

A NEST-BUILDING MALE SONG SPARROW

BY WILLIAM E. SCHANTZ

IN early March, 1933, a Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia beata*) came to our neighborhood, a rather closely built-up section of northeastern Columbus, Ohio. After a few days he was attracted to a small red cedar twelve feet from our rear window, and here he began a nest. When it was half completed, he ceased building and roosted on it the remainder of the year. Although he sang a great deal, no mate appeared.

During the next spring he built an excellent nest a few inches higher in the same cedar, but still no mate came to use it. In mid-summer he ceased to be about our premises almost all day, but centered his attention about a half square to the north, although he usually returned each evening to bathe and roost. For a few days in late summer he was accompanied to our yard by a mate and two or three young. It was not long before he was again a bachelor, remaining with us throughout the winter.

Very early in the spring of 1935, he began a third nest several inches above the last one. Soon a mate came, and they moved to a neighbor's yard where they both built a nest in a brush-pile. This was hauled away after the eggs had been incubated for two days, whereupon the birds returned to the cedar and completed the first nest. *In it they raised four broods, relining it three times.*

SUMMARY OF FOUR BROODS

<i>First egg</i>	<i>Number laid</i>	<i>Hatched</i>	<i>Young left nest</i>	<i>Number reared</i>
May 1	3	May 14-15	May 27	3
June 1	5	June 14-15	June 26	2
July 2	4	July 16-17	July 25-26	1
August 2	3	August 16-17	August 26	1

One egg of the third brood did not hatch. The female had laid *five* sets of eggs and raised seven young to independence. The nest was in excellent condition after the last brood left it. The male was absent from the time the last brood left the nest until October 20, after which he remained all winter, usually roosting in the cedar.

On April 14, 1936, a new mate appeared and both began a nest seven and a half feet up in the cedar upon the excreta left there by the roosting male. It was not finished until May 3. On May 1, a Cowbird (*Molothrus ater ater*) had visited the unfinished nest, coming again on the 5th, when she laid an egg. After each visit the male spent most of his time perched on the edge of the nest or nearby, singing or preening. Neither rain nor our faces gazing up at him about twenty inches away deterred him from singing

or frightened him away. The four Song Sparrow's eggs hatched as well as the Cowbird's. On May 31, the young Cowbird was monopolizing the food, getting all of it at seven consecutive feedings. We tried to remove it, but its *cheep*-ing and strong, sharp claws clinging to the young Song Sparrows caused them to scatter from the nest.

The little birds were caught and the male tried to lure them away. He brought food close to them and then hurriedly ran a short distance across the lawn. He then looked back and, seeing he was not followed, repeated the performance. Over and over, dozens of times he tried, but in vain, for the young were imprisoned in our hands. I then put them into a tub, whereupon the male rushed at me with open bill and spread tail, making a hissing sound. When newspaper was tied around the tub, the male changed his tactics; he kept circling about and running ahead of me with his wings held stiffly upward.

The female in the meantime had been acting differently. At first she repeatedly carried food to the empty nest; next she skulked about under the shrubbery with food in her bill, but finally she found her way to the young by following her mate. On June 3, the female was trying to get the young out of the tub, but the male merely fed them. Both parents were concerned over the presence of a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta c. cristata*). The female succeeded in getting two of the young out of the tub, one of which was snatched up by the jay and eaten on a nearby fencepost. The parents were frantic as long as the little bird cried, but appeared to forget the tragedy quickly.

The second brood of 1936 was reared in a neighbor's yard, but for the third the birds returned to our grounds, building in a barberry bush. The three eggs were laid July 10-12, but never hatched, although incubated faithfully for twenty-four days. When opened, they were found to contain half-grown embryos. It may have been that the female had been frightened off her eggs by a cat some night. She disappeared August 5 and was never seen again. The male had disappeared on August 3 and was not seen again until October 11, when he seemed very glad to get back to the cedar. He was around continuously for a month when he dropped out of sight again, possibly never to return.

This last female became antagonistic to her mate after each set of eggs had been laid, remaining so until the young were well feathered. When the male approached, she faced him with open bill and spread tail, giving a growling note. At times she threatened him while he was singing, causing him to cut short his song. If she approached while he was feeding, he retreated four or five feet and did not venture to return until she had finished. When the food was inside the feeding cage, and she came there before he could escape, he fluttered around in a panic. On one occasion when he

paused a moment in his fluttering, she quickly seized him by the neck and both held their heads low and motionless. When she released him, a feather floated away, and he again was too frightened to escape. The male had always been friendly. His mate of 1935 gradually became tame and the same was true of the 1936 bird. As we sat on the rear steps, the birds regularly ate from the step below the one on which our feet rested.

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DISCUSSION BY MARGARET M. NICE

ON May 31, 1936, I had the privilege of seeing Mr. Schantz's pair of Song Sparrows and their nest and later of studying his detailed records. There are several points in the foregoing account to which I would like to call attention.

Striking departures from the behavior of the large number of Song Sparrows which I have studied for eight years in a different part of Columbus were the nest building of the male and the raising of four broods in the same nest. In my experience the male carries nesting material at an early stage of the nesting cycle, but once the real nest is started, takes no further part in building. Lone males of various species sometimes build nests; the bird under discussion not only did this, but later assisted his mates in building. Perhaps his latent (?) nest-building instinct had been developed by practice when mateless in 1933 and 1934.

With my Song Sparrows a later nest was invariably built at some distance from a previous one, although I know of three instances in other localities where a nest was used for two broods in succession. The remarkable fidelity to the one nest in 1935 may have been partly due to the attachment of the male for the cedar, the only evergreen in the vicinity, since he roosted in it much of the time for four years and built in it each year.

Other points of particular interest are the despotic attitude of the 1936 female toward her mate, and the latter's behavior when his young were captive: his attempts to lure them, then to intimidate Mr. Schantz, and finally the 'nest-protecting' display. This last procedure is typical of parent Song Sparrows when young of seven days or older appear to be in danger.

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