

DISCOURAGING THE ENGLISH SPARROW.

BY THOMAS H. WHITNEY.

For nearly two years I have spent a good deal of leisure time on the almost hopeless task of ridding my home grounds of the English sparrow. Having tried nearly all the methods I could think of or read about that promised any practical results, in the hope my experience may be of some little value to others, I venture to describe it briefly.

The sparrow problem naturally divides itself into three parts: Destruction, Prevention of Increase, Protecting Food Supplied to Native Birds.

DESTRUCTION.

In the twenty months elapsed since I began work, I have killed 216 sparrows. Not a very large number, but ours is a small inland city which does not harbor any big flocks in the upper residence districts, the sparrows being rather evenly distributed a few to a place, as nesting and roosting are convenient. Those formerly resident in our grounds have long since been killed, and the great majority of those destroyed were new-comers in search of food or un-preempted homesites. The total number killed is divided as follows:

Poisoned by strychnine-coated wheat.....	13
Shot with air-rifle.....	10
Shot with .22 cal. rifle.....	31
Caught in wire funnel trap.....	13
Caught in nest box trap.....	137

Total..... 216

There are practical difficulties in the use of poison, the principal one that of limiting the poisoned bait to sparrows only. I have a fresh supply of poisoned wheat made up for use this winter, but juncoes linger, and would probably be killed with the sparrows. Better a whole flock of sparrows than the unnecessary death of one native bird.

It is only occasionally that a bird can be killed or even in-

jured with an air-rifle, irrespective of marksmanship, as the shooting quality of the ordinary air-gun is very unreliable.

In my judgment the best gun for shooting sparrows in towns is the .22 calibre rifle, using shot cartridges, and to be equipped with a silencer; it is then practically noiseless, and almost certain to drop the bird if fired from a reasonable distance. When shot at irregularly and with this gun, sparrows do not become especially "gun-shy," as they certainly will if hunted in the ordinary way. Shooting, however, is usually against the ordinances of towns and cities, and apt to be dangerous, no matter how much care is exercised. Moreover, little impression can be made in this particular way, on the large numbers of sparrows always present in towns.

The ordinary funnel wire trap such as advertised extensively of late by various bird supply houses, I have tried out thoroughly, and found wanting. It will catch a few birds the first time or two of setting,—after that the sparrows will not enter, no matter how carefully the bait is placed, and irrespective of moving the trap to different locations. Where localities are over-run with large flocks of sparrows, a funnel trap will at first catch a good many, but the fact remains that they will not enter it after a few days, and further setting is useless.

It will be noted that more than 50% of the sparrows killed have been caught in a nest box trap. This kind of trap is fully described in the U. S. Farmer's Bulletin "The English Sparrow as a Pest." All the time I have been trying to shoot, poison, and trap sparrows by other means, this nest box trap has been steadily reducing their numbers, in all sorts of weather, and in all seasons of the year; it makes no difference when the bird arrives, the trap is ready and there is no escape. A thousand nest box traps put in commission throughout the country, would take their annual toll of tens of thousands of sparrows, and if placed with discretion will catch few native birds.

Of all the methods I know, the nest box trap is by far the best; not only from the standpoint of actual results in my

experience, but because it affords a really constant menace to the sparrows. Poisoning, shooting and trapping by other means are effective only when attended to by some one. The nest box trap, once put up, is always set, and if the receiving sack be fairly large, needs visiting only once or twice a season, though common humanity will direct attention to it at frequent intervals to prevent unnecessary cruelty.

PREVENTION OF INCREASE.

Sparrows are not allowed to roost anywhere on our premises; at intervals of not more than a few days, we make the rounds of the house and grounds, and by poking with a fish pole in corners and above windows, and shaking vines and awnings, any birds present are driven off; if disturbed more than once, the same birds will not return. This undoubtedly discourages to a large extent any attempt to build in these places.

Boxes made of boards are put up only for wrens, the hole being made too small for sparrows. Any board box containing an ordinary sized hole, and especially if fitted with a perch or ledge, will certainly be occupied by sparrows and not a chance afforded the birds for which it was erected.

Several boxes in the von Berplesch style hung on our trees have been successfully occupied by wood-peckers, and are now in use by nuthatches and possibly chickadees as winter quarters. Early last spring the sparrows reconnoitered nearly all of these boxes, but made no attempt to occupy them and have not annoyed the rightful tenants. It may be too soon to be sure, but indications point strongly to the immunity of this style of nest boxes from occupation by the sparrows. If this is so, they certainly deserve a wide sale.

Our martin house has to be carefully watched, even for some time after arrival of the martins. At least one pair of sparrows will be allowed to rear broods without objection by the martins, and it has been necessary each spring to climb up several times and tear out nests. If the owner of a martin house is not persistently watchful, young sparrows will be

reared amidst the martins without his knowledge, as the parents develop astonishing cunning in concealing the presence of the family.

Once in a while some one writes that he does not let any sparrows nest in his yard. All praise to those who pursue this laudable ambition. "No sparrows nests" ought to be the slogan of every member of the Wilson Club, and every one else who takes an interest in our native birds.

PROTECTION OF FOOD SUPPLIES FOR NATIVE BIRDS.

I have tried out two of the best known winter feeding devices, one a self feeder attached to a tree, the other an expensive glass shelter with self feeding hopper for nuts, erected on an iron pole. The tree self-feeder was up only a short time till the sparrows began to frequent it, to the virtual exclusion of all others. Even when it contained food they did not want, the sparrows sat around anyway, and kept other birds at a distance. The glass shelter worked admirably last winter, and afforded the chickadees and a red breasted nuthatch plenty of dry food, and a sunny and sheltered place to rest. I thought the recommendation of its makers, that sparrows were afraid to enter, was justified; but alas, my fond expectations were dashed this fall by finding it the favorite resort of sparrows, who drove the returning chickadees away. Possibly it should not have been left standing all summer, and familiarity bred contempt. Any way, it has been taken in now, to be put up again later if there seems to be possibility of the sparrows forgetting it.

No attempt is now made to feed any of the hard billed or seed eating birds, as it seems to be impossible to prevent such food being monopolized by the sparrows. At present I am feeding sun-flower seeds in cloth pockets on the trunks of trees, and suet in mesh bags. Both these supplies are tacked or tied on the upright trunk, and all small nearby limbs or other projections that might serve as perches, are carefully cut away. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees and brown creepers have no difficulty in using these food supplies owing

to their ability to cling to the bark, the lack of which faculty prevents the sparrows from interfering.

In our part of Iowa, practically no seed eating birds are seen in towns during the winter. It is therefore not worth while to in effect invite the sparrows by putting out grain of any kind, especially as any such attempt is sure to be rendered valueless by the pugnacity and persistence of the sparrows, who will eat or waste all the food put out.

In conclusion, I believe I have demonstrated to my own satisfaction that sparrows can be successfully combated, by any one who can devote a small part of his spare time to the work. It requires energy and persistence, but it can be done.

In every locality, there needs to be a development of public sentiment to a point where many will be become interested enough to help. It is all well enough to talk and write about conserving our native birds, putting up nest boxes for them, etc., but in my humble opinion the crying need at present is an active campaign against the sparrow. If we will reduce the numbers of sparrows, native birds will certainly come in of themselves, and have a chance to survive the increase in towns and cities, which is denied them under present conditions.

Those of mature age can remember when the first visit of the snow birds was a welcome event of the early winter. When the lovely blue-birds, and vireos, and phoebes were about our yards in town all summer. How sad it is that all this is gone, perhaps forever, and we are compelled to listen to the incessant chirp of the alien sparrows, and witness their persecution of any hapless native birds that chance to stop even for a day, in their migration.

Lack of training and in doors occupation doubtless prevents many members of the Wilson Club, as well as myself, from following many lines of bird study we would enjoy; these must be left to others. But there is a line of work we can engage in, and one of the greatest importance, *The destruction of the English Sparrow.*