UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
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Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

SSWEC119

House or English Sparrow [1]

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The house or English sparrow, a non-native species, has flourished in the Americas since its human introduction in the mid-19th century. This document describes the ways of dealing with the nuisances they can cause.

Background

The house sparrow, *Passer domesticus* , is a native of Eurasia and Africa that long ago learned to live closely with humans. It was deliberately introduced to the Americas in 1854 by homesick immigrants from Europe who wanted a reminder of their homelands. Because of human introduction, the house sparrow has an almost worldwide distribution.

Description

The house sparrow is the most abundant sparrow-like bird in Florida. They have generally brown plumage and are about 5.75 inches (14.5 cm) total length. Males have a striped back, the crown of the head is gray while the back of the neck is brown. Mature males are also characterized by their black bib. Females and juveniles are brown with striped backs, unspotted buff bellies and a buff eye stripe (Figure 1).

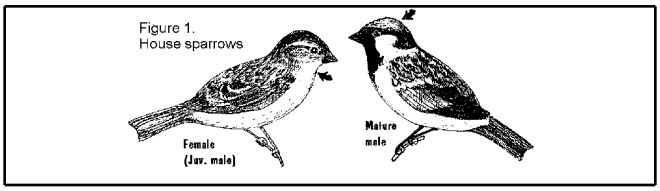

Figure 1.

Some people confuse the house sparrow with the Carolina wren (because of this wren's habit of nesting in buildings), or migratory and resident species of native sparrows seen at bird feeders.

Range and Habitat

The house sparrow is common throughout the state, but is most abundant near people and their structures. In some situations house sparrow populations can reach true pest proportions.

Food

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The young are fed on insects until they are almost full grown. Young birds are often seen following and begging for food from their parents for up to two weeks after they leave the nest.

Adults primarily feed on seeds and grain. They are one of the dominant species at bird feeders--where they feed on white, red, and German golden millet; and canary seed found in commercial wild bird seed mix. House sparrows will eat other types of seed as well: including wildflower seeds, sunflower, and safflower seeds, and tree seeds especially from sweet gum. They will also feed on grain products such as bread crumbs and livestock feed.

The willingness of the house sparrow to feed close to people can cause problems at picnic shelters and outdoor restaurants.

Nesting and Reproduction

The nest of the house sparrow is an untidy mass of dried grass, leaves, pine straw, string, paper, and feathers. The nests are usually built in bird houses, soffits and attics, behind signs, behind or above pipes and ductwork entering buildings, in crevices into wall voids, behind shake siding, in or on the rafters of large buildings like warehouses, barns and livestock buildings and in the forks of branchy trees. The nests usually fill the crevices they are located in and may be as large as 1 to 1.5 feet (30 to 46 cm) in diameter.

House sparrows can breed year-round in Florida, but most clutches are laid between March and September. They can have several clutches per year. Each clutch contains 3 to 5 heavily speckled white eggs. The incubation period is 10-14 days. The young remain in the nest until they are almost the size of their mother; about 15 days.

Problems and Solutions

Aesthetic and Economic Problems

The primary problems associated with house sparrows are caused by their close proximity to people. The unsightly nests and white droppings are generally considered undesirable. The dry plant material in the nest can be a fire hazard, especially inside lighted signs. When birds occupy a warehouse and defecate onstored goods this becomes an expensive nuisance if retailers refuse to accept contaminated goods.

The uric acid (white material) in bird droppings is both unsightly and can damage the finish on automobiles. Large populations of sparrows in agricultural situations can cause economic losses due to consumption and contamination of livestock feed.

Health-related Problems

The most common problem associated with house sparrows is bird mites invading the living space of the house during or after the nesting season. Bird mites--like northern fowl mite and tropical fowl mite--will bite humans and cause a small pustule, similar to a chigger bite. House sparrows are also important reservoirs and vectors of reintroduction of fowl mites into treated poultry houses. Sparrow nests can also be a source of stick-tight fleas, soft ticks, bed bugs, and dermestid (carpet) beetles.

House sparrows have been associated with numerous disease organisms transmissible to humans and livestock. These include the following: Nine bacterial diseases including salmonellosis (*Salmonella* food poisoning) and tuberculosis; the fungal disease *Sarcosporidiosis* ; three protozoan diseases including *Toxoplasmosis* and *Coccidiosis; Chlamydiosi* s; nine viral diseases including eastern equine, St. Louis, Venezuelan, and western equine encephalitis, Newcastle disease and fowl pox of poultry, and transmissible gastroenteritis of swine (hog cholera); three species of parasitic nematodes of poultry *Tetramares* (2 sp.) and *Acuaria spiralis* ; and the parasitic fluke of poultry, *Collyriculum faba* . House sparrows are generally a more serious disease vector to livestock, especially poultry and egg producers, than to humans. However the presence of house sparrows in areas where food is prepared or people eat, such as picnic areas and outdoor restaurants, should be a cause for concern about the spread of *Salmonella* bacteria.

Control

Exclusion

Exclusion is always the best option to a nuisance wildlife situation. Exclusion will also prevent most situations from developing. Here are some tactics: Make sure all attic and soffit vents are properly screened to keep birds and other animals out. Makesure that all openings through the walls for pipes or wires are properly sealed or caulked. (Birds nesting inside or behind signs can be excluded by sealing the edges of the sign with hardware cloth and silicon caulk or with plastic bird netting). Close off all openings where sparrows might nest. In some large structures this can be very difficult, but the more areas you close off, the fewer sparrows will be able to nest. Be sure the sparrows have been flushed from the nest site before sealing openings. In areas that can not easily be sealed, persistent removal of the nests will eventually discourage the birds from nesting in that site.

When putting up bird houses for native birds, do not put perches at the entrance holes of blue bird and wren houses and close up your purple martin houses from when the birds leave the house, usually September through January. These measures will discourage house sparrow use of bird houses put up for our native cavity nesting birds.

House sparrows often congregate in large numbers in improperly pruned trees, especially in parking lots. Trees trimmed to form a dense round crown, become an ideal roost for house sparrows and other birds, like starlings. To avoid this, prune trees to create a more natural and open growth form (Figure 2).

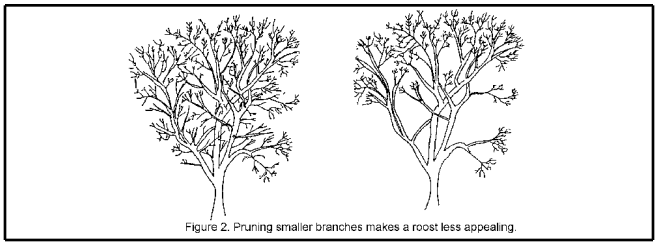

Figure 2.

Trapping

Trapping is used if a local population becomes a nuisance. The secret to trapping is to pre-bait for about one week before setting the trap. Also, remember that birds can learn quickly how to escape a trap, so it may be necessary to try different types of traps to keep the birds from becoming trap shy or trap smart.

When large numbers of birds are a nuisance, funnel or drop-in multi-catch traps are used (Figure 3a).

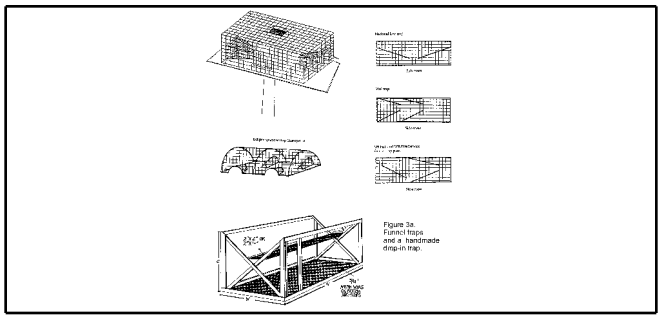

Figure 3.

House sparrows will quickly learn how to enter and leave a funnel trap. Some crafty birds have learned to come and go through a funnel trap as easily as a person walks through a doorway. By adding bobs to the funnel entrance you can out-smart those individuals.

Many traps can be homemade and funnel entrance traps are also commercially available. Some traps like the elevator traps are only available in garden supply catalogs. In some situations numerous birds can be trapped at one time with a clap-net trap (Figure 3b).

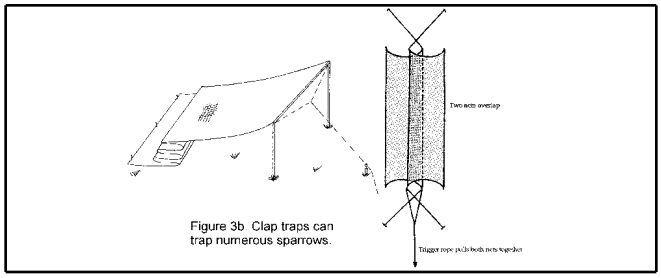

Figure 4.

The sieve trap and the nest box traps are effective for taking a few nuisance individuals (Figure 3c) and (Figure 3d).

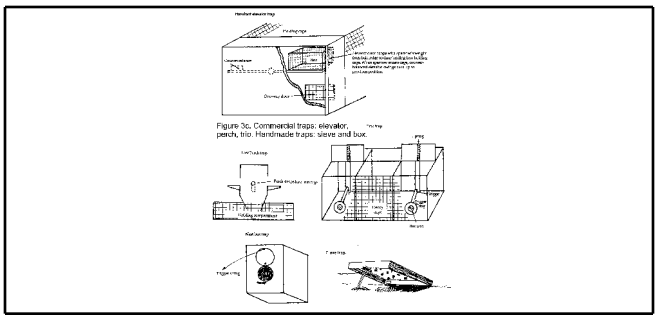

Figure 5.

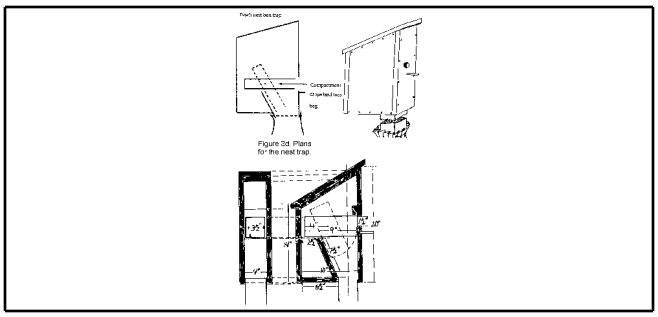

Figure 6.

It is also possible to flush the sparrows from the nest into a bait or insect net held in front of the nest opening.

Shooting

Before considering shooting as a control method, contact your local law enforcement agency to find out about the laws in your area. Many cities and towns also have local ordinances protecting birds, which may include pest species like house sparrows.

If you are legally able to use a weapon and local ordinances do not protect house sparrows, use a pellet rifle or .22 cal. shot cartridges rather than solid bullets. The bullet from a .22 long rifle can travel over 1.5 miles (2.4 km). Be absolutely sure of what you are shooting and identify your back stop. A .22 bullet will go through corrugated tin, drywall, and plywood to hit anyone or anything behind it. It is wise for anyone who plans on using a firearm to receive some type of firearm safety training. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) offers free Hunter Education Classes that stress firearm safety as well as teaching hunting skills.

Poisons

Currently in Florida, it is illegal to use any poisons for sparrow control. The only registered avicide (poison for birds) is Avitrol ^{TM}. It may only be used for pigeon control with an Avitrol Permit issued by the FWC. Repellents like naphthalene are registered for bird control, but are rarely effective and never a permanent solution.

Tactile Repellents

Tactile repellents may be either mechanical like porcupine wire, wire loops, electrified wires on roosting surfaces, or sticky substances, that usually containing polybutene. They make surfaces uncomfortable or impossible for birds to roost on. Tactile repellents are usually used on resting surfaces used by pigeons. Because of the behavior and natural history of house sparrows, tactile repellents offer limited uses in sparrow control--exclusion is more effective.

Sound Repellents

Sound has long been used to scare away birds. Loud noises like those produced by firearms, pyrotechnics, or propane exploders may scare away flocks of sparrows from a particular area for a short time. Unless the noises are randomly discharged, the birds quickly learn to ignore the sound.

Also, producing loud noises randomly during all daylight hours will quickly irritate all but the most understanding neighbors and may violate noise ordinances.

Ultrasonic devices. To get around the problems noises present people have tried ultrasonic devices. These produce sounds above the human threshold of hearing. Ultrasonic waves reflect off objects, rather than going around them, producing sound shadows where the birds can avoid the sound. In general, ultrasonic devices rarely drive sparrows from established home ranges. Further, research at Purdue University has shown that some of these devices have caused hearing loss in dogs.

Another use of sound involves using recorded distress calls of the target bird species. Originally calls were recorded on tape and played back. Now

calls can be digitally stored on a chip and programmed to be played in a random pattern. The birds may eventually learn to recognize that particular call over time and ignore it, but this type of auditory scare device may prove effective longer than previous startle devices.

Legal Aspects

The house sparrow is an exotic species in the Americas and is listed as an unprotected species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The birds, their eggs, and nests may be removed by any method except by poison, steel traps, or with guns and lights at night. Some municipalities have issued local ordinances that protect all birds, both exotic and native.

Suggested Readings

Field guides for identification

Peterson, R.T. 1947. *A field guide to the birds: Eastern land and water birds.* Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 230 pp.

Robbins, C.S., B. Bruun, and H.S. Zim. 1966. *A guide to field identification of birds of North America.* Golden Press, New York. 340 pp.