

The female sparrow eats the eggshells soon after the chicks hatch.



## WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW

*Zonotrichia leucophrys*

One of the best-studied birds in North America is the widely distributed White-crowned Sparrow. Numerous in the west, this large and perky sparrow breeds from Alaska south to New Mexico and east across northern Canada. The five subspecies winter in the southern half of the United States and northern Mexico. Each has a slightly different preferred breeding habitat and winter range, and some can be differentiated by their calls.

About seven inches long, the White-crowned Sparrow has a boldly patterned white and black head and grey undersides. Primarily ground feeders, these sparrows eat seeds, berries, and insects, and are common visitors to bird feeders in winter. During the breeding season they migrate north to stake out a small territory in brushy habitat, usually with lots of ground cover near water.

Dawson City is an ideal habitat for White-crowns. Situated on the bank of the mighty Yukon River, Dawson has plenty of areas with low plant growth and several brushy fields. When I first arrived in Dawson in May 2003, I saw quite a few sparrows around town. That season I discovered eight of their nests; all but one were tucked into a small depression in the ground beneath low plant cover. The remaining nest was a bit of an anomaly—I found it two and a half feet high in a rose bush, tucked against a chain-link fence. When I checked the nesting data on Yukon White-crowns, I found that this nest was the only one ever located above ground—out of more than 60 nests.

Three of the ground nests were suitable for photography, and I took several slides of each in June and July. Many pictures turned out quite well, but at a considerable expense. Processing had to be done in Whitehorse, over six hours away, and it took three weeks to get my pictures back. Film and developing costs were about double what I would have paid in Vancouver.

When I returned to the Yukon in 2004, I had a brand new digital Nikon D70 camera with me. Anticipating the opportunity to take many pictures at no cost, I was eager to find more White-crowned Sparrow nests. Although the sparrows are common in Dawson, locating the nest of one is challenging. The birds don't flush until you are at close range, and visually scouring the ground is useless. To find nests with eggs, I had

Exiting the nest with a powerful wing burst, the female White-crown goes off in search of food for her tiny young.

