

We often talk about the impact of non-native species on our native fauna, in this case impacts to our bluebirds. An old article by Art Gingert entitled Return of the Bluebird (Country Journal, May 1988) discussed the invasion of two species, the English house sparrow and European starling. Included here is some of the information presented in that article.

HOUSE SPARROW

House sparrows were first released to a Brooklyn, NY cemetery in 1853 to control an outbreak of spanworms. They quickly adapted to the city life, reproducing with more enthusiasm than they showed for eating insect pests. Sparrow populations sky-rocketed and these cavity nesters evicted bluebird pairs at all phases of the nesting cycle. Eggs were destroyed, nestlings killed, and adult bluebirds mortally wounded while attempting to defend their eggs or young. It is not uncommon to find dead adult bluebirds in boxes with heads pecked bare from the house sparrow's relentless attack. One only needs to spend time in the field monitoring a bluebird trail to discover the damage these non-native birds impact our bluebirds.



By the late 19th century, bluebirds were disappearing from city parks and gardens and rural village greens. The cheep-cheep-cheep of house sparrows now can be heard continent-wide, and they remain a constant threat to bluebird recovery programs. The damage house sparrows inflict on our bluebirds is significant and one of the hardest nest competitors to deal with.

In a 1974 article in Smithsonian, columnist Brooks Atkinson summed up the sparrow-bluebird conflict: "To love bluebirds is to despise house sparrows." For those of us that deal with this species on a regular basis, truer words were never spoken. Control house sparrows and watch how soon the bluebirds respond positively.

STARLING



An even greater bluebird nemesis was brought to this country earlier than the house sparrow but the European starling didn't take hold until 40 pairs were released in 1890 at New York's Central Park. The starling did not reach the Mississippi River until 1928. Starling flocks have successfully invaded all city, suburban, and most rural environments. We are fortunate that the bluebirds smaller entrance hole size (1 1/2") prevents the starling from entering a properly designed bluebird box, making control easier to deal with. The starlings major impact is on other cavity nesters like flickers, wood ducks, and great crested flycatchers.

DEALING WITH HOUSE SPARROWS:

Location of boxes:

- * Do not place bluebird boxes within 400 feet of livestock farms.
- * Placing boxes near residential buildings may increase sparrow problems.
- * Relocate the box to a different area if the sparrows problems are persistent.

Control:

- * Under no conditions should you let house sparrows fledge young from a nest box.
- * Concentrate on eliminating the male house sparrow.
- * Shooting where safe - a pellet gun with a scope is effective.
- * Nest trapping is a necessary and effective way to control sparrows. A Van Ert nest trap works great. Preset two 10x1/2" screws on the inside of the box, insert the trap as needed to control the

sparrow. Remove after trapping the sparrow.

- * Try using some of the boxes that house sparrows do not prefer (slotted, gilbertson pvc, and sky-light boxes offer relief but are not totally effective).
- * Pulling nest material is futile - this will not discourage the sparrow.
- * No single device totally works - your ultimate goal is to eliminate the sparrow.
- * Do not feed bird seed if house sparrows regularly visit your feeder.

COMMENTS

House sparrows are easiest to trap when they have started nesting. They can be easy to trap, sometimes in a few minutes. However, don't quit, controlling sparrows is an ongoing management requirement. They can nest 2-3 times during the season. Be prepared, other male sparrows will replace ones eliminated.

There is no legal protection, State or federal, for either the house sparrow or starling. They can be eliminated at any time, preferably in a humane manner. The Human Society of the United States recommends cervical dislocation at the neck as a humane method.

Bluebird organizations recommend that if you are not going to control house sparrows, take the boxes down as you will be doing more harm to the bluebird by leaving the boxes in place and unmanaged.