A case of infanticide by a hen House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Pramod Patil & Girish Jathar

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Pramod Patil, Datta Housing Society, Plot. No. 15, 'B' Ward, Sambhaji Nagar, Mangalwar Peth, Kolhapur 416012, Maharashtra, India. Email: *pramodwild@yahoo.com*

Girish Jathar, Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, S. B. Singh Road, Mumbai 400001, Maharashtra, India. Email: *girishjathar@rediffmail.com* (Corresponding author)

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At 0745hrs on 14th September 2007, we were standing on the porch of the second author's house at Kolhapur, Maharashtra, when we heard an unfamiliar chirping call of a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*-emanating from the rooftop. While searching for the bird, we saw small bundles of cobwebs falling from the rooftop. We were shocked to see that it was a nestling sparrow entangled in some nest material. On reaching the rooftop we found a cock House Sparrow perched on the lattice, intently watching something. After about five minutes, a hen sparrow appeared on one of the openings of the lattice and as we watched she dropped a nestling that she was carrying in her beak! After a ten-minute search we located the nest on the joint of a rainspout and a concrete slab.

Due to our presence on the roof, the hen flew away and sat on the lattice. Therefore, we withdrew into one of the rooms and watched the nest from there. 15 minutes later the hen returned and went inside the nest cavity. We heard a chorus of nestlings' calls and after a while the hen popped out with a nestling in her beak. The nestling was alive and uttering distress calls. Holding the nestling in her beak, she flew up to the lattice and perched on it. After a few seconds, she dropped the live nestling to the porch below. Surprisingly the cock remained a silent spectator. The hen sat there for ten minutes and preened her feathers. After that, she re-entered the nest cavity. Within half a minute, she came out with another live nestling, flew to the lattice, and dropped it. After three minutes both adult birds flew away.

In less than an hour, the hen had thrown out four nestlings from the nest. None of them survived the 20-foot fall to the porch. They were approximately a week old-only few down feathers and contours of primaries were visible. All of them appeared to have been healthy, as there was no visible abnormality or sign of disease or parasites on their bodies. We examined the nest and found that it was empty and partially destroyed.

That same afternoon, a pair of House Sparrows appeared at the same nest site and the hen entered the nest cavity. We assumed that it was the same pair that was responsible for the infanticide. Next day we observed that the pair was engaged in repairing the nest. We monitored the nest for the next ten days and found that the hen had laid a clutch of four eggs and started incubating them.

This event suggests that there could be two reasons for the infanticide. In the first: an aggressive intruder (pair) might have been chased off the original owners of the nest, usurping it and killing the nestlings. In the second: the mother of the nestlings might have died or been chased off by a new female. We rule out the first case upon the premise that the cock was not involved in the actual killing.

The killing of unrelated young has been typically considered a male behaviour because it represents a sexual strategy (Hausfater & Hrdy 1984; Hrdy 1979; Packer & Pusey 1983; Sherman 1981; van Schaik 2000). Veiga (2003) suggested that in House Sparrows 'The killing of genetically unrelated young by males has been viewed as a strategy where infanticidal males gain a time advantage that may be crucial to maximize reproductive success.' On the contrary the commonest proximate causes of infanticide by hen sparrows are competition for breeding resources and infant exploitation (Blumstein 2000; Digby 2000). Veiga (2004) mentions 'the female house sparrows regularly committed infanticide when taking over a nest and replacing the previous female owner. Experienced females committed infanticide, as an alternative strategy to passive replacement, more frequently than novel females.'

It seems that the cases of infanticide in House Sparrow are common. A detailed study on the behavioural aspects of this common bird may reveal many secrets of its as yet elusive life.

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