

Double-Scratchers

by Jean Iron

Alert birders often find secretive species of the thickets like the Eastern Towhee and Fox Sparrow by listening for their noisy rummaging in the leaf litter. Using both large feet together, they kick back leaves a half metre or more, uncovering seeds and insects. This feeding behaviour is called double-scratching, but only certain birds do it. Harrison (1967) describes it: "The double-scratch is a rapid backward kick performed simultaneously with both feet which are scraped along the surface of the ground, scratching back the superficial layer and exposing what is beneath." It is used to dig down through snow, leaves or debris. Other species such as the domestic chicken scratch, but they scratch one foot at a time.

After watching double-scratching behaviour by the **Spotted Towhee** last winter near Bronte Road in Oakville, I wondered what other North American species did it. At my feeder in Toronto last winter and spring, I noted double-scratching by **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **American Tree**, **White-throated**, **White-crowned**, **Fox** and **Song Sparrows**, and **Eastern Towhee**. I also observed a **Lincoln's Sparrow** double-scratching on 11 May 1996 at Point Pelee. On page 386 of the *National Geographic Guide* (1987), the last line under Rufous-sided Towhee says, "Like all species on this page, forages on the ground, scratching with both feet together." This adds to our list: **Olive Sparrow**, **Green-tailed Towhee**, **Brown Towhee** now split into **Canyon** and **California Towhees**, and **Abert's Towhee**. Other species of double-scratchers added by Nice (1937), Harrison (1967) and Hailman (1973) are **Savannah**, **Seaside**, **Sage**, **Black-throated**, **Harris's** and **Swamp Sparrows**. There are no doubt other double-scratchers that I have missed. For example, the **Yellow-eyed Junco** and **Golden-crowned Sparrow** are probably double-scratchers, but I could find no literature references. In total, I found 20 double-scratchers north of Mexico shown in bold above.

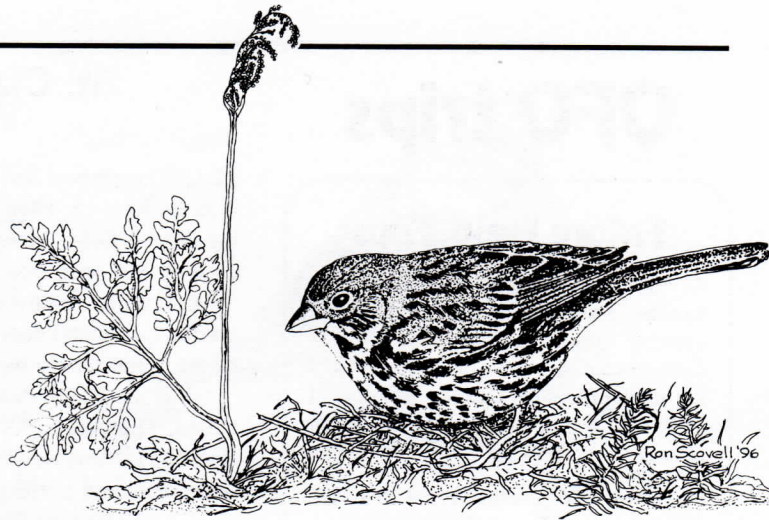
Although species like Northern Cardinals have ample

OFO on the Net

by
David Cattrall and John Barker

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Fox Sparrow by Ron Scovell

opportunity to observe double-scratching, they don't do it, indicating a possible genetic basis to the behaviour. Also, the American Tree Sparrow uses the double-footed scratch, but it appears to be absent in some other members of the genus *Spizella*, such as the Field and Chipping Sparrows (Clark 1970).

In summary, double-scratching occurs in some New World sparrows in the subfamily Emberizinae (sparrows and buntings). However, it is interesting that no Old World buntings do the double-scratch. Emberizinae is "more diversified in the Western Hemisphere and it probably originated here and spread later to the Old World" (Godfrey 1986). Double-scratching is not restricted to Emberizinae, it also occurs in a few other groups such as babblers (Timaliidae) (Harrison 1967).

Next time you are birding, listen for the distinctive loud rustling noises made by the double-scratchers. It will improve your birding skills. Who can say? You might find Ontario's next Green-tailed Towhee or just imagine a mind-bending Olive Sparrow.

Literature Cited

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