

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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The Ubiquitous House Sparrow

Often nature lovers (including me!) need to be gently reminded that nature isn't only about the pretty, sexy, marvelous sights and sounds of some little known, rarely seen creature. Sitting at my desk, the loud, persistent "*chirruping*" outside my window, was a knock at my door. House Sparrows, the ever-present birds in our lives that so often get looked over, decided it was high time they did something to grab my eyeballs.

A few days ago, as I sat sunning myself in my backyard, a pair of sparrows descended to the ground. The two sparrows were quarreling, grabbing at each other and tumbling in the mud in a fit of angry energy. Ah-WWF entertainment in my backyard, I thought. On closer examination, I discovered the fighting sparrows were females. I was a little surprised-male birds quarreling over a potential mate is common, but a spat of jealous females was unusual.



Could they have been fighting over a mate? I wondered. Unlikely, right. Males don't have the fortune of getting fought over! They must be sparring over the choice of a nesting location, I thought to myself. The rough-and-tumble of the sparrows soon ended, and one of the females flew triumphantly to a small protruding pipe in the wall, which served as its nesting site. She sat there preening herself with pride, while her mate, cowered in the background, wondering what treatment he would get if he ever crossed her path!! Soon, the sparrows began building their nest and I hope that in the days to come, the chirruping of young sparrows will light up my day. Female sparrows are known to be very aggressive, often kicking out the male from the nest, once the eggs hatch, so it's likely that I am going to have a very disgruntled male sparrow in my backyard, soon!

The House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is present in virtually every continent in the world, being either native or introduced. It has followed humans where they go. In fact, the sparrow's scientific name "*domesticus*" means "of the house" in Latin, reflecting its close relationship with humans. It is possibly the world's most common wild bird, but its population is declining. Present almost everywhere that humans live, rapid urbanization has affected sparrows. While all the reasons for their population decline are not entirely understood, a decrease of nesting sites and food in rapidly "concrete" urban cities has surely contributed to their decline. While adult sparrows eat seeds, bread and other human food waste, the young ones of the sparrow prefer insects. With the decrease in green areas in cities, many young birds perish. It is also believed that rampant pesticide use and micro-waves from mobile towers, too, affect sparrows.

Tomorrow, 20 Th. March, 2010 is the first World House Sparrow Day. This is an initiative launched by Nature Forever, Bombay Natural History Society and numerous other conservation organizations to highlight the plight of the sparrow (as well as other common urban creatures). So, tomorrow, spare a thought for these ubiquitous birds, imagine what the world would be like without their chirrups in the background and think about how you can help them survive this in this millennium.

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Making a difference: On World House Sparrow Day (check out www.worldhousesparrowday.org for more information), resolve not to use pesticide in your garden. Pesticides enter the bodies of insects, which in turn are eaten by young sparrows, resulting in their deaths.