

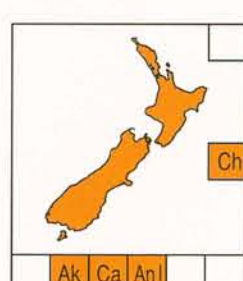
Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g.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

DUNNOCK *Prunella modularis*

Common European introduction

14 cm, 21 g. *Nondescript, dark and unobtrusive bird*, rather like a female House Sparrow but has *slim body, fine black bill*. Upperparts brown streaked darker; face, collar and breast washed grey; flanks streaked brown; red eye; orange-brown legs. Sexes alike. Juvenile similar but has brown eye. Usually feeds alone on the ground, keeping close to cover; shuffles along in a crouched posture, delicately picking at the surface. Sings from the top of a bush or hedge, a thin hurried warble. Call a high-pitched insistent 'tseep'. **Habitat:** Forest, scrub, farmland with hedges, orchards, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Aug–Feb.

[Sp 294]



ACCENTORS

Prunellidae

13 species in Europe, North Africa and Asia; 1 introduced to New Zealand.

These small, rather drab brown birds resemble sparrows but have a fine, pointed bill for catching insects.

294. DUNNOCK *Prunella modularis*

Plate 67

Other name: Hedge Sparrow
Size: 14 cm, 21 g
Distribution: Natural breeding range is Europe and western Asia, some migrate south to winter around the Mediterranean and in North Africa. Several hundred birds were introduced into New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies and private individuals in 1867–82. They were released in both islands and spread quickly, although some parts of the country, especially Auckland and Northland, were not colonised until the 1930s. The species now breeds throughout New Zealand, including the Chatham, Antipodes, Auckland and Campbell Islands, and is a vagrant to The Snares. They are found in a variety of habitats from sea level to subalpine scrub at 1600 m, including suburban gardens, orchards, exotic plantations, scrub and forest. Uncommon on well-forested offshore islands such as Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands. In Eurasia, they migrate, but there is no evidence

of long-distance movement in New Zealand. **Population:** Widespread and locally common in scrub, orchards, parks and suburban gardens, places where there is a mix of dense cover and open spaces. They are inconspicuous and so are little known by the public. **Breeding:** In England, Dunnocks have a variety of mating arrangements, including simple pairs, a male with several females, a female with several males, or even several males with several females (usually the surplus birds are helpers at the nest of the main pair). This has not been studied in New Zealand, but most seem to be in simple pairs. Eggs are laid in August–January, during which time 2–3 broods are raised. The female takes c. 5 days to build the nest, and she is sometimes helped by the male. The nest is usually well concealed in thick undergrowth or a hedge, and normally less than 2 m above the ground. It is a neat bowl of twigs, grass and moss, lined with hair, wool, feathers, tree

fern scales and moss. After a gap of c. 4 days after the nest is complete, the female lays 2–4–5 clear deep blue eggs (20 x 14.5 mm) at daily intervals. Incubation is by the female alone, and takes 11–12–14 days. Both parents feed the young during the fledging period of 10–12–14 days. The oldest Dunnock recorded in New Zealand lived over 6 years. **Behaviour:** In England, many territories contain a main pair plus other birds that help to defend the territory and to feed the nestlings. In New Zealand, birds seem to remain on territory all year and do not migrate. The territorial song of the male, heard mainly in April–January, is a hurried warble, faster and stronger than that of a Grey Warbler, and rendered 'weeso, sissy-weeso, sissy-weeso, sissy-wee'; this lasts a few seconds but is repeated several times in rapid succession. The male often sits high in a tree or on

top of a bush to sing. The main call is a sharp, insistent 'tseep'. **Feeding:** Diet is mainly small invertebrates, such as beetles, spiders, flies, aphids, ants and worms. Some small fruits and seeds are also eaten. Most food is taken from the ground, usually not far away from cover. **In the hand:** Males and females are virtually identical, with the male tending to be more grey on the chin, throat and breast. During breeding, the female has a brood patch and the male has a large bulbous cloacal protuberance. In autumn, adults have a reddish-brown eye, black bill and are often in wing-moult, while juveniles have a dull or greyish-brown eye, dark brown bill and are not moulting wing feathers. **Reading:** Birkhead, M.E. 1981. *Ibis* 123: 75–84. Mauersberger, G. 1977. *Zool Abh Mus Tierk Dresden* 34: 101–126. Moed, A. & Fitzgerald, B.M. 1982. *NZ J Zool* 9: 391–403.