

Wild Things: Sparrows

BY MARGARET BAIRD



What's the most widespread wild bird in the world? Yes, the pigeon is a good guess—but nope, wrong. The answer may surprise, since we encounter these little birds so often that we tend to overlook their ubiquitous presence.

You'll hear them twittering in the rafters of big box stores and airport terminals; you'll see them nesting in traffic lights and hanging around McDonald's. You may have heard them affectionately referred to as "little brown jobs" for their uninspired plumage, or "french fry birds" for their fast food appetites: They are house sparrows, also known as English sparrows.

Originally introduced to America by shortsighted Europeans back in the 1850s, the plan was for Jack Sparrow and friends to provide insect control while serenading homesick immigrants with familiar bird-song from the Old Country (seriously). Only nobody realized what bullies sparrows can be. Sparrow populations quickly, um, *soared* as they aggressively muscled out more timid native songbirds, chowed down on grain crops, and thrived on another food source often deposited on pre-motorized city streets: the undigested seeds in horse poop.

These days, sparrow-human conflicts continue to run the gamut, but the complaints and concerns most often voiced to shelter staff are usually one of two issues: Sparrows nest in inconvenient places

around homes (especially in dryer vents), and they make rather ingenious use of warehouse-type buildings.

In the case of the former, the good news is that keeping these birds out is fairly easy. But if nesting is already in progress or if eggs are present, preach tolerance as the most humane short-term solution. Sparrows will incubate their eggs for 11 days, and chicks will be on their own two weeks after hatching, so it won't be a long wait for an empty nest. Once homeowners are sure the coast is clear, they can remove the nesting material and securely cover the access point with a made-to-fit cover (this can be purchased at most big home supply or hardware stores; it will prevent a reoccupation). They should also closely examine their homes' exteriors for other nooks and crannies, particularly along the roof lines. These areas can be screened with hardware cloth once the birds have flown the coop.

House sparrows are also increasingly common residents of many big retail stores—especially in home and garden establishments, where life seems a protected paradise. Open loading docks and automated front doors make admission easy; it's often reported that sparrows open them by fluttering in front of the electronic sensors! Such bird-brained behavior can make exclusion difficult at best, so unless the birds are creating a real problem with their presence, live and let live is the way to go.

Where eviction is a must—such as in grocery stores—managers should establish a strict protocol of live-trapping and removal, along with comprehensive bird-proofing of all access points. It takes effort, but is the only way to truly resolve this conflict; killing birds only creates space for more to quickly move in. And while house sparrows are not a federally protected species, they should still be treated humanely. **AS**

For more on resolving wildlife conflicts, go to humanesociety.org/wildlife.