

ON TWO FRONTS: OCCURRENCE OF THE HOUSE SPARROW IN ALASKA

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ABSTRACT: The first Alaska records of the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), comprising birds reaching southeastern (132° W) and far western (171° W) localities in the state, probably reflect short-distance dispersals from adjacent Canada (British Columbia) and from the adjacent Russian Far East (Chukotka), respectively. Both source populations are the results of human introductions.

THE ALASKA RECORDS

There was no certain Alaska record of the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) until late in the 20th century, when the first two records were established some 2200 km apart, one in southeastern and one in western Alaska (Figure 1). A lone female observed on 23 October 1987 at Petersburg (56° 48' N, 132° 58' W) provided the first (Am. Birds 42:121, 1988; Gibson and Kessel 1992; see Appendix for details of all Alaska specimens). A lone male observed 13–14 June 1993 (during a field trip following an AOU convention) at the landfill at Gambell (63° 47' N, 171° 45' W), Saint Lawrence Island, provided the second (N. Am. Birds 47:1140, 1993).

Nine years after the Petersburg occurrence, a House Sparrow was recorded on 26 October 1996 in southeasternmost Alaska, at Ketchikan (55° 20' N, 131° 38' W), where there were five records in the ensuing years through 2004 (Heinl and Piston 2009) and where the first Alaska nesting records were established in 2009 and 2010 (N. Am. Birds 63:488, 63:642; 64:137, 64:484, and 64:635). Fourteen years after the isolated Saint Lawrence Island record, a group of about five House Sparrows was present from mid- to 22 October 2007 at Shishmaref (66° 15' N, 166° 04' W), a barrier-beach village on the Chukchi Sea coast of the Seward Peninsula (N. Am. Birds 62:135); at least two of those birds persisted through the winter and into spring (62:291, 62:465). One was found dead and was preserved.

For completeness I append here two earlier, published, nominal reports attributed to Alaska—one House Sparrow reported 15 July 1967 at the Annette Island airport (55° 09' N, 131° 28' W), near Ketchikan (Eastman and Eastman 1968), and four or five birds reported “in June 1981” at the Anchorage airport (61° 13' N, 149° 53' W) (Summers-Smith 1988:129, 1993:62).

INTRODUCTIONS AND EXPANSION OF RANGE—NORTH AMERICA

Early in the 21st century it is difficult to fathom the mid-19th century zeal that led to the many and scattered introductions into North America of the House Sparrow, a species introduced “partly because European immigrants longed for the familiar birds of their homeland and partly because they believed this bird would serve a useful purpose in controlling insect pests”

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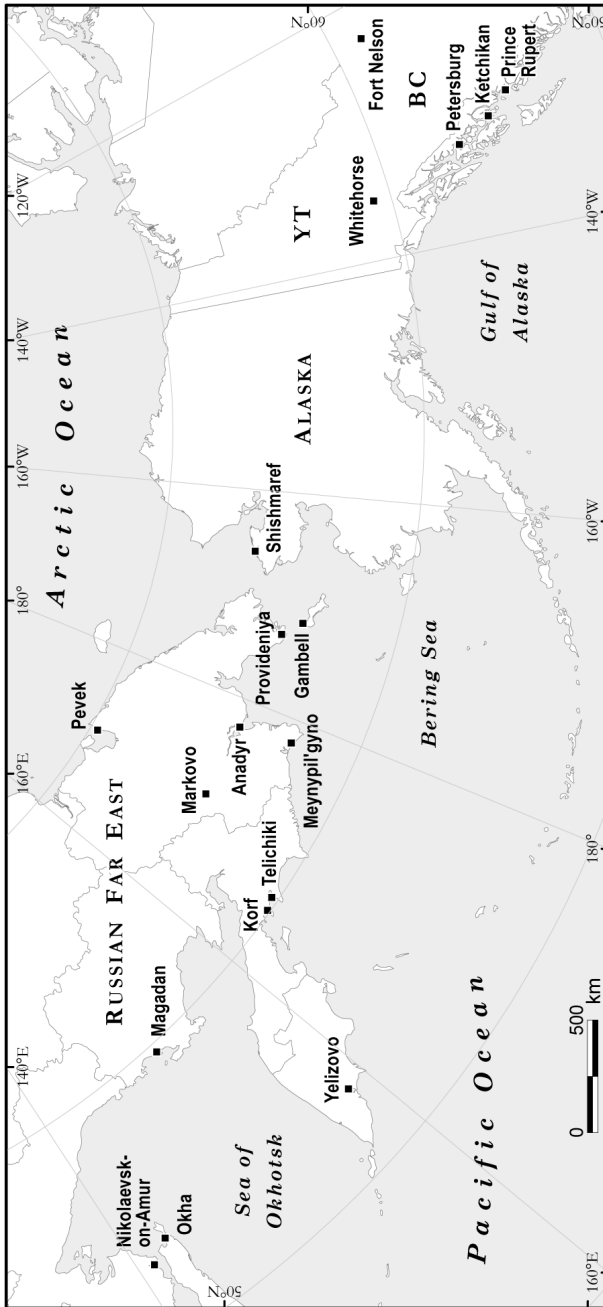


Figure 1. Locations of records of the House Sparrow between 140° E and 120° W mentioned in text.

(Robbins 1973:3). Multiple releases, of subspecies nominate *domesticus* from Great Britain and Germany, took place primarily from 1850 to the early 1870s in New York City, Portland (Maine), Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, Halifax, Québec, and various points in Ohio (e.g., Cleveland, Cincinnati), Michigan, Wisconsin, and Galveston, Texas (Barrows 1889). "But no sooner had they become fairly numerous at any of these points than people began to take them thence to other places, sometimes in large numbers, but more often only a few pairs at a time...and it is only within the past year that we have come to realize something of the magnitude of the 'craze' which led so many people to foster and distribute this serious pest" (Barrows 1889:18). In that fashion were birds transplanted from New York City and elsewhere in eastern North America to Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, and beyond.

Farther west, 20 House Sparrows were introduced in Salt Lake City in 1873 or 1874 and an unknown number was introduced in San Francisco in 1871 or 1872. Barrows (1889:23) was the first to discuss the influence of railroads on this bird's North American distribution: "there is no doubt that the great railways along which vast quantities of grain are transported have been so many great highways along which the Sparrows have traveled slowly from place to place." Regarding the first California records, Grinnell and Miller (1944:573) cited Barrows and wrote, "it is supposed to have been purposely introduced from some point in the eastern United States where the species already had become abundant. Probably, however, it has repeatedly entered the State along railroad lines, of its own volition or through adventitious transportation in grain and stock cars." In the Pacific Northwest, the species was introduced in Oregon (Gabrielson and Jewett 1940), where known since 1888 (Marshall et al. 2006); it was apparently not introduced within Washington, where first reported about 1895 (Jewett et al. 1953, Wahl et al. 2005), but it was introduced in adjacent southwestern British Columbia about 1890 (Brooks and Swarth 1925). In British Columbia today House Sparrows are most plentiful in the human-populated areas of the south coast and in the dry southern valleys of the interior, but they are resident as far north and west as Smithers, Terrace, and Prince Rupert and as far north and east as Fort Nelson (Campbell et al. 2001). They had reached Fort Nelson by 1943, when Rand (1944) reported having seen a flock of about a dozen on 16 September.

As discussed by Barrows (1889) and by Grinnell and Miller (1944), "freight trains...probably played a big part in the spread of the House Sparrow, as many of the reports from western states at the turn of the [20th] century mentioned the bird as being well-established in cities along the railroads" (Robbins 1973:7). That means of dispersal alone probably explains the northwestern limits of the North American range at turn of the 21st century: Prince Rupert (54° 19' N, 130° 20' W) and Fort Nelson (58° 49' N, 122° 32' W) (Godfrey 1986, Campbell et al. 2001; see also Gibson and Kessel 1992)—the northwestern terminus and the northeastern terminus, respectively, in British Columbia of railroads connecting directly to the south and east. Because the species is "among the most sedentary of wild birds" and "extent of movement is...limited" (Summers-Smith 1988:141), the birds in

southeastern Alaska can reasonably be surmised to be dispersals from Prince Rupert, 125 km south of Ketchikan, or from another not-distant community on the Canadian Pacific Railway. The possibility of long-distance dispersal by individual House Sparrows has not been studied, but there seems to be no evidence of such behavior (Lowther and Cink 2006).

In Eurasia, the House Sparrow has long been associated with human communities north of 60° N (Cramp and Perrins 1994), ranging, for example, north to 66° N on the Ob', Taz, and Yenisei rivers, in the Ural and Siberian federal districts of Russia (Stepanyan 1990). For decades it has occurred in west-central North America in Northwest Territories at Yellowknife (62° 27' N, 114° 21' W) and Fort Simpson (61° 45' N, 121° 14' W) (see AOU 1957, Godfrey 1966). But in northwestern North America the House Sparrow—the legacy distribution of North American introductions vs dispersals from Asia—has been recorded north of 60° N only since the 1990s. In Yukon Territory the first, present August–December 1996 at Whitehorse (60° 43' N, 135° 03' W) (Alexander et al. 2003), was followed by eight, 14, and 38 birds reported on Whitehorse Christmas Bird Counts in December 2007, 2008, and 2009, respectively (<http://birds.audubon.org/historical-results>).

EXPANSION OF RANGE AND INTRODUCTIONS— NORTHEASTERN ASIA

House Sparrows (nominate *domesticus*) followed the Trans-Siberian Railway (completed 1916) across Russia, via which corridor they reached Khabarovsk (48° 30' N, 135° 06' E), capital of the Far Eastern Federal District of Russia, soon thereafter, and thence, in dispersal north down the Amur River, reached Nikolaevsk-on-Amur (53° 09' N, 140° 42' E) in 1929 (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Summers-Smith 1988, Stepanyan 1990). Birds apparently dispersed from there to nearby Okha (53° 34' N, 142° 56' E), at the north end of Sakhalin Island, “where [the species had been present] for three decades in June 1987” (kde v tret'ey dekadē iuniya 1987), when Nechaev (1991:570) counted about 20 pairs; he saw broods there in July 1987 and in July 1988. Elsewhere in northeastern Asia, the House Sparrow was first recorded between 1990 and 1994 in Japan (Brazil 1991, Ornithological Society of Japan 2000), where Summers-Smith and Taguchi (2010:273) considered “colonisation...unlikely.”

In the Russian Far East, in the last three decades of the 20th century, House Sparrows were introduced north and east of the Amur River mouth in the 1970s on the north coast of the Sea of Okhotsk at Magadan (59° 34' N, 150° 48' E), in which area A. Ya. Kondratyev (in litt.) reported the species thriving in farms and villages in the mid-1990s. Farther east, *P. d. domesticus* was introduced near the Pacific coast of southern Kamchatka in 1981—24 birds from Moscow released at Yelizovo (53° 11' N, 158° 23' E), where they nested successfully at least through 1984, in which year no fewer than 50 young were fledged (Lobkov 1986). At the close of the 20th century it was regarded by Artyukhin et al. (2000) as established at Yelizovo, as well as in the villages of Korf (60° 19' N, 165° 49' E) and Tilichiki (60° 28' N, 166° 06' E), on Korfa Bay, northern Kamchatka/coastal Koryakland—where not known earlier (see Kistchinski 1980).

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North of Kamchatka, from 1993 to 1995 House Sparrows persisted in sheds and greenhouses in the community of Markovo (64° 40' N, 170° 25' E), upper Anadyr River basin, and a flock of 10 fledged young was seen there on 31 July 1995 (Tomkovich 2008). Not known to Portenko (1973), they were first reported as far east as the Chukotski Peninsula—the easternmost extremity of the Russian Far East—in the 1990s, at Provideniya (64° 22' N, 173° 14' W), where birds were introduced (Summers-Smith and Taguchi 2010), probably by Russian aircrews: “fairly common,” 7–8 July and 27 July 1993 (K. A. Russell in litt.); none seen mid-July 1994 (D. R. Paulson in litt.); a few, July–August 1995 (D. Banin in litt.). A. Ya. Kondratyev (in litt.) regards their long-term survival there as unlikely. The most parsimonious explanation for the June 1993 occurrence at Saint Lawrence Island is direct dispersal from Provideniya, 100 km away.

In the first decade of the 21st century, in 2009 House Sparrows bred commonly in the village of Meynypil'gyno (62° 32' N, 177° 02' E), on the Bering Sea coast west of Cape Navarin, had almost disappeared by summer 2010, then in 2011 the number increased, but not to the level of 2009 (P. S. Tomkovich in litt.). Farther north, they were nesting in the town of Anadyr (64° 44' N, 177° 31' E), at the mouth of the Anadyr River, in 2000 (P. S. Tomkovich in litt.). Much farther north, at arctic Pevek (69° 42' N, 170° 18' E), on Chaun Bay, East Siberian Sea, the species appeared in the early 2000s and was numerous and building nests in 2007 (Tomkovich 2007, in litt.). It seems only likely, therefore, that the birds that reached Shishmaref, Alaska, in fall 2007 were dispersals from a site of introduction on the adjacent Chukotski Peninsula, 160+ km away, like the earlier bird at Saint Lawrence Island.

“[A] commensal of man, almost invariably closely attached to cultivated land and vicinity of habitations from the largest cities to isolated farms...occasionally, chiefly in the eastern [Asia] part of the range...[*Passer domesticus* has nested] in free colonies away from man along river banks, or in the open forest or along its fringes” (Vaurie 1959:568). A lone female seen several times in 1992 about the Balaganchik River mouth (V. G. Krivosheeva in Tomkovich 2008), Anadyr River basin, was an example of a House Sparrow distant from a human community.

SUMMARY

At this juncture, the House Sparrow has been recorded in both easternmost and far western Alaska. The few records represent birds from two geographically disparate sources. Though from two different proximate origins, they are all (1) the same subspecies, *Passer domesticus domesticus*, and (2) the direct or indirect results of releases by humans, either examples of dispersal by the legacy of long-ago releases (in North America) or of dispersal by recent releases (in Russian Far East). There is to date no record of *Passer domesticus* in northwestern North America between 135° W (Whitehorse, Yukon Territory) and 166° W (Shishmaref, Alaska), but the species warrants continued attention in this region.

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APPENDIX

Alaska specimens of *Passer domesticus domesticus* (3): Univ. Alaska Museum 5448, ♀, 23 October 1987, Petersburg (56° 48' N, 132° 58' W), coll. E. L. Young; UAM 6358, ♂, 13–14 June 1993, Saint Lawrence Island, Gambell (63° 47' N, 171° 45' W), coll. B. Kessel and J. W. Fitzpatrick; and UAM 26024, ♂, winter 2007–2008, Shishmaref (66° 15' N, 166° 04' W), coll. K. Stenek.