

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

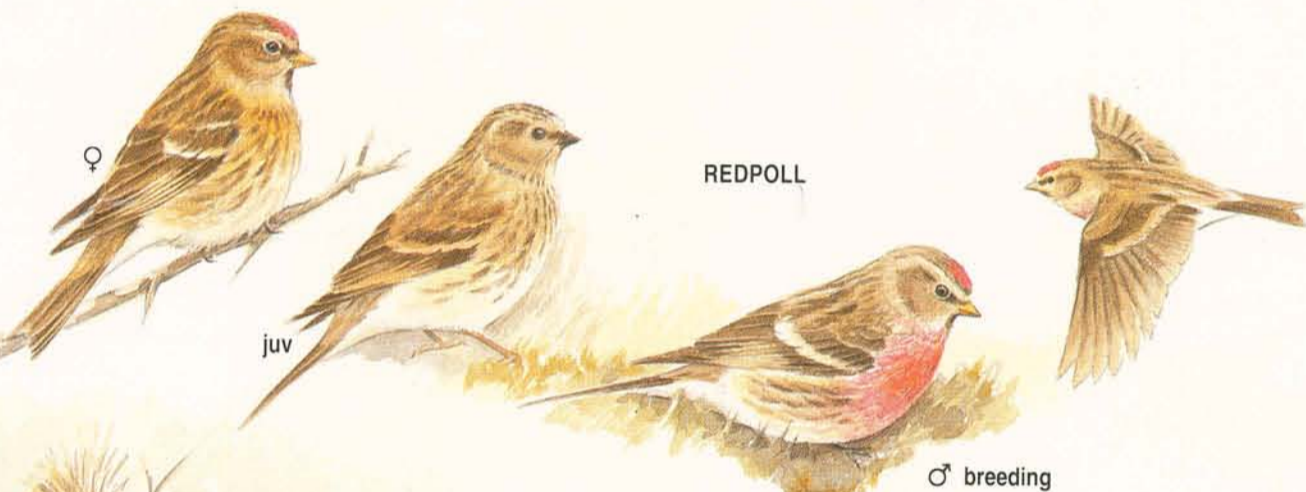
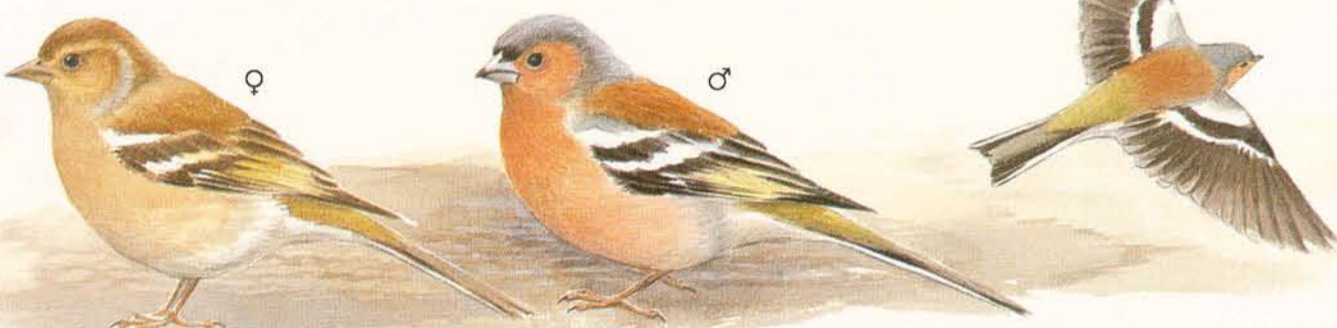
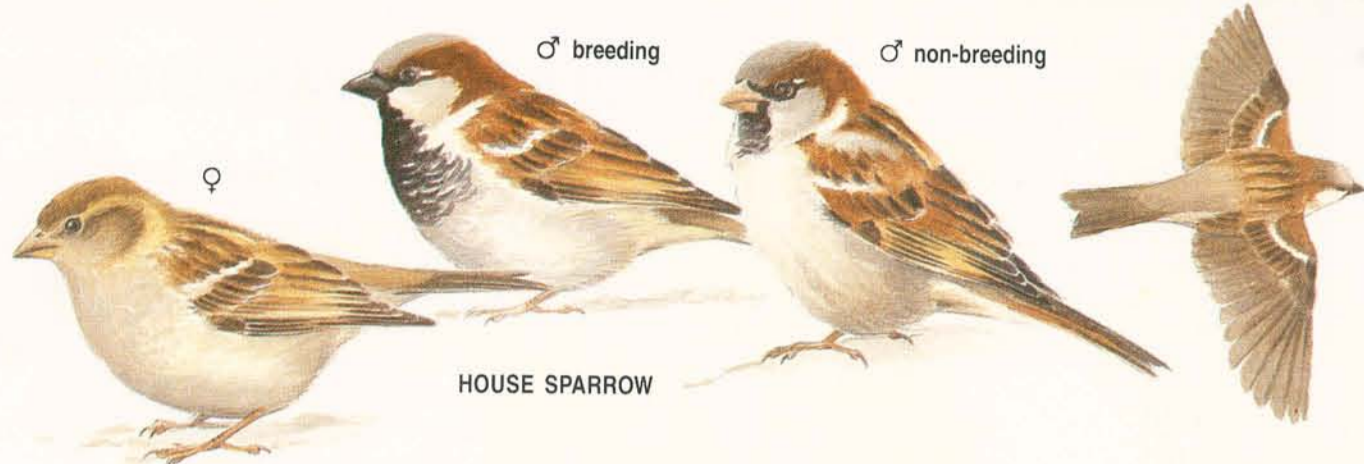
HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

Abundant European introduction

14 cm, 30 g. A gregarious, garrulous and quarrelsome associate of humans. Conical bill. Adult male chestnut brown above, streaked black on back; crown dark grey; rump greyish brown; underparts greyish white. Black bib and bill in breeding season, bib smaller and bill greyish pink rest of year. Female and juvenile drab sandy brown above, streaked darker on back; greyish white below; pale buffy eyebrow and sides to neck. Young juvenile often shows fleshy yellow gape. Flight fast and direct, showing small white wingbar. Voice a variety of monotonous unmusical cheeps and chirps. **Habitat:** Towns, arable farmland and farm shelterbelts, orchards; sometimes edges of native forest well away from human habitation. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb.



[Sp 318]



SPARROWS and WEAVERS

Ploceidae

143 species in Africa, Europe and Asia; 1 species introduced to New Zealand. Small birds of open country with heavy

conical bills for eating seeds. Most build untidy domed nests, or nest in holes. Calls are simple and unmusical.

318. HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

Plate 71

Size: 14 cm, 30 g
Distribution: Natural range is Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia, except for the southeast; introduced to North America, South America, southern Africa, Java, Australia, New Zealand and various islands including Mauritius, New Caledonia and Hawai'i. Over 100 House Sparrows were liberated in New Zealand by various Acclimatisation Societies in 1866–71. They quickly became established and were widespread by 1880, at about which time they colonised the

Chatham Islands. Now common throughout the mainland and inhabited offshore islands, and the Chathams and Norfolk Island, and recorded from the Antipodes, The Snares, Auckland and Campbell Islands. They are mainly in arable farmland, rural and suburban gardens, town streets and around grain-storage or grain-handling facilities. House Sparrows are generally sedentary, but a few long movements have been recorded in New Zealand: 300 km from Upper Hutt to Reporoa,

85 km from Hawera to Raetihi and 65 km from Ward to Picton.

Population: Abundant, especially in arable farmland and in towns.

Breeding: Pairs form in flocks in late winter, and males establish territories in September. The male spends about a week building a bulky, domed nest with a side entrance. It is usually in a hole in a tree, building, cliff or nest box, or near the tops of tall conifers or gums, and occasionally on an abandoned Blackbird or Song Thrush nest in a low shrub. Laying is from late September to January, during which time 3–4 broods are raised. They lay 1–4–6 greyish-white eggs (22 x 15.5 mm, 2.9 g) marked with brown spots and streaks. Eggs are laid daily, shortly after dawn. Both the birds incubate, from the laying of the penultimate egg, for 10–12–15 days. The chicks are fed by both parents and fledge at 11–15–19 days old. House Sparrows breed at 1 year old. The oldest bird recorded in New Zealand lived over 15 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious, feeding in flocks of hundreds of birds and roosting in their thousands in dense conifers and bamboo stands or in buildings in the autumn and winter. In the breeding season, they defend a small area around the nest, and sometimes form loose colonies where breeding habitat is limited. From late September to January, males call from a perch near their nest a series of unmusical chirps. At roosts, the chirping of many birds creates a loud chattering.
Feeding: Diet is mainly cereal, grass and weed

seeds, supplemented with invertebrates, fruit and nectar. The main seeds eaten are standing or stubble wheat and barley, maize, grasses (especially toetoe), fat hen, redroot and matt amaranth. Invertebrates are rarely eaten by adults but form the most important part of the diet of young nestlings. Main invertebrates eaten are beetles, caterpillars, leafhoppers, grasshoppers, flies and spiders. In late summer, they frequently chase and catch cicadas. House Sparrows are probably the most economically important bird pest in New Zealand, by causing serious damage to wheat, barley and maize crops, and lesser damage to oats and seedling peas and brassicas. They also attack grapes, cherries and other ripening fruit, and feed on grain products being fed to livestock and poultry.

In the hand: Males are slightly larger than females: wing 71–78–84 mm cf. 70–75–80 mm. In summer, recently fledged juveniles resemble adult females but have fresh wing and tail feathers. Juvenile males usually have a dusky throat patch, rather like the adult female, while juvenile females have a grey throat. In autumn, all birds moult wing and tail feathers, and so after moult is complete, ages are impossible to determine; however, during moult the unmoulted wing feathers of adults are very worn compared with those of juveniles.

Reading: Baker, A.J. 1980. *Evolution* 34: 638–653. Dawson, D.G. 1970. *NZ J Ag Res* 13: 681–688. MacMillan, B.W.H. 1981. *NZ J Zool* 8: 93–104. MacMillan, B.W.H. & Pollock, B.J. 1985. *NZ J Zool* 12: 307–317. Summer-Smith, J.D. 1963. *The House Sparrow*. London: Collins.