



## HISTORY OF THE HOUSE SPARROW

*Editor's note:* This article, by John V. Dennis, is reprinted from the September/October 1999 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Mr. Dennis passed away in 2002 at age 86 and was the author of the top-notch book *A Complete Guide to Bird Feeding*.

People today do not need to be told about the faults of the House Sparrow (also called English Sparrow). But if we think it is a nuisance, what must people have thought 100 years ago when it was perhaps 10 times more abundant than it is today? For a perspective, it might be helpful to look back and find out where this pesky little bird came from, why it was brought over here, and what people were doing about it.

The natural range of the House Sparrow extends from the British Isles eastward through Russia and Siberia to western China. Arabia, Pakistan, India, and Burma (now Myanmar) are also part of its range.

As for its original homeland, Oliver Austin in his *Birds of the World* points out that the House Sparrow is a weaver finch and that this family originated in Africa. Family characteristics are a quarrelsome, boisterous temperament; gregariousness; a liking for grain; absence of a pleasing song; polygamy; a high reproduction rate; and year-round residency. The only other member of the weaver finches in the United States is the Eurasian Tree Sparrow, which in 1870 was introduced to St. Louis, Missouri.

House Sparrows were brought to the United States from England in 1850 for the purpose of controlling the larva of a geometrid moth known as the cankerworm. The moth larvae were defoliating shade and fruit trees in parts of the East. Nicholas Pike of the Brooklyn Institute of New York, who was very active in introducing European birds, received a first consignment of eight pairs of House Sparrows in the fall of 1850. These birds were held until the spring of 1851 and then released. They did not take hold. Additional birds were brought over and in the spring of 1853 were released in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. These birds thrived and spread throughout the neighborhood. Over the next 30 years, House Sparrows were released all over the United States and in four provinces of Canada. Even if human beings had not had a hand in this, the species would have spread anyway. Although nonmigratory, these birds had a habit of hitchhiking on railcars carrying grain.

As mentioned in connection with the cankerworm, the House Sparrow's brief period of popularity was based upon its mistaken reputation as an important destroyer of injurious insects. Although primarily a grain-eater, the House Sparrow during the nesting season feeds insects to its young. Among the insects destroyed were beetles, weevils, crickets, grasshoppers, and cankerworms. Nesting almost year-round and raising from two to three broods a year (the average brood being five), the House

Sparrows did consume a good many insect pests. But many of our native birds do a far better job in this regard.

Arthur C. Bent, as he reported in his *Life Histories*, had an uncle who at first did everything he could to welcome the newcomers to his yard in Massachusetts. He first kept them in cages, and when they began to nest in nesting boxes, they were released into the wild. Neighborhood cats that preyed upon the birds were killed. But when he discovered that the sparrows were killing native birds and taking over their nesting sites, he began devising methods to get rid of them. He had a trench dug and baited it with grain. When the sparrows came there to feed, he blasted them with a shotgun. But it was too late. The House Sparrows were multiplying rapidly and raising havoc with native birds.

In 1912, in a book on Michigan birdlife, Walter B. Barrows summed up the faults of the House Sparrow: "It usurps the nesting sites of native birds, stops up gutters and downspouts with nesting material, spreads chicken mites and hog cholera, and defaces structures with its droppings."

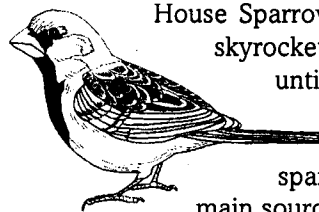
In some states, bounties were paid to those who brought in specified numbers of dead sparrows. But to no avail.

House Sparrow populations continued to skyrocket in this country and Canada until the coming of the automobile. As automobiles replaced horses in cities, the sparrows were deprived of their main source of food — partly digested grain in horse droppings. Thousands of them starved to death. Second, the sparrows were frequently killed by colliding with the same motor vehicles that were indirectly depriving them of their food supply. Beginning about 1915 and continuing up until the present, the House Sparrow population in North America has steadily declined. But there are still too many as far as Purple Martins and bluebirds are concerned.

To get some idea of how abundant the House Sparrow was around the turn of the last century, look in Bent's works and other literature of that time. For example, in getting rid of House Sparrows that were nesting in ivy that covered a church in Columbus, Mississippi, 459 of their eggs were broken and 700 young were killed. The ornithologist Frank Chapman counted some 400 House Sparrows bathing in a small puddle in Central Park in New York City. It was estimated that in suitable habitat there were as many House Sparrows as all other birds combined. This was around farms and in built-up areas.

Helping turn the tables on the House Sparrow are several of our native birds that are now preying on or competing with them. The Common Grackle often runs down and kills House Sparrows whenever it gets a chance. Typically, grackles decapitate their sparrow prey.

Ever since House Finches were released on Long Island in 1941, this western species has exploded in numbers in



much the same way as the House Sparrow did less than a century earlier. The two species compete for food and nesting sites, and occupy very much the same habitats. Under such conditions, one of the competing birds will gain ground at the expense of the other. In this case, the House Finch is winning out.

At my bird feeders in the small town where I live in Maryland, House Sparrows used to come in large flocks. Since the House Finch arrived about 10 years ago, I haven't seen even one House Sparrow in my yard. Among the few places where I still see them are at shopping malls and parking lots at fast-food restaurants. Here they live on scraps and French fries.

Almost every time there is a population explosion, the species in question reaches peak numbers and then begins to decline. Factors that cause the decline include disease, predation, competition, and adverse weather. The European Starling, introduced in 1890, has reached peak numbers in the East and has begun to decline. The same is true of the House Finch, which is subject to an eye infection that has led to heavy mortality. So all one has to do is wait, and natural factors will see to it that an overly abundant bird species will reach levels where it is no longer much of a pest.

*Editor's sequel:* The House Sparrow's numbers in Great Britain have declined from 25 million in the early 1970s (their peak) to 13 million in 2004, prompting the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the British Trust for Ornithology, and the British government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to create a booklet posing the question "Why do sparrows need help?" You can download it from [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/sparrows.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/sparrows.pdf).

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Mary Jane Russell has arranged for us to spend **June 4 and 5** in Clarence Fahnestock Memorial State Park. The park and its Taconic Outdoor Education Center (where we'll stay) are located off the Taconic Parkway in the highlands of Putnam County, about 90 minutes away. The cost of this outing is expected to be about \$60 for SSAS members and \$65 for nonmembers.

Fahnestock is part of an Audubon Important Bird Area and consists of over 11,000 acres of oak, hickory, and hemlock forest, with lakes and ten miles of trails. We'll use Fahnestock's rowboats and will try to arrange an easy canoe trip along the shore of the Hudson River at the nearby Constitution Marsh Audubon Center and Sanctuary.



Three meals prepared by students of the Culinary Institute of America will be provided for all registrants (lunch and dinner on Saturday, breakfast on Sunday). Most rooms have five beds, so be ready to share your sleeping space with your fellow SSAS members and friends. SSAS's first weekend there was in October 1998, which was before they added indoor plumbing to the heated/electrified cabins.

A \$10 deposit, payable to South Shore Audubon Society, will hold your reservation. Please call Mary Jane at 766-7397 now if you're interested. We must have 35 advance registrants for this trip to occur.

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**OUR NEWEST THANK YOUS**

SSAS would like to thank Joan Silverstone and Charu Champaneri for their financial donations, and Susan Pratt for donating a fine collection of birding books.

We'd like to belatedly thank SSAS member and Tackapausha employee Wendy Albin for playing the key role in saving our birdseed sale when the seed was dumped in the squirrel-patrolled parking lot by a late-night trucker who was supposed to leave the loaded trailer there.

Also, we'd like to thank the SSAS volunteers who juggled the 300 attendees at our December 18 Children's Holiday Party at Tackapausha: Gloria Berkowitz, Alice Blaustein, Helen Buckley, Glenda Delgado, Rose Kamins, Therese Lucas, Anna Marcotrigiano, Laurie Raisher, Dolores Rogers, Tom Schmelke, Chris Schmitt, and Mike Sperling.

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**17TH ANNUAL WATERFOWL SURVEY**

Our 2004-05 Waterfowl Survey will continue, rain or shine, on **Saturdays, February 5, February 26, and March 26**. Volunteers are welcome. If you are interested in spending a full or half-day visiting up to 28 locations from Valley Stream to Massapequa Park, call Joe Grupp, Research Chairperson, at 481-4208.





## NY AUDUBON LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

*Editor's note:* Our state office in Albany provided the following "2004 End of Session Update" on some federal and state legislative priorities. Those priorities are based on the Conservation Policy Resolutions approved by New York's Audubon chapters each spring, which you can download from [http://ny.audubon.org/resolutions/2004/book\\_2004.pdf](http://ny.audubon.org/resolutions/2004/book_2004.pdf). For space reasons and to help keep you awake, I've omitted the article's federal priorities (the state priorities are more interesting to read about), which are reauthorizing the Long Island Sound Restoration Act, approving the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act, and adequate funding for the Forest Legacy Program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

### *Clean Water Protection/Flooding Prevention Act*

Regardless of size, freshwater wetlands contain a diverse range of plant and animal species, including some species that are exceptionally rare. These important communities provide essential habitats for many species of migratory waterfowl; for numerous threatened, endangered, or special-concern species, such as the Bald Eagle and Osprey; and for countless other amphibian, avian, fish, and wildlife species to nest, breed, and feed. They also provide countless other environmental benefits, from flood protection and storm-water runoff control, to filtering pollutants, pesticides, and sediments from the water. These benefits illustrate the need to protect the state's freshwater wetlands to the greatest extent possible.



Currently, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has the authority to regulate wetlands 12.4 acres or greater that are mapped, while the federal government (EPA and Army Corps) has authority over the rest. However, a 2001 Supreme Court ruling in *Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County v. United States Army Corps of Engineers* held that the federal government did not have the authority to regulate "isolated" wetlands under the Clean Water Act. "Isolated wetlands" are wetlands that are not connected by navigable surface water to waters of the U.S. Since that time, the federal government has backed away from protecting these extremely important areas. New York State needs to step in and ensure these vitally important areas are protected.

The Clean Water Protection/Flooding Prevention Act (A.7905-a/S.4480-a), sponsored by Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli and Senator Carl Marcellino, decreases the size threshold for DEC regulation of freshwater wetlands to 1 acre or larger, thus increasing the state's ability to protect these ecosystems. This legislation also greatly increases the state's ability to properly manage these habitats for the benefit of all New York's citizens, birds, and wildlife, by removing the mapping requirements for regulation. Without this increased level of protection, the health of all New York's water bodies is put at risk.

This legislation passed the Assembly with strong bipartisan support in 2004, but was held up in the Senate's rules committee.

### *Smart Growth Infrastructure Policy Act*

Current local planning and zoning actions, and state development decisions, have expanded the infrastructure base of the state, requiring new development of roads, sewer systems, utilities, and other public facilities on green spaces instead of using structures that have already been built. This type of sprawl has resulted in great costs to the taxpayers and great costs to the environment of New York State. The loss of open space and the degradation of habitats that occurs from poorly planned development is one of the leading threats to many species of birds and other wildlife in New York. Several Audubon New York Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are also threatened by development proposals.

The Smart Growth Public Infrastructure Policy Act (A.8651-a, S.6255-a), sponsored by Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli and Senator Kenneth LaValle, helps to correct the pattern of development that has required expensive and expansive infrastructure projects, resulting in the underutilization and degradation of existing infrastructure. This important measure requires state agencies (like the Departments of Environmental Conservation, Transportation, Health, and others) to make smart development decisions and investments by requiring priority for funding new development projects to be given to those that utilize areas of existing infrastructure and those that are consistent with local governments' plans for development, instead of funding projects that destroy our important open spaces and farmland.

This legislation passed the Assembly, but stalled in the Senate's finance committee.

### *Community Preservation Act*

While the population of New York State has not increased significantly over the past 30 years and in some areas has actually decreased, the land area covered by development has increased. This trend was recently highlighted in a Brookings Institute/Cornell University study, "Sprawl Without Growth: the Upstate Paradox." They found, in looking at upstate growth patterns for the years 1982 through 1997, that the amount of urbanized land increased 30 percent, while the population grew just 2.6 percent. They also observed this in central New York, where the population actually declined; over 100,000 new acres were developed. Many communities are exploring the different options available for conserving and protecting open space, but need increased resources to achieve their goals.

The Community Preservation Act (A.10053-A, S.6949-A), sponsored by Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli and Senator Carl Marcellino, would authorize towns in New York State to adopt a transfer tax on certain real property transactions of up to 2% for the purpose of establishing a



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*Option 2.* To join NAS and your all-volunteer local chapter, you can help SSAS survive NAS's major dues-share cutbacks by joining Audubon through us for the same price that it costs if you join through NAS (we get \$0 unless you join through us). Mail the form below and your check payable to **National Audubon Society** to SSAS at the address above. The special rate for the first year is \$20 per household; \$15 for students and seniors.

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