

## The Introduction of Sparrows into Victoria

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The English Sparrow is an unusual subject for continued attention in the pages of this journal. But when Mr. Brian Sage (*Emu*, vol. 56, 137) stated that "the date of the introduction of the Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) into Australia and the geographical origin of the individuals concerned is more or less veiled in mystery", I felt that some notes on the subject might be of interest.

Through the courtesy of the Director of the Melbourne Zoological Gardens, Mr. A. G. Whitlam, I have recently perused the volumes of the Acclimatisation Society and the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society from 1861 to 1927. In these pages are the authentic records of our forebears' attempts to introduce a varied fauna to their new homeland.

The first record of sparrows having been shipped to Australia was on November 24, 1862, when 60 were sent out in the *Suffolk*. All except 12 died before the equator was crossed, and the remainder died within a few hours of each other in 'the forties': however, in January of the following year, it is recorded, 19 sparrows arrived safely on the *Princess Royal* from England.

The arrival of 'Chinese Sparrows' (*P. m. saturatus*) took place in March 1863, as in the minutes of the Society of March 24 it is stated that "between 30 and 40 Chinese Sparrows have been received from Mr. G. W. Rusden". The Acting President stated that Mr. Michie had offered to build a suitable aviary for the sparrows as the one at the Botanic Gardens was already overcrowded.

Mr. Rusden detailed the efforts he had made to carry out the objects of the Society during his stay in China. He was thanked "for selecting and bringing out under his personal supervision some valuable Chinese birds".

On May 27 a pair of sparrows was presented to the Acclimatization Society of New South Wales, but from which shipment they came is not stated.

Another shipment of 130 "small birds, principally Sparrows and Chaffinches" arrived by the *Relief* on June 9. Colonel Champ, of the Pentridge Stockade, asked that 30 or 40 of these birds be placed in his charge. They were apparently given more favourable housing than his other charges since they were placed "in a room fitted up for them and prepared in a most suitable manner".

The first recorded liberation of Sparrows came when the Secretary to the Society, George Sprigg, received permission from the Council to liberate the "rest of the small birds gradually, so that they may become accustomed to the place".

On September 15, 1863, 80 Sparrows were liberated. This will explain why these birds were for so long referred to as 'Spriggies'. Baron von Mueller reported that English sparrows were nesting in the aviaries in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens.

Referring again to the Chinese Sparrows, the Hon. A. Michie stated that as these birds "showed no disposition to build" they were liberated (7/10/1863). On October 20 (1863) Colonel Champ liberated those at Pentridge.

Acclimatization was progressing apace. On November 3 "a pair of English Sparrows had built a nest in the Park" (the Zoological Gardens was referred to as 'The Park' for many years) and had "hatched off some young ones". In the following month Dr. Black mentioned that some of the Chinese Sparrows had taken up their abode close to his house at St. Kilda and had already built two or three nests. A later report stated that young ones were 'hatched off'.

The first mention of country liberation was in March of the next year (1864), when J. O'Shannassy of Boroondara was informed that he could have some if he would "take special care of Sparrows to be liberated in his plantations". Some were sent to Ballarat in 1865 and a letter from Clunes to the Society detailed the success with which these birds had settled down in that township.

In 1867 a gardener wrote to the Society giving a most encouraging account of the numbers nesting at Flemington and stating that they were useful in destroying caterpillars and other insects.

During 1867, too, sparrows were sent for liberation to Tower Hill, Maryborough (Vic.), St. Arnaud, Benalla, Heathcote, Barwon Park, Beechworth and Castlemaine in Victoria and Hobart in Tasmania. As all of the birds would have come from Royal Park (where English sparrows were liberated) it is to be assumed that they would be the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).

All too late came a murmur against the introduction of the Sparrow. In 1868 the Rev. O. Mackie and the Count de Casteinau stated that "these birds have always been found to be most destructive in France". Dr. Howitt also expressed his displeasure when they attacked the fruit in his Collins Street garden.

One of the new specific references to this bird was made in 1869, when, in answer to an inquiry applying for insectivorous birds, the Secretary was instructed to write to the applicant stating that the only birds the Society had was the House Sparrow, and that on account of the controversy upon the advisability of introducing that species, the Council of the Society did not feel justified in "sending them away for the purpose of liberation".

As a final blow, in 1871, Dr. L. L. Smith introduced and carried an addition to the Game Act excising Sparrows and

Indian Minahs from its operation. This matter had originally been brought up at a Council meeting by J. B. Were.

The last reference I could find on the subject of Sparrows was one dated 1875, when a request for some to liberate on Champion Island in Torres Strait was refused.

With regard to the suggestion from Colonel C. S. (later Sir Charles) Ryan, that the Tree Sparrow had died out, it is to be noted that Lucas and Le Souef say "The list of survivors then is much shorter and comprises both House and Tree Sparrows".

In the first Proceedings of the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society, as well as recording the liberations mentioned here there is reference to a number of sparrows being sent to Sydney and to 20 Chinese Sparrows being released at St. Kilda.

From these notes it will be noted that the two species of sparrows were set free on opposite sides of the city, the House Sparrow at Royal Park and the Tree Sparrow at the Botanic Gardens and St. Kilda, both species adapting themselves quickly to their new environment as might be expected with these birds.

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**Protective Flocking of Regent Honeyeater.**—Many species of birds gather in compact flocks as protection from the attacks of hawks. This has rarely been observed with our native birds, although the introduced Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) oftens adopts this mode of protection. The following experience with the Regent Honeyeater (*Zanthomiza phrygia*) should prove of interest.

On February 8, 1958, A. R. McGill and I investigated a patch of open forest near Cooranbong, a small township west of Lake Macquarie and about sixty miles north of Sydney. Many of the angophoras and eucalypts were in flower, and honeyeaters and large flocks of lorikeets had been moving around throughout the afternoon. It was not until late in the afternoon that we first encountered the Regent Honeyeater. A party of five flew swiftly through the trees pursued by a Collared Sparrow-Hawk (*Accipiter cirrocephalus*). A few minutes later a dense compact flock of forty flew into a leafy eucalypt near us. These remained a few minutes then flew off and were followed by another flock of fifteen birds which alighted in the same tree.

All of the flocks were very compact, the birds keeping close together and flying swiftly. They were only noticed to alight once—in a tree with a dense canopy of foliage. On taking flight the flocks left as a whole, all birds taking off together and keeping their compact flight. All of the flocks were travelling from the direction in which the Sparrow-Hawk had disappeared. In our opinion this was an excellent example of protective flocking, due, obviously, to the presence of this swift-flying predator.—M. T. KAVENEY, Bonnell's Bay, N.S.W., 20/4/58.