

THE SPANISH SPARROW IN MALTA

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The House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* are a fascinating species pair. Over most of the range where both occur, they exist as good species, the House Sparrow living in towns and villages in close association with man, the Spanish Sparrow in the country, particularly associated with damper localities. However, in certain parts of the Mediterranean basin, particularly northern Algeria and western Tunisia, the two species interbreed freely forming a complete range of hybrids of intermediate plumage. The birds in Italy form a stable hybrid population and are now recognised by most authorities as a subspecies of *Passer domesticus*. To a lesser extent hybridisation occurs on a small scale in other parts; for example, I found a small hybrid population beside Lake Scutari in southern Yugoslavia some years ago and others are reported from time to time.

During many years intensive study of the House Sparrow I have taken every opportunity that has arisen of watching other members of the genus *Passer*. Although I have seen Spanish Sparrows in many countries — notably Yugoslavia, Greece, Afghanistan, Algeria, Madeira and the Canary Islands — I have found it a most elusive species to get into close contact with. In contrast to other *Passer* species, I have always found it to be a relatively shy bird, particularly in those parts of its range it shares with House Sparrows.

In the Canary Islands, where Spanish Sparrows first appeared in the early part of the 19th century and where like Malta the House Sparrow is also absent, it is mainly a bird of cultivated land nesting to some extent in urban area, but using palm trees as nesting sites in preference to holes in houses. The situation is somewhat similar in Madeira, though the Spanish Sparrow only arrived there in 1935 and is so far restricted to part of the south coast extending on either side of Funchal and the island of Porto Santo. In both the Canaries and Madeira its main competitor is the Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* from the same sub-family *Passerinae*; the Rock Sparrow tends to occupy the more arid country with the Spanish Sparrow occupying the cultivated land, but even with this competitive pressure the Spanish Sparrow in both the Canaries and Madeira is by no means the complete 'house sparrow' that it is in Malta, though it shares the habit of forming large roosts in trees in the towns and villages.

A visit to Malta in October 1977 provided my first real opportunity of watching Spanish Sparrows closely. It is somewhat risky to make comments on the Maltese birds after only two weeks' observations, but as so little attention is usually paid to 'sparrows' I hope I may be forgiven for this presumption.

Taxonomists are not agreed on the exact position of the Maltese sparrow. Hartert (1923) gave it the subspecific rank *P. h. maltae*, whereas more recently Vaurie (1959) allied it more closely to *P. domesticus italiae*, the stabilised hybrid between *P. domesticus* and *P. hispaniolensis* that occurs in Italy. My observations in October and photographs I saw of spring birds suggest that it does not have the full plumage characteristics of European and African *hispaniolensis*,

lacking the extent of the bib and flank streaking. The presence of the birds in the towns and villages, their attendance at the nest sites in October, and the display in which one female is courted by a number of males (which I have not seen in other Spanish Sparrow populations) made it difficult for me to realise that I was not watching House Sparrows. In contrast, the small parties of sparrows I encountered on the cliffs and rocky uncultivated land, which on disturbance were inclined to fly away some considerable distance, seemed like true Spanish Sparrows. The Spanish Sparrow character of the Maltese birds is supported by the ringing recoveries of the Ornithological Society in Malta. No less than five of the 64 recoveries of ringed Spanish Sparrows (*Il-Merill* Nos. 6, 14 and 16) refer to birds that had moved more than 5 km., with one individual having moved 6 km. in less than 24 hours. This type of behaviour would be quite exceptional in European House Sparrows. The sparrows in Malta, as indeed those in the eastern Tunisian towns, show much that is reminiscent of House Sparrows that was not apparent in the Spanish Sparrow populations in Madeira and the Canary Islands.

A brief visit to Malta only served to raise more questions than provide answers: what is the catchment area of the noisy tree roosts in the villages; do the 'town' and 'country' birds maintain separate lives or is there interchange between them; is there some instability in the plumage characteristics, as some earlier writers have claimed, suggesting a hybrid population?

My impression is that although the Maltese sparrows are rightly classified as *P. hispaniolensis*, they nevertheless contain some element of *domesticus* 'blood'. A thorough investigation of the behaviour of Maltese sparrows, in line with the modern approach to systematics, which is concerned not only with morphological characteristics, would be of considerable value in providing new evidence for our understanding of the inter-relationship of these Palearctic sparrows. This bird would thus be an excellent subject of study for a resident Maltese ornithologist using the techniques of colour-ringing and patient observation.

References

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