

Observations on House Sparrows

Last winter I spent January and February afternoons counting and watching a flock of house sparrows that spent every afternoon in a bush at the edge of the woods. At first, I did this mostly out of sheer boredom-there weren't many other birds around - but after a few days I began to notice interesting things, such as the following: The flock averaged about 15-20 individuals, of which slightly more than half were adult males; the females perched lower in the bush, with the males at the top. The females' "churk" call averaged slightly lower and more hoarse than the males. The number of birds in the flock began to drop around mid-February (probably because the birds were pairing off), and they stopped roosting in the bush around the end of February.

There are a lot more questions I would like to answer this year if the flock keeps roosting where it did last year, or at least some place accessible to me. Is the flock made up of the same individuals it was last year? Do one or two birds watch for enemies while the others rest and feed? If so, do they take turns watching? Do they roost there in the night, too? Where do they go when they leave the bush for the day?

Even now, in late summer, there are still things to discover about house sparrows. Just today, I was observing a flock on the garden fence. They were moving busily around eating weed seeds straight off the weeds growing by the fence, chirping among themselves, going back and forth to the creek for drink breaks, and doing various other sparrow things. I swept my binoculars back and forth over the flock and I noticed a strange-looking bird. It resembled a female except for a gray crown and cheek, a tinge of chestnut along the back of the head, and a smaller, more crisply defined edition of the breeding adult male's bib. But what really puzzled me for a second was the bill, which was light brown like a female's, contrasting stunningly with the black bib. It took me a minute to determine that the bird I was watching was a young adult male. I have previously seen many young male house sparrows, but none were in this stage of maturation.

One good thing about house sparrows is that they're almost always available for study. They nest in a variety of places, have fascinating behavior, and some interesting facts to go with them...did you know that the male carries his breeding plumage all winter long? Instead of molting from their winter plumage into breeding plumage, the male molts in the fall into his winter plumage, where the black bib feathers are tipped with white. The feather tips simply begin wearing away around February, revealing the black bib underneath-a process called "feather wear." The males also actively preen during this time to encourage feather wear.¹ House sparrows will also gather nesting material all year round, leading to the belief that they actually breed all year too.

But I am not going to pretend that house sparrows are harmless, innocent little birds. Oh, no! Far from it. They, along with European starlings, were one of the main causes of the infamous bluebird decline. To win possession of an occupied nest box, they will remove the eggs and/or kill the babies, and drive off or sometimes even kill the parents.

Last year, tree swallows nested in one of my bluebird boxes. Everything went smoothly until about the second or third day after the young hatched, when house sparrows invaded the box. They drove off the parents, snapped the neck of one baby

bird, half-ate another, threw a third out of the box, and the remaining two died of starvation and exposure.

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The sparrows made a weak attempt to nest in the newly evacuated box but I removed any nesting material they put in and they gave up after about two weeks. And the number one thing on my birthday wish list was - you guessed it - a sparrow trap.

One of my favorite poems happens to be about the house sparrow's bad side:

*So dainty in plumage and hue,
A study in grey and in brown,
How little, how little we knew
The pest he would prove to the town!
From dawn until daylight grows dim,
Perpetual chatter and scold
No winter migration for him,
Not even afraid of the cold!
Scarce a song-bird he fails to molest,
Belligerent, meddling thing!
Wherever he goes as a guest,
He is sure to remain as a King.*

-Mary Isabella Forsyth

A short history of the house sparrow in Ohio

The house sparrow was first released in 1850 in New York City. However, the population I study probably are descendents of birds released in 1869 in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Warren, Ohio. Also in the later 1800s house sparrows were released in Steubenville, which is only a half-hour drive from where I live. House sparrows are adaptable birds, and they soon spread to every corner of the lower forty-eight states. But you won't find a house sparrow roughing it in the wilderness-they usually stay near human habitation.

By 1960, they began to decline, due to an increase of automobiles and a decrease of horses (upon which the sparrows relied for food, eating the horses' grain). Also, the house finch, an aggressive western species introduced to eastern North America, competes with the sparrow for resources. House sparrows are slowly declining, but Ohio still has one of the largest house sparrow populations.²

Sources

¹ *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*, Kathleen Groschupf, (Chanticleer Press, Inc., 2001), pp. 562, 564.

² <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/ohc/nature/animals/birds/sparrow.shtml> Accessed August 2004.