



## House Sparrow

Huismossie

*Passer domesticus*

The natural range of the House Sparrow extends from Ireland to Vladivostok, south to the Nile Valley in the Sudan, Yemen, Sri Lanka and Burma. It has been widely introduced and is now almost worldwide, excluding Japan, China, Indo-China and Indonesia where the Tree Sparrow *P. montanus* occupies its human-commensal niche (Summers-Smith 1988; Clement *et al.* 1993).

The race *P. d. indicus* of the House Sparrow was introduced from India to coastal KwaZulu-Natal in the late 19th century. It now occurs virtually throughout southern Africa, except the Kalahari, the Kaokoveld of northwestern Namibia, the dune sea of the southern Namib Desert and the wilderness areas of Botswana. Substantial areas of Namibia and Botswana are unsuitable, and this is reflected in the lower reporting rate in Zones 1–2.

There is no problem in recognizing adult males. Females and juveniles are less easily identified, but the sexes seldom move separately.

**Habitat:** It is primarily a bird of human dwellings and other constructions made of brick or stone, provided that they are not noticeably enclosed by dense woodland or a rich growth of trees and shrubs. It was recorded from all vegetation types.

**Movements:** The source population in India is sedentary. It took c. 50 years for the KwaZulu-Natal population to become mobile and invasive. Dispersive movements are now substantial (e.g. Harwin & Irwin 1966; Irwin 1981). There is no evidence for seasonal movement, except possibly at the highest altitudes. The tendency towards reduced reporting rates in midsummer, just after breeding, may relate to dispersal away from human habitation after breeding, and less conspicuous behaviour during moult.

**Breeding:** There is a large number of atlas breeding records compared to published information (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a). Breeding takes place throughout the year, particularly in the warmer areas, and is more seasonal in the southern Zones 4 and 8. It is primarily a summer breeder (September–February, usually peaking October–November) throughout its southern African range and the breeding peak is synchronized, including the winter-rainfall areas in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4). In rural areas it starts breeding later than birds in adjacent, preferred, urban environments (Earlé 1988a).

**Interspecific relationships:** It interacts relatively little with its indigenous congeners, the larger Cape Sparrow *P. melanurus* and the slightly larger Southern Greyheaded Sparrow *P. diffusus*. Both breed on or in buildings at times but neither appear to be

limited, let alone threatened, by the alien House Sparrow. In Bloemfontein (2926AA), Earlé (1988a) demonstrated differences in habitat preference and breeding success between Cape and House Sparrows in urban, suburban and rural environments.

House Sparrows do take over a few nests of the colonial Little Swift *Apus affinis* and South African Cliff Swallow *Hirundo spilodera*, but this has no obvious effect on their populations. It is perhaps the Cape Wagtail *Motacilla capensis*, also a scavenger among human detritus, whose populations are diminished as result of the expansion of the House Sparrow (Brooke *et al.* 1986).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The principal introduction was of the Indian race *indicus*. Small numbers of the nominate race have been introduced at various localities but have been absorbed by *indicus*-type birds (Brooke *et al.* 1986). It appears that indentured sugar-cane labourers from India brought House Sparrows as pets in the 1880s and 1890s; escapes established a feral population (Clancey 1964b). The history of expansion in KwaZulu-Natal before 1950 is poorly known, but it was present in Pietermaritzburg (2930CB) by 1912 (Gebhardt 1944) and common there in 1930 (Godfrey 1930). By 1949 it had crossed the escarpment to Bethlehem (2828AB) in the Free State (Harwin & Irwin 1966). Thereafter, the expansion was explosive and covered not only southern Africa but also Malawi and Zambia (Winterbottom 1961a, 1972a; Harwin & Irwin 1966; Vierke 1970; Brooke 1986; Brooke *et al.* 1986). It was not known from southern Angola (Brooke 1986) but the atlas data suggest that it now occurs there; this has been confirmed in respect of Namibe town by B.A. Bennett (pers. comm.).

The House Sparrow is an immensely successful commensal species requiring no conservation action. Because it is not a major threat to indigenous birds or to human food supplies, it does not require control measures. It does invade conserved natural areas, but only around staff houses and similar structures.

R.K. Brooke

Recorded in 2657 grid cells, 58.6%

Total number of records: 61 222

Mean reporting rate for range: 44.7%

### Reporting rates for vegetation types



