



**MERSEYSIDE
RINGING
GROUP**



Annual Report 2016

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*

Michael Miles

MERSEYSIDE RINGING GROUP

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Report Editor: Peter Coffey



Cover: a White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*, caught and ringed at Woolston on 30 April 2016. It has been accepted by British Birds Rarities Committee as belonging to the subspecies *gambelii*, a new subspecies for Britain, and is only the second White-crowned Sparrow to be ringed in the UK. (Photo: D Bowman)

Acknowledgements

Merseyside Ringing Group receives vital co-operation from many landowners, farmers and gamekeepers in Merseyside, Cheshire and north Wales. They permit group members to work on their property and without their generous help, much of the work of the group would be impossible. The Group also receives considerable support from local authority countryside and ranger teams, local Wildlife Trusts and private individuals. Thank you all for your support.

Maps showing the distribution of controls and recoveries have been produced using DMAP.

Merseyside Ringing Group operate under the auspices of the BTO Ringing Scheme which is funded by a partnership of the British Trust for Ornithology, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (on behalf of: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland), The National Parks and Wildlife Service (Ireland) and the ringers themselves. Data from the BTO Ringing Scheme has been used in several articles in this report and we acknowledge the use of this valuable resource.

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WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW *Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii* WOOLSTON EYES 30 APRIL 2016

Michael Miles

Saturday 30 April was a routine ringing session on No.3 bed at Woolston with nets opened in the usual places from 06.00 onwards. On a normal Saturday morning our first capture, a male Grasshopper Warbler, the first of the season, would have been the high point of the day. Just after 08.30 I went to check a net set 30 metres from our ringing table. This net had been quiet all morning and as I approached it I could see that it contained just two birds. I removed the first, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and moved towards the second. Even from a distance the head pattern was distinctive. For three years around the turn of the century I lived, birded and banded in central New Jersey and the thought passed through my mind “if I was still in Princeton I would say that was a White-crowned Sparrow”, a regular but not plentiful visitor there. As I lifted it from the pocket of the net it was clear that it was indeed a White-crowned Sparrow but this was so unlikely that my brain struggled to accept the evidence of my eyes. I placed the bird in one of the soft cotton bags used to transport birds and took it back to the ringing table. I showed it to my ringing colleague Kieran Foster who has also handled this species in North America. With admirable calmness, he said “That’s a White-crowned Sparrow”.

Not surprisingly White-crowned Sparrow does not occur in the list of ring sizes in the BTO app on my iphone since only one previous bird has been ringed in Britain, on Fair Isle in 1977. Accordingly, callipers were used to measure the diameter of the tarsus confirming B as the correct ring. A ring was fitted and standard biometrics taken. Wing measurements were maximum chord 76.5mm, relaxed 74.5mm and the weight was 30.9gm. The bird was in exceptionally good condition with well developed breast muscles (score 2 on the 3-point scale) and fat filling the tracheal pit and a pad of fat on the abdomen (score 4 on the ESF scale).

Several characteristics were used to age the bird. Retained brown juvenile feathers in the hind crown (see photo 1) show the bird to be a second year (Euring code 5) bird coming to the end



1: Head, showing retained brown juvenile feathers in the hind crown, yellow lower mandible and absence of black in the lores.

of its partial spring moult (“pre-nuptial” in American terminology) which replaces the brown and tan juvenile head pattern with the familiar black and white. The brown abraded primary coverts lacking pale edging also indicates a bird in its second calendar year (photo 2)



2: Wing showing brown abraded primary coverts.

Other features are shown below. White-crowned Sparrows have twelve retrices; nine are visible in photo 3 (the other three are hidden by the hand) and they show fading and abrasion as might be expected of a bird that forages on the ground. The upperparts of the bird are predominantly brown heavily streaked with grey (photo 4)



3: Retrices showing extensive wear



4: Upperparts heavily streaked grey

During processing, photos were sent to Chris Batty, MRG country member and a member of British Birds Rarities Committee, who suggested that the bird showed characteristics of the Western Taiga (Gambel's) race *gambelii*. There are five subspecies of White-crowned Sparrow:

- Eastern Taiga (Eastern) *Z. l. leucophrys*
- Western Taiga (Gambel's) *Z. l. gambelii*
- Interior West (Mountain) *Z. l. oriantha*
- Pacific group (Nuttall's) *Z. l. nuttalli* group (includes Nuttall's *Z. l. nuttalli* and Puget Sound *Z. l. pugetensis* subspecies)

Reference sources: Identification Guide to North American Birds (Peter Pyle); Field Guide to the Birds of North America (National Geographic); The Sibley Guide to Birds (David Allen Sibley) and Banders Information Resource Data Manual (Eastern Bird Banders Association).

The bill appeared small against my memory of the birds I handled in New Jersey which would have been of the race *leucophrys*. Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow, which breeds from Alaska eastwards to Hudson's Bay, are distinguished primarily by the small bill, the yellow-orange colour of the lower mandible and the whitish area above the lores. The photographs were sent to Marshall Iliff and Christopher Wood at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Marshall Iliff commented "Personally, I'd call this a Gambel's without too much hedging. The bill looks yellower than some (less orange), but I think the back has enough gray (sic) to rule out the extremely unlikely *nuttalli/pugetensis* option. I'd like to see the full bird without a hand around it to really be sure. But I'd be confident this is not *oriantha* or *leucophrys* and plumage, bill color (sic) and probability (whether ship-assisted or not!) weigh strongly for Gambel's". Christopher Wood agrees with Iliff's conclusions and both have some differences of opinion with Sibley's online guide (<http://www.sibleyguides.com/bird-info/white-crowned-sparrow/>).

What is a bird that breeds in north-western North America doing in Woolston? Whilst not the most obvious candidate for transatlantic relocation, the taiga races of White-crowned Sparrow have very large migration ranges and birds of this race have previously made autumn and winter appearances in eastern Canada (<https://birdtherock.com/2013/02/09/apparent-gambels-white-crowned-sparrows-in-newfoundland/>) and one made an appearance at Corvo in the Azores (<http://birdingcorvo2013.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/white-crowned-sparrow-still-on-show.html>).

In North America all races of this species except *nuttalli* 'Nuttall's White-crowned Sparrow' would be undertaking migration at this time of year and this individual could have been engaged in a "parallel" and, of course, pointless migration when it arrived at Woolston. Its body condition certainly suggests it was migrating and that it had been feeding well for some time. Given the position of Woolston beside the Manchester Ship Canal and some 30 kilometres from the Port of Liverpool, the possibility exists that the bird was ship assisted but this implies it was receiving food on the ship or that it had been on land long enough to recover its condition.

The bird was released 09.00, approximately 30 minutes after capture. Information was released on Rare Bird Alert and a steady stream of visitors had reasonable views before it moved into deeper cover, the last sighting being at 11.45am.

The bird is the sixth record of White-crowned Sparrow of any form and just the second to be ringed after a bird on Fair Isle in 1977. The record has been accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee as a White-crowned Sparrow and accepted as being of the subspecies *gambelii*. As this is a new subspecies for Britain, it must also be considered by the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee before being accepted to the British List; that decision is awaited.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to David Bowman, Vice-Chairman of the Woolston Eyes Conservation Group, who took all photographs used in this report and managed the process of granting access to the normally gated reserve for visitors wishing to see the rarity.