



Male house sparrow.

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THIS ISSUE

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Make Ecocide an International Crime

Recycling House Sparrows by Hawk and by Snake

I wrote about the ecological ills wrought by the introduced, invasive house sparrow in a column opening our March 2014 newsletter. Entitled, *The Trouble with House Sparrows*, I explained some methods through which we were combatting the species on our property. It's a worthwhile requisite or reread before continuing the present column: <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar14.pdf>

Here is a link from another source that iterates much of my column:

<http://www.daggerpress.com/2010/07/03/lets-get-this-house-sparrow-thing-out-in-the-open/>

I've battled ever-present house sparrows (btw, not even closely-related to true New World sparrow species) at varying rates of intensity ever since we moved to this property north of Williamston 34 years ago. Initially, I had tolerated their mingling amidst the native species around our feeders, and the annoying, cheeping brouhahas that break out in the yew and juniper shrubs outside our windows. However, once I erected bluebird nesting boxes in our yard that first spring, I knew I would have to become a dedicated ally if this once-rare bird was to have a fighting chance to procreate within this slice of habitat under our control.

In the spring when a male house sparrow stakes a claim to one of the bluebird boxes I will insert a special spring-loaded mechanism that traps a bird inside for careful removal. Additionally, in late fall and winter I will sometimes place a fairly large, resetting wire live cage trap on the ground under the feeders outside our dining room window. Since non-target species, like a chickadee, titmouse or junco may enter the trap I like to be on hand in order to set them free. For this reason I'd rather not use the trap when I am not home for an extended period.



A "non-target" American Tree Sparrow is carefully removed from the cage trap for release.

It can take a while - sometimes days - to capture a house sparrow in this trap despite the presence of seed as bait. Once the first bird gets in, however, the mere presence of an individual of this gregarious species seems to almost be a greater attractant than the seed itself. Then, multiple house sparrows can accumulate in the trap on any given day. Now, what to do with them all?

I take no delight in killing house sparrows. However, given their noxious pest status and the demonstrated benefit to native birds by removing them, I do it anyway. I'd rather not just euthanize then pitch them onto the compost pile, although websites from various bluebird societies around the country suggest humane ways to do so. I feel much better about the process if, like hunting deer, the creatures that I cull can be used as sustenance for another. Recycling via the food chain, let's say. Enter the several rat snakes in our



menagerie. These large constrictors eat a range of small mammals and birds, so feeding house sparrows to them helps curtail a significant grocery bill for lab-raised frozen rodents.

Due to the coronavirus restrictions last winter nearly all of our regular school lessons were online from home so I anticipated more availability to set and monitor the trap. I put it into action in late November, 2020. A couple of days passed before the first house sparrow was captured, but, as expected, quite quickly one became two, two became four, and four became eight by the following day.

It didn't take long, however, before a glitch developed in my capture-and-feed conveyor. House sparrows were accumulating too quickly. Being cold-blooded means the rat snakes do not and cannot eat *every* day. They require multiple days to digest their stomach contents. Furthermore, although we have five adult snakes on hand capable of constricting and eating a prey item the size of a house sparrow, their collective appetite is not as robust as in the warmer months of the year. I soon found that I could only expect to dispose of the captured birds via rat snake at a rate of no more than ten a week. This meant that any extra house sparrows in the trap would need to be maintained (fed/watered) daily until the snakes' next feeding cycle; an undesirable situation given that a few hours a day are already required to maintain our huge native reptiles and amphibians menagerie.

If obtaining free snake food was the only consideration in using the trap the obvious solution would be to shut down the operation until the snakes were ready to eat again. However, I couldn't lose sight of the fact that the *primary* reason for acquiring the trap was to cull house sparrows in and around our yard, the more the better. The means of disposal was simply a side-issue...

On December 3, 2020, the snakes were stuffed, but the house sparrows kept coming. Twelve birds-in-waiting hopped, fluttered, chirped and fed inside the cage trap on the ground outside our dining room window. No one could have staged what was about to ensue any better. As if heaven-sent, an organic Hoover Deluxe suddenly swooped into our world.

That afternoon, from inside the house I heard an abrupt flush of wings as panicked songbirds exploded away from the feeders. It could only mean one thing – an incoming, bird-hunting Cooper's hawk. I slowly approached the window and looked out. It is amazing how quickly birds can make themselves disappear when frightened by a passing hawk. However, the caged house sparrows had nowhere to hide. I got close enough to view the cage on the ground below the window. Sure enough, a juvenile Cooper's hawk, about one and a half times a pigeon's size, perched on top of the cage completely focused on the frightened birds within. The hawk danced and bobbed from one side to the other, flashing its brown-banded wings and tail for balance, trying to figure out a way to circumvent the quarter-inch mesh that separated it from the

roiling meals in front of it. Normally skittish, if an incoming Cooper's hawk sees any glimpse of our movement at the window it disappears as quickly as it arrived. Yet, this one was so focused on the house sparrows it never noticed the gawking human pressed against the window only six feet above it.

I wished I could retrieve a house sparrow from the trap for it, but surely, if I walked outside the hawk would see me and be gone. Still, I had to give it a try. When I slowly walked around the corner of the house and approached the feeding area the hawk continued to scuffle around the caged birds. Taking short, measured steps I inched nearer, then nearer yet, and it still hadn't noticed me. In a few more steps I found myself, incredulously, watching the clueless hawk while standing directly over the cage. Suddenly the hawk's head swiveled up and we made eye contact. It leaped from the cage, and in an instant flew up and over my head.



I expected it to vanish in a flash, but instead, the bird made a tight circle in the air over and in front of me, swooped over the cage and landed inside the dimness of the dense yew bushes only six feet behind it. The hawk's chosen perch gave it an unfettered view of both me and the cage.

I bent slowly to access the flap on the side of the cage and began to reach through the hole, all the while keeping an eye on the hawk that was eyeing me back. At first petrified to stillness, the dozen sparrows flew into a panic at the sight of my intruding hand. Feathered bodies flurried and banged against all sides of the cage.

The movement excited the hawk into action. It launched off the perch and collided with the cage while my arm was in it! I felt a puff of wind in my face from its beating wings. Bright yellow talons gripped the wire grid inches from my arm. The adrenaline rush was apparent in the startled yelp that escaped me. The hawk let go at that instant and retreated back to its same vantage point in the bushes.

I hastily snatched a sparrow out of the trap and closed the flap. Now, how could I toss it toward the hawk without it instantly flying away? I pulled a wing open and firmly creased the flight feathers in half between my thumb and forefinger. I maneuvered the bird, then did the same to the opposite wing.

Aiming for a narrow corridor between the bushes and the house wall in front of the hawk's perch I tossed the bird in its direction. The sparrow flapped past the hawk but its flight was notably hampered. The hawk leaped after it and gave chase out the opposite side of the bushes and out of my view. I jumped up and took a few strides around the front of the bushes to relocate it. There, hawk stood on the lawn only a few



yards away, the motionless sparrow secured beneath it. Its gaze pivoted onto me, then it took off. Firmly clutching its prize it disappeared into the row of spruce trees across the lawn. I was ecstatic.

Would the hawk return when it was ready for another meal? A few hours later I peeked out the window. The hawk was indeed back – in its original position atop the cage. Its attention was on the sparrows below, but it was not expending energy to get at them this time. Was it waiting for the wait staff to serve it again? This time I grabbed a pair of scissors in order to snip the sparrow's flight feathers back.

Upon seeing my approach once again, the hawk retreated onto its semi-hidden perch and observed me. I reached into the cage to grab a bird while simultaneously watching the hawk in order to brace myself should it attack the cage a second time. The flurry of birds caused the hawk to lean forward on its perch tensed to launch, but it managed to refrain long enough for me to secure a bird and pull it out. I quickly



snipped the flight feathers on each wing and tossed it in the same manner. This sparrow didn't get as far. The hawk pounced on it before it could even make it past its perch. Prey secured, it flew up and out of the bushes in front of me and disappeared again into the row of spruces across the lawn to dine. The hawk and I had developed an understanding as well as a system.

With no more than an hour of daylight remaining the hawk was back. The third feeding procedure went without a hitch. The hawk and I each knew what was expected of the other. As it entered the spruces clutching its final meal of the day I wondered if, and hoped that it would still be around in the morning. And it was...

By 8am on Saturday, like a breakfast patron at a diner, the hawk was back on the cage waiting patiently for service. Its waiter, James, secured and served the meal. And then there were eight. The hawk returned three times more throughout the day, and I do say, the quality of the service was impeccable.

By nightfall only five birds remained in the trap. If you are wondering why - with several house sparrows in the cage to lure others - additional birds weren't accumulating, it was strictly due to this fearsome predator's almost constant presence somewhere nearby. Since its arrival the day before, our yard was suddenly like a bird ghost town. Feeders were devoid of activity. The cardinals, jays, doves, woodpeckers, chickadees, finches and, yes, house sparrows were either cowering under cover or had fled the area entirely because, by all indications, Godzilla was spending the whole weekend in Tokyo.

From dawn to dusk on Sunday four more house sparrows were served to the Cooper's hawk, then consumed. This bird was definitely becoming inured to my presence. Instead of perching near the ground on the cage then retreating into the bushes, the hawk waited for service in the open, atop the slim, elongated tray feeder positioned directly in front of the window.

When I approached the feeding area on one occasion it jumped from the tray to the open ground behind it then watched me and waited. I tossed the laboring sparrow toward it and thrilled to see it leap in the air and snag the bird in its talons before it even hit the ground. The hawk reached down and snipped the sparrow's neck vertebrae in a mere second. It then commenced to pluck and consume it piece by piece only eight feet or so from where I stood. In less than ten minutes the hawk had finished the entire meal. It flew to, and alighted on a limb that angled upward from a large broken branch that had fallen on the lawn. Here, it deliberately wiped its beak on the limb, fluffed its breast feathers, pulled one leg up and into them, and appeared perfectly content to rest and digest for awhile.



The Cooper's Hawk consumes House Sparrow Number Ten.

The hawk remained there as I returned indoors. I set up my spotting scope and tripod inside the window and trained it on the hawk for an especially up-close look. It loafed and even dozed while balanced on one

leg in a visibly contented air. I came back to the window sporadically to check if the bird was still present and to take another close-up gander. It wasn't until well over an hour later that I approached the window to see that it had finally gone.

The hawk ate the second to last sparrow about two hours before dark, and I wondered if this would be its last meal of the day. Dusk settled across the yard. Colors faded to deepening shades of gray. In the murky dimness I glanced out as I passed the window. The hawk - in silhouette - perched atop the tray feeder. I went outside then prepared and tossed the last sparrow to it. The hawk caught and dispatched it quickly, as usual, and disappeared into the spruces. No doubt, it would dine then roost in that very spot for the night. I was out of house sparrows.

A little before 8am on Monday the hawk was back. I felt a minor twinge of guilt at having nothing to offer. Over the next few hours the hawk would disappear then reappear at the feeding area. One time I found it perched below the window atop the vacant cage trap. By around noon, and after over an hour of no sightings, I sensed that the Cooper's hawk had finally understood the circumstances - or perhaps been required by hunger to move on. The songbird activity at the feeders resumed as robustly as ever, as if the weekend of terror had never happened.



So far this winter the cage trap has been set for a little over a month. One recent day I saw a different young transient Cooper's hawk out the window. It perched on the cage trap, taking an appropriately keen



interest in the contents. However, like the reaction I've come to know from so many other Cooper's hawks that have landed outside our window, the bird suddenly flinched when its eye caught my movement behind the pane and vanished in an instant, not to return.

Last winter I estimate that I probably caught roughly thirty house sparrows that were destined to become either rat snake or Cooper's hawk food. I'm keeping a more purposefully accurate tally this winter. It currently rests at 35, with four more "on hold" in the cage trap until the next rat snake feeding cycle.

Does removing all these cavity-competing invasives really make a difference? It's interesting to note that this past spring, for the first time going back too many years to remember, we witnessed not a single incident of house sparrows fighting with our backyard bluebirds, nor seen one even attempting to claim a nesting box.

On request, any adults or families who make an appointment to pay a visit can watch the drama of a rat snake constricting and eating one of our captured house sparrows. The process is remarkably quick, clean, efficient and educational. Contact us.

-Jim McGrath

Nature Discovery

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A Snowy Owl rests atop a snow-covered pole barn.

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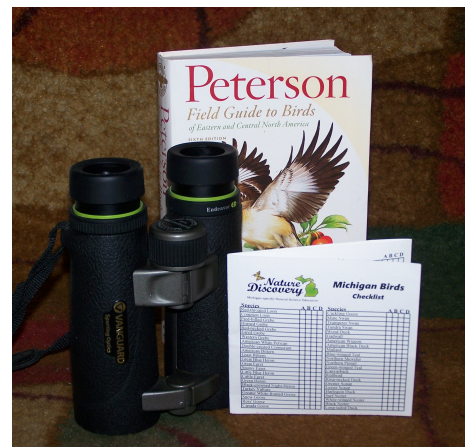
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While fewer birds can be found in Michigan through the winter months than in other seasons there is quite a list of species that can *only* be found here now. In addition to our common non-migratory species a slew of migrant visitors from northern coniferous and tundra biomes appear in varied habitats, many of which are a short drive from home. There are specific destinations to visit in the Lansing area to get great looks at Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Snowy Owls and other iconic birds.

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An Eastern garter snake consumes a live tadpole.

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Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.



Kids love hand-feeding lettuce to “Milberta,” our Red-footed tortoise.

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including a special “thank you” to
these most recent donors...*



*Judy & Allen Marr
Katharine Merritt
Montessori Childrens House
Gene Wasserman
Zellner Family*

The Cooper's Hawk highlighted in the opening column rests and digests contentedly after one of many house sparrow meals.

Make “Ecocide” an International Crime

While the climate careens out of balance and the Amazon burns at an increasing rate, this series of articles from *Inside Climate News* make the case for “ecocide” to be treated and prosecuted as an international crime.

The first link, from the organization Stop Ecocide International, explains how the process of making ecocide an international crime would work.

<https://www.stopecocide.earth/making-ecocide-a-crime>

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/07042021/ecocide-should-destruction-of-the-planet-be-a-crime/>

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/22062021/ecocide-definition-panel-international-crime/>

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/11082021/amazon-indigenous-tribes-jair-bolsonaro-international-criminal-court/>

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/19122021/amazon-rainforest-brazil-jair-bolsonaro-climate-change/>

-JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

*Scientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations.
- from President Biden’s Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking.*



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