

# House Sparrow or English Sparrow

by Sally Cureton

One of the most commonly found birds in the United States today was not even here 150 years ago. The **House Sparrow** or **English Sparrow** (*Passer domesticus*) was introduced on the east coast in the mid 1850's. Subsequently additional populations were released in other parts of the country including Texas and California. The result has been that it is now one of the most abundantly found songbirds in North America numbering approximately 150 million. A couple of the reasons given at the time for their introduction are that they were wildlife familiar to European immigrants and that they would help control insects.

As an unintended consequence, House Sparrows have displaced other insect eating birds, such as bluebirds and swallows. Many bird lovers have developed a distinct dislike of these birds as a result. In fact, what is known as "House Sparrow Invasion" when they take over available nesting sites, is considered to be an unfortunate and serious outcome of their presence. However, these little birds have been in America for so long now, that they have experienced some physical adaptations. For instance, those that live in the north are larger than southern members of the species. In addition, ones from the southwest are paler in coloration.

A House Sparrow is the bird frequently seen around shopping centers scooping up crumbs and bits dropped in the area. They are gregarious, adaptable, lively little birds. Generally about 4¼ inches long, they have a thick conical bill essential for their seed dominated diet. The male is distinguished by a black mask, breast and throat, a grey crown, and rusty upper parts. The female is smaller with a grey-brown crown, and grey and white underparts. The male will have a black bill in the summer and a yellowish one in the winter. These birds are not related to North American Sparrows. In appearance, they are chunkier, fuller in the chest with a larger head and shorter tail than American sparrows.

A cheerful and sociable little bird, House Sparrows can be found wherever there is human habitation, in large cities and in agricultural areas. Their chipper little calls of chirrups and cheeping sounds can make any day feel brighter. Essentially sedentary birds that do not migrate, they form flocks in the winter months. One interesting observation regarding their behavior is that a single sparrow will be silent if they discover food that is only enough for one bird. If there is plenty to share, they will begin the chirrup calls that summon others. A benefit is that with larger numbers there is protection against predation and each bird can spend more time foraging and less time looking for danger.

House Sparrows will generally raise 2 to 3 broods a year. Each brood consists of 4-6 eggs in a nest built in a tree, under the eaves, or a small bird house. The eggs are incubated by the female for just under 2 weeks, and the young fledge in about 2 weeks and are fed primarily on insects. Recent research shows that House Sparrow populations are declining in Europe, both in the cities and the countryside. The same observation has been made in the eastern and central United States. No one is sure why. It could be the increased use of garden pesticides, killing the insects that they feed on. It could be feral cat and hawk predation.

Some interesting facts about House Sparrows include the fact that they can actually swim. Ones that have been caught in water traps have been observed diving underwater and swimming to another part of the trap and freedom. However, not being a water bird, its preferred bath is in dust which it throws over itself. A versatile eater, it is known to eat over 83 different foods. A common companion to humans, and an ever cheerful buddy, the House Sparrow is here to stay.