

101

Agriculture Protection Board
Advisory Leaflet No. 101
March 1984
Agdex No. 675
113865/3/84—10M—L/3668

THE SPARROW



Male House Sparrow

THE SPARROW

There are two common species of sparrow, the house sparrow *Passer domesticus* and the hedge sparrow *Passer montanus*. Both can become pests in some situations and both have shown a capacity to spread and colonise large areas of land far from their point of origin.

The house sparrow is the most widespread bird in the world. It is found over the whole of Europe and Asia, except for China and the extreme north of Russia. It also occupies parts of North Africa and the Nile valley of Egypt and the Sudan. It has become established by deliberate introduction in both north and south America, southern Africa and New Zealand. Sparrows were released in Victoria in the early 1860's and have since spread over the eastern half of the continent. No deliberate introductions have occurred in Western Australia although a few accidental arrivals took place by ship and other birds travelled overland. These have been shot to prevent them becoming established.

The house sparrow is a grey-brown bird about 15cm long and weighing some 30g. It has a short heavy bill, black in the male and brown in the female. The back and wings of the male are brown speckled with black. The rump and crown is grey with a distinctive black throat. It has a short white wing bar and greyish white cheeks and underparts. Females are smaller and duller with an indistinct wing bar and grey throat. Immature birds have a similar colouring to the females.

They move across the ground by hopping and are capable of flying considerable distances. Sparrows make a "cheep-cheep" sound but have no distinct song. Males are especially noisy during the breeding season.

Their nests consist of an untidy mass of dead grass and straw and are usually found in and around buildings. Sparrows are mainly grain-eating birds. They take ripening grain from paddocks prior to harvest and waste grain from around farm buildings. They also steal food from feedlots and take waste food from man. In autumn they may pull up germinating seedlings, especially peas, and eat the seed. They also consume buds of flowers and fruit trees, fruit tree blossom and vegetable seedlings and will rip open the pods of ripening peas to eat the seed.

In addition to the food sparrows actually eat, they are considered a pest because of the amount they spoil. They can squeeze through a hole 2cm in diameter and show no fear of entering buildings. They defaecate over grain and grain products in stores, bakeries and milking sheds.

Their nests sometimes block gutters and downpipes and they carry parasites some of which readily transfer their attentions to people.

Although primarily grain eating birds, sparrows also consume some insects, and this was the stated reason for their introduction to many countries. They probably do more harm by displacing native insect-eating birds than good by the insects they themselves eat.

They breed prolifically, laying two or more clutches of four to six eggs every year. The eggs are grey or white with variable black or brown markings. Sparrows usually feed in flocks varying in size from a handful to many thousands. This habit is partly a means of increasing feeding efficiency, because if one bird is seen feeding others join it. It is also a means of reducing the chance of being killed because each individual

bird in a flock can spend less time looking round for predators and more time eating. It has also been noted that birds of prey seem to be confused by large numbers of sparrows, hence attacks on flocks are often unsuccessful.

The tree sparrow, *Passer montanus* is smaller than the house sparrow. It has two white wing bars, a white cheek with a black triangular patch and a chocolate crown. The plumage of both sexes is similar.

It builds nests which resemble the house sparrow's but are frequently found in holes in trees and cliffs. It lays a clutch of from four to six eggs which are smaller and darker than the house sparrow's. The tree sparrow's range extends from China through Eurasia to Ireland. Two successful introductions are known, one in the central United States and the other in south-eastern Australia.

In China it causes damage to rice crops resembling that caused by house sparrows to cereal crops in other parts of the world. Elsewhere it is considered to be only a minor pest, however it undoubtedly causes some damage to crops and gardens and competes with native birds. House and tree sparrows which arrive in Australia from overseas aboard ship are, like other birds entering the country in this way, potential carriers of diseases which could infect domestic poultry, native birds and man.

Any person seeing a bird which might be a sparrow, should contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, Western Australia, 6151, telephone (09) 367 0111 or any country office of the A.P.B. or the Department of Agriculture.