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THE SPARROW INVASION OF 1962

By C. D. GOODING and C. R. WALTON

During late 1962 and early 1963, a report that sparrows were at large in the metropolitan area close to Perth drew intense public interest. This article gives some facts about the reported sightings.

The house sparrow, Passer domesticus, is practically world wide in its distribution, having spread naturally and with man's help during the last hundred years. It is found in Europe, Asia, Africa, America and New Zealand. In fact, Western Australia is one of the few remaining parts of the world where the sparrow has not yet gained a foothold.

The Agriculture Protection Board, and before it the Department of Agriculture, has kept the sparrow on the Vermin List since 1928. This was done because it was considered the bird was a pest to agriculture as well as a nuisance because it builds large colonial nests in gutters, spoutings, ceilings and under the eaves of buildings.

The first introduction of sparrows into Australia appears to have been into Victoria in the 1850's by the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society of Victoria. Sixty birds were released in the Royal Park and five at Ballarat. In 1856, two boys found
Hen and cock sparrow. The top bird is the hen and the lower bird the male. Note the black "bib" on the male. The female does not have this.

a sparrow's nest in a street at Warnambool and were fined £5 for destroying the eggs. This is a far cry from the situation existing now, when sparrows and other introduced birds have eliminated a large number of species of native birds from the eastern capitals of Australia.

FIRST SIGHTINGS

The first sightings in the 1962 outbreak were on September 21, when a member of the staff of Stewarts and Lloyds, steel distributors, at Leighton, near the Leighton Army Shore Battery, reported seeing a hen sparrow feeding on the ground near their lunch rooms. On the following day, a male sparrow was reported on the other side of the building. The information was phoned to the Agriculture Protection Board on Monday, September 24, and an immediate inspection was made. However nothing could be found. Many inspections were carried out and, although numerous other birds were found in the area adjacent to the storage yards, no sparrows could be found. On Thursday, September 27, a third person saw the hen bird still in the grounds. All three people who made these sightings had had recent contact with sparrows and should have been in a position to positively identify them. One of these people is also a warden of fauna.

Later, positive sightings occurred in the same general area from a half to three-quarters of a mile closer to Fremantle. One was near the grain terminal and the other on the south side of the Fremantle traffic bridge. The first of these was by a garage proprietor who has had extensive experience with the birds in Malaya and is also an amateur naturalist. The other report was from an Englishman who is also experienced with the birds.

A much later positive sighting on December 10, was made by another employee of Stewarts and Lloyds, who also should have been able to identify the birds with certainty as he had only been in this State two months after arriving from England.
Bonus

Soon after the reported sightings a bonus of £1 was placed on the birds. This bonus is identical with the one on Ceylon crows and has been retained on a permanent basis.

Other Sightings

Many reports from as far afield as Wanneroo and Bunbury were received, but none were considered positive identifications. While most suburbs west of the Darling Range were included, the largest concentration of calls came from areas within a four mile radius of the Fremantle traffic bridge.

Most of these other sightings followed press, radio and T.V. publicity which was released on November 30. Before that date, the only reported sightings were those received from Stewarts and Lloyds; these were considered authentic. In the two weeks after the publicity, 75 calls were investigated and at least an equal number of obviously incorrect reports were received.

Until mid-January the Agriculture Protection Board investigated nearly 100 reports; odd calls are still being received. Every call which sounded genuine was investigated, while those calls which were obviously fallacious were recorded, but no investigation was made. All members of the staff played a part in investigating these calls and in taking their turns at weekend duty. Nine men were engaged either full or part time in this work but they saw no sparrows.

Specimens

Specimens of birds suspected of being sparrows were sent in from various country centres for identification. These included Pinjarra, Gnowangerup and Bunbury. Specimens received included cuckoos, quail, tree creepers and honeyeaters, but no sparrows were forwarded for identification.

However, success was at last achieved when one bird was found in a car packing case which had been sent from England. The bird had apparently been trapped in the case at the time of sealing and was “dead on arrival.”

Speculations

Whether any sparrows actually did enter Western Australia may never be answered, but it seems highly likely that at least two sparrows did gain a foothold in the State. The next question is, from where did they come and how did they get in?
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The map shows that all the sightings which were assumed to be positive occurred in the area from Leighton to Fremantle. The rest of the sightings were uniformly spread over the metropolitan area.
It is significant that the sightings at Stewarts and Lloyds were all made soon after the arrival of shipments of large diameter (4 to 8 inch) piping from Newcastle in New South Wales. In the absence of reports to the contrary, we can only assume that:—

(1) These birds were set upon and killed by local birds. (Several hawks were sighted in the area but other predatory birds such as magpies and butcher birds were not seen in large numbers.)

(2) They are still surviving somewhere in Western Australia.

FUTURE WORK

In the absence of a continuing flow of reports from residents in the metropolitan area, the Agriculture Protection Board can do little to follow up this present situation except to:—

- Keep a close watch on all suspected areas, including warehouses, grain storage facilities and railway yards in the Fremantle district and the railway lines running from Fremantle through the metropolitan area.
- Make a thorough inspection of all ships entering Fremantle from sparrow infested areas, which are carrying cargo which may be suitable as a harbourage for birds during the journey to Western Australia. However, unless the birds were able to obtain food on the journey, Western Australia is in such an isolated position that the birds would probably die on the journey even from South Australia.
Story of a Fire Sale

No sound business needs a Fire. When every member of the Staff works full time—and then some—to keep up with day to day procedure, a safecracking attempt can only mean one thing: "Work. Work and MORE WORK," as one of the Staff said at PARRYS DEPARTMENT STORE.

After days of checking with the Assessor, some £8,500 worth of Stock and Plant were dumped: and when the goods went to the Tip, they went straight out again. One of our men couldn't get back quickly enough to tell about the scavengers waiting to unload the debris before he could even turn off the motor—and how they fought over a polisher as it fell to pieces in his hands. An AGA Stove that took three of us 30 minutes to pull to bits and put on the truck, took 20 minutes to be up off the Dump and into the back of a Ute... A lounge which was unrecognisable took five minutes to be broken up into two wheat bags... Damaged Warmas and Fyrsides hardly hit the ground!

The undamaged Stock, Sales Staff and Offices moved into the second building, next door; and our original shop, where the attempt had been made on the safe, was used for the Fire Sale. On the first Saturday there were 500 people outside the door at 8.30 a.m. Not being used to this, we called for volunteers to open the glass doors which were in danger of being broken in the crush.

To give the public a fair choice, some new Stock was put out at the same prices as fire-damaged goods. This brought out some peculiar quirks of human nature—such as the man who turned down a brand-new mattress for one that was scorched (same price for either): and another who refused a new lounge at £85, then went into the other Showroom and paid £90 for an identical Suite!

One problem that really stumped us was the family of small children who took with them a number of "sold" stickers off tables and various items—which were then re-sold. So we were really in trouble when it came to delivering goods we didn't have. Asked for his impressions of the Fire Sale, the Despatch Manager said, "There were no good reports from this Department"—but after dealing with some irate customers whose goods were re-sold, perhaps he was biased.

Another sidelight was the number of people who were not even slightly interested in the Sale; but who had come to buy direct from the main Showroom... so business boomed in both buildings (rumblings from the Despatch).

On the whole though, the result was a good one, due to a co-operative Staff and to the generosity of those friends and acquaintances who became Salesmen for the occasion: and added to the humour, too. Some little filing shelves from our office desks were smoke-damaged and tucked away at the end of the shop "for later." After the Sale it was found that one of our new recruits had sold them off at £2 10s. (they only cost £2 each). Another helper sold a radio for 30s. that had been brought in a few days previously for repair.

However, it is over now and everything intended for the Sale has been moved. Of all the £7,500 worth of damaged Stock, very little was left after the Sale—a 4 ft. Wardrobe, four Buffets, some 3 ft. Bed Ends, a Lamp Stand and a Borletti Sewing Machine, which have now gone to Hopkins' Auction Mart. All stock now on the floor is completely unmarked and is backed with our full service guarantee.

The builders have now started the big clean-up and the ceiling should be replaced by the time this Report reaches you. Both buildings should be connected and operating as one unit within the next month or two.

So we look forward to brighter days in the Spring; and to offering you a Summer as good as our prices and terms can make it.
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