

Outlook on Lifestyle

House sparrow close to towns

Backyard Naturalist

By DON SCALLEN
Herald Special

When man alters the environment through urbanization or agriculture, species of plants and animals are eliminated and absolute numbers of those that remain often decline dramatically. As indicated last week however, some species of animals and birds do prosper in the human altered landscape.

The story of one of the most successful of our urban bird species - the Starling - was told last week. Another introduced bird that has successfully filled the void created by the demise of our native species is the House Sparrow. This bird, now a familiar sight around our homes and gardens was introduced in several localities in Eastern North America during the 19th century. Within a few short decades this rather drab coloured finch had aggressively occupied almost all of North America.

The House Sparrow has a closer association with humans than even the Starling. Whereas Starlings can be found in woods and forests some distance from human habitation, the House Sparrow is almost always found close to farms, towns, and cities. It uses buildings for nesting, is a popular patron of backyard feeding stations and devours seeds from the weeds that flourish in open, untended areas.

The real heyday of the House Sparrow in North America was during the era of the horse drawn carriage. Grain used to feed the horses became a mainstay of the sparrow's diet. House Sparrows multiplied profusely during this time. They eventually incurred the public's wrath because of the unsightly and voluminous droppings of their roosting congregations.

Since the passing of horse drawn transport the House Sparrow has declined, but remains one of our most common birds.

A new challenge to the prolific House Sparrow has now arrived on the scene however - the House Finch.

The House Finch is a small bird, slightly shorter and thinner than the House Sparrow, but equally aggressive. Its bill is thick, enabling it to crack large seeds, and the male of the species has an attractive reddish breast and face. There is also a rarer orange coloured variant.

House Finches, unlike their successful avian immigrant precursors, the Starling and the House Sparrow, were not introduced from Europe. They came instead from Western North America where they were, and are, a common urban resident.

In 1940 a New York City pet store wholesaler brought House Finches to the east to sell in the pet bird trade. They were released when authorities became aware he was dealing in the illegal sale of native birds. Following a pattern first established almost a century earlier by the Starling and the House Sparrow, the House Finch spread explosively - by 1980 it occupied suitable habitat from Georgia and Alabama, northward to Quebec, Ontario and Wisconsin. I noticed the first House Finches at my feeders in the winter of 1984 - 1985. Initially I confused them with the closely related and similarly coloured Purple Finch, an irregular visitor from the north, but a quick glance at Peterson's guide confirmed them as House Finches.

Since my first observation, House Finches have become regular visitors to my feeders, though they still do not appear on a daily basis. In spring their canarylike call can now be heard in Halton Hills, as pairs establish breeding territories in the area. This call and the attractive colour of the House Finch has made it a welcome new arrival. Whether its popularity will flag in future, as its numbers increase, remains to be seen.

Another uncertainty is whether the advent of the House Finch will cause a decline in House Sparrow populations. With similar eating habits and habitat requirements, the more aggressive of the two may eventually prevail.

Disabled advocacy centre wins one in pension

The Advocacy Centre for the Handicapped (ARCH) has one another victory for the handicapped after extensive research and preparation was made in the case of a person entitled to a disability pension under the Canada Pension Plan.



Against
the odds
**PAT
WOODE**

In 1981, a patient in the Mental Health Centre at Penetanguishene had applied for CPP benefits as he had made sufficient contributions to the plan to render him eligible and he was suffering from a psychiatric disability. In fact he had been committed to Penetanguishene indefinitely on the Lieutenant Governor's Warrant after being found not guilty of a criminal offence by reason of insanity. His initial application was rejected by the CPP Disability Determination Board on the grounds that he was not "disabled" as that term is used in the CPP act.

His appeal to the CPP review committee was also denied. The client, himself, could see no logic in a system that, on the one hand, declared him insane and a danger to himself and others yet found him not disabled for the purpose of a CPP, on the other hand.

Prior to a hearing of the Pension Appeals Board, the final level of appeal in the CPP scheme a settlement was reached. The client received his

pension payment retroactively from 1980.

Several serious questions arose as a result of this case and ARCH will be pursuing the following concerns:

1. The Disability Determination Board which employs 28 doctors and 11 nurses, who look at all applications from across Canada, does not employ a single Psychiatrist.

2. It appeared there was an attitudinal bias against psychiatric patients who were found guilty by reason of insanity. One doctor on the Board equated them with "prisoners." It is inappropriate for a doctor charged with the responsibility of considering individual applications to be making "policy decisions" regarding any group, class or persons.

3. A series of decisions from the Pension Appeal Board indicates a very narrow interpretation of "disability" in "confinement" cases. They argue that the person's illness is not necessarily "severe" as defined in CPP legislation.

Ask your self how, logically speaking, one's condition can be so severe that one requires maximum security confinement of an indefinite duration and still be found to be employable.

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