

## House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

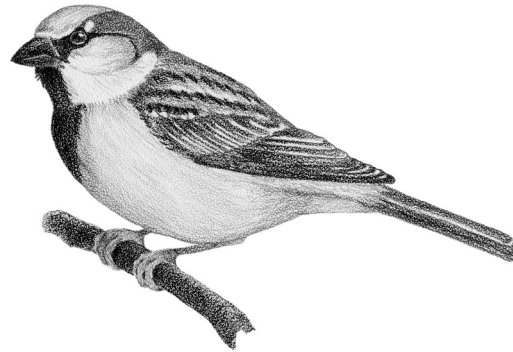


**Folk Name:** English Sparrow, Bull Sparrow, Weaver Finch

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Very Common to Abundant

**Habitat:** Human settlements: cities, towns, farms, open neighborhoods



The House Sparrow is a common to abundant resident throughout the Carolinas. These birds can be found nesting almost everywhere people live. They feed on almost any type of seed or grain, and they also eat insects.

The House Sparrow is an icon of our man-made habitats. These birds are perhaps most conspicuous at strip malls, gas stations, parking lots, and fast food restaurants, where they can be found nesting in the eaves of the buildings and fighting over fries and other discarded food on the pavement below. These birds are found in the Piedmont year-round in good numbers with over 300 being counted in a single day on some Christmas Bird Counts held in the region.

House Sparrows have a protracted nesting season. They generally begin nesting as early as March and continue through September. Some have been observed in Charlotte carrying nesting material to a nest box during the last week in January. These birds are quite prolific. Three to five broods of four to seven young can be raised each year. They aggressively compete with native cavity-nesting birds for a limited number of natural cavities and are well known for chasing off or even killing bluebirds and other native songbirds:

“The English sparrow will rear three or four nests of young a season. And this same season birds from the first, possibly the second set, will rear young of their own. No wonder this bird is everywhere.”

—William McIlwaine, Charlotte, May 8, 1928

South Carolina ornithologists Sprunt and Chamberlain called this bird “noisy, quarrelsome, and aggressive” and remarked that: “It is unattractive and generally despised, but its history is of considerable interest.” The House Sparrow is originally a native of Eurasia that has spread throughout the world. It has adapted to and thrived within man-made environments for hundreds of years. Today, this hardy bird is considered by many ornithologists to be “the most common bird in the world.”

During the nineteenth century, numerous attempts were made to introduce populations of the exotic House Sparrow at many locations in the United States. These introductions were made for a variety of reasons ranging from the desired introduction of all birds mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare, to helping to control



outbreaks of pest caterpillars like cabbage-worms, cotton caterpillars, and cankerworms. Ultimately, many of these attempts were successful. The earliest documented introduction is eight pairs that were imported from Great Britain by the Brooklyn Institute in 1850 and released in Brooklyn, NY. These first birds did not survive, but a flock released by the same group in Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery in 1853, survived, “did well and multiplied.”

Over the next two decades, House Sparrows imported from Great Britain and Germany were released in cities across the continent from Philadelphia and Boston in the east; to Akron, Galveston, and Iowa City in the central states; to Salt Lake City and San Francisco in the west. In 1889, W.B. Barrows, a government ornithologist studying House Sparrows, wrote:

But no sooner had they become fairly numerous at any of these points than people began to take them thence to other places, sometimes in large numbers, but more often a few pairs at a time. In most cases these few birds were carefully watched, protected, and fed, and so multiplied rapidly by successive transportations by man. This important factor in the rapid increase and wide distribution of the [House] Sparrow in America has been too generally ignored, and it is only within the past year that we have come to realize something of the magnitude of the “craze” which led so many people to foster and distribute this serious pest.

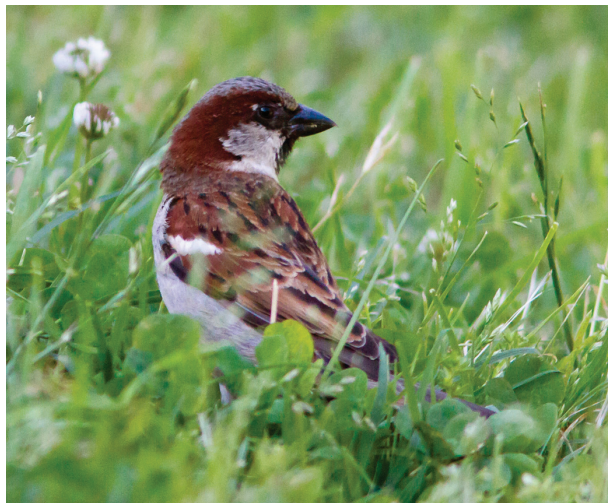
From this time [1850] to the present, the marvelous rapidity of the Sparrow’s multiplication, the surpassing swiftness of its extension, and the prodigious size of the area it has overspread are without parallel in the history of any bird. Like a noxious weed transplanted to fertile soil, it has taken root and become disseminated over half a continent before the significance of its presence has come to be understood.

The introduction of the House Sparrow into the Carolinas has been poorly elucidated. In 1910, Arthur T. Wayne wrote: “The English Sparrow made its appearance in Charleston either in 1874 or 1875.” In 1919, the authors of *Birds of North Carolina* wrote “so far as we know,” it “first appeared in Raleigh in 1879” and then spread to cities and towns throughout the state. In fact, a review of the literature of the late nineteenth century provides us many additional clues on how this bird arrived in our region. Several published reports from the 1870s are summarized below.

Dr. A.P. Wylie liberated a half-dozen House Sparrows in Chester South Carolina during the summer of 1873. He had transported them from New York. This small colony began to grow, and in 1885, Leverett Loomis noted: “this aggressive little foreigner has become firmly established in the town of Chester, especially in the business portion.”

In addition to the Chester introduction, W.B. Barrows reported introductions in Columbia, SC, in 1869–1870, in Wilson, NC, in 1876–1877, and in Goldsboro, NC, in 1879. In Charlotte, on January 7, 1877, “a drove of about fifty English sparrows was seen in the city by several gentlemen.” On April 13, 1877, *The Observer* newspaper in Raleigh proposed introducing a flock in Capital Park. That summer, Colonel Turner, Keeper of the Capitol, released House Sparrows there, and they thrived. In December 1877, Alderman Foster ordered 300 birds to be purchased for release in the town of Wilmington. English Sparrows showed up in Winston-Salem in January 1879.

Within just a few short years after these introductions, many communities realized they had made a serious mistake. The House Sparrow was soon dubbed “the Little Nuisance,” and was called “an aggressive destructive pest,” and a “terror,” among many less congenial names. As early as March 1878, *The Charlotte Democrat* reported: “People of the various cities who have introduced the English Sparrows, are now mourning their folly, and are anxious to get clear of what they consider a great nuisance.” Just



Male House Sparrow. (Gary P. Carter)

two years later, the editors of this paper wrote: “Shoot them and kill them in any and every way possible. They are a nuisance on any one’s premises, and destructive to other birds of all sorts. Kill them off, now, in time, before further mischief.” In November 1882, the *News and Observer* in Raleigh reported: “English Sparrows are fast becoming a nuisance in many places in the state. There are many in this city.”

By 1885, a “war of extermination” ensued, and bounties were offered on English Sparrows in many cities throughout America. One penny per sparrow was offered in some places, while in Gaston County in 1888, officials made a standing offer of “one lump of sugar for one English Sparrow, dead or alive, or one of their eggs, or a fish-hook for five birds or five eggs.”

By the end of the nineteenth century, House Sparrows were reported to be expanding out from their urban strongholds in the Carolinas and “rapidly going into the country” around farms as well. By the 1910s, it was reported they could be found near man-made dwellings anywhere in North Carolina. In 1916, the League of American Sportsmen, a national group dedicated to the preservation of wildlife, issued a formal proclamation that a “War is Declared on the English Sparrow.” On June 9, 1916, the YMCA Bird Club in Greenville, SC, advised all boys in the area “to go to it with sling shots and air rifles to see if they could exterminate, if possible,” this bird.

Throughout these decades relatively few “friends of the sparrow” publicly spoke out in its defense. When they did, they highlighted the bird’s role in the control of insect pests, especially the cotton worm and the cankerworm, which is still a serious pest that annually infests oaks and other trees throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Defenders of the House Sparrow were often publicly berated and treated with some contempt. One example comes from the *Audubon Magazine*, when bird lover was pitted against bird lover.

Mrs. Lydia L.A. Very sent a letter, published in the February 1888 issue, in response to words by General F.E. Spinner, a known bird enthusiast who was the 10th Treasurer of the United States. She wrote:

I was reading (with pleasure) your remarks and advice to the boys to spare the birds, when I came to your ending advising them to kill the poor little English (European more properly) Sparrow. We who have watched the sparrows from the first year of their introduction into the country know them to be useful and interesting. They have freed our trees from canker worms (we do not tar them now), they eat the pupa of the caterpillars (we seldom see a caterpillar now), they destroy the clothes moth in embryo, and they are busy scavengers of our public yards and streets.

General Spinner provided a misogynistic and pithy response:

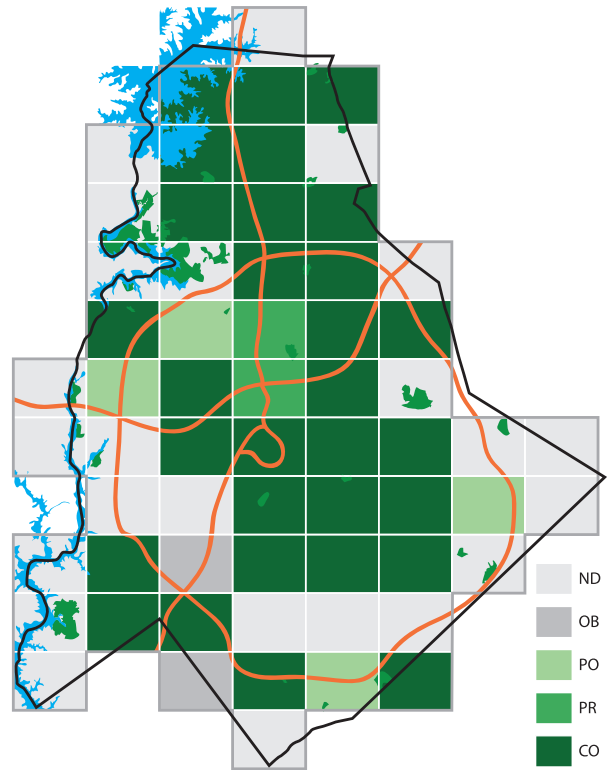
While your sympathy for the feathered biped brigand, the English sparrow, does you credit, I think it is misplaced. I can only account for it, on the supposition that you, like many others of your sex, have a perverted sympathy for the worst kind of criminals. ... You say God made these sparrows for a purpose; now, while I will not dispute your proposition, I beg to remind you that the same may be said of skunks, wolves, rattlesnakes, scorpions, fleas, mosquitos, and thousands of other animated nuisances.

Population numbers of this invasive bird appear to have peaked in the Carolinas around the 1920s. At this time, agriculture was widespread, horses still roamed both farms and city streets, and stores of grain and loose seed were prevalent. As the automobile replaced the horse, the extent of farmland declined, and industrialization expanded, the numbers of House Sparrows declined. In addition, there is also speculation that efforts made towards cleaner streets and cityscapes have also aided in the decline of this species in many urban areas. Breeding Bird Survey trend data indicate a fairly steep decline from the 1960s through the 1990s. Today, the House Sparrow is still a common to abundant bird across the Carolinas, but its population numbers are far reduced from the numbers present during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Unlike most of our other birds, the House Sparrow is not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and has no legal protection in the Carolinas.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding

Bird Atlas determined this species is a widespread breeding bird in the county. Its presence in some survey blocks may have been overlooked as volunteers tended to focus less effort on searching for these non-native birds.



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
*Widespread (PR/2, CO/30)*