seen year-around on the west side of the Cascades and are winter birds on the east side. In Wenatchee, I've photographed them as early as September and as late as April.

I use several apps on my phone to learn about and identify birds.

One of my go-to bird apps is the iBird Pro Guide to Birds by the Mitch Waite Group. It provides some interesting facts about these sparrows.

For example, they have been studied extensively and are fundamental to a lot of our understanding of bird songs and

behavior. Male White-crowns learn their songs and calls from other, mature White-crowns as they mature.

I always wonder about some of the collective nouns applied to bird species. The app notes that a group of White-crowned Sparrows is known as a "crew," "flutter," "quarrel" and "ubiquity." The last term, ubiquity, certainly reinforces the fact that White-crowned Sparrows are very common and seen frequently.

December is a great time to watch for White-crowned Sparrows. Watch for small flocks of brown birds with distinctive white and black stripes.

Take a drive or go on a hike and you can find them in cities and towns as well as out in the shrub-steppe areas of central Washington.

Don't forget your binoculars and camera. Good luck!