

OUR BABY SONG SPARROW

WITH ONE SET OF FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

By JOSEPHINE R. MICHENER

THE FOLLOWING account of the attempt to raise a young San Diego Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia cooperi*) which had been lost out of its nest long before it was able to fly, is given, not because our efforts were successful, but because success seemed so near until death brought sorrow to the household and because of the interest and affection the little bird commanded.

On June 23, 1925, one of the boys who live across the street brought us this baby bird which he had found on the ground in his front yard. Its only troubles seemed to

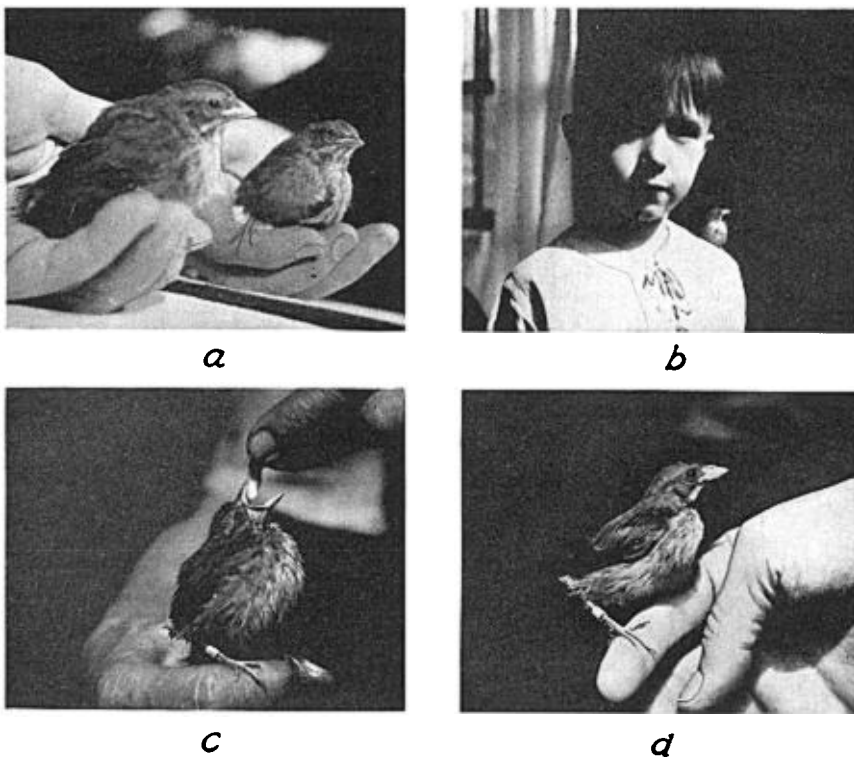


Fig. 27. VIEWS OF BABY SONG SPARROW.

- a. In front of mirror showing two views in one photograph.
- b. On boy's shoulder.
- c. Being fed bread and milk.
- d. Just posing.

be that it had no nest, no parents, too few feathers and insufficient strength even to hop on the ground. We fed it bread and milk and put it in a small cage where it seemed contented. The feeding was repeated at frequent intervals. Soon an adult song sparrow was noticed near by. It was talking excitedly, as parent birds do when

something has happened to their young. That night we covered the cage containing the small bird with a cloth and placed it on a screen porch, and in the morning we found the parent bird there with it, having come in through a hole in the screen. We caught the parent and found it to be wearing band no. A14368, which proved it to be the first song sparrow we had banded when we began banding on November 2, 1924. Previous to that this bird had been banded by us on September 9, 1924, with a band of fine copper wire. It had repeated in our traps on November 27, December 28, January 9, 10, 12, February 6, 10, 20, April 8, 25, May 22, 24, June 12, 19, 21 and 22.

After releasing the adult bird, the young bird was put outside on the ground in a small cage made of three-quarter inch mesh poultry wire, in the hope that the old bird would feed it. Two adult birds came near and displayed much interest, but they did not feed the young one so far as we could tell. We were afraid that cats would get the young bird if it were left unattended in this position very long, so it was returned to its original small cage and the feedings of bread and milk were continued. It ate quite readily and often, and grew stronger rapidly.

It was kept out in the yard nearly all the time so that the parents would retain their interest in it and be ready to guide it in bird lore when it became strong enough to fly. But it would not eat well outside the house because the parent birds would talk to it and make it more interested in trying to fly away than in eating. In the house it would eat eagerly and then snuggle down and shut its eyes for two or three minutes. Then it would awaken and be normally active for half an hour or so before begging for food again.

After three or four days it was put out in the cage of three-quarter inch mesh again, to see if the parents would feed it. Somehow it escaped from this cage and we spent most of the day hunting for it. It was not yet able to fly well enough to get up out of the way of cats, so that it would almost certainly have perished if we had not found it. Finally, after a very minute search, directed by the chipping of the parent birds, it was found beneath some shrubs and taken back to its cage. This convinced us that we would have to accept the sole responsibility of feeding it until it could fly.

Before many days it would beg for food by voice and quivering wings every time I would come near its cage, unless it had just been fed. As it grew stronger and its feathers developed it began to try to fly—first a few inches from one hand to the other and then farther and farther, always to something higher than the perch upon which it was standing. It particularly liked to hop onto my hand and up my arm a few inches at a time until it reached my shoulder, and then to snuggle close to my neck under the brim of my sunshade hat. It never moved from there of its own accord. It became very friendly with me, and when out of the cage it would fly toward my face or shoulder, one time actually flying right against my face.

When we first began to feed it, it did not want the drops of water I offered it on the tip of my finger, but before many days it would at times beg for water and would not be satisfied with food until it was given the water, always a drop at a time. When given a dish of water, for the first time on the fifteenth day, it gave a little chirup and hopped into the middle of the water and took a bath, then sat on a twig that was in the cage until it was dry. No instructions from a parent bird were necessary.

We had been wondering for several days how soon it would be safe if released into the shrubs and trees of the yard. On the evening of the sixteenth day it was

left until late in a large cage on the porch, when we decided that it was not very well protected for the night. I took it hurriedly in my hand, without thinking to give it any warning, and put it in the smaller cage. It was very much frightened, because it had been sleeping so soundly, and screamed piteously; but there seemed to be nothing that I could do to help matters so I left it, thinking that I had done it no real harm. The next morning it was dead, scared to death, we believed. It had seemed perfectly healthy all the time we had it and was thriving well on the care it was getting. There was real sorrow for all of us that morning. Our only consolation was in the thought that we had surely prolonged the little bird's life and that we had tried to give it a good start.

Pasadena, California, August 10, 1925.