



Feeding House Sparrows

A few decades ago, I began earnestly and enthusiastically feeding birds -especially in winter when food was scant and bird need great. Several feeders are on the back deck outside our kitchen. Observing their comings and goings is a simple enjoyable pleasure—like sitting in a McDonalds at lunch hour. I increased the experience by placing a baby monitor in the large open feeder where it transmits their cheerful songs and chattering to our kitchen table. Watching and listening to their conversations provides contentment as we listen to their table talk enhancing ours-- a satisfying way to spend time. In fact, as I observe thoughtfully my life's sand passing through my hourglass, I have made an agreeable plan that should a hospice bed be in my future, I would like it to be in the kitchen to spend my last days enjoying good food in the company of friends both human and feathered.

Their menu is simple—black sunflower seed and small square squares of suet. The primary reason for that selection is the offering seemed to satisfy the songbirds and woodpecker appetites while not being so appealing to the common House Sparrows. The menu worked as planned – until this year. Gangs of chattering House Sparrows have suddenly found their way to the feeder. Gangs is the fitting name, for unlike the chickadee or nuthatch, they are not solitary in arriving nor departing nor in their table behavior. At a moment, they appear and just as suddenly leave in mass. They number sometimes into the fifties and only the bossiest of blue jays can boot them out of the bar. I think they surely have a “let’s scam” chirp and in unison they will suddenly accomplish it for no apparent reason. They follow the adage, the more the merrier.. as well as safety in numbers. A gang of sparrows is a far more a fitting name than flock.

The Common House Sparrow was introduced into this county in Brooklyn, New York, from Europe in 1850. Ben Franklin had introduced Europeans to the Cardinal decades before. We got Sparrows. Two more introductions occurred in San Francisco and Utah in the 1870's soon provided brood stock for making House Sparrows the most plentiful of birds in North America. Unfortunately, that also might have made them acceptable victims for me and my band of BB armed buddies one hundred years later. Sadly, one of the most entertaining activities of

my young boyhood occurred every autumn when many hundreds would gather for several evenings in the trees in our neighborhood to spend the night. As dusk approached, armed with flashlights and Red Ryder's, we would invade their sanctuaries and calmly slaughter hundreds of the poor unsuspecting birds. Our adult supervisors seemed not to mind. Neither did the gorged neighborhood cats. Sparrows were granted little acceptance by the general population. They were after all, immigrants..numerous immigrants and surely must be a threat to the status quo of the locals. They had few if any vocal human defenders. To do so might seem in poor taste – even unamerican. Few pointed out the common sparrow simply enjoyed being near humankind and chose their nests to be in the nooks and crannies of human abodes and construction – gutters, eaves and such. Of course, having unsightly nests—not at all tidy like the robin or oriel, did little to improve their appeal. I do not suppose any of their detractors had numerical evidence of any declining numbers of “good” birds. They simply observed that sparrows were prolific – thus, unable to build a wall to keep them out, there was no objection to our nightly slaughter of the innocents.

Then I changed -- and continue to do so. Likely first cause for this change was a story perhaps more myth than truth. Like most myths, a story that leads to understanding. Abraham Lincoln and birds were leading characters. The story related that while riding on the Illinois circuit with several other lawyers including a judge, they passed two baby birds that had fallen from their nest. Further down the trail, they noticed Lincoln was missing. There was speculation that he had might have decided to tend to the birds putting them back in their nest. When he caught up with his companions, he verified their speculation. They gently needed him. He replied something to the effect that he could not have slept unless he rescued the baby birds. The story influenced on my moral growth as much or more than George and the cherry tree. My second influencing event occurred at my grandfather Jim's home in Brooklyn. I had taken my BB gun on the family visit and after a Sunday dinner, had gone “hunting.” I spied a sparrow and stealthily moved in and shot the poor creature. I remember standing looking down at the poor dead bird experiencing pangs of remorse. Regret never fully departs. The third experience was more pleasant and yet as influencing. My other grandfather's home was on Burton Lane in Martinsville. We always entered it by the back porch by the brick milk house. Next to the milk house as a large sugar maple tree ever-present home to friendly chattering sparrows with the greeting chatters. Today as I listen to the bird monitor I am easily and yearningly taken to the walk to Grandpa's back door.

There is a song I enjoy by Carrie Newcomer. She is a lovely gifted spiritual folk singer with songs that impart knowledge. One occasionally comes to mind as we view our feeder—“There is Room at the Table.” There is indeed room at our table for everyone-- including gangs of cheerful chattering House Sparrows.

Don Adams On Bethel Pond, January 2022.