

## The Sweet Spring Song of a Little Brown Bird

**O**n a recent overcast morning in late winter, I heard the sweet, pensive song of a white-throated sparrow. The four notes hung in the air and turned a gray day into gold. The first, wistful low note was followed by three on a higher key that carried a serene optimism. There was hope in the song of the little brown bird.

I don't know why the bird was singing a May song in March. Was it a practice session for the coming spring, when the song will announce dominion over some opening in a New England spruce forest?

From what perch was the bird singing this simple song? I half-hoped, half-knew the clear whistled notes came from my brush pile only a few yards from the bird feeder and the kitchen door. This pile of small branches and twigs would be considered by some to be unsightly. Juncos and white-throats regard the pile — now three feet high and at least five feet across its base — as a refuge.

I can do a reasonable imitation of the simple song of the white-throated sparrow. Once, I tested the accuracy of my mimicry by whistling it after the birds had settled in the brush pile for the night. As light was fading at the end of a winter day, I whistled the four notes. It was answered by a questioning *chink?* and a number of sparrows appeared at the outer edges of the pile. They seemed to say, "Who is this imposter breaking the rules about singing after the sun sets?" Seeing only me, the birds retreated to the safe and tangled interior for the night.

When I return from an errand and drive into the parking area behind the house, the wintering finches flee from the bird feeder to the safety of the dense, tangled interior of the brush pile. They do the same when I go out the back door. To the birds, I fall into the category of a large predator and an imposter.

A sharp-shinned hawk landed in the red maple tree last week. Juncos, white-throats and Carolina wrens fled for the cover of the pile of brush. There they were safe.

I enjoy thinking that the wintering white-throat population in the yard has increased in direct proportion to the growth of the

The brown sparrow ignores me and scratches away.

The white-throated sparrow is normally a ground feeder. On first arriving in October, he tends to scratch for seed among the leaves on the stone wall under the feeder. By late November, an adventurous individual

has learned there is more seed available with less effort on the plywood platform. There he joins other birds — chickadees, titmice, nut-hatches, cardinals and goldfinches — as they jockey for position and choice seeds. It is not long until this one white-throat is followed by others made brave by his seed-finding success.

Often I stand at the bay windows and look down on these birds and wonder at the delicate shading and combination of browns that make up the patterns on the white-throat's back. Underneath, the bird's breast is smoky gray with very faint stripes. His throat is only a shade lighter and the black and white stripes on his head

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**In early May, the throat of a male will be ash white as his head stripes. The brilliant yellow spots between eye and bill — his "lores" — will be bright and clear.**

refuge I have created in the yard. The brush pile had its origin in laziness. After high winds had tumbled them down, I piled small branches and twigs at the base of a maple tree. At the time, I reasoned that later I would remove this debris of nature to a less obvious place. That did not happen and the refuge for birds has grown to its present size. Each November, yellow leaves from the maple drift down and form a kind of roof, providing a dry interior within the pile.

Now, in March, white-throated sparrows feed on the platform feeder nailed to the railing of the steps leading up from the back yard. On occasion, one will engage itself in the double-scratch — that bit of sparrow dancing that consists of one small jump forward followed by a quick, much larger movement back, with both feet. This sends seeds flying. It works well on a leaf-covered ground, but I have heard myself say aloud, "You don't need to do that on the feeder!"

are dull and indistinct.

In late April, the birds will molt, changing old feathers for new. Before leaving my yard in early May, the male's throat will be ash white as his head stripes. The brilliant yellow spots between eye and bill — his "lores" — will be bright and clear. This plumage signals his readiness to fly north and declare through song his rights to an opening in a spruce forest of New England or Canada.

With less contrast and more distinct breast stripes, females are no less elegant in their subdued plumage. She does not require the level of refinement of a male.

As the day of his leaving nears, the white-throated sparrow will sing more and more on bright mornings, providing a nice start to the day. Then there'll be that night in May when his urge to migrate sends him into the darkness and on his way north. ■