

FIELD NOTES

Birdsitting

Joey Mason

It's not always a success when baby birds are "rescued" by someone, but in this case it was essentially a happy ending. If you have ever had House Sparrows take over a nest box that is already occupied by bluebirds or Tree Swallows, then you know that the outcome is usually death to the latter two species. This particular story is not all peaches and cream, but it is a true story.

One early sunny summer morning a few years ago, I was walking out to the barn, contemplating my schedule for the day. Beyond my barn is a one-acre meadow. The previous owners had horses, so the field has a well-chewed, weathered board fence enclosing half of it. Little saplings of pitch and white pines are trying to make a comeback within. The other half is grass and goldenrod, and I mow it periodically to keep it from reverting back to forest. I have numerous bluebird nest boxes randomly placed there to attract cavity-nesting birds. In the past, Tree Swallows, bluebirds, House Wrens, chickadees, Tufted Titmice and White-breasted Nuthatches have all nested in my yard at one time or another.



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I love to hear the Tree Swallows chitter to one another as they fly circles around the meadow and up and over the large, awkward white pine that looms in its midst. This particular morning, my ears tuned into the screaming alarm calls of several Tree Swallows. There were two pairs nesting on the property at the time, and they had joined forces. All four adults were taking turns diving on a nest box in the back of the meadow. My immediate thought was that a cat had wandered into the yard and had decided to try its luck on having the Tree Swallows for breakfast. My instinct was to dash out there and scare it away. As I ran toward the box, I saw a cocky little brown head peering out of the entrance hole, chirping away happily. It was a House Sparrow or English Sparrow, as some call it.

House Sparrows are an introduced species. They compete for nesting cavities with many of our native species. My heart sank as I approached and the male sparrow flushed out of the box. I dreaded what I would find inside. I knew the adult Tree Swallows were safe because they were frantically flying above my head. But what of the young I knew were inside? When I opened the box, I carefully lifted out all four young and cradled them in my hand. They looked like they had five o'clock shadows because their quills were just emerging from their flesh, giving them a nubby gray appearance. The first three appeared to be fine, although one had a couple of tiny lacerations on its head. But the fourth had a bloody, swollen head. It was alive, but hunkered down flat in my hand.

House Sparrows have a stout, seed-eating bill, which they can use to kill any unsuspecting victim they happen to trap inside a nest box. They usually go for the head, and will peck enough times to expose the brain. Adult Tree Swallows or bluebirds do not have such stout bills and have no defense against House Sparrows. There was no hope for this innocent nestling. I hadn't gotten there soon enough for that one chick, but any later and the rest would also have been killed. It was lucky there were any survivors at all.

I couldn't put the remaining young back into the box until I disposed of the sparrow. I needed to catch the sparrow or he would also try to kill the adult swallows if they ventured back into their box. Since House Sparrows are an introduced species that are not protected by law, this puts them in the same category as pigeons (Rock Doves) and European Starlings. They can be disposed of humanely, or even kept as pets. Do not confuse House Sparrows with our native species of sparrows, which are protected by law. I have seen House Sparrows kill bluebirds and Tree Swallows through the years, so I have become heartless and will not tolerate them in any of my boxes. I do not place boxes in House Sparrow-infested areas for this reason. I will kill most that I catch and freeze them for recycling by a local educator's or falconer's birds. A few I keep alive in a cage and use as lures to catch more sparrows.

I walked back to the house to find something that would hold the young swallows. I found a small, lidless margarine container, stuffed it with Kleenex, and placed the four birds inside. I am not and have no wish to be a rehabilitator; but in an emergency I can get instructions from or work with a licensed rehabilitator. The rehabilitator had given me a supply of baby bird formula, which I keep in the freezer

at all times. I thawed it in the microwave and then sucked some up into a one-cc syringe. Although I can't reproduce a swallow's chattering call, I can do a really good bluebird imitation, so I tried it on the baby swallows. As luck would have it, my bluebird call worked well to get these young Tree Swallows to gape for food. As soon as their mouths opened, I carefully pushed the syringe way down their throats and gave a little squirt. They weren't dehydrated and were in no need of electrolytes, so this procedure didn't take long. Sadly, the badly injured bird did not want food. I called the rehabilitator on the phone and described the injury. She told me exactly what I expected to hear. I knew full well there was no way to save it, but I wanted to go through the formality of checking with the expert just to be sure. I had to put the poor thing out of its misery.

There was no place to hide in the backyard where I could get close enough to lie in wait for the sparrow's return to the box. My first thought was to bring my car and park it close to the box. I would try to catch the sparrow by running up to the box and covering the hole with my hand. I was not hopeful, but I was willing to give the mad dash approach a try. This works well to capture Tree Swallows, but isn't very successful with bluebirds and sparrows, in my experience. Sparrows are very quick. I didn't have a trap that would fit on the box other than an improvised flap of cardboard. I quickly discarded this idea because I didn't want to change the appearance of the box, which might cause the sparrow to switch his deadly attentions over to the other occupied swallow box. I would have to wait for him. And since the young needed to be fed every half hour or so, they came along for the ride.


So picture, if you will, a forty-something gal sitting in a meadow in a rusted-out 1985 Toyota Landcruiser with her hand on the cracked-open car door, waiting for a male House Sparrow to enter a nest box some thirty feet away. I sat and I watched and I waited as this lone male sparrow flew from branch to branch on the tree edge while the swallows watched from the fence posts. Once in a while, a swallow would land on the entrance hole to the box, and the sparrow would fly down and spook it away and perch on top of the box. There wasn't one female sparrow in sight, which aggravated me even more because this little beast was setting up housekeeping in hopes of attracting a mate that he didn't even have yet. I made a few mad dashes for the box when the sparrow went inside, but they were all futile attempts. He flew out effortlessly each time I got close to the box. He got so wary of my presence, he finally wouldn't even enter the box anymore but perched nearby singing away, still determined to attract a mate. The Tree Swallows hung around a little while but later gave up and disappeared.

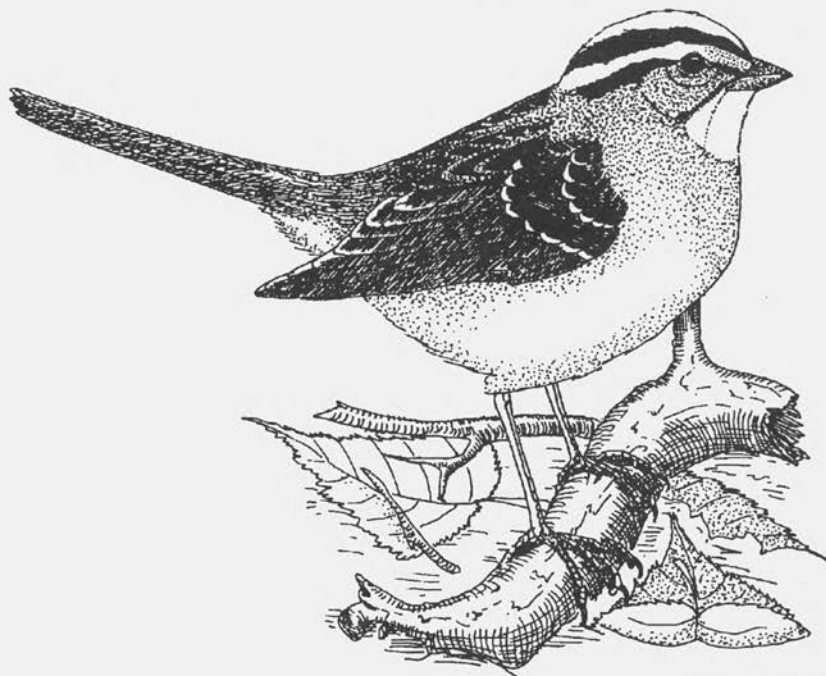
I had things to do, and could not waste any more time, so I decided plan B was next. I got my Cedar Valley Sparrow Trap and set it out, baited with birdseed and another male sparrow I had been keeping for just such an occasion. This is a trap that works best with a live sparrow inside. I had other nest boxes to check that morning, so I set the trap and took off. The young swallows went with me so I could feed them as needed. When I returned two hours later, I was happy to see two male House Sparrows in the trap. Success! But now that he was out of the way, what was I to do

with the three young Tree Swallows? There were no adult Tree Swallows hanging around the box anymore, so I was stuck with finding a home for them.

I have fostered young into other boxes before, but that year I didn't have any the same age that didn't already have a full house. It is best to have young of the same age in a nest box because if the fostered bird is larger, the original young in the box could be stressed for food from the competition, and conversely if the fostered one is smaller. So I had to become a baby-birdsitter for the rest of the day.

Sometimes if young Tree Swallow nestlings have all died, I have seen the adults revisit the box days later. This is not to say it is the same pair of Tree Swallows, but the way they act leads me to believe they are. They land on the entrance and look inside briefly and call. This call signals the young to beg for food, which prompts the adult to go in and feed them. That is what convinces me the adults haven't given up yet. They are trying one more time to see if anyone will answer from within the box. Remembering this gave me hope that these adults, too, might come back to see if their young were really gone.

It was six o'clock the following morning when the young birds went back into their original nest box. I did my chores for the morning and kept checking to see if the adults were back. The adults came back within an hour. It was such a relief to see the butt-end of a Tree Swallow disappear into the box once again! I stood and watched as one adult poked its head out the door and chattered to its mate. A tragic beginning to one morning ended happily the following morning. A week and a half later, all three baby Tree Swallows fledged successfully from their box. 



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