

# EURASIAN TREE SPARROW IN MANITOBA

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On 2 November 1986 an unfamiliar bird appeared at the feeder of James and Helen Owen at their rural bungalow adjoining an oxbow of the Assiniboine River about 20 km west of Winnipeg. On 3 November they identified it as a Eurasian Tree Sparrow. On a cold and blustery 4 November George Holland, Richard Knapton and the author arrived at 7:00 a.m. and were welcomed with coffee and breakfast, after having installed themselves behind a window close to the feeder.

Birders tend to be a skeptical lot. The doubts of these observers increased when after a few minutes a female Purple Finch appeared with some House Sparrows.

Then, at 7:10, the Eurasian Tree Sparrow arrived suddenly in the birch tree which housed the feeder and was studied for the next 20 minutes at distances as close as 5 m. The sparrow was similar to the House Sparrows, but slightly smaller, with a chestnut crown and white cheek with a black patch in it. Its black bib was smaller than that of the House Sparrow. Although the rest of the plumage was similar to that of its larger relative, the bird had a neater, trimmer appearance. It showed no unusual tameness or shyness, generally moving around with a flock of House Sparrows. Light conditions at the time, while more than adequate for observation, were not suitable for photography



*Eurasian Tree Sparrow, St. Francois Xavier, Manitoba  
(Bottom Left)*

*James Owen*

especially since photos had to be taken through two panes of glass.

During the next two months birders from within and outside the province visited to observe the bird. Several fine photographs were taken. Discussion among local birders centered on the origin of the bird. Careful study of its plumage, soft parts and behaviour did not indicate that it had been in captivity. The feathers showed no unusual wear or fraying and they were clean. The legs and feet were clean and the nails were of normal length. The bird had arrived just before the trough of a vigorous low pressure system which brought falling temperatures and strong northwest winds on 31 October and 1 November and snow and strong south winds from 2 to 4 November. On 8 and 9 November it was subjected to the worst blizzard southern Manitoba had seen in two decades, while two days later it survived  $-26^{\circ}$  C., indicating it was very hardy. Checks with the Winnipeg zoo and a number of pet stores dealing in exotic birds turned out negative, pointing to this being a "wild" bird, but from where? The only North American population is found in the vicinity of St. Louis, Missouri and is not known to wander.<sup>6</sup> The species is common in much of Eurasia, where it does migrate to a certain extent, and it has been introduced to Australia, where it is largely sedentary.<sup>5 7</sup>

Establishing the origin of the bird was further complicated by inability to determine its subspecific identity. Henri Ouellet of the National Museum of Natural Sciences concluded, based on photographs and a description sent to him, that the bird closely resembled the nominate race *Passer m. montanus* from western Europe, which in turn is very similar to *P.m. saturatus* from eastern Asia (pers. comm. 11 February 1987). Ouellet stated that he could not determine the subspecies of this sparrow from the photographs because it did not belong to

one of the well marked and readily identifiable subspecies. The St. Louis population, incidentally, came from western European stock.<sup>1</sup>

Two birds which were found in Vancouver in the fall and winter of 1985-86 were believed to have been "ship/sailor assisted."<sup>3</sup> The Manitoba bird rated "Special Attention" in American Birds, but was dismissed in another part of that journal as of "probably dubious origin."<sup>4 2</sup> While it would appear likely — given the species' lack of wanderlust — that this bird had escaped or been released, the evidence at hand suggested otherwise.

One year after the initial sighting the bird was still doing well and regularly visiting the same feeder. Its ancestry will probably remain a mystery.

I wish to thank Henri Ouellet of the National Museum of Natural Sciences for his comments regarding the identity of the bird.

<sup>1</sup> BENT, A.C. 1958. Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers, and allies. U.S. National Mus. Bull. 211. 549 pp.

<sup>2</sup> DEBENEDICTIS, P.A. 1987. The changing seasons. Am. Birds 41(1):43-51.

<sup>3</sup> FORCE, M.P. and P.W. MATTOCKS, Jr. 1986. The winter season. Northern Pacific coast region. Am. Birds 40(2):316-321.

<sup>4</sup> HARRIS, W.C. 1987. The autumn migration. Prairie provinces region. Am. Birds 41(1):104-106.

<sup>5</sup> HEINZEL, H., R. FITTER and J. PARSLow. 1975. Elseviers gids van de Europese vogels. Elsevier, Amsterdam. 324 pp.

<sup>6</sup> PETERSON, R.T. 1980. A field guide to the birds. Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston. 384 pp.

<sup>7</sup> PIZZEY, G. 1980. A field guide to the birds of Australia. Collins, Sydney. 460 pp.