



## White-crowned Sparrow

### Coloring instructions:

Black - the eye

Orangish yellow - the bill and legs

Gray - the nape, breast, belly, sides, and thighs

White - the throat, wing, crown, eye stripe, and wing bars

Brown - the rest of the wing, back and rump

# White-crowned Sparrow

**Length:** 5  $\frac{3}{4}$ "

**Habitat:** Thickets, hedgerows, and wooded margins of open areas

**Field marks:** Sparrow with a white and black striped crown

Ornithologists have studied the song of the White-crowned Sparrow more than almost any other to find out how birds get their songs. They study the White-crowned Sparrow song because it is rich in dialects. **Dialects** are slight differences in melody, rhythm, and tone. White-crowned Sparrows in one area will have a slightly different song from sparrows in another area. These dialects can be easily heard if you listen to songs along a vacation trip of many hundreds of miles. But ornithologists have sometimes heard differences in dialect over only a few hundred yards. Do sparrows learn their dialect or are they born with it?

The ability to sing is instinctive. If the sparrow is raised completely alone without ever being allowed to hear any other songs, the song it will sing only slightly resembles the song of normal White-crowned

Sparrows. If the sparrow is raised where there is only one other bird from a different species, it will not learn the other specie's song.

To produce the right song, the baby bird needs to hear other members of their own species singing. For many birds, there is a critical time for this learning. The White-crowned Sparrow must learn its song 10 to 50 days after hatching. While the baby grows in the nest and follows its parents around as a fledgling, the young birds are hearing what their song should sound like. It is learning its dialect from the birds around it.

The song pattern is memorized by the baby 10 to 50 days after hatching. But the young birds do not begin practicing their songs until 150 days after hatching. Their first attempts at the song are a jumble of sounds. More sounds are added, and the right pattern is developed with practice. By day 200 after hatching, the perfected song will sound like the dialect of the sparrow's group.

You can hear young birds perfecting their song because White-crowned Sparrows move into our area in the winter. Once they arrive, these flocks of 10-50 sparrows do not move around. They tend to stay in one location. You can hear the young which hatched last spring beginning to practice their songs. Listen through the winter as a jumble of notes gradually grows into the right song.

# White-crowned Sparrow Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify an adult White-crowned Sparrow. The male has brighter black and white striping on its head.
- Identify a juvenile White-crowned Sparrow. It has dull stripes of brown and gray on its head.
- Hear young birds practicing their songs in the winter.
- Learn the White-crowned Sparrow song well enough to recognize the dialects from different regions.

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