

# FOX SPARROW FALLOUT IN SOUTHEAST SASKATCHEWAN IN APRIL 2021



Fox Sparrow. Photo credit: Nick Saunders.

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Fox Sparrows (*Passerella iliaca*) are a summer resident in northern Saskatchewan but are a rare or uncommon migrant in the aspen parkland and mixed grass prairie region of the southern part of the province.<sup>1,2</sup> To account for this apparent rarity, Smith speculated that Fox Sparrows either fly over the parkland and grasslands or fly around it, during both spring and fall migrations.<sup>3</sup> Recent abundance animations produced by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology suggest the species follows the forest

through Manitoba and swings into Saskatchewan without crossing the parkland or grasslands.<sup>4</sup> Here I present evidence of an unusual fallout occurrence of Fox Sparrows in southeastern Saskatchewan based on eBird data and observations posted on the Facebook group “Sask Birders” (hereafter Sask Birders).

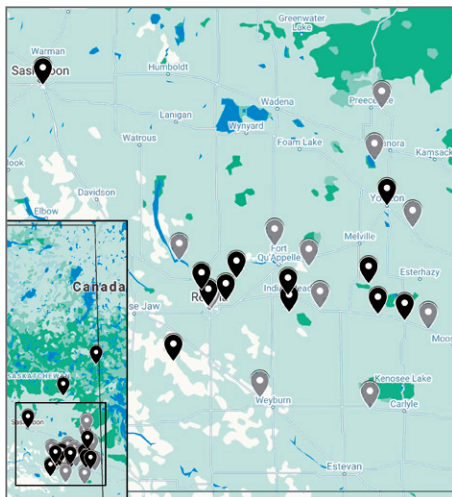
Overnight, on 11-12 April 2021, a winter storm began in southeastern Saskatchewan generated by a Colorado low pressure system centered over Ontario. The storm continued until 14 April during which 15-25 cm of snow fell throughout the region (from Regina east to the SK/MB border) and wind speeds reached 60 km/hr from the north.<sup>5</sup>

An unusual number of posts of Fox Sparrows on Sask Birders at the time of the storm caught my eye that something was going on. To examine the effects of this storm event closer, I searched through the Facebook group and found, through comments and posts, a total of 14 records of Fox Sparrows from 12 to 16 April (Figure 1 – gray points). I also searched the checklists submitted to eBird and found an additional 21 records of Fox Sparrows observed during the same period (Figure 1 – black points). Of the 14 records posted on Sask Birders, 11 did not appear in the eBird database. When all the locations were plotted, a clear pattern emerged showing most of

these observations matched the area covered by the storm, except for the two points where one and three birds had made it to Flin Flon, MB and Love, SK, respectively, prior to the storm (Figure 1). When one bird was observed over several days at the same location, I classified this as one record.

All of the 32 observations comprised of one to four birds, except for one record of eight birds seen by Don Weidl in Broadview on 13 April. An additional noteworthy observation from Virden, MB was made on 13 April by Amanda Galbraith, who recorded 20 Fox Sparrows at her feeder. Once grounded, many birds lingered for days after the snowstorm, presumably waiting for more suitable migration conditions. For example, I observed two birds at my feeders, near Edenwold, on the evening of 12 April and at least one remained in the yard, singing, until 21 April. A total of nine Fox Sparrows were recorded at seven locations in Regina and Saskatoon had four birds at four locations. Saskatoon was outside the storm's path, so it is curious that four birds were recorded there during this period.

The Cornell Lab abundance animation suggests Fox Sparrows



**FIGURE 1:** Fox Sparrow observations in Saskatchewan from April 12-16, 2021. Records from eBird are in black and records from the Sask Birders Facebook group are in gray.

follow the forest through Manitoba and generally avoid southern Saskatchewan, so it is likely that the winter storm of 12 to 14 April blew the birds off-course into the parkland and grassland region of southeastern Saskatchewan.

To highlight the rarity of this fallout event, April records in eBird from south of the boreal forest show that few Fox Sparrows are observed each spring in the province. From 2017 to 2020, a total of eight, seven, seven, and six locations, respectively, were recorded in the entire month of April. Therefore, the 21 records that occurred over five days in April from eBird and the additional 11 sightings from the Sask Birders group is significant. An additional eight records from eBird were documented in the remainder of April in 2021.

While looking through the eBird Fox Sparrow records, I came across a similar apparent fallout in April 2017 along the forest fringe. On 15 April 2017, Bert Dalziel recorded 28 Fox Sparrows in his yard near Love, SK, while 100 km straight west, Dave Britton documented 67 Fox Sparrows at Christopher Lake, two days later on 17 April 2017.

It is clear that severe spring storms can have significant impacts on migrating birds. Platforms like eBird and the Sask Birders Facebook group can provide valuable data documenting these unique events at larger spatial scales to help us further understand the life history of birds.

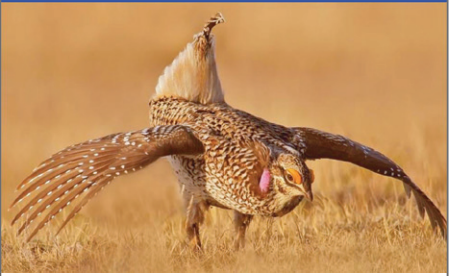
### Acknowledgements

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