

OLD WORLD SPARROWS — FAMILY PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

No bird on earth is as completely a commensal of man as the House Sparrow. A native of Eurasia, it was introduced repeatedly from England to the United States in the 19th century, then transplanted within this country. Transplantation to San Francisco allowed the birds to spread to southern California; they arrived in San Diego in 1913 and quickly proliferated. Now few clusters of buildings of any consequence lack House Sparrows, but in southern California the birds seldom spread into undeveloped natural habitats.

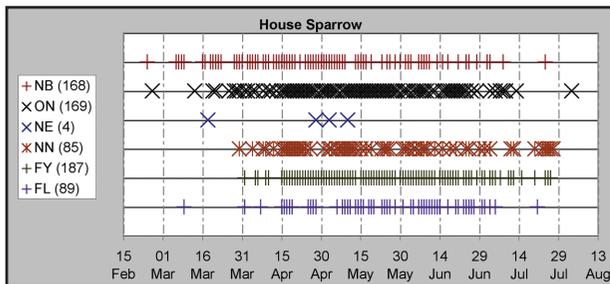
Breeding distribution: The House Sparrow's distribution in San Diego County follows the limits of built-up areas almost exactly. Even isolated desert communities and campgrounds have their colonies; indeed, numbers in such places can be quite large (75 at Ocotillo Wells, I28, 26 April 2001, J. R. Barth). The Anza-Borrego Desert also furnished our largest one-day estimate of House Sparrow numbers in the breeding season, 200 in the Club Circle area of Borrego Springs (G24) 15 April 2001 (L. and M. Polinsky). The apparent gaps in a few squares with appreciable urban development were likely due to atlas observers' concentrating on natural habitats at the expense of developed areas. The sparrows are lacking around some scattered rural ranches, however, though they inhabit



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

even many of these. House Sparrows are largely absent above 4500 feet elevation, although there may be buildings that would attract them elsewhere.

Nesting: House Sparrows most typically nest in a crevice in buildings, filling the cavity with grass and trash. In southern California, the birds commonly use the gaps under curved Spanish roof tiles, so much so that builders now attempt to exclude House Sparrows—not always successfully—by blocking these gaps with strips or sections of material called birdstops. Other common nest



sites include street lamps, old Cliff Swallow nests, and the spaces between the bases of palm leaves. Many pairs may nest colonially in a single palm, as at Club Circle, Borrego Springs, or Kimball Park, National City (T10). Sometimes House Sparrows build ball-shaped nests with side entrances, placing them in exposed situations in trees, especially thorny ones. Even eucalyptus trees occasionally host colonies of such nests.

Because House Sparrows may maintain their nests year round, observations of nest building and occupied nests convey less information about breeding than they do with most songbirds. A female with a brood patch

trapped at Point Loma (S7) 18 March 1997 (V. P. Johnson) and the 30 March–27 July spread of nests with nestlings demonstrate that in San Diego County House Sparrows lay from mid March to early July.

Migration: The House Sparrow is nonmigratory, adults often roosting in their nest cavities and guarding them year round. Only a fraction of the juveniles disperse from their natal colonies (Lowther and Cink 1992).

Winter: The House Sparrow’s winter distribution in San Diego County does not differ materially from its breeding distribution. The site of concentration that emerges most conspicuously from winter atlas data is the San Diego Zoo in Balboa Park (R9), where the sparrows capitalize on animal feed as well as human food waste. Estimates from the zoo ranged up to 300 on 15 January 2000 (J. R. Barth).

Conservation: The House Sparrow may be expected to spread further in San Diego County with continued urban development, but its exponential growth phase is long over. Christmas bird counts over the final third of the 20th century show no clear trend. The population may decline as buildings are engineered to preclude the birds’ nesting.

Conversion of land from agriculture to urban uses disfavors the House Sparrow because even if more buildings mean more nest sites, suburbs probably offer less food, especially the insects fed to the young. America’s shift from the horse to the automobile is generally credited for a decline in House Sparrow numbers in the eastern U.S. A more recent sharp decline in several European countries has not yet been paralleled in California. But the more sterile, the more rigorously managed our environment, the more it discourages all wildlife, even the lowly House Sparrow.

Taxonomy: The north Eurasian *P. d. domesticus* is the subspecies introduced to North America.

