

## **Observations on the House Sparrow**

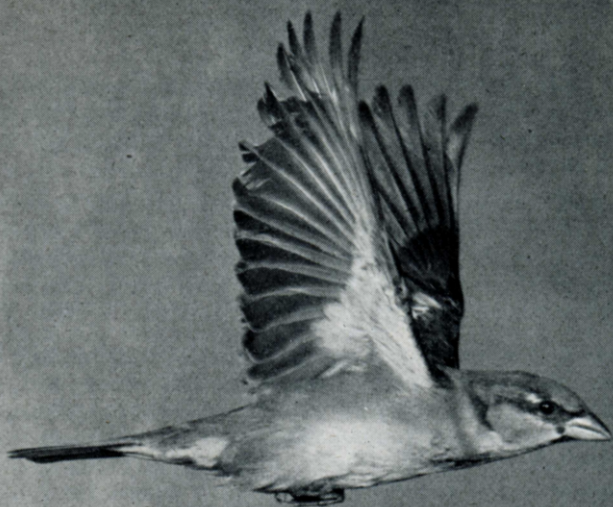
By CHARLES H. COOKE

**T**HE house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) has come to be regarded by most people as one of nature's common nuisances and a bird to be endured more out of sentimentality than for any other reasons.

It is the best known of all our native birds, and its preference for human habitations is one of the main reasons why it is left in comparative safety despite its mixed virtues.

Yet, considering the fact that it is such a common and widely-distributed species, the personal behaviour and habits of the house sparrow are not so well known as they should be, and it has certainly never received the same attention and close study as other birds.

As R. S. R. Fitter so aptly remarks in his *London Birds* (1949), "It is strange that the best-known bird in Britain should have the least courtship, but familiarity has so bred contempt among ornithologists that the standard work on British birds (*The Handbook of British Birds*) is obliged to sum up the subject with "sexual behaviour peculiar and not well understood . . . whole subject requires further study." "If the house-sparrow were known only in the British Isles by half a dozen pairs on Benbecula and a few more on the Blaskets, it is tolerably certain that a full description of its courtship would long before now have appeared in the Proceedings of the Zoological Society or "The Ibis.""



### HOUSE SPARROW

Photograph by courtesy of Eric Hosking, F.R.P.S.

The various displays and posturings of this bird are given in *The Handbook of British Birds* (1938). A prominent feature of the breeding season is noisy display, when sometimes one or more males hop about with loud chirpings around the female with elevated bill and drooping wings which merely elicit pecks from the irritated hen. The performance frequently ceases with a sudden dispersal of the participants and appears unconnected with coition or even with pairing. Rough-and-tumble scrimmages between several males without display have also been recorded, and, although females are sometimes involved in these tussles, selection of mates as a result is not clearly demonstrated. Coition is normally solicited by females with drooping wings and twittering notes without any display by the males. F. Haverschmidt has recorded that in exceptional cases coition may be preceded by typical display of the male without the usual solicitation of the female.

So much for the information supplied by the leading work on British birds. During the past few years I have paid some attention to the house sparrow and have been well rewarded by observing several interesting aspects of its habits.

Clad in brown plumage of varied tints, the male house sparrow can boast none of the striking colours of some other species. He is devoid of any of the prominent adornments or brilliant colouring of more ornate species, and, consequently, has to rely entirely on his personal charms and graces for attracting mates.

Despite this sober plumage, the house sparrow still appears smart in his nuptial array, as, with tail erect and fanned, throat distended and wings drooping, he bounces about in airy manner before his paramour. The cock advances and retreats, as he carefully parries the blows of his mate-to-be, ignoring the disappointment and rebuffs that inevitably follow his preliminary advances. But he is an ardent and persistent wooer, and to human observers appears foolish and ever willing to endure a series of prolonged snubs and deliberate peckings before finally securing a mate and consummating his courtship.

The house sparrow's amorous advances consist of a series of pleasant, intimate and subtle movements, persuasive rather than animated by any coercive endeavours at securing a mate. The cock bird dances before the hen exhibiting his unpretensive charms to full advantage.

It is true that he is always ready to fight and skirmish with any rivals that are unwise enough to dispute his right to acquire a selected mate, and these noisy squabbles are frequently seen and heard during the courtship and nesting season, a fact I have observed on many occasions.

The hen bird is a somewhat discriminating creature, exercising at times a considerable amount of fastidiousness before finally accepting the advances of the male. I watched such an incident in 1948. A hen sparrow was perched on a small tree about ten feet from the ground. She was followed immediately by a cock bird who alighted a foot or so directly above her on another branch. He dropped, helicopter-wise on to her with rapidly quivering wings and extended tail. This performance was repeated a dozen times without the female showing any signs of interest. But finally she succumbed to his ardent attentions and coition followed.

It is curious, moreover, how bold and cheeky the house sparrow is when engaged in courtship display, for I have seen it taking place on pathways in busy streets, in parks, and other crowded places. House sparrows are early wooers and various forms of sexual behaviour may be observed at most times of the year.

In 1948 I was also fortunate in observing another most interesting aspect of the sexual display of this species. My curiosity was attracted one morning by a noisy demonstration by a dozen or so birds in a tree overhanging my garden wall. I focussed my binoculars on the spot and was in time to see a hen sparrow alight on the garden path, followed by two males. One of these commenced to peck the hen's cloaca but she remained in a passive state. The other male bird remained an interested spectator of the proceedings. After the hen had flown away, the cock remained on the ground, rapidly fluttering his wings, and raising them above his back in ecstatic excitement. This particular behaviour is only recorded once in *The Handbook*, but since I reported it in *British Birds* it has been recorded several times by other ornithologists. I myself saw it repeated last year and it may be far more prevalent than reported examples indicate.

Another unusual incident came my way in 1950. I noticed a female sparrow picking up freshly mown grass from a churchyard and flying with it to a nearby spot where she was constructing her nest. So far as I have been able to discover this material has not previously been given as a nesting material for the house sparrow.

Several letters have appeared in certain natural history journals recently regarding the habit of house sparrows clinging to the sides of houses and apparently pecking at the mortar between the bricks.

I observed similar behaviour myself last year when two or three sparrows alighted on the side of a pebbled house and clung, tree-creeper like, to the rough surface, and pecked at the mortar for some minutes. I have seen this peculiar behaviour repeated once since but it may be that the birds were only sharpening their beaks. However, further investigations seems necessary, and I am keeping a watchful eye for further examples.

House sparrows are notorious dust and water bathers, and two or three years ago I even saw a number having a good time in snow, fluttering their wings and showering the powdery snow over their bodies.

These few examples of peculiar display and behaviour are sufficient to show how true are the words of the *Handbook of British Birds* when it summarises the matter by saying that "the whole subject requires further study."

All interested in birds, and especially stay-at-home ornithologists, can assist in elucidating the habits and courtship behaviour of this common bird, for it is easily observed at close quarters and is so unafraid of man that it does not hesitate to display and attract a mate even in crowded areas and near our homes.