

NEST BOX DRAMA : HOUSE WREN VS. HOUSE SPARROW

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Figure 1. The disputed birdhouse and its contents, fall 1999 Garth Nelson

In 1997, we were seeking a tenant for our birdhouse. We were hoping to attract a House Wren, but ended up with a House Sparrow. And so, the following year, I altered the “doorway” of the birdhouse, so that only a wren would be able to get inside. Needless to say, although the wrens were happy with this renovation, the sparrows were furious. What followed was nothing less than a pitched battle.

May 24, 1998 : House Sparrows are still trying to get into our birdhouse. About a week ago I put up the birdhouse under the eaves of the garage. I had altered it so that the hole is 1 inch in diameter instead of 1¼ inches, hoping to keep out the House Sparrows and attract a wren. Two minutes after I put it up, there was a House Sparrow trying to get in, and the sparrows have been at it ever

since. We did see a House Wren go in and inspect it early last week.

June 5, 1998 : Earlier this week we saw House Sparrows starting a nest on top of the birdhouse, wedged between the slanted roof of the birdhouse and the eaves of the garage. I took it down from the garage and relocated it in the crab apple tree. Today, House Wrens were in and out of it with nesting material. They were singing in our yard this evening.

June 6, 1998 : Some interesting bird dynamics today! After breakfast, we noticed the male House Sparrow frantically trying to get into the birdhouse while the House Wren fretted nearby, watching him intently. The House Sparrow was trying desperately to get in, but couldn't. After lunch, we noticed the contest continuing, but this time the

wren dive-bombed the sparrow, who wasn't quite as frantic as at breakfast-time. This went on until a robin intervened. I saw the robin chasing the House Sparrow and Lillian thought she saw it chasing the wren. The robin perched near the birdhouse for a while, and the others kept their distance. After supper – sparrow still trying to get into the birdhouse with wren watching intently.

June 7, 1998 : At breakfast, a pair of House Sparrows were at the birdhouse trying to get in. Most of the time it was the female — the first time we've seen the female making the attempt. She got her head in a little further but had no more success than the male. At one point they were both trying to get in at the same time: a bit of a domestic squabble. We also saw them mating a couple of times. Through all this, there was no sign of the wren, although I heard it singing some distance away. The second half of the day saw very little action at the birdhouse — sparrows were observed a couple of times without trying to get in and there was no sign of the wren. Any time we looked from supper time on, there were no birds around.

June 8, 1998 : For the most part, no action around the birdhouse. After supper, the female House Sparrow checked it out and tried to enter, while the male watched, but they soon both flew off.

June 16, 1998 : The House Wren has returned to the birdhouse. Lillian saw it go into the house this morning and heard it singing. Around 1:30 PM, I saw it go into the house then drop to the ground looking for nesting material. It picked up several largish twigs, discarding each, then flew into the next yard.

July 12, 1998 : We heard, then saw, the House Wren for the first time since June

16th. It went into the birdhouse (at approximately 4 PM), stayed there for about 2 minutes, then came out and disappeared.

July 14, 1998 : Lillian heard and saw the House Wren again this morning. It went into the birdhouse again.

End of season: Took the birdhouse down in September. Didn't find much inside: just a few twigs.

June 13, 1999 : House Wrens visited our birdhouse again. House Sparrows have checked it out and tried to get in a number of times, but not as persistently or as frantically as last year.

June 14, 1999 : The House Wren has been busy all day, taking material into the birdhouse. It was interesting to see it manoeuvre around to get long pieces into the hole. At one point, around noon, the House Sparrow and the wren were on either side of the birdhouse nattering at each other. The House Sparrow fluttered its wings. The wren's whole body was involved – wings flapping, tail flicking, body jerking from side to side on the branch. We could see its beak going. It was obviously saying dark things to the sparrow. The sparrow would light on the birdhouse occasionally. Earlier in the day, we noticed the sparrow chasing the wren. However, the sparrow didn't stick with it—not as aggressive as last year.

June 15, 1999 : The wren was busy all day again today, taking nest material to the birdhouse. The House Sparrows weren't around.

June 16, 1999 : The wren worked all day at nest-building. The House Sparrow was back again, challenging the wren. We watched the argument off and on most of the day. I watched the sparrow repeatedly try to get into the

house. Then it would perch in various spots nearby while the wren, as it did yesterday, reacted with its whole body. I watched the sparrow sit for a long time – it looked very relaxed and non-plussed by the wren's antics. At another time – but only the once – I saw it fluttering its wings in a crouched position. The sparrow would take breaks and go away, and when it did, the wren returned enthusiastically to nest-building. At one point, the wren went inside and the sparrow came to the hole right afterward. I watched the sparrow, for about five minutes, try to get in. It got its head inside, repeatedly trying hard to enter. I would love to know what the wren was doing: cringing in a corner? (not likely); pecking at the sparrow? (possibly); going about its business arranging the nest material? Who knows? The sparrow would let go momentarily, then continue as before. Eventually it went away. As I kept watching, I saw the wren's head appear. It stuck its head outside, looked around, then flew away to return shortly after with another twig.

June 17, 1999 : The contest goes on! Wren vs. House Sparrow. The pattern was very much the same as yesterday. House Sparrow comes and perches near the birdhouse and just sits while wren cusses at it and emphasizes every syllable with body movement. Periodically, the wren dive-bombs the Sparrow. At one point, as the wren was trying to get into the house with a beak full of twigs, the Sparrow zoomed down and hit it, knocking it away from the entrance. Whenever the Sparrow flew away, the wren wasted no time resuming its nest-building activity. This evening we saw it moving along the edge of the garage roof, feeding on insects between the edge of the shingles and the wood beneath.

June 18, 1999 : The House Wren-

House-Sparrow drama goes on – same pattern. At one point, I saw the House Sparrow with its head in the hole, straining to get in further. It then withdrew with a bit of the wren's nesting material (dryer lint) in its beak.

June 19, 1999 : They're still at it! Wren still nest-building. House Sparrow continuing to harass it. The sparrow has taken to perching right beneath the birdhouse where the wren can't dive-bomb it. (The house is partially supported in the crook of two branches.) During the evening, the wren spent a lot of time just perched near the birdhouse, singing.

June 20, 1999 : The House Sparrow came to the birdhouse and looked in while the wren was in it. Previously, I saw the wren taking in a bit of dryer lint. Same patterns as previous days continued throughout the day. We sat outside most of the day. The Red-eyed Vireo was singing loudly to our left and the House Wren was singing loudly on the right in our crab apple. Yellow Warbler and Chipping Sparrow could be heard occasionally, as well as a robin. A crow perched atop a tall poplar back of our place, then came for a drink at our bath. Several Cedar Waxwings came and fed on insects/worms in the birch next door; Brewer's Blackbirds and Rock Doves flew over. Ten species altogether. Just before supper, the wren and House Sparrow were being more aggressive than I've seen them. The wren kept diving at the sparrow – very agitated, moving quickly from branch to branch around the sparrow. Every now and then the sparrow would fly at the wren.

June 25, 1999 : The wren has been working on its nest in the birdhouse for a week and a half with the House Sparrow waging a continued campaign of harassment. The wren has showed a very feisty nature – still dive-bombing

the sparrow. In between times, the wren builds and sings energetically – singing in the rain today.

This pattern continued for the next several days. Then the observers were away on a trip from 29 June to 3 July.

July 4, 1999 : Wren still at birdhouse, singing all day. House Sparrow: saw it once, trying to get into the house.

July 5, 1999 : Didn't see the House Sparrow today, but wren very much around – singing – back and forth from nest. It's been three weeks today since it started building its nest. It doesn't seem to be taking nest material in now.

July 8, 1999 : The wren continues to sing lustily, and to go in and out of the birdhouse. We haven't seen the House Sparrow around the birdhouse since July 4. We still just see the one wren – have never seen two. We wonder if a female is inside on the nest – but haven't noticed the wren taking in food. It seems to have stopped taking nest materials in.

For the next two weeks, a wren was seen or heard only occasionally.

July 16, 1999 : Sitting outside in afternoon, we heard the wren in our yard, then saw it enter the birdhouse. It came out with a feather or bit of fluff in its beak. It was around while we were there – first time in several days that we have seen it near the birdhouse tree.

July 17, 1999 : The wren was busy at breakfast time, singing and entering the birdhouse. The House Sparrows are leaving it completely alone these days – haven't seen a sparrow trying to get in the birdhouse or challenging the wren since July 4.

July 18, 1999 : House Wren: singing most of the day, in and out of birdhouse. House Sparrows: 2 parents, 1 young.

July 19, 1999 : Didn't see or hear the wren in our yard until evening, when it paid one visit to the birdhouse. It made a sound we hadn't heard before: a kind of short chipping sound or rattle: "scolding chatter," "scolding grating chatter."

Rest of July : Only heard the wren once or twice.

End of season: opened birdhouse. Although a full nest had been built (Figure 1) there were no eggs inside. The nest wasn't used.

May 21, 2000 : House Wren appeared in the yard. We haven't yet put up the birdhouse.

June 3, 2000 : Put up the birdhouse.

June 5, 2000 : Around 5 p.m., saw the House Wren. It was on top of the birdhouse, then a little later it went inside for a few minutes, looked out from it a couple of times, then flew away. The House Sparrows have left the birdhouse completely alone.

June 6, 2000 : The House Wren appeared and sat next to the birdhouse. When the wren was not around, a House Sparrow tried to get into the birdhouse, but couldn't.

June 9, 2000 : Saw the House Wren near the birdhouse, but not in it.

June 11 & 12, 2000 : The House Wren has been in the yard and I have heard it singing. But it hasn't been going into the birdhouse.

June 13, 2000 : The House Wren is back and is now going into the birdhouse. I have seen it flying back and forth, with



Figure 2. Birdhouse and the wren nest, fall 2000

Garth Nelson

twigs. It was quite busy, bringing nesting material to the house. House Sparrow was there, but didn't bother it.

June 15 & 16, 2000 : Saw the House Wren on both days, busy carrying twigs and material into the house.

June 17, 2000 : Around 9:00 AM, saw both House Wrens, male and female, busy around the birdhouse. This is the first time we've ever seen both wrens there at the same time.

June 18 – 20, 2000 : House Wren busy working at the nest in the birdhouse.

June 21, 2000 : House Sparrow tried to get into the birdhouse. But the House Wren fought it off.

July 13, 2000 : Again, both House Wrens were in the yard, busy working at the nest.

July 18, 2000 : Both House Wrens have been busy. I think they may be engaged in feeding their young.

July 23, 2000 : We definitely saw several young House Wrens in the birdhouse and could hear them singing.

July 24, 2000 : I saw four House Wrens, including 2 young, in the back yard this afternoon. So I assume the young wrens have left the birdhouse.

August 30, 2000 : 2 House Wrens. At the end of the season, the house was again full of nest (Figure 2), and this time had clearly been used to raise young.

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