

# House Sparrow

**T**HE HOUSE SPARROW (HS), often called English Sparrow, was introduced (from England and Germany) into the United States in Brooklyn, New York, in 1850, and by 1910 had spread to California. They are found everywhere in the U.S. and are now the most ubiquitous avian species in the world.

There are slight variations in size and color, but these invaders are easy to recognize. They are 6.25 inches long (putting them in the middle of the pack of sparrow sizes) with a wingspan of 9.5 inches. The bill is thick, for seed eating. The male has a black bill during breeding season, which becomes yellowish during other times of the year. His chest is gray with a black streak from bill to center of the chest (black mostly around the bill during non-breeding). The back and wings are chestnut brown (or a paler gray-brown during non-breeding). There is one white wing bar. Females lack the black and are uniformly gray-brown, lighter on the belly, and with a light stripe through the eye. Their song is mostly a series of chirps. They are non-migratory.

The HS builds nests in trees and cavities, especially around fields and human habitation. Males court with spread wings and drooped tail. Pairs are monogamous, usually for life. Male or female may select the nest site. Four to six eggs are laid, which hatch in 10 to 13 days. The helpless young are able to fledge in 14 to 17 days. Several broods (2 to 3) may be produced each year. Diet includes spiders, insects, blossoms, grass, and forb seeds.

Birds usually stay within a mile of where they were hatched.

The HS is a plucky bird, usually found in small groups in the summer and larger flocks in the winter. Unfortunately, they are aggressive and will displace bluebirds and swallows, destroying nests, eggs, and hatchlings.

Their number decreased after the automobile replaced horse travel, presumably because the supply of grain to be found around horses and in horse droppings declined. They have also declined due to the use of pesticides and monoculture crops.

I am a bluebird and native bird fan and thus do not want HSs around. They appeared at my seed feeders about four years ago. I was using a mixed seed which had many small pieces. I immediately switched to black oil sunflower seed only, and the HSs were gone in about four to six weeks. However, I now see quail less frequently at my feeder. But I have been blessed with bluebird babies every year!

As a non-native bird, the HS is one of two birds whose nests can be legally destroyed and which can be killed as vermin. The other is the Starling. They are not protected by the Migratory Bird Act.



Photo: Mindaugas Urbonas, from the Lithuanian Wikipedia

—Pam Henline