



House Sparrow

Taxonomy

Order: Passeriformes

Family: Passeridae

Species: *Passer domesticus* (Linnaeus)

Synonyms: *Fringilla domestica* Linnaeus

Summary

A small bird of Eurasian and African origin, the house sparrow is widely regarded as one of the most successful of all introduced species. It is present on every continent except Antarctica. An anthropophilic species, it achieves highest numbers in environments modified by humans, including agricultural, residential areas and cities. They are known to threaten local bird diversity, out-competing them for resources and can be a real pest on farmland by feeding and damaging ripening grains. To a lesser extent they may damage soft fruits and a variety of other commercially grown produce proving problematic particularly for small scale growers.



Male House Sparrow © Evan Lipton



Female House Sparrow © Douglas Faulder

Biology

Passer domesticus is a monogamous, flocking, non-migratory species that tends to make its nests in holes in buildings, creeping/climbing plants against walls and trees, thick hedges/shrub or conifers. It is highly adaptable and makes its nests from a variety of materials including dry grass, paper, papery bark, feathers, hair, string, paper, seed heads, straw etc. Generally, most adults feed on insects when they're tending their young. They then feed on grains throughout the rest of the year be it from weeds, grasses or cultivated origin. House sparrows are recognised as having a prolonged breeding season with multiple broods.

Distribution in Caribbean

Common throughout the Caribbean region, including Anguilla and TCI in disturbed and natural habitats.

Pathway of Entry

Natural dispersal: do not usually fly more than a few kilometres during their lifetimes. Limited migration occurs in all regions.

Intentional dispersal: human-mediated dispersal from one area to another by way of vehicles is possible. House sparrows are known to forage on or in trucks and other freight.



Further Information:

CABI 2020: <https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/38975>

eBird: <https://ebird.org/species/houspa>

Impact

Despite their diminutive proportions, they are quite an aggressive species. They can evict other bird species from their nests, out-compete them for natural resources which may lead to their displacement entirely. They can be a problem around grain storage facilities, poultry farms, as well as fields with ripening grains, such as wheat, oats, corn, barley and sorghum. They may also feed on and damage produce being grown especially young, developing produce. May be a problem for bakeries, warehouses and food storage facilities. Material from nests can congest gutters and drainage pipes causing water damage sometimes. Fires have sometimes been attributed to electrical shorts from electrical housing containing sparrow nests. In large populations, their faeces can be unsightly and potentially a health risk.

Field Description

A sexually dimorphic species, house sparrows are small, stocky birds with members of both sexes having brown backs with black flecks/streaks throughout. Both sexes have pale to dirty greyish undersides with the male possessing an often distinctive black "bib". Males have a black stripe going through the eye with brown flanking either side of a grey crown also. Females quite featureless but notably lacking the bib and are greyer, with lighter brown dorsal plumage than the male.

Breeding males have thick, black bills otherwise they are pale pinkish-brown. The eyes are dark brown and legs dull pink.

The eggs are white, bluish white, or greenish white, spotted with brown or grey. Sub elliptical in shape, they are 20-22 mm long and 14-16 mm wide.

Song: Disyllabic composed of a series of "cheep" or "chirrup" notes. It is mainly given by males. The sound gives rise to the old English name of "Phyllip sparrow" where the "phyll-ip" is onomatopoeic.

Similar species

Difficult to confuse with other species, although may potentially be confused with the following New World sparrows:

- Chipping sparrow, *Spizella passerina*. Unlike *P. domesticus* it has a bright, rusty crown, absence of a bib and thinner black eye-stripe.
- Clay-coloured sparrow, *Spizella pallida*. A much more subtly patterned bird of beige, black, grey and buff colouration. It has a notable insect-buzz sounding call.
- White-crowned sparrow, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*. It has an obvious and striking white and black, zebra-like crown.
- Savannah sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis*. The plumage varies but is generally mottled with black streaks on breast and distinct yellow spots in front of the eyes.