

The first Central American record of White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*

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Reportamos un vagabundo de Gorrión Gorjiblanco *Zonotrichia albicollis* en el cayo Half Moon, a 73 km al sureste de la Ciudad de Belice, siendo el primer registro de esta especie norteamericana para Belice y para América Central. El ave apareció en la isla pequeña al mismo tiempo que se encontraban varias aves transeuntes que migraban hacia el norte. Especulamos que el gorrión hizo una parada durante su migración después de invernar más al sur.

On 18 May 2005, we visited tiny Half Moon Caye, at the edge of Lighthouse Reef, 73 km south-east of Belize City, Belize, in the western Caribbean. The island covers just c.18 ha; it has sandy wooded thickets on the western four-fifths, and open, coconut *Cocos nucifera*-shaded beach on the eastern end. The caye harbours a nesting colony of Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* and Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*.

At 07h45, near the Belize Audubon reserve headquarters on the north-facing beach at the east end of the island (17°12'N 87°32'W), AdG found a largish sparrow on drying coconut fronds between the picnic area and restrooms. The rest of us quickly found the bird and recognised it as a White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*. We were able to study this bird at close range at various times during the morning, until we left the island at 10h00. It appeared to forage on the sandy ground amongst sparse beach vegetation, always near the visitor's centre.

The bird was in adult (breeding) plumage, with bright white superciliary and narrow crown-stripe contrasting with the nearly black crown and eyestripes (Fig. 1). The supraloral spots were bright yellow, the throat pure white, distinctly bordered by

darker grey breast and cheeks. Other field marks clearly noted were the streaked brown back, brown wings with two indistinct wingbars, long brown, slightly notched tail, pale grey rear underparts, buffy flanks and pink legs. It occasionally gave a characteristic very high *tseet*.

The sparrow often sought the shade of young coconut palms or piles of dried palm fronds. Although it picked frequently amongst the sand, we were unable to see if the bird found food, although some seeds from the sparse beach grass and other plants, as well as small ants and other insects, probably were in the sand. The bird's bill was often covered with sand.

White-throated Sparrow breeds in late May–August in Canadian boreal forests and mountains south of the boreal zone in the north-east USA, where it can be abundant². The species usually winters in the southern USA, south to about mid Florida and north-east Mexico. There are no records in Central America^{4,5,8,10} or in most of the Caribbean⁶, but there is one record from Aruba, off Venezuela^{12,13} (Fig. 2).

How did a White-throated Sparrow find its way to the western Caribbean in mid May? We can only speculate. One option is reverse migration, such



Figure 1. White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis* on Half Moon Caye, Belize, 18 May 2005 (left), and a panorama of beach habitat where the bird foraged (right) (Kerem A. Boyla)

that the bird flew south from the north coast of the Gulf of Mexico in April or early May, when it should have begun to migrate back north. Reverse migration is usually attributed to autumn migrants migrating north or west when they normally migrate south or east^{3,7,11}. A wintering sparrow near St Petersburg, Florida, rather than migrating north-northeast to maritime Canada, could have reverse migrated south-southwest, making landfall at the cay c.1,300 km distant. This explanation is unlikely, however, because White-throated Sparrows are unknown to make such long over-water migrations unaided and reverse migration in spring is apparently undocumented in any species of New World sparrow. Another possibility is that the bird was blown offshore when commencing its northward journey, perhaps along the west or east coasts of Florida, and landed aboard a boat headed for Belize or elsewhere in the western Caribbean. It is unlikely, however, that a northbound sparrow would stay on the boat as it headed south, and then find its way to the tiny cay.

Alternatively, the sparrow could have arrived at the cay the previous autumn, overshooting the normal wintering range, and spent the winter there. Overshooting is a well-known cause of vagrancy, and may explain many records of vagrant White-throated Sparrows in Europe in May and June. Nonetheless, such a scenario seems unlikely, considering that other birders visiting Half Moon Caye during the winter had not reported the sparrow.

Finally, the bird may have migrated to points further south the previous autumn, either naturally or ship-assisted, in which case we found it at a stopover en route north. Half Moon Caye is just

c.140 km north of the Honduras coast. There are records of other 'short-distance' migrant passerines wintering as far south as the Canal Zone of Panama, e.g. European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*⁸ and Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis* (specimen in University of Panama Vertebrate Museum). Such cases, and the Aruba record of White-throated Sparrow mentioned earlier, may be ship-assisted. For example, Chapman¹ reported a Dark-eyed Junco in a shipment of Christmas trees en route to Panama, and Raffaele *et al.*⁶ the case of a flock of juncos riding a freighter from New York to the Virgin Islands.

The last hypothesis is consistent with the presence of numerous other northbound migrant birds the same morning on the cay. All were undoubtedly en route from Honduras or southern Central America or even South America, and probably arrived early in the morning after a nocturnal migratory flight of hundreds of kilometres. For example, we observed at least 50 other migrants during the 2.5 hours we visited the cay, including c.10 each of Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia* and Mourning Warbler *Oporornis philadelphia*, 4–5 each of Eastern Wood Pewee *Contopus virens*, Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*, American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* and Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*, 2–3 each of Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*, Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*, Cedar Waxwing *Bombocilla cedrorum* and Magnolia Warbler *Dendroica magnolia*, and singles of Merlin *Falco columbarius*, Great Crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus crinitus*, Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Grey Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*, Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis* and Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*. So, whilst the White-throated Sparrow was clearly a vagrant from North America, the most likely scenario may be that we discovered it en route north from a wintering site in southern Central America or even South America, where it has never been recorded.

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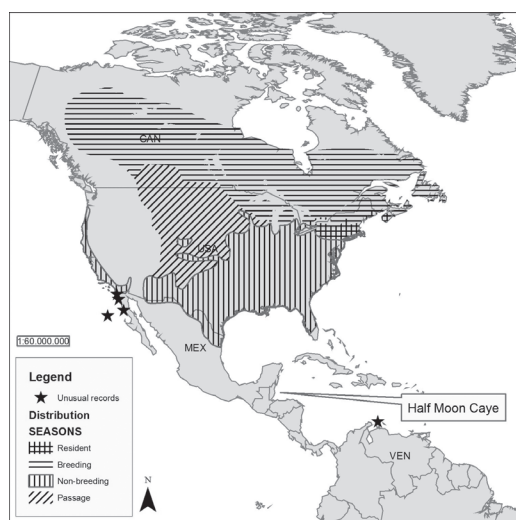


Figure 2. The range of White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*, based on Ridgely *et al.*⁹.

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