

It Finally Happened to Me

By Kathy Laine, Scottsburg, Virginia

I had heard about it from others. I had seen their pictures. However, it had never happened to me. But one day, it finally did—a House Sparrow killed birds nesting in my yard. Through an open window, I heard the familiar, annoying, “Chirrup, chirrup, chirrup” of a male House Sparrow. Knowing the danger these non-native birds pose for our native cavity-nesting species, I rushed to see where he was. To my horror, he was clinging to the entrance hole of the nest box in my backyard where a pair of Carolina Chickadees was raising their family of seven adorable nestlings, eleven days old.

I went outside and carefully peeked into the box. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that the babies were fine. I was hosting many native birds on my 5-acre property—an overflowing Purple Martin colony with thirteen families, two families of Eastern Bluebirds, three families of Tree Swallows, and this family of Chickadees; therefore, I had many adult birds, eggs, and babies to guard from danger. House Sparrows are a threat because they commonly enter the nests of native birds and peck them to death. They scalp the parents, peck out babies’ eyes, sever their spinal cords, and often throw them out of the box onto the ground. Sometimes they injure the babies and leave them in the nest, smother them with nest material, and



The Carolina Chickadee nest the day before the attack; nestlings are eleven days old

build their own nest on top of the baby birds while they are still alive. I feel that if I am going to draw wild birds to my property, offering feeders and man-made nesting places, it is my responsibility to do all I can to protect them from predators and non-native competitors. Therefore, I immediately went to work, trying to trap the House Sparrow. There are no laws protecting non-native bird species, so trapping and shooting are legal. I set out a ground bait trap, and placed several spare nest boxes on a nearby wall, in hopes of distracting him—luring him away from the chickadee box and its helpless babies. I could later capture him in those boxes, if he bonded to one of them. However, he would not enter the bait trap and ignored the additional empty boxes.

The next day, I heard the House Sparrow’s chirping, looked out, and saw him clinging to the front of the chickadee box—and then he dove into it! I raced outside, grabbing my nylon laundry bag along the way, hoping to throw it over the box and capture him; I also grabbed an entrance hole plug, to prevent premature fledging of the babies inside. But the sparrow heard me coming and flew out of the box. I plugged the entrance hole and quietly lifted the side panel of the box, fearing what I might find inside the box. It was too late; that was not the first time that sparrow had been in that box. He had already killed the Momma chickadee. He had torn up the nest; I couldn’t even see the babies. I removed the cardboard nesting cup, pulled back the nesting material and found the babies under it—buried alive! They would have suffocated and starved to death. The sparrow had injured one of them (pecked

its head), and although all of the nestlings looked weak, they were moving. I found a bruised and bloody nestling thrown out onto the ground—dead. Ants were on it, so I knew the murder had been committed last evening or earlier that morning, because all of the babies were fine when I checked on them the previous afternoon. I was deeply saddened. However, this did not come as a surprise to me. I had read many reports of how these little brown birds that peck at food scraps in parking lots have killed many native birds in their nest boxes. I could hear a chickadee scolding in the woods; I hoped that was the Daddy chickadee. I pulled back all the nest material so he could see and feed the chicks, and placed the nest back in the box; I could only hope he would return to care for the babies and attempt to raise them—alone. It would be a tough job, but they would fledge in a few days—IF the sparrow didn’t come back and kill the Daddy, too.

I worked on implementing other ways to stop this aggressive little bird. I mounted a trapping nest box within sight of that box, and repeatedly looked out my windows for any sign of the sparrow. Within less than ten minutes of hanging that trap, I was able to capture the House Sparrow, and he was humanely euthanized, so he could never again kill another native bird. I left the traps in place, in case another House Sparrow was in the area. Thankfully, Daddy Chickadee returned to the nest box, found



Female Chickadee on rim of nest, killed by House Sparrow



One nestling pecked by House Sparrow and thrown out on ground

his surviving babies, and worked very hard to raise them—and all of the nestlings successfully fledged! About two weeks later, another male and a female House Sparrow appeared and were captured in the ground bait trap.

I typically do not have many House Sparrows in my area—but it only takes one. Aggressive control is needed, if we want to aid in the conservation of native birds, doing what we can to protect our native birds. Relocation of non-native birds doesn't usually work—they typically fly back to our area. Even if they don't, relocating an invasive, destructive creature is like dumping our garbage into our neighbor's yard. Doing nest tear-outs of House Sparrow nests doesn't work, either; unless the sparrow who built the nest can be eliminated, it often returns and rebuilds its nest, and/or it kills native species who try to nest there. Even worse, nest tear-outs often incite House Sparrow Revenge Syndrome, where the House Sparrow finds the nearest nest of a native cavity-nester and kills those birds—or destroys eggs and/or babies of multiple nests

at a Purple Martin colony. House Sparrows even kill when they already have their own nest of young, elsewhere. They are not simply trying to find a home and survive—they kill other species to reduce future competition for nest sites.

Some will not agree with a proactive approach to managing non-native species. Each birder must decide to what extent they will go in safeguarding native species. God did not place House Sparrows or European Starlings in the U.S.—humans brought them here from Europe. North American bird species are vulnerable, because they did not evolve with these imported pest species and cannot successfully compete with them, as the other bird species in Europe can. The House Sparrow's powerful beak is deadly to our native birds that cannot adequately defend themselves. I do not take pleasure in capturing, shooting, or euthanizing any creature, and I only use humane procedures. If we desire to help native birds to be as productive as possible, it requires moxie. I was asked to share my experience, so others can see the damage House Sparrows do—and learn what can be done to reduce harm to our native birds.

This experience also demonstrates the importance of monitoring. It is unlikely that the Daddy chickadee would have been able to uncover his buried babies to feed them, if I had not taken action. The House Sparrow probably would have killed the Daddy, and the other babies would have suffocated and starved, if I had felt that opening nest boxes to check on birds would disturb them too much. If I had "let nature take its course," nine precious native birds would have suffered and died—needlessly. Monitoring helps save the lives of native birds. Willing and observant caretakers can protect our native birds, intervening and coming to their aid when they desperately need our help.

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