

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

### FIRST RECORD OF HOUSE SPARROW FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA

On 30 December 1976, four House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* were observed in the grounds of the Central Veterinary Laboratory, Kila Kila, a suburb of Port Moresby. One of the birds was an adult male in non-breeding plumage, with white flecks on its black chest patch. Two specimens were in female plumage and one was a juvenile male, having rusty wing-coverts with white tips. Individual birds, both male and female, were seen during the following week and a male and two females on 7 January 1977. Finally a single female was seen on 13 January. Repeated searches by many observers in the area and in other areas of suitable habitat round Port Moresby failed to reveal any further Sparrows. The birds were extremely shy, rarely allowing an approach to less than fifty metres. They were also very quiet and appeared somewhat disoriented, often flying away for more than 200 metres. On many occasions they were seen to be chased by resident honeyeaters.

The identity of the birds was corroborated by Messrs R. D. and K. D. Mackay among others. The grey centre of the crown of the adult male was clearly seen. This, together with the absence of a black mark on the cheeks, and larger black bib distinguishes this bird from the Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*, which replaces the House Sparrow in much of tropical Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The sexual dimorphism and distinctive call are also characteristic of the House Sparrow. The writer is very familiar with both species as well as six other species of *Passer* in Europe and Africa.

The agricultural and wildlife authorities were alerted to the presence of these birds, which however disappeared before control measures could be effected.

The habitat in which the birds were seen at Kila Kila is varied, consisting of houses and gardens with accommodation for cattle, deer, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens. There are small, heavily grazed wet paddocks in which brewer's mash and other foods are put out for the sheep. This is the nearest agricultural concern to Port Moresby harbour, eight kilometres distant.

The disturbed nature of this area is well indicated by the list of birds seen at the same time as the

Sparrows. The list includes both garden birds and birds of open country and is remarkable in including only one endemic species. The scientific nomenclature is that of Rand and Gilliard (1967, The Handbook of New Guinea Birds). Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*, Peaceful Dove *Geopelia striata*, Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus*, Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus*, Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatus*, Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae* (breeding?), Pied Chat *Saxicola caprata* (breeding), Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* (breeding?), Lesser Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus* (breeding), Torresian Crow *Corvus orru*, Fawn-breasted Bowerbird *Chlamydera cerviniventris*, Rufous-banded Honeyeater *Conopophila albogularis* (breeding), White-eared Honeyeater *Lichmera alboauricularis*, Yellow-tinted Honeyeater *Meliphaga flavescens*, New Guinea Friarbird *Philemon novaeguineae*, Grey-headed Mannikin *Lonchura caniceps* (breeding), Chestnut-breasted Mannikin *Lonchura castaneothorax*.

The disturbing discovery of an apparently viable group of House Sparrows was mollified by the fact that they disappeared. There is no record of their having been legally imported or confiscated. In view of experience in Western Australia where this species is frequently thought to be imported accidentally on boats from other parts of the country, these birds were most probably brought by ship from Australia, where the nearest House Sparrows are at Cairns. It may be that this species is insufficiently well adapted to the humid tropics to become established in Papua New Guinea and one hopes that this is indicated by the disappearance of the Kila Kila birds. However, there are large and expanding agricultural concerns in the cooler highlands; in view of the potential danger to these and to the indigenous avifauna, the risk of permanent establishment of these birds ought to be taken seriously.

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