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# NOTES AND LETTERS

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## HOUSE SPARROW - AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

We have more than our normal share of House Sparrows living on our farm, just north of Saskatoon, flocking anywhere around the yard where food presents itself. The House Sparrow, introduced in eastern North America in the 1850s, has adapted very well to conditions here from the wet damp coast to the dry, cold centre. House Sparrows can be found everywhere, but reside mainly where human habitation occurs. To most farmers and birders, the House Sparrow is a pest 90% of the time. I say 90% because our observations over the last two years have proved this disliked bird to be a useful ally.

On several occasions, we observed House Sparrows eating substantial amounts of grasshoppers in August. I watched a sparrow catch a large grasshopper, too large for it to eat whole. The grasshopper was already dead when I noticed the sparrow lift it by the wing, then smash it down on a rock so that the wing broke off - then the other wing and each leg in turn. Then it took the body to feed to its young.

A publication by the Department of Agriculture in Washington, written in 1889 states that research has shown the adaptable House Sparrow can diversify its feeding habits to eat caterpillars, cankerworms ( keeping them in check ) and spiders, to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

In our experience, cats rarely take House Sparrows; they take far more native birds. In North America, the real predator of the House Sparrow is, in winter, the Northern Shrike.<sup>1</sup> Sharp-shinned Hawks and Kestrels will also

take their share of the House Sparrow population when the opportunity presents itself and the Long-eared Owl will make a meal of the House Sparrow, determined by examining their pellets.<sup>1</sup> I have yet to find a House Sparrow beak in the pellet of a Great Horned Owl or Short-eared Owl. We have observed the Merlin and the Cooper's Hawk take House Sparrows right in our farm yard.

Having said this, the House Sparrow is part of where we live, like it or not. The question remains whether, as an introduced species, the House Sparrow has taken its place in the North American ecosystem. Maybe, just maybe, we could change our attitude towards the House Sparrow by observing this bird throughout the summer months. I suggest it can be an ally, if only partially, by keeping some balance in insect infestations and fluctuations.

<sup>1</sup> Barrows, WB. 1889. The English Sparrow in North America. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bull. 1. Washington, D.C.

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## GOSHAWK NABS REDPOLL

We live in downtown Saskatoon, a block and a half north of Saskatoon City Hospital. Fifteen minutes after noon on Saturday, 15 January 2000, my stepdaughter and I were in the sunroom. I noticed a Common Redpoll on our feeder, then as I turned my head away a large shadow flashed by the window and my stepdaughter gasped. "That bird just took the redpoll from the feeder!"

Sure enough, there was a large hawk perched in the pine tree, tearing at the redpoll. Out came the Peterson Western Field Guide. Between us, we made a tentative identification of an immature male Northern Goshawk. When he had finished his lunch, the goshawk moved to an overhanging branch in our neighbour's yard. We phoned Stuart Houston, who came over to confirm our identification of this unusual species for a city backyard.

After about an hour and a half, the goshawk dropped from the branch like a stone, soared over the back fence and was gone.

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### **WOOD DUCK NEST ON THE GROUND SOUTHWEST OF KYLE**

My first sighting of a Wood Duck was a male that appeared briefly at my pond near Kyle, 16 May 1993. My next sighting was in May 1999, when a pair of Wood Ducks elected to lay their eggs beneath a triangular wooden structure I had placed on the ground on an island in the pond ten years earlier to shelter the nest of domestic ducks. This structure also had been used once, about 1995, by a wild female Mallard as a nest shelter. We checked the Wood Duck nest 6 June 1999, and found nine Wood Duck eggs, cold and abandoned, with no adult in sight. Two eggs had been opened at one end; I suspect the predator was the resident muskrat.

This is the first Wood Duck nest record for the "Elbow district" of south-central Saskatchewan. It may be only the second report of a Wood Duck nesting on the ground. Mason and Dust reported that a Wood Duck laid seven eggs on a hummock 10 m from the shoreline of a pond on the Auburn

University campus in Alabama.<sup>2</sup> This is the only record of a nest on the ground Gary R. Hepp (pers. comm.) encountered in researching the Wood Duck literature.<sup>1</sup> The Wood Ducks on my pond built their nest on the ground but under an artificial shelter.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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1. Hepp, Gary R. and F. C. Bellrose. 1995. Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) In: Poole, A. and F. Gill (eds.). The Birds of North America, No. 169. The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D. C.

2. Mason P. J., and J. L. Dusi. 1983. A ground nesting Wood Duck. *Auk* 100:506.

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