

DEFENSE OF THE HOUSE SPARROW

In response to Vince Yurkunas' observation of grackles killing House Sparrows (*Bird Observer*, 15: 78, April 1987), I have witnessed this behavior in my yard as early as May 9. Sometimes the victim is dropped in flight. The following is an account of this nesting-season activity as recorded in J. V. Dennis: *A Complete Guide to Bird Feeding*, 1980, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, page 246: "Numerous observers have told of grackles killing house sparrows at feeders and then dismembering the victims and eating portions of them. The brains seem to be a special delicacy. During a single spring, an observer in Rhode Island counted no fewer than thirteen house sparrows killed by a **single** grackle." No statistics were given for how many a **mated** grackle might kill!

While on the topic of House Sparrows, I'd like to know why so many birdwatchers put down these and other more common creatures, variously referred to by such derogatory terms as "junk birds" or "dickey birds." I refer to the title of Mr. Yurkunas' field note "Solution to House Sparrow Problem?" [actually, the editor of *Bird Observer* was responsible for this title], recent poisoning of starlings in Rhode Island as reported on page 59 of *The Boston Globe* for Sunday, April 26, 1987, or the article on Canada Geese in the February/March issue of *Sanctuary* as other recent examples of the C.B.D.S. (common bird disparagement syndrome).

First, some of these species didn't ask to be imported, and furthermore, they are all quite interesting to observe. (Three cheers for the Stokes' behavior series!) Although my pocketbook may frequently collapse to see them approach the feeders, their presence does attract other species and provides protection. Certainly their great numbers enhance the startle effect when they fly off at the least disturbance and decrease the likelihood of an individual being caught by a predator. The House Sparrow's lively chatter on cold winter days reminds me how varied is its communication. Maybe they're not as colorful as warblers, but not every birder is as handsome as Robert Redford or Bo Derek, either.

Starlings also attract attention by their mystifying flight patterns. Their beautiful iridescent coloration and masterful mimicry (Rich Little, move over!) are intriguing. (Read *Arnie, the Darling Starling* by Marguerite Sigl Corbu and Diane Marie Barras.)

By some accounts (J. V. Dennis, 1980, pages 9, 66, and 236), numbers of some common species, especially House Sparrows, may be declining. More locally, a comparison of the 1984 and 1986 Christmas Bird Counts for Eastern Massachusetts shows a drop of about ten percent (10,779 in 1984 to 9585 in 1986) in the House Sparrow population. Likewise, starlings dropped by over

43,000 individuals. Even at my feeders, there are half as many House Sparrows as a few years ago. Are they going the way of the most common bird in Audubon's time, the Passenger Pigeon? Perhaps someday, birders will record *Passer domesticus* as a write-in.

Some distinguished birders may travel the country in search of number 701 or rush around the world to "get" all the species they can, but do they notice the "Simple Gifts" in their backyards? (Perhaps, they're not home long enough.) At least those of us who stay put can -- on those days when no Fieldfares show up -- pay more attention to our more common backyard friends.

Dottie Case, Needham

FURTHER COMMENT ON GRACKLES AND HOUSE SPARROWS

The latest [April 1987] issue of *Observer* is a delight. We've been reading the short articles aloud and crowing over them. Vince Yurkunas (Arlington) might be interested to know that when I was a child in Richmond, Virginia, I raised an orphaned baby House Sparrow to a healthy feathered fledgling. She was taking strong flights every day, with me looking on. I was sitting on the curb watching her at a neighbor's feeder, when a Common Grackle swooped down, grabbed her by the neck, and bore her screaming away. End of story. And now I help set traps for sparrows. But that early experience was a blow to my Disney-molded view of nature.

Julie Zickefoose, Hadlyme, Connecticut

LOVE AFFAIR IN DOWNTOWN BOSTON: PEREGRINE COURTSHIP

On March 9 a fellow hawk enthusiast at work on the thirtieth floor at One Beacon Street, Boston, called me to the window to see the Peregrines. We had been watching one, and sometimes two, for more than a year. As I watched that day, however, I saw immediately that several things were unusual about their flight. What was most noticeable, and different from any other Peregrine flights that I had seen, was how "together" the birds were. Although they were separated by space (the male, the smaller bird, was above; the female, below), they turned and dove as one bird. Their synchronous flight was breathtaking. Another striking aspect of this flight was the interactions. The male would dive at the female, folding his wings and plunging toward her. Suddenly, one or both birds would seem to plummet, not flying, soaring, or diving, but falling. Then they would swoop up (as we all breathed again!) and resume their positions in

the sky. From time to time they would flutter their wings very fast. It did not seem to be a wing beat used for flying, as the beats were very short and quick.

Soon a group of us was watching at the window; the wonder of this flight was apparent to more people than the hawk watchers. The birds were coming very close to the window and staying in a contained area between our building and the Kennedy Building, but they were using a great extent of vertical space -- soaring way above us on the thirtieth floor and diving far below. We watched from 10:00 to 10:30 A.M. The birds continued their courtship for at least four more hours, because every time we would check the window, they were there. I learned that earlier in the day, one of the birds (probably the female) had been perched on the ledge of the Kennedy Building, and the male repeatedly dived at her.

I often think about the birds and their flight that day. The most memorable thing about it, the aspect that made it different from other Peregrine flights I have seen (and working in downtown Boston I have fortunately had many opportunities to watch Peregrines) was the synchronous flight. I felt over and over that the birds were not just flying. Their dives were breathtaking, and the unity of the flight seemed purposeful, as if it had been choreographed to the smallest wing flutter.

Many people "fell in love" that day -- it was hard not to. We set up a scope near a window and delightedly watched Peregrines perch and eat and cache prey on ledges of the Kennedy Building. "Have you see the birds today?" became the usual greeting. We later discovered a peregrine-watching network independent of our own and anxiously awaited news of their nesting site, which we all hoped would be on the Kennedy Building.

We greeted with elation the news learned through a Peregrine network memo sent through interoffice envelopes that a nest site was established and that first one and then two, three, and four! eggs were laid.

Chere Bemelmans, Bradford

BACKGROUND FOR THE PEREGRINE FIELD NOTE

The following information is quoted from an article in the Spring 1987 issue of *Massachusetts Audubon: Boston* (1: 1), "The Peregrine Falcon: A Species on the Mend."

An endangered species, the Peregrine has not nested in the Commonwealth since 1955. The widespread use of DDT as a pesticide that began at this time interfered with the Peregrine's nervous and reproductive systems, most notably by reducing egg shell thickness. . . .Before they started disappearing, there were 350

wild pairs of Peregrines east of the Mississippi River. By 1966, in this same area no pair remained. . . . DDT was banned in 1972. . . . [Starting] with birds borrowed from falconers, program scientists hatch Peregrines and send five-week-old falcons to nesting sites. In the years 1984 and 1985, a dozen of these baby falcons came to Boston. . . . part of the Peregrine Restoration Program (PRP). . . . Under the direction of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife [MDFW], the falcons have been raised in a special, wooden, hacking tower on the roof of the McCormack Post Office Building in downtown Boston. Hacking is the process of allowing young birds to learn to hunt and fend for themselves in the wild while providing them with food. . . so that the falcons never see their human surrogate parents. . . . Of the 12 that were initially hacked in Boston, 6 have survived. . . . [The first courtship calls, "E-CHIP, E-CHIP," were heard by Tom French on February 10, 1987, outside his window at the MDFW office at 100 Cambridge Street in Boston.] The male falcon was Dublin, the bird who was released here in 1984 and visited in 1985. The female, identified by bird bands, was released in Toronto, Canada, in 1984 and is the only Canadian release known to have taken up residence in the United States. . . . In other areas east of the Mississippi River, there are [at present] 43 pairs of Peregrines. Last year, thirty of these pairs attempted to nest and 25 of them succeeded in raising 53 young.

The urban environment of Boston is an ideal setting for hacking the Peregrine Falcons. As state ornithologist Brad Blodgett notes, "The skyscrapers mimic the cliff nesting sites of these birds in the wild." . . . In the city, there is a vast food supply for the falcons, consisting mainly of seabirds, starlings, and to a lesser extent pigeons. However, the program is not a pigeon control effort. . . . Another advantage . . . is a lack of natural predators in Boston, namely the Great Horned Owl. . . . The Peregrine Restoration Program was the first program that resulted from the Nongame Wildlife Fund . . . made up of contributions from taxpayers who check off a section on their tax returns to contribute to this program. . . . The PRP [has] a volunteer network to keep track of the Peregrines in Boston [of which *Bird Observer's* Chere Bemelmans is a part]. . . . Other articles on the Peregrine Falcon can be found in *Boston Magazine* (November 1986) and *Massachusetts Wildlife* (Summer 1986).

D.R.A.

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