

NABS Factsheet

House Sparrow Control

It is the responsibility of every bluebird landlord to ensure that no House Sparrows fledge from their boxes. **It is better to not put up a nestbox than to have one that fledges House Sparrows.** The North American Bluebird Society is providing this information on House Sparrow control to let you know that there are options available when dealing with House Sparrow problems.

HOUSE SPARROW HISTORY

House Sparrows are one of the most abundant birds in North America and most widely distributed birds on the planet. House Sparrows are not native to North America. They were first introduced from England beginning in the 1850s, on the mistaken premise that they would help reduce insect pests. At first, the new immigrants welcomed this little bird of their homeland. They quickly realized the seriousness of their mistake. The House Sparrow population increased at an explosive rate, and the birds caused extensive damage to crops and fruit trees. They also took over the nesting sites of native cavity-nesting birds. Scientific studies show from 2005 – 2017 House Sparrows populations are decreasing at a rate of 2.5 to 3.5% per year.

LIFE AND HABITS

House Sparrows are extremely aggressive. They will harass, attack, and kill adult native birds (including bluebirds) when competing for nest sites, and will also destroy their eggs and young of native cavity nesting species. In addition, they create problems at birdfeeders, overwhelming them with large numbers and driving native birds away.

The breeding season for House Sparrows begins very early in the spring, pairs may produce up to four broods a season. The male House Sparrow's bond with his nest site is stronger than his bond with a mate. He may lose a mate, but he will not give up his nest site. Although they usually prefer to nest in a cavity, House Sparrows will settle for any nook or cranny they can find. They will also occasionally nest in evergreens, and also may use the nests of Barn Swallows and Baltimore or Bullock Orioles.

House Sparrows quickly build a bulky nest of coarse grasses with seed heads, weeds, trash, and feathers. The female lays three to eight ivory to olive eggs which are heavily speckled with brown (see image) and incubates them for 11–13 days. The young sparrows fledge after 14–17 days.

House Sparrows are not migratory, but flocks of birds move about within about one half to five mile radius. House Sparrows are primarily seed eaters, although they will consume some insects while raising young. They are also attracted to, and will eat, garbage. Feedlots and farms are particularly attractive to sparrows as they provide an abundant source of food, as well as shelter and plenty of nesting sites. They frequent residential birdfeeders, malls, home improvement stores, and restaurants.



David Mitchell



SPARROW CONTROL ON A BLUEBIRD TRAIL

Control of sparrows on a bluebird trail can be either PASSIVE (taking preventative measures to discourage sparrows) or ACTIVE (e.g., removing nests, eggs and trapping adults).

NOTE: House Sparrows are not a native species to North America and are considered a nuisance or invasive species so they are not protected under federal law. State and local laws may vary, so check them first.

Nests and eggs may be destroyed, and young and adults may be humanely euthanized under federal law. Do not consider relocating the bird, as this just relocates the problem, and is even illegal in some states. Some wildlife rehabilitators will accept House Sparrows as food for injured animals.

Before any active control measures are used, **you must be absolutely certain** that it is a House Sparrow adult/nest/egg/young (i.e., not some other similar looking species). See the photos at right for help with identifying House Sparrows, nests and eggs.

Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, it is illegal to interfere with the active nest of any *native* bird without a permit.

PASSIVE CONTROL OPTIONS

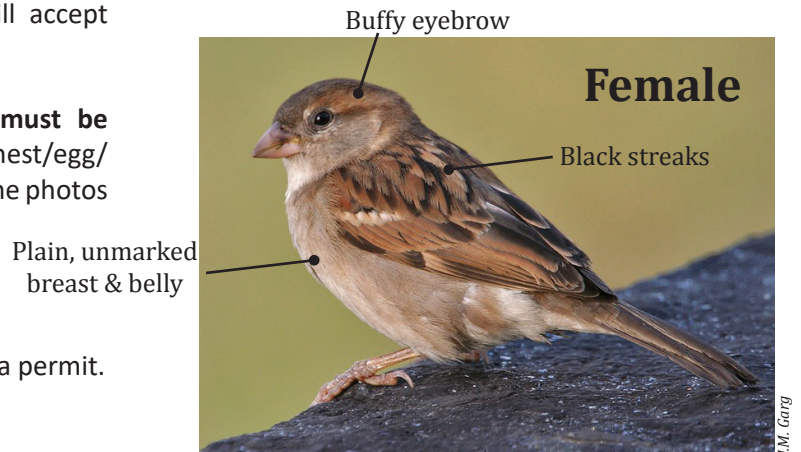
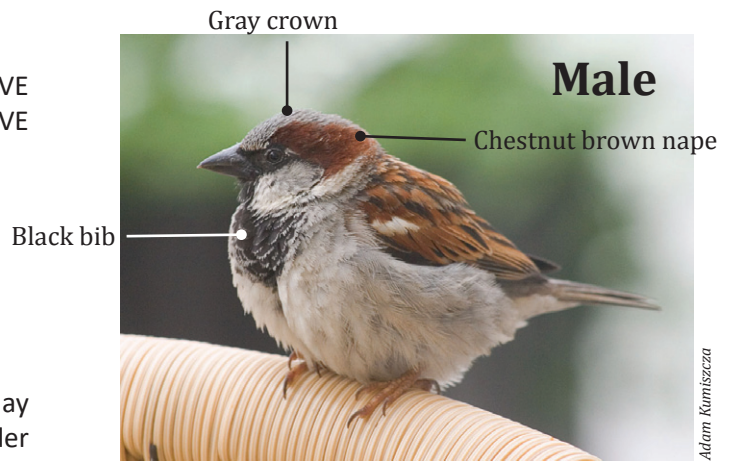
1. BOX LOCATION

Box location is a crucial factor in controlling sparrows on a bluebird trail. The House Sparrow's Latin name, *Passer domesticus*, aptly describes its preferred nesting habits—around houses. Avoid placing nestboxes near farm houses, feedlots, barns, old out-buildings, etc. Boxes placed in or around residential areas are likely to be claimed by House Sparrows. If sparrows do take up residence, one option is to relocate the box to a site farther away from human occupation.

House Sparrows may avoid a nesting site if the box is placed low to the ground (e.g., 3 feet). However, boxes placed at this height are likely targets for snakes, raccoons and cats so this is a feasible option only where there are no climbing predators.

2. PLUGGING THE ENTRANCE HOLE

Plugging the entrance hole of a box taken over by House Sparrows will prevent the male from using that specific box, and will encourage him to move elsewhere. Some bluebird landlords plug the entrance hole at the end of the nesting season and leave it plugged until the bluebirds arrive in the spring. This will prevent House Sparrows from roosting in the box during the winter, and then staking an early claim in the spring. However, keep in mind that this will also prevent bluebirds from roosting in the box during a cold winter.



The nest is a jumbled mess of grass, twigs, feathers, and bits of paper or cloth, built up to nearly fill the nestbox.



House Sparrow eggs are quite variable, but the basic look is gray or brown speckles on a white, ivory, or greenish background.



3. USE OF GILBERTSON PVC BOXES

Although no nestbox suitable for bluebirds is sparrow-proof, some believe that House Sparrows are often comparatively more reluctant to use Gilbertson PVC boxes as well as other nestboxes that have a small interior volume. Some have found that if PVC boxes are paired with a wooden box, House Sparrows tend to choose the wooden box. If you are trying to attract bluebirds in an area where you suspect House Sparrow problems, one strategy could be to start off with the PVC box.

4. ELIMINATING FEEDING AREAS, ROOSTING AND NESTING SITES

Problems on a nestbox trail can be reduced if the overall, local House Sparrow population can be reduced. This can be achieved by taking control measures at bird feeding stations such as avoiding cheap, mixed bird seed that contains a high percentage of “filler grains”, such as milo, millet, or cracked corn, foods preferred by House Sparrows. You can also seal up all potential winter roosting and summer nesting sites.

5. SPARROW SPOOKERS

A Sparrow Spooker is a device that flutters strips of Mylar brushing the roof of a nestbox. Some believe that these are effective in scaring off House Sparrows, but not deter native birds like bluebirds from using a nestbox. It helps to protect the nestbox contents from House Sparrow attack on a 24/7 basis. It is placed on the box AFTER the first native birds' egg is laid, and removed after fledging to avoid scaring off native birds, and also to prevent House Sparrows from becoming accustomed to it. Designs and instructions can be found at www.sialis.org/sparrowspooker.htm.



David Kinneer

ACTIVE CONTROL OPTIONS

1. REGULAR MONITORING

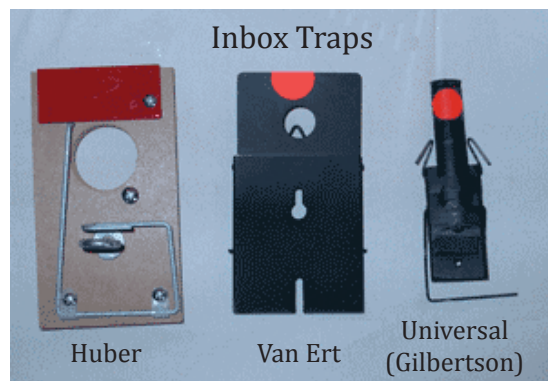
Regular nestbox monitoring helps control House Sparrows. If House Sparrow nests and eggs are regularly removed (e.g., once or twice a week), no young will fledge from the box. However, the male will tenaciously defend his box, and will usually begin rebuilding the nest immediately. He will also drive off and attack other birds that express an interest in the box or are nesting nearby. Therefore, it is best to eliminate the male. This is usually accomplished using an in-box trap.

2. IN-BOX TRAPPING

Three live in-box traps that work well are the Van Ert, basic Huber-style, and the Gilbertson universal trap.

A. INBOX TRAPS: Do not set an in-box trap until a House Sparrow has laid claim to that box. Once he has claimed it, he will try to prevent other species from going inside. The male House Sparrow will be more likely to enter the box if a small amount of nesting material is left in the bottom or tucked in the entrance hole, or if eggs have already been laid. However, be careful that the nesting material does not interfere with the trap.

IMPORTANT: The trap must be checked at least every hour because there is the possibility that a bluebird or other native cavity nester may enter the box.



Bet Zimmerman

To remove a trapped House Sparrow from a box, place a mesh laundry bag or strong clear garbage bag over the entire box, cinch it below the box, then open the door with the bag still over the box. The House Sparrow will fly out and be captured in the bag. From outside the bag, grab the House Sparrow firmly with your free hand and remove the bag from the box. Trying to capture the bird by hand, without a bag, will very often result in it escaping. A thoughtful discussion of options for dealing with the House Sparrow (e.g., humane euthanasia) can be found here: www.sialis.org/hospdispatch.htm.

B. NESTBOX CAGE TRAPS: Basically, these consist of nestboxes atop a wire cage. The nestbox has a hinged floor, which tips the bird down into the cage below.



3. MULTI-BIRD TRAPPING

There are several ways to live ground trap a large number of House Sparrows.

Ground and Other Traps: These traps can be built or purchased, and can hold a large number of birds. One to two House Sparrows should be kept in the cage trap at all times to act as “decoys.” Females are good, as they are less aggressive than males.

The decoys can be attracted into the trap by baiting them with white feathers, grain, bread scraps, white proso millet, mixed bird seed, or cracked corn, or by catching them using an in-box trap and then putting them into the ground trap.



A repeating trap for House Sparrows or European Starlings.

A small mirror placed in the bait compartment of the trap may help lure birds in.

Food, water, and shelter must be provided at all times. Since House Sparrows are gregarious, the success of ground traps depends on the birds being attracted to the food and each other. For this reason, the trap works most effectively in areas with a high initial population.

Used continuously once the population is under control, its effectiveness, though varied throughout the course of the year, is usually very good. These traps are especially effective when juvenile birds are abundant in midsummer.

Repeating Traps: These traps have a small catching elevator that opens through a one-way trap door and empties to a larger holding pen. This permits the capture of a large number of birds. (see <https://www.sparrowtraps.net>)

IMPORTANT: All multi-bird traps must be checked several times daily to ensure that the trapped House Sparrows have adequate food, water, and shelter, and in case a native songbird becomes trapped. Native birds must be released immediately. The male House Sparrow is very easy to identify, but females are quite similar to some species of native sparrows. Check a bird book if necessary. You can check a bird field guide (e.g., by National Geographic, Golden, or Peterson’s) if in doubt.

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The North American Bluebird Society, Inc. is a non-profit education, conservation, and research organization that promotes the recovery of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting bird species in North America.

www.nabluebirdsociety.org

