

## APRIL 1 - 14, 2020 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

### HOUSE SPARROW DECISION



**House Sparrow**, *Passer domesticus* (English Sparrow), female  
© thespruce.com

The calendar says that the first month of spring is March. Many times we don't necessarily feel that that is so. March can be cold, snowy, with sleet and rain. Spring is supposed to be warmer, rainy at times and pleasant with enjoyable weather. We can have some of that weather toward the end of March, but generally, we think of spring as April or May.

Birds on the other hand think of spring in a different manner. They are forced by their hormones to fly to the north and find and compete for nesting sites, nesting boxes, as well as finding food in an area that weather-wise is coming off from winter. Not an easy time.

Birds that arrive early to Vermont have a better chance to compete for nesting sites. Birds who are here year-round and stake out their territory and nesting boxes in March are assured that when migrating birds arrive in April and May the locals already have a nest box.

Thus, the predicament we are in here at EastView. I am responsible for 8-9 nest boxes that ring the far berm of South Pond. What to do about House Sparrows and European Starlings. To be honest, at this time, I'm not as concerned about starlings as I am about House Sparrows. House Sparrows are more invasive and can usurp native birds more readily from a nest box, more so than starlings. As far as I can tell we have one pair of starlings that have nested now in the same box for three years, just one pair. However, starlings can eventually take over a number of nesting boxes on their own. The seven nesting boxes on the berm of South Pond last year started out in May with 3 House Sparrow pairs, 2 Tree Swallow pairs, 1 Eastern Bluebird pair, and 1 European Starling pair. Yes, all those boxes were used. By June only 1 Tree Swallow pair remained. House Sparrows usurped a Tree Swallow pair and an Eastern Bluebird pair. I did not see any Tree Swallow fledglings, which leaves me to believe that both pairs of Tree Swallows and the one Eastern Bluebird pair were harassed and ultimately lost their boxes to House Sparrows.

My concern is that House Sparrows and starlings initially took over 57%- 72% of the available boxes around South Pond. That does not include other nest boxes around EastView that I don't keep track of. By the end of the nesting season, 2019, they occupied 100% of the nest boxes. That in itself is a HUGE concern. House Sparrows will have two or more clutches of young from one female in a year. They will take over a box early and have 2-3 clutches during that year. Therefore, she can produce as many as 3-5 nestlings in a single clutch. One can see that by producing 2-3 clutches during the nesting season a single female could produce a maximum of 10-15 young in a single year.

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Why is that bad? **First**, House Sparrows are not native to the United States or North America and have spread throughout the United States and Canada since 1851. Native birds over this time have not developed a way to respond to House Sparrows. **Second**, House Sparrows are very aggressive and will harass local birds in boxes which results in a lack of young native birds in a calendar year. This year, 2020, all nest boxes but one were taken by House Sparrows when I went to clean them out and open the box. One box was for a pair of starlings. Tree Swallows tried to investigate two boxes, but the sparrows prevented that from happening.

### What to do to discourage House Sparrows?

I have checked each of eight boxes that surround South Pond, straightened the poles and have opened the doors. Some boxes have doors that are wide-open and others that were left open have fallen to being partially closed. I am hoping that this disturbance to the nest boxes will discourage House Sparrows and European Starlings from nesting in them and help to break their bond with the nest box. However, if I'm realistic it may, but it also may not succeed. They might still nest in the boxes whose doors are partially closed. At any rate this is a yearly experiment to see if we can discourage House Sparrows from taking over all the nest boxes. Will we also discourage Tree Swallows from securing a nest box this year? Yes! But that would have already been done by House Sparrows!



**Nest Box** with a House Sparrow nest.  
Photo by Bet Zimmerman.

Hopefully, one year plus will break the bond that has been established between House Sparrows and a European Starling pair with their past boxes. If it does not, we will figure out something else to try the following year.

There are other labor-intensive ways that I am not willing to entertain at this junction. Too many variables that can't be controlled. Therefore, I am hopeful that we can dissuade House Sparrows from nesting in these nest boxes so that native bird species will reappear and hopefully be successful in the future.

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**House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*** (English Sparrow),  
Male, © thespruce.com

## **OBSERVATIONS**

### **MAMMALS**

**Coywolf** – several howling & barking or yipping  
**Meadow Vole** – 1 plus tunnels and burrows

### **Weather Tidbits**

**Month of APRIL 1-14, 2020**

*All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).*

### **PRECIPITATION**

**Total Precipitation: 33.4 mm or 1.3 inches**

**Overcast Days: 8**