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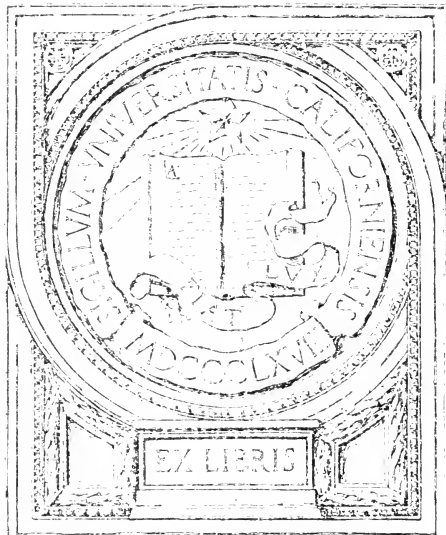
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ON THE

MISDEEDS

OF THE

HOUSE-SPARROW

(*PASSER DOMESTICUS*).

BY

J. H. GURNEY, JUN., F.L.S.

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"She fetches her breath so short as a new-ta'en Sparrow."  
TROILUS AND CRESSIDA, Act III. Sc. 2.

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TO VNU  
ABSTRACT

ON THE MISDEEDS  
OF THE  
HOUSE-SPARROW  
(*PASSER DOMESTICUS*).

BY  
J. H. GURNEY, JUN., F.L.S.

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THE Rev. F. O. Morris has issued to the public a small book entitled 'The Sparrow-Shooter,' intended as a reply to 'The House-Sparrow,' recently published\*. As I happen to be a contributor to the latter volume, and am taken to task for my share in it, I will essay a few words in rejoinder.

Neither the authors of 'The House-Sparrow,' nor any one else, desire to withhold from Mr. Morris due credit for the humanitarian motives which prompt him to befriend *the poor Sparrows* through thick and thin; but the interests of *the poor farmers* must be considered, an important matter which too many seem to overlook.

The plain fact remains that the House-Sparrow does an extraordinary amount of harm to corn, and it is impossible for Mr. Morris to deny it, or at least, if he does continue to deny it, it only shows that he shuts his eyes to the undeniable evidence afforded by dis-

\* By William Wesley and Son, 28 Essex Street, Strand.

section, which is given by the writers he so loudly condemns ('House-Sparrow,' p. 12 *et seq.*).

The Sparrow does harm in many other ways, but these need not be here considered: the chief charge against it is that it eats corn,—corn when it is newly sown, corn soft and milky, corn ready and ripe to be harvested, and corn which is thrown out for fowls.

The Sparrow is a bird which is annually increasing in this country, as it is in other countries where it has been introduced, and the question is becoming a serious one for farmers, who, with the present low price of wheat, are hard put to make two ends meet, without this new and feathered item against them in their balance-sheet.

Recent investigations have conclusively shown that the Sparrow does not destroy nearly so much insect-life as was supposed\*. IT RESTS WITH ITS ADVOCATES TO SHOW THAT THIS AMOUNT OF INSECT-LIFE (WHATEVER ITS EXACT PROPORTION MAY BE) WOULD, IF SPARED, DO MORE HARM THAN IS DONE BY THE SPARROWS THEMSELVES TO CORN. Old Sparrows, as a rule, do not eat insects†. The *larvæ* which form the customary food of young Sparrows are, for the most part, species which prey on shrubs and plants, but not on corn, such as *Teras contaminana*, *Triphæna pronuba*, and *Pontia brassicæ*‡.

\* In support of this statement I need only refer to the table of dissections ('House-Sparrow,' p. 12 *et seq.*).

† But they may occasionally be seen to catch and give their young ones insects, long after those young ones are able to fly. It may here be mentioned that Mr. T. Wood has observed adult Sparrows picking *Sitones* (Weevils) off peas, and eating them themselves. The *Sitones*, he explains, "are the small beetles which nibble away the leaves of beans and peas, frequently reducing the plants to mere skeletons" ('Our Bird Allies,' p. 164).

‡ For the identification of these *larvæ* I am indebted to Mr. C. G. Barrett.

Can any one else, who wishes to speak on behalf of the Sparrows, produce any evidence of their feeding—not occasionally, but habitually—in any locality in the United Kingdom, on the Wireworm, or on the *larvæ* of the Gamma Moth or Crane-fly? They eat the Rose Aphis, but no one has detected them eating the Wheat Aphis (*A. granaria*), which is much more to the point, though at least one competent observer has made special search for it.

But whatever be the kinds of *larvæ* which they eat, and whatever the quantity, if Sparrows did not eat them, *would not our Greenfinches and Chaffinches do so?* This seems the true way of putting it.

No one has ever answered the late Colonel Russell's query:—"Why is it that in fields far away from farm-premises, where there are no Sparrows, insects do not increase and multiply?" And why have not insects multiplied at Colonel Russell's place in Essex, where, for many years, Sparrows were rigorously kept down, in fact almost exterminated? The reason must be that the caterpillars are eaten by other small birds, such as Chaffinches, Greenfinches, and Yellow-Hammers, and by a host of Warblers and other birds which visit this country for the summer, when insect-life in all its stages is rampant.

It is all very well to suppose that by eating fourteen flies a Sparrow disposes of their subsequent progeny to the tune of 280,000,000; but we know what these calculations, which look so prodigious on paper, are worth. Under ordinary conditions, how many of the two hundred million flies would reach maturity? perhaps very few, or none at all.

It is a shame to see how the pretty House-Martins are decreasing in this country at the hands of the Sparrows, which dispossess them of their nests. There is hardly

a country-place where this has not gone on at some time or other, although it has never happened to Mr. Morris (*cf.* 'Sparrow-Shooter,' p. 7). Some have argued that this does not matter, because the Sparrows do not kill them, but only evict them; but wherever they go it is all the same, they are so much bullied that very few of them succeed in rearing young\*.

It may be that in some exceptional seasons (when a great plague of insect-life shall again occur), as in 1574, when it is said cockchaffers gathered in such numbers on the banks of the Severn as to prevent the working of the water-mills, and in 1868 when they formed a black cloud in Galway, which darkened the sky for a league, destroying vegetation so completely as to change summer into winter ('Wild Birds' Protection Report,' p. 170), Sparrows will do good. Bearing this in mind no one should advocate their extirpation; but Mr. Morris and his friends claim much more than this for them. They claim that in an ordinary year, when insects are not more than usually numerous, Sparrows do more good than harm: it is exceedingly difficult to prove a negative; but I do not believe that any one who has not made a series of dissections realizes how much corn they eat.

Mr. Wesley's book gives a table prepared by many hands with much care (p. 12), a study of which will show that corn forms their customary food for every month of the year. In January it is corn from stacks and from poultry-yards, mingled with refuse-corn from

\* Nor is it confined to the Martins: every bird is, more or less, driven from the vicinity of houses by the obnoxious Sparrow. For my part I would sooner see two or three Chaffinches and Nuthatches eat the crumbs which are put out of the window, than any number of Sparrows, which, by their presence, only usurp the place of better birds than themselves.



the roads; in February, March, April, and May it is much the same—corn, mingled with seeds, buds of gooseberries, young tops of peas, turnip and hay-seed, &c.; in June corn, peas and seeds of various sorts; in July and August ditto. After that they mix the corn with considerable quantities of wild seeds, including, be it freely admitted, the destructive knot-grass and corn-bindweed; but even then they take corn by preference.

I do not think Mr. Morris can have noticed this table, or he would hardly say what he does.

Neither would he say that Sparrows have done as much good as harm in America since their introduction\* ('Sparrow-Shooter,' p. 5) if he had read what our American cousins *of late years* have written about them. On this head let me merely draw his attention to what Dr. Elliott Coues says at page 52 of Mr. Wesley's book, which is only a sample of a hundred other testimonies to the detestation in which they are now held in the United States,—and to a Report on the subject by a Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union, published last year, and reprinted, though not *in extenso*, in Miss Ormerod's 'Ninth Report on Injurious Insects' †. The Committee's Report may be seen in the 'Forest and Stream' newspaper of August 6, 1885 ‡. It is impossible, in my humble judgment, for any one to read the testimony therein contained and think that Sparrows have done good in the United States.

\* Into Maine in 1858 (Gentry's 'House-Sparrow,' p. 33).

† Mr. Morris is not very complimentary to Miss Ormerod, whose efforts to sift the matter in an impartial spirit deserve different recognition.

‡ A copy of which any one interested in the matter will find at the library of the Zoological Society in Hanover Square.

And the same applies more or less to New Zealand\* and Australia †.

It is almost as difficult to guess the value of the corn which Sparrows consume annually in England as to estimate the harm which might be done by the caterpillars with which they feed their young; but I believe one Sparrow will eat 5000 grains of corn in a year at any country farmstead; and this conjecture is not arrived at, as Mr. Morris supposes, from the fact of 20 or 25 grains having been occasionally found in a Sparrow in November, but from counting the grains and writing down the results of very numerous dissections at all seasons of the year.

Mr. Morris is not accurate in one of his quotations: I did not say that Sparrows ever worked "their way through a whole field in regular progression" ('Sparrow-Shooter,' p. 6). What I said was that Sparrows might "be seen sticking to the gradually lessening square of corn until all the field is cut" ('The House-Sparrow,' p. 4), *i. e.*, on the day when the farmer mows it with his reaping-machine.

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\* The latest champion of the Sparrow, Mr. Theodore Wood, who writes sensibly about it, speaking of America and New Zealand, says:—"So far from rendering itself of service, it has become an unmitigated pest" ('Our Bird Allies,' p. 173). This testimony coming from such a man as Mr. Wood, an avowed upholder of the Sparrow, is strong, but not one whit stronger than it ought to be. Concerning Great Britain, Mr. Wood says that he has made experiments (*l. c.* p. 150), and considers that Sparrows do more good than harm. His dissections have led him to a different conclusion from mine; but, if he continues them long enough, I believe he will come round in this matter; and I am sure (from the many I have examined) that a pair of Sparrows do not supply their young with anything approaching 30,000 caterpillars (pp. 161, 179) during the breeding-season, unless it be in some very exceptional locality.

† *Cf.* 'Field,' Nov. 26, 1881, and Dec. 30, 1882.

Those who decide to have the Sparrows killed will probably think it well to form a committee of the farmers of the neighbourhood. As an example may be given the following notice, which has been circulated in the neighbourhood of Aylsham, in Norfolk :—

“DEAR SIR,

“January 5th, 1886.

“A great deal of attention has lately been called to the enormous increase in the number of Sparrows and to the damage they do.

“A wish has been expressed that some concerted action should be taken in the matter of their destruction ; may we ask whether you will undertake to kill the Sparrows on your own occupation ?

“It is felt that any action taken must be agreed to universally in the district, or it will be useless.

“The Committee think that care should be taken that only Sparrows should be killed.

“It would be of great service to the Committee if you would keep a record of the number of Sparrows killed on your farm, and communicate it to them at the end of the year.

“Yours faithfully,

“C. LOUIS BUXTON.

“WM. LEMON.

“J. LEE CASE.

“B. B. SAPWELL.

“WM. CASE.

“J. SOAME.

“J. GOULDER.

“H. G. WRIGHT.”

“E. T. LEARNER.

This circular was sent to all the large occupiers in Aylsham, Banningham, Blickling, Burgh, Ingworth, Marsham, and Tuttington, and the returns as sent in by 42 of them to Mr. Buxton show that in twelve months 8957 were killed, though it is to be feared a few other Finches were mixed up in this number.

The best time to shoot Sparrows for dissection is between 3 and 5 in the afternoon. The crop will give a far better idea of the day's meal than the gizzard. A magnifying-glass is often a great help in making out dubious substances: the late Col. Russell considered that with a watchmaker's lens the most delicate insect might be detected in the crop of a Sparrow, and no one ever took greater pains to master the Sparrow-question thoroughly than he did, or knew more about it. Macgillivray gives a figure of a Sparrow's crop (B. B. i. plate viii.). It is to be looked for on the right side, and is generally very easy to find, being sometimes swollen with food to the size of a marble.

Sparrows are far more difficult to keep down than people, who have not tried it, suppose. Taking their nests about the time of hay-harvest is the simplest plan, and probably the most efficacious. They are very artful in avoiding traps, and after a few days' shooting at them become so wild as to be unapproachable. Nets are very little use, and poisoned grain should never be employed. Mr. Wood says that "Hawk-Kites," such as are sold in toy-shops, have been tried with success in the Isle of Thanet to scare them; they are too audacious to care much for scarecrows with us in Norfolk. Although it is desirable to keep them down at all times, it should be remarked that the mischief done by them at harvest-time is 20-fold greater than at seed-time, for at the latter season there are other Finches which are often much more harmful than Sparrows. If, as Mr. Wood remarks, farmers sowed their grain deeper (*l. c.* p. 184), no birds would be able to get it.

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In conclusion let me propound the following argument:—Suppose that on the 31st of December, 1888,

there be a million less Sparrows in England than at the present time, it follows that there would very soon be a large number more of allied birds, such as Greenfinches and Chaffinches, to say nothing of Martins, and the increase would begin to show itself in the ensuing season.

Let no one suppose that, if we spare our Sparrows, Nature will allow us to have an addition of Greenfinches and Chaffinches *plus* those Sparrows: there is no likelihood that such a thing would happen, for it is contrary to the experience of every practical ornithologist. The land will not support an indefinite number of individuals, and if the Sparrow increases, other birds go to the wall—partly because they drive them away from gardens where they used to nest, but principally because they eat their food. That being so, it follows that the Sparrows had better be kept down.





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