

Focus on the House Sparrow

Familiarity seems to breed contempt in many bird watchers but House Sparrows are well worth studying. Intensely social birds with a complex clan system and an extraordinary worldwide distribution, their behaviour and their apparent decline intrigue. *Chris Mead.*

If House Sparrows were rare birds they would be a stirring sight for twitchers and considered well worth a detailed look. The intricacies of the male's plumage with its subtle mixtures of browns greys and the solid black of the bib, together with the swashbuckling, cheeky chappie behaviour would make it really memorable. It is only because there are a couple of million of them in the country that we do not value them more, although the female is rather a drab-looking bird! There are few species with which you are likely to confuse a male, in the British Isles only the smaller, neater Tree Sparrow is similar. This bird has a wholly chestnut cap not one with a grey centre, and is much rarer.

Your House Sparrows are YOURS. The birds have a very restricted range covering a just few dozen gardens in a typical suburb, with various buildings where the birds are able to nest in cavities or creeper, or some large ivy-covered trees. Consternation is caused by any change – the birds seem unable to grasp that the cover they have used for generations has gone! In my Tring garden a huge Clematis montana had to be cut down as it fell off the house wall. That evening 40 House Sparrows came to roost in it as usual and, although it was immediately obvious that their roosting site had gone for good, the birds hovered around it for some time in a very noisy and worried flock before finally roosting elsewhere.

Neighbours about a hundred yards away seldom had house Sparrows in their garden but further up the road the next clan held sway. Clan members had a very definite social structure with a pecking order and co-operative exclusion of strangers – especially if there was a group of them. Individual birds would be accepted if they approached the clan correctly and did not throw their weight around at first. These groups of birds are very aware of their surroundings and the feeding possibilities and very good at spotting threats like predators such as cats and Sparrowhawks.

The individual territory of the male really consists of the nesting hole and a very small area round it. This is defended vigorously and used as the ultimate come-on for the female. She will judge the male by his vigorous behaviour and also by his plumage. The black bib is the badge he uses and this is very important for him. In fact it seems that males with small bibs can be induced to behave more boldly if they have bigger and blacker bibs painted on them! Mind you the males are not very good at making sure that the eggs laid by their mates are fathered by them. DNA studies show that some broods are fathered by three different males and there are even cases where the supposed father has actually none of his offspring at all in the brood. Each male tries to cuckold his neighbours!

Many people have reported smaller groups of birds coming to their gardens now than in previous years, or even that their House Sparrows have disappeared completely and very suddenly, probably due to loss of a traditional nesting or roosting site. For the many people who are really chummy with the humble spuggie, this seems a great shame and worthy of investigation.

Chris Mead

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House Sparrows by Tommy Holden © BTO

House Sparrow Fascinating Facts

Detached Dwellings

The normal nests sites are holes in buildings but if these are not available they regularly build untidy detached nests, usually within ivy but sometimes in thorn bushes. These are really very characteristic and show the House Sparrow's quite close relationship to the weaver birds which build similar nests in the tropics. Terraced accommodation is sometimes found in the base of the nests of bigger birds – like Grey Herons or Rooks. I have also found them nesting in old Sand Martin burrows!

Export Success

The House Sparrow, and its close relatives, are familiar and native birds over much of Europe and Asia. They are staggeringly successful introduced birds to most of South Africa, parts of Australia and most of New Zealand but also the non-Arctic and non-Tropical parts of North, Central and South America. I remember that it was very frustrating for me to have to spend my first hour in America, at Houston airport, watching only qqq European – House Sparrows and Starlings!

Horse Sparrow Heaven!

There was a period when House Sparrows in cities and towns throughout the developed world must have thought they had died and gone to Heaven - well almost. The horse-drawn cab was the main transport and feed would have been lost from nosebags, spilt round stables and excreted in edible form by the horses. Manna from heaven! Urban populations crashed in the 1920s when cars were introduced. In the countryside old buildings would have provided ideal nesting sites and the winter stubble fields ample food. The only problem may have been a liking for sparrow pie, with many roosts trapped for the pot!