

MALTA'S MOST COMMON BIRD – THE SPARROW

Several species of the genus *Passer* have been the most successful birds along most of the range which they occupy and in the Maltese Archipelago we have a perfect example in the Spanish Sparrow, *Passer hispaniolensis*.

The key to the Spanish Sparrow's success in Malta is its ability in adapting itself to live close to man. It is unlike those species which are highly specialised in their diet and behaviour and therefore have to be restricted to limited special areas. Being quite catholic in its food and habitat requirements it is found all over the Islands inhabiting every niche in urban, suburban as well as rural areas. Apart from the domestic cat, it is totally free of predators. The Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, which used to prey regularly on the sparrows when it used to visit their large roosts, has been nearly exterminated from the Maltese Islands. Its choice of nest-sites for its bulky, somewhat untidy, domed nest is unlimited. Ventilators, drain pipes, ledges and window sills, telegraph and electricity poles, holes in rocks and walls, overhanging plants on bastions and cliffs and a variety of trees are all suitable. Its number seems to have increased considerably coincid-

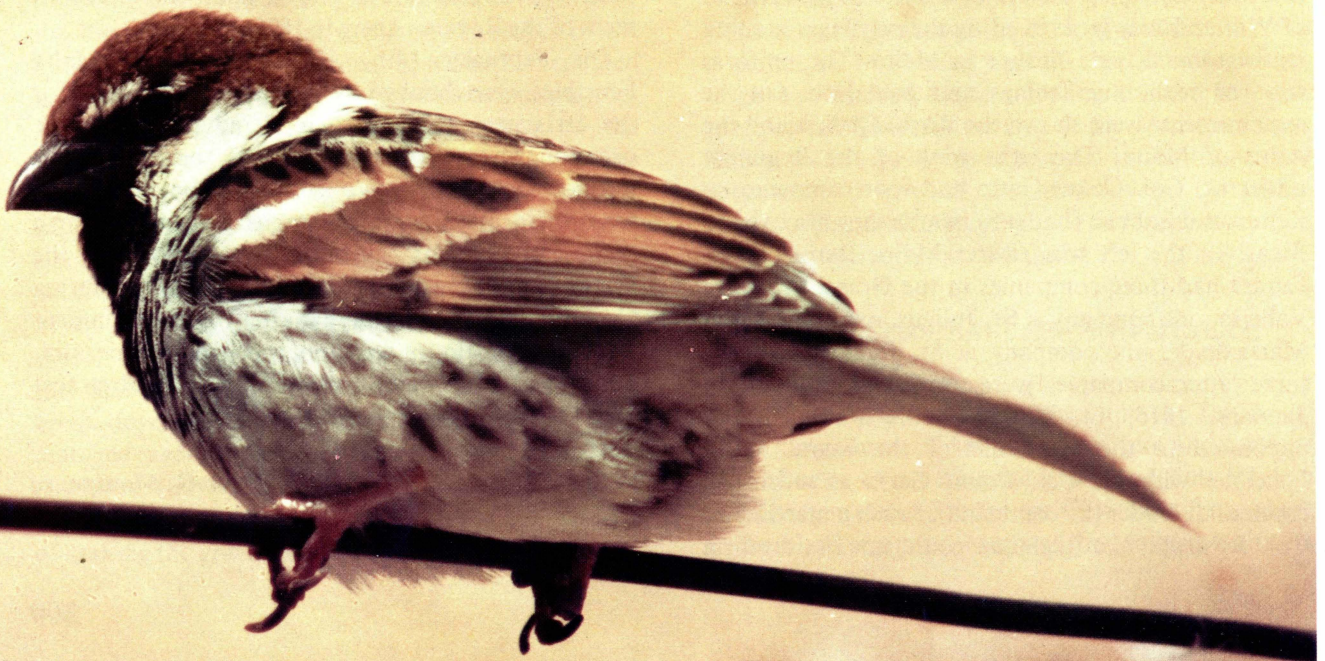
ing with the vast intrusion of human dwellings into rural areas.

The Spanish Sparrow is quite a prolific breeder as its Maltese name "Ghammiel tal-Bejt" suggests. Four to six eggs are laid in one brood. These vary in colour from white to greyish or bluish white with a varying amount of dark speckles. Incubation lasts about 12 days and the young fledge after about 14 days, after which they follow their parents for a few more days. Generally two to three broods are raised in a season which may stretch from the end of February until August.

When the breeding season is over the Spanish Sparrow congregates in large numbers. Most of the birds roost communally and many large roosts are found in high trees in public places such as town and village squares as well as in gardens. During summer flocks also congregate and invade areas where some freshwater is available. Farmers put up all sorts of scarecrows to protect their crops from the sparrows which at certain times of the year raid the fields.

The Spanish Sparrow is a sedentary species and few birds move far from their area. Out of 7,400

Being so common, most people overlook the bright colours of the cock Spanish Sparrow which has a conspicuous rich chestnut crown and a black bib





The female is a rather dull bird with no eye-catching colours

birds ringed by the Ornithological Society only 11 birds moved 5 km or more, the longest recorded movement was barely 12 km.

The Spanish Sparrow found in Malta was formerly given the rank of a subspecies *Passer hispaniolensis maltae*, but recently taxonomists have suggested that the local population is a hybridized form between the true *Passer h. hispaniolensis* and the Italian Sparrow *Passer domesticus italica*. This hybridized form is also found in Italy, south of Rome and in Sicily.

Joe Sultana

FURTHER READING

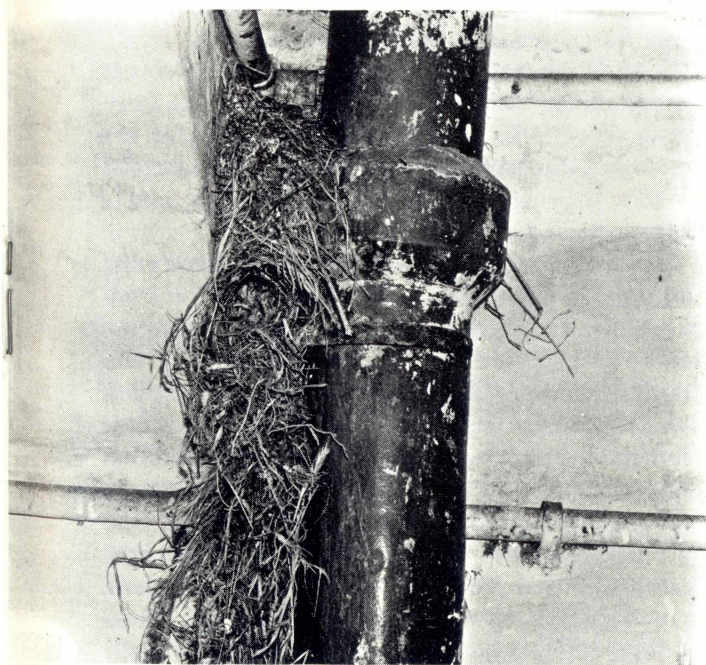
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Spanish Sparrow nests in trees



Spanish Sparrow's choice of nest-sites is unlimited



Female Spanish Sparrow with food for the young