

House Sparrow

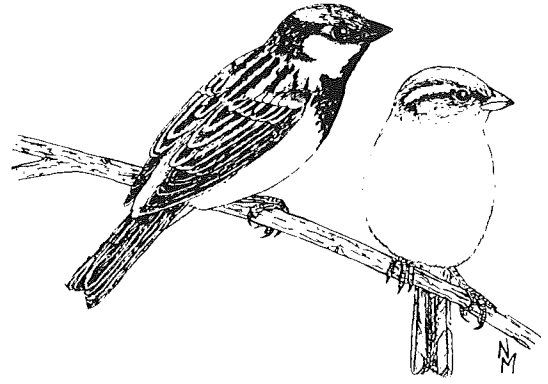
Passer domesticus

House Sparrows, also known as English Sparrows, were introduced in North America in the mid-1800s, beginning in 1851 and 1853; subsequently they were introduced at selected locations throughout the U.S. and contiguous Canadian and Mexican sites (Bent 1958). They were first released in Vermont at St. Johnsbury between 1874 and 1876. Following that introduction, the species rapidly spread throughout the state (Merriam and Barrows 1889).

The name "English Sparrow" is a misnomer, as the species is widely distributed throughout Europe, Asia, and North Africa. The species was called the English Sparrow in the U.S. before 1957 because most of its kind had been imported from England; the correct name now is the House Sparrow. Primarily a granivorous bird, the House Sparrow was first imported because of its exaggerated reputation as an insectivore. To some extent, the bird was introduced by new European immigrants to satisfy their longing for home, which its familiar chirp recalled.

The House Sparrow's population peaked between 1910 and 1920 and thereafter began to decline. When automobiles replaced horses, especially in the cities, available grain (digested and undigested), which was the House Sparrow's chief food supply, diminished (Bent 1958). It has also been hypothesized that as the starling population increased it competed with House Sparrows for nesting sites, thereby contributing to the sparrows' population decline (Ross 1927).

The House Sparrow is most easily seen around the buildings of working farms or near grain supply establishments, and roosting in the thick ivy attached to buildings and in thick shrubbery (Bent 1958; Stokes 1979). The House Sparrow's favored nesting site appears to be a cavity in a tree or building, or a nest box. The species prefers well-hidden natural sites in and about buildings to nest boxes. It will nest in dense growths

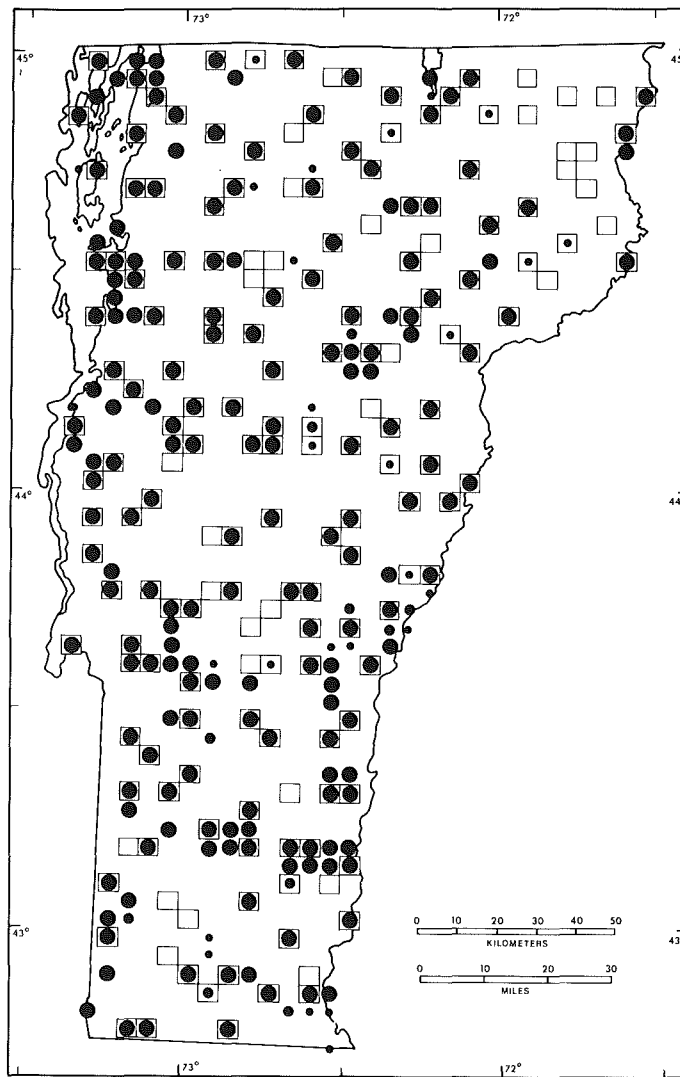


of ivy or similar vines. Pairs may even use the nests of Cliff and Barn swallows (Bent 1958). The House Sparrow has a prolonged breeding season, usually raising two and sometimes three broods a year. Earliest recorded nest building in Vermont was for March 8 (Ross 1927).

The nest is bulky, 15–20 cm (8–10 in) in outside diameter (Stokes 1979). It is unkempt and loosely constructed, with the outer part made up chiefly of long, coarse grass stems, some of which retain their heads and may point in every direction; leaves; a few small feathers; string; cloth and pieces of paper. The lining is made of finer materials, usually whatever is at hand, such as feathers, cord, hair, and frayed rope. The cup of the nest is shaped by the female as she turns round and round in the center. Entrance to the nest is usually from the side (Bent 1958).

The easiest way to confirm the House Sparrow is to look for the ragtag nest in or on a building. Atlas Project confirmations were most frequently obtained by seeing the nest and eggs or a bird sitting on the nest (NE), and by seeing adults entering and leaving nest sites (ON).

Eggs laid by the House Sparrow are ovate to elliptical and vary in number from 3 to 7 per clutch, with 4 to 5 being most common. The base color is almost pure white, sometimes greenish or bluish. Eggs are marked by a few gray or brown dots. Seven Vermont egg dates range from April 21 to June 24. Incubation, usually a 12-day period, is per-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 146 (86%)

Possible breeding: 10 (7% of total)

Probable breeding: 3 (2% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 133 (91% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 31 | 100 | 21.2 |
| Green Mountains | 39 | 72 | 26.7 |
| North Central | 16 | 84 | 11.0 |
| Northeast Highlands | 6 | 37 | 4.1 |
| East Central | 18 | 95 | 12.3 |
| Taconic Mountains | 15 | 94 | 10.3 |
| Eastern Foothills | 21 | 87 | 14.4 |

formed by the female. After hatching, males and females share the feeding of the young at the nest. Feeding at first is by regurgitation. Fifteen Vermont records reveal nests with young dating from March 25 to July 8. House Sparrow young leave the nest at about 15 to 17 days after hatching, at which time they can fly rather well. The young are fed for 2 weeks or more after leaving the nest. Adults eat about 3% animal and 97% vegetable matter, of which 74% is grain; nestlings consume about 68% animal and 32% vegetable matter (Bent 1958).

The House Sparrow is noisy, boisterous, opportunistic, and adaptable. This non-

migratory species chirps and chatters cheerfully, if aggressively, and adds a little joy to the winter landscape.

GEORGE F. ELLISON