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CONTENTS

# UNUSUAL HOUSE SPARROW (PASSER DOMESTICUS) NESTING BEHAVIOR

Daniel Drennen

Some aspects of house sparrow (Passer domesticus) nesting behavior were observed at the Demonstration Farm in Oak Mountain State Park, Pelham, Alabama. Observations were made almost daily between 17 February and 1 June 1982. Twelve pairs of nesting sparrows were observed in the demonstration arena, building large and bulky nests between the supporting steel rafters of the ceiling. Initially, farm workers used rubber green snakes, 12 inches long, to detour nesting of these birds. After only two days the sparrows became habituated to the snakes and began roosting on and near them. In one instance a snake was used for nesting material. To rid the arena of sparrows farm workers then destroyed nests regularly. Regardless of the constant nest destruction, the sparrows continued to build their bulky nests. About 5 days were needed for the sparrows to complete a nest that consisted of hay, chicken feathers, grass, wool and paper. When the nests reached a particular size and weight they began to lose balance, slowly lean, and then fall from the rafters. Surprisingly, the birds continued to add material to the "leaning nests." Thievery of nesting material by other house sparrows on an oversized nest was not contributed to its destruction. Once the nest did fall the sparrows would start rebuilding on the same or adjacent location. As before, these nests slowly lost balance, became awkward and fell. By the middle of May, bird nesting intensity had decreased. Between then and 1 June only two nests were built. These nests also fell. It was not determined if the same sparrows were rebuilding the nests. Whatever the case, the rebuilding of nests occurred during 17 different instances.

Experiments by Sargent (1965) with zebra finches (Poephilia castanotis), showed that experience plays a partial role n nest building behavior. Welty (1975)

stated that birds of many species build better nests as they grow older. Hormonal states (Hind in Welty 1975) may control several different behavior activities such as material gathering. This may stimulate carrying, and carrying material may lead to placing and weaving. In the case of the observed sparrows, the sequence of behavior events started with material gathering, placing and then weaving. These nests soon lost balance, leaned over and slowly fell to the ground. The behavioral cue to stop adding material to the already oversized nest may not of have been learned at this time.

This behavior may be common for unexperienced bird nesters who have not learned from their previous nesting seasons mistakes. Nesting house sparrows were observed in less precarious structures such as barn eaves and ventilation openings of a poultry house. The first eggs (5) were found in one nest on 9 April 1982.

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## CATTLE EGRET MANAGMENT IN ALABAMA

Julian L. Dusi

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Cattle Egret, Bubulcus ibis, immigrated and dispersed in Alabama, it has mainly been accepted as a desirable addition to the avifauna. Now that it has

become the most abundant egret in North America, there are complaints regarding its nesting in undesirable areas.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first problem results from the egrets nesting too close to houses. Dusi (1979) reported the history of the heron and Cattle Egret colony at Tuskegee and the 13 July 1979 shooting of over 1,000 Cattle Egrets in the late summer attempt to cause the colony to desert and leave the area and how the remaining 10,000 egrets did not leave. In that report, Dusi also recommended that out-of-place colonies could be caused to leave before young were present in the nests, by harassing the birds at roosting time, by removing nests, tying colored plastic streamers in the trees, and using other noise scare devices. After the young had hatched, it was noted, it was practically impossible to cause the birds to desert and leave their nests with young.

The summer of 1981, Tuskegee again was the site of an unwanted Cattle Egret colony that was being established near houses. This time the city officials took action immediately. Police fired shotguns to disturb the birds, for several afternoons before dark. Unfortunately, the noise was not continued after dark. As a result, the birds waited until the noise was stopped and then came back to the area to roost.

The Tuskegee officials then contacted Dusi, who suggested that Bobby Trammel, the Fish and Wildlife Service control agent, be brought in for consultation and on 4 June, they met with the city officials at the site and then made recommendations: 1) that the birds be harassed with the shotgun shells called "shellcrackers," for several nights until after dark; that the nests probably would have to be pulled down; and that some of the trees possibly be removed to thin out the area and make it less attractive. Apparently the "shellcracker"

harassment caused the birds to leave without necessitating other measures. By quick, early action the birds were removed with little mortality.

On 24 July 1981, a call from the Alabama State Department of Health showed a similar problem with the colony at Millbrook, just north of Montgomery. The colony there had been a minor nuisance to residents since 1976 but now it was judged acute. The Health Department was concerned with the possibility of histoplasmosis affecting the students at the adjacent school.

The colony was in a wooded area on the east side of the city, bounded on the east by a gravel pit and on the west by several houses and a school. The colony had been there for a year, then it moved several hundred yards away for two years and finally back to the original site in 1979. After its use in 1980, many of the trees in the center of the wooded area were killed. The birds nested in peripheral trees in 1981 and this is what brought them close to the houses and the school.

Since it was late in the season and many young were nearly ready to leave the nests, nothing could be done that season except to clean up the dead birds, which are always present on the ground, and to spread hydrated lime on the ground to control some of the odor and the flies. Killing 15,000 egrets was not warranted, since no actual health hazard was present. It was recommended that the trees near the houses and the school be cut down so that the problem would not occur again the following year. Recommendations were not followed and the problem was again present n late 1982. This time the trees were bulldozed down and the area near the school cleared.

The second problem is concerned with the destruction of trees in the nesting colonies. The birds nest very closely together so that 12,000 may nest in less than a hectare. Their droppings are so concentrated that they greatly increase the fertility and pH, which kill the

trees. Willows, Salix nigra, supporting a nesting colony in a slough at the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge were killed in one nesting season but sprouted back from the roots the next year. Pines, Pinus sp., especially those in upland plantations, are also usually killed in one season. The colony reported near the Holiday Inn at Tuskegee destroyed about 1.5 ha of pine trees in a plantation (Dusi, 1977). The loss was accepted by the Tuskegee Institute, the owner, but this probably would not be acceptable to most land owners.

## CONCLUSIONS

To prevent egrets from nesting near homes, or in valuable trees, the birds should be harassed and cause to leave by using noise, colored streamers fastened in the trees, by pulling down the existing nests, and if necessary, cutting down the trees. This should be done shortly after the birds arrive and before any young are present in the nests. After the young hatch, it is practically impossible to force the birds to leave without killing all of them.

These management principles should be applied to prevent egrets from becoming undesirable problems.

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# BIRDS SIGHTED AT 27,000 FEET OVER BIRMINGHAM

C. W. Summerour

Two "large, all dark" birds were sighted soaring at 27,000 feet over Birmingham at 4:20 CST on 15 August 1981 by Lt./JG Allen Smith, a Navy pilot and former biology student at Jacksonville State University.

Smith said he spotted the birds directly across from, or slightly below, his aircraft and estimated they were less than a mile away and were soaring in circles about 50 to 100 feet apart. Smith immediately checked, then rechecked, his altimeter and recorded the time and location. Conservatively, he said the birds could not have been below 26,000 feet. He could not distinguish what species they were, only that they were "large" and "all dark," but any species by this general description in the Birmingham area would in all probability be vultures or eagles.

Twenty-seven thousand feet is the highest that birds have been recorded over a nonmountainous area and is comparable to the highest that birds have been known to fly. Yellow-billed Choughs, Pyrrhocorax graculus, have been observed on Mt. Everest at 27,000 feet (Gilliard, 1958), and Bar-headed Geese, Anser indicus, have been seen at about 30,000 feet crossing the Himalayas in migration (Swan, 1970). Other high altitude records include Canada Geese, Branta canadensis, at 20,000 feet, a few nocturnal migrants, probably shorebirds, at 20,000 feet (Nisbet, 1963), a mallard, Anas platyrhynchos, at 21,000 feet (Manville, 1963), and a single gull at 14,000 feet (Young, personal communication).

Since high altitude observations are random, chance encounters by a handful of pilots and mountain climbers, it may be that some soaring species regularly attain very high altitudes and pass over largely undetected except

for an occasional sighting by pilots. Many observations from the ground seem to support this possibility. Borneman (1976), Heintzelman et al. (1974), and Servheen (1976) have reported seeing vultures, eagles and condors riding thermal currents into opaque clouds and I have seen Sandhill Cranes and herons also disappear into clouds. Fred Harris, a sailplane instructor, was reported by Borneman to have seen a condor ride a thermal into the base of a cumulus cloud at 15,000 feet.

The fate of birds seen disappearing into clouds is usually unknown, but Smith's Birmingham sighting indicates that large soaring species such as hawks, eagles, cranes, vultures and condors may sometimes ride thermal currents to heights of 27,000 feet or more.

The fact that some birds fly above 20,000 feet is in itself a phenomenon that raises many questions as to how they adapt to thin air, low oxygen levels (half the surface amount at 18,000 feet) and temperatures well below 0° F.

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## EUROPEAN STARLINGS, STURNUS VULGARIS, HAVE IMPRESSIVE REPERTOIRES

C. W. Summerour

In the spring of 1977 I had the opportunity to observe at close hand the singing and mimicking abilities of a European Starling, Sturnus vulgaris, that took up residence in a bluebird house just outside my bedroom window. No amount of gesturing, shouting or rock throwing discouraged his determination to take over the box, so I gave in and made the most of it by observing his courtship activities.

Every morning I awoke to a constant garble of unmusical squawks, squeaks, rattles and whistling notes, but I soon came to realize that in between the squawks and whistles was hidden an impressive repertoire of low pitched, but high quality imitations.

I eventually listed 15 imitations of bird songs and sounds and other animal calls from this one individual. These included the following: Green Heron (Butorides striatus), Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus), Common Bobwhite (Colinus virginianus), Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americanus), Common Flicker (Colaptes auratus), Eastern Kingbird (Tyrannus tyrannus), Tufted Titmouse (Parus bicolor),

American Robin (Turdus migratorius), Eastern Meadowlark (Sturnella magna), Common Grackle (Quiscalus quiscala), Brown-headed Cowbird (Molothrus ater), American Goldfinch (Carduelis tristis), the whistling of dove wings and the call of a leopard frog (Rana pipiens).

After incubation got was underway and the young hatched, singing and displaying tapered off. As the young grew older, they became noisier and noisier until one morning I noticed a dead silence and no activity around the box. That afternoon I spotted the head of a gray rat snake (Elaphe obsoleta) looking out of the hole, which explained the silence. The snake stayed in the box for several days digesting its meal and eventually disappeared. The male Starling made occasional visits to the box for several weeks thereafter, but did not sing or display and dared not get close to the box.

In addition to some of the imitations already mentioned, another Starling that occupied a box in front of the house gave good imitations of a Chuck-will's-Widow (Caprimulgus carolinensis), Blue Jay (Cyanocitta cristata), Eastern Pewee (Contopus virens) and White-throated Sparrow (Zonotrichia albicollis). A third male occupying still another box gave imitations of a Killdeer, Common Flicker, Eastern Blue-bird (Sialia sialis), Common Grackle, and leopard frog.

Most of the species imitated tended to be those that produced squawks (Green Heron), squeels (Red-shouldered Hawk), squeaks (Common Grackle), and whistles (Common Bobwhite, Tufted Titmouse, sound of dove wings, etc.). But some imitations were entirely different and demonstrated the Starling's wider range of capabilities as a mimic (Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chuck-will's-Widow, leopard frog).

All total the three males produced 20 imitations of bird songs and other animal sounds, all easily recognizable and of good quality. It is doubtful that

Starlings will every replace the extroverted and vociferous Mockingbird (Mimus polyglottos), but they are none-the-less accomplished mimics in their own right.

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## HOUSE WRENS, TROGLODYTES AEDON, ATTEMPT NESTING IN JACKSONVILLE

C. W. Summerour

While running one of my training routes through Jacksonville in May, 1981, my attention was drawn to a musical babbling which immediately struck me as "different" from the familiar background of bird song in the Jacksonville area. A quick investigation confirmed my suspicion that it was a House Wren, Troglodytes aedon, which I found perched atop a bluebird house loudly and energetically proclaiming his occupancy and claim on the territory.

This discovery initiated a methodical census of Jacksonville which turned up two more singing males on territory, all in the southwest, or mill section, of town.

All three birds sang incessantly throughout the summer, from May through August, and all constructed dummy nests. Two chose birdhouses for their nests, which they defended actively and aggressively against bluebirds (Sialia sialis) and House Sparrows (Passer domesticus), and the other used the open end of an old clothes line pipe.

Despite their success in establishing territories and securing dummy nest sites, none of the birds was

successful in attracting mates and subsequently all of the nesting attempts ended in failure. by the end of August all singing had ceased and the birds were not seen again. None of them returned to their territories in the spring of 1982 and no other males were heard singing in the area.

The habitat favored by the wrens was essentially the same weedy, unkept, areas used by Song Sparrows (Melospiza melodia). One of the males chose a new, manicured subdivision, but its territory included a weedy lot which it often frequented.

Imhof (1976) lists two other unsuccessful nesting attempts in Alabama, one at Auburn in 1971 reported by s. H. Adams, and one in 1973 of an unmated female reported by E. L. Grimley at Mountain Brook (photograph by K. W. Grimley). Helen Kittinger also recorded a singing male in Birmingham on July 7, 1971.

I found House Wrens nesting under the hood of an old junk car just seven miles across the Alabama line in Tennessee in 1959 and successful nesting has been reported at least as far south in Georgia as Athens. These records plus the increasing reports of nesting attempts, indicate that House Wrens are in all probability breeding successfully somewhere in north Alabama. Thus far, however, all known nesting efforts have not been successful.

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# SONG SPARROWS, *MELOSPIZA MELODIA*, MOVE FARTHER SOUTH IN ALABAMA

C. W. Summerour

Since Song Sparrows, *Melospiza melodia*, were found nesting at Weiss Lake in 1974, and Piedmont in 1977 (Summerour, 1979), the species has since moved into Jacksonville (Summerour, 1980) and now, in the summer of 1982, has turned up in Oxford, thus extending the leading edge of their push into Alabama 20 miles further south.

This most recent account was of a singing male observed by the author along a weedy ditch bank behind Quintard Mall in Oxford, just north of I-20. If this southward movement continues as predicted, pioneering males should turn up next in Munford or Talladega if, in fact, they are not already there.

Meanwhile, the Song Sparrow population has continued to increase slowly in Jacksonville since the first pair was found nesting here in the summer of 1979. If this increase follows a sigmoid curve as expected, Song Sparrows should increase rapidly in Jacksonville over the next several years. In the meantime more pioneering males may be expected to turn up in Anniston and Oxford and as far south as Talladega.

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IN MEMORIAM

P. Fairly Chandler

July 19, 1982

AOS lost one of its most loyal members and Alabama one of its leading nature photographers and conservationists with the passing of Fairly Chandler. His excellent photographs have appeared in Alabama Birds by Tom Imhof and Wildflowers of Alabama by Blanche Dean, co-authored by Amy Mason and Joab Thomas, as well as other publications and photographic media including a beautiful postal card depicting springtime in Magnolia Springs, Fairly's home. He was also a principal contributor to the AOS slide collection, containing photographs of most species of birds found in Alabama and Northwest Florida.

Fairly was a past officer and long-time member of the board of AOS and organized and participated in many Christmas Bird Counts in Baldwin County, the most notable being the Gulf Shores Count that has been held every year since 1973. His contributions to ornithology are attested by the numerous records reported under his name. In addition, he was an active supporter of the Audubon Societies in our state, having given programs and done photographic work for both the Mobile Bay and Birmingham Societies; and he assisted greatly in the project to set aside the Perdue Tract in Baldwin County as a part of the newly-established Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge.

An avid student of nature, his photographs have captured many rare avian visitors to Alabama as well as some of its most significant flora and, through his interest and knowledge, he gave an appreciation of our natural world to all those with whom he came into contact. Fairly was also active in the Presbyterian churches of Magnolia Springs and Foley and especially in their program to establish a retirement home at Spanish Fort. Although he will be greatly missed, he has left, for us and for future generations, a lasting legacy in his fair in God, his appreciation of Nature, his photographic work and his sincere friendliness. AOS extends its deepest sympathy to his family and many friends.