

The Decline of the House Sparrow by By Leonel Richard of the Miramichi Naturalists' Club. Published in the Miramichi Leader May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

In 1852, a group of 50 pairs of House Sparrows from England were released in Brooklyn, New York and finding it to their liking, proceeded to spread their likeness until they had colonized most of North and South America. Similarly, they were brought to South Africa and Australia in the 1860s where they have become established to the detriment of some native species.



During the 1960s, House Sparrows were once so plentiful around here that at any time of the year you could be sure to see or hear them around every farmyard. Most people were so accustomed to seeing them that they never would have believed that they were introduced to North America and not indigenous as are our other finches.

Viewed with contempt because of their habit of destroying the nests of swallows, sometimes even as the nests were in use, the House Sparrows were often made the target of young boys' slingshot practice. In our ignorance of their name we called them "les petits oiseaux gris" which was quite sufficient for us and our non-scientific need to know what was right and what was not, in the grand scheme of nature. The "little grey birds" were the destroyers of other birds' nests and could not be tolerated by the righteous such

as ourselves. Fortunately for me, my enthusiasm was tempered a lot by my father who regarded all birds, except chickens, as somewhat sacred. So much for the workings of a boy's reasoning.

I truth they weren't really destroying the other birds' nests but just appropriating them for their own use. Swallows were often the victims of this as were Eastern Bluebirds. Coincidentally the Eastern Bluebird seems to be making a comeback in recent years but it may be due to something else than the demise of the House Sparrow. On the other hand, our swallows have been decreasing in numbers.

House Sparrows are not the only species of birds having been introduced to North America. The others such as the European Starling and the Rock Pigeon have not diminished in numbers while the House Sparrow has almost disappeared; at least from some areas. They have not been plentiful since the early 1990s but since the year 2000 they have become very scarce. It's probable that the last one recorded on the Miramichi was on a farm in Napan in 2008 during the Maritime Breeding Bird Atlas. There was a single bird that had been part of a small flock which had been dwindling for a number of years. In 2009 there was no sign of any House Sparrow activity.

This scenario is playing out elsewhere as well. All of the Maritime Provinces are showing a drastic decline in numbers as was proved by the data accumulated from 2006 to 2010 during the Breeding Bird Atlas of the Maritimes. In the United Kingdom where the bird is indigenous and has never shown much fluctuation in the past, there is now a national concern about its decline.

How can such a resourceful bird be in this predicament when other species are thriving? Some place the blame on changing agricultural practices while another possibility is the increase in predators such as house cats and Kestrels (Sparrow Hawks). Still others believe the reason is disease; notably salmonella.

When I get to travel to places where the little grey bird is still common, I appreciate him for the fact that he reminds me of the sounds of the old barnyard from my childhood. It's difficult to say what fate has in store for the little guy but being adaptable, which he is, will surely guarantee his survival.

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