

Extirpation of a sparrow colony

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Rick and Elis Simpson



House Sparrow © Elis Simpson

*'Tell me not of joy: there's none
Now my little sparrow's gone;
He, just as you,
Would toy and woo,
He would chirp and flatter me,
He would hang the wing awhile.
Till at length he saw me smile,
Lord! how sullen he would be!'*
William Cartwright (1611-1643)



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This may seem unrelated to the plight of waders or shorebirds, but bear with me, there is a point to bringing this up as it is symptomatic of the root cause of many of the waders' problems, ranging from a disconnect from the world around us (at best) to a wilful lack of consideration for the negative impact our actions, designed to better our own lives, have on the lives of other creatures.

Elis and I live in an oasis, sadly not one surrounded by remote natural desert, but rather a man-made desert. Neighbouring gardens are, for the most part, laid to lawn as a best case scenario, or worst case, completely denuded of anything living with decking, patios and plastic lawns. Almost every tree that used to be in the neighbourhood has been removed, which means our meagre plot, with its flowering plants for the insects, a rowan tree, a silver birch, several small blackthorns, hawthorns, buddleias, yew and an ivy-clad washing line post are some of the few hiding and roosting spots on the estate.



Our little oasis © Elis Simpson

Fairly recently a lone fir tree was felled in a garden across the road, thus removing the last Coal Tits *Periparus ater* and Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* from the estate, we lost our daily sight and sound of these charming little birds. This meant that up to the beginning of November we only had the following as regular guests to the garden; European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (up to 20); Eurasian Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* (up to 50); Feral Pigeons *Columba livia* (a flock of around a dozen); Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* (one that comes sporadically); Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* (occasionally visit) Black-billed Magpies *Pica pica* (passing through); Common Blue Tits *Cyanistes caeruleus* (a pair); a Dunnock *Prunella modularis*; a European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*; a Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* and, up to recently House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* (up to 50).

Those sparrows are now gone.

Our estate was built after the second world war, as a council estate. Most of the houses are now privately owned and have been better cared for with cracks and holes being filled. The remainder are still council owned and in the eaves, where the tiles meet the boarding, many of the concrete plugs have long gone and never been replaced. These holes have been the roosting and nesting places of our colony of House Sparrows. I was always very smug when discussing the loss of House Sparrows up and down the country when I related that we had a very healthy population; the crowds of sparrows coming to our feeders were highly entertaining. In the semidetached houses at the bottom of our garden one roof (council) held 6 nests this year, their neighbour (private), only one, all on the south-facing side.

Then the re-roofing of all the council houses started. All old tiles were removed, and the entire roof of each house replaced, whether they needed it or not. When finished the roof met the boarding snugly and any gaps filled with a device known as 'bird stopper'. The result? There is nowhere for the sparrows to go at night and they have now all gone. I hope they have just moved elsewhere, but the recent cold and the complete absence of them makes me fear they simply perished as they had nowhere to roost.

Our feeders now lay empty for most of the day. The Goldfinches come still, flitting in and out when the fancy takes them. The starlings descend and cause bedlam for a while then leave, the Feral Pigeons still come but find little fallen food to glean and don't stay long, and other birds seen are largely incidental and not feeder related, except the Blue Tit pair which comes several times a day. I greatly miss the fun I had watching the sparrows and their 'cheerful' chirruping and chattering as



Old style roof with missing plug where a sparrow pair nests in our roof © Elis Simpson



New style roof preventing with 'bird stopper' the ingress of sparrows © Elis Simpson

they would fly down from the houses around us like Exocet missiles and crash twittering into a bush or tree. They would then hit the feeders, hustling and niggling one another, sending away the Goldfinches to watch from the Rowan until they all suddenly shot off again as though on a given signal. Calm would return, but not for long. Presently they would be back.

But they come no more.

We have purchased and installed a couple of sparrow nesting boxes, in the hope that we will be able to accommodate some of the displaced birds, should they ever return, but the neighbours are not bothered, indeed I learned today that the only tree left in the neighbouring gardens we can see is to be cut down. Why? Because, apparently, of the birds!! We're all doomed I tell you.

So this is how it happens. Another small colony of sparrows has gone, in the greater scheme of things perhaps it doesn't make a difference, but when you consider each and every small part of greenery that we lose, every small population of a species that we eject, results in the same thing, then you know that the cumulative effect of such action is devastating.

The reason for bringing this up is that this very same piecemeal but relentless removal of habitat for our wildlife is what has happened to our Eurasian Curlews *Numenius arquata*, our Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and other wader species around the world, all of which are being edged out of existence little by little.

**'Grandad knew of dozens,
Father a few.'**

**'My son will not know you here —
His sky wide eyes will not witness your wildness.'**



A section from *A Shropshire Curlew* by Lucy Grove. The moving poem, which describes the decline of the Curlews on a single farm in Shropshire, UK.



Northern Lapwings and European Golden Plovers © Elis Simpson

The photo above was taken in Bedfordshire. On that day there were 5,000 European Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* and 3,000 Northern Lapwings on this field. We often stopped to watch them on passing, enjoying them on the ground and even more so when they took to the air. During the following summer a drain was dug across the field. There have been no lapwings or golden plovers since.

Where I first saw Northern Lapwings as a child is now a housing estate, where another favourite spot for European Golden Plovers existed near Milton Keynes is also now a housing estate. I'm sure we all have such stories to tell across the country, and that is the point. Such drainage of a field here, a new road or housing estate there, each detrimental change in farming land use, each conversion from mudflat to aquaculture, or worse still reclaimed for industrial use, the forestation of a grassland, every little piece of habitat lost is another opportunity to breed, feed or roost gone. Lack of food and rest cause birds to be out of condition and unable to migrate, let alone breed and when a species loses the opportunity to breed entirely, it is then that it becomes, inevitably, extinct.

A friend of ours, with whom I corresponded recently on the subject of the sterilisation of our urban habitat, where not long ago I was declaring that there was a greater variety of birds and other wildlife in our collective gardens, than in the so-called countryside, told much the same story of gardens being sanitised and fruit trees grubbed up with what she called slash and burn gardening techniques in her own neighbourhood. She brought to my attention a quote, which I feel neatly summarises the way we feel sometimes, about the death by a thousand cuts that we are dealing to our environment.

'One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.'

Aldo Leopold; US conservationist.