

House Sparrow Control... circa 1916 - and Other Birding Tidbits!

By Bob Tamm

"Ah, for the good ol' days!" How many times have we heard THAT said, especially those of us who have been around for a few decades. Well, times HAVE changed, and in no area has it changed more than in the area of Birding. In perusing my collection of vintage bird books, I came up with some eye-openers, a few of which I thought I'd share with my fellow birders. And what better area to start with than house sparrow control – circa 1916. In my book entitled "BIRD FRIENDS – A COMPLETE BIRD BOOK FOR AMERICANS" by Gilbert H. Trafton, published in 1916, here are some recommendations for ridding your area of house sparrows – yes – they were already a recognized nuisance that far back...

"Mr. Neil M. Ladd gives the following suggestions in the first annual report of the Greenwich Bird Protective Society: - 'Shooting accomplishes great results when done as follows: Feed small grain from a small narrow trough on the ground for several days until hundreds of sparrows from the surrounding neighborhood flock to it the moment the food is put out. A shotgun so placed as to sweep the length of the trough will kill dozens at each shot. The gun can easily be secured in place and the trigger released by a long string.' "

Hmmm, wonder how our neighbors would like that setup in our backyards today? Well, if that method is too harsh for you, here is another, a few paragraphs later... "In the Farmers' Bulletin No. 493, on 'The English Sparrow as a Pest', the following directions are given for the preparation of poisoned grain: Put one eighth ounce of pulverized strychnine sulphate into three fourths of a gill of hot water, add starch or wheat flour, moistened with a few drops of cold water, and heat, stirring constantly until mixture thickens. Pour hot poisoned starch over a quart of wheat and stir till every kernel is coated... small kernal wheat is preferable to first quality grain, being cheaper and more



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easily eaten by the sparrows."

Strychnine! Now why didn't I think of that. Of course, no mention is made of other birds or wildlife that would be tempted by the stuff...

In a 1915 book, "WILD BIRD GUESTS – HOW TO ENTERTAIN THEM", by Ernest Baynes, the author recognizes that there are a number of "pests" in any given neighborhood - and here is one solution he gives to correct that problem: "On a small place, one man with a gun can, without devoting much time to the work, do a great deal toward keeping it free from bird enemies. For example, I know one New Hampshire man, who, with a .22 caliber rifle, has for years kept his home farm of a hundred acres clear of red squirrels, house cats, and European sparrows; reduced the chipmunk population considerably, and who has shot several sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks and two northern shrikes. The same man has shot practically all the red squirrels in the nearby village of Meriden, and with the help of one other man has cleared the village of European sparrows. These men, one a doctor and one a writer, both lead very busy lives, but by carrying their guns occasionally while going about their work, they have been able to free the local birds of nearly all their natural foes."

I can't help wondering whether that doctor's last name was Orkin...

Well, I've got a lot more of these fun tidbits but space wouldn't permit all the good stuff I've found, but I will leave you with one more juicy birding tip. This one is for those of you who like to capture birds. No, I didn't say capture birds with your camera, I

said CAPTURE BIRDS! It comes from the 1905 edition of "THE COMPLETE AMERICAN AND CANADIAN SPORTSMAN'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF VALUABLE INSTRUCTION" by Francis H. Buzzacott. This book is absolutely bursting with information on hunting, fishing, camping, and trapping. One hundred and two years ago, it was "the book that no sportsman should be without"...as it so humbly indicates in several places. And under the TRAPPING section was this paragraph on "To Capture Small Birds: Use bird lime made as follows: Take inner bark of slippery elm, which should be gathered in early summer, scraped into a pulp, and simmer slowly in just enough water to cover it, stirring and mushing it so as to extract the substance; add to it linseed oil, and when thick enough like glue, it can be smeared over limbs or trees where birds frequent. If you can secure an owl, fasten it to some spot frequented by birds, and a short distance away smear limbs and twigs with the bird lime. When the owl, which is the most detested enemy of all birds, is found, it will attract a veritable swarm of birds to that vicinity, when they will be caught by the quicklime that surrounds the captured owl."

(And we all know how easy it is to secure a Great Horned Owl...)

So there you are, more information that none of us should be without. Next time you want a new way to get those sparrows, or rid the town of other pests, or do a little birdcatching, well, you could give these old ideas a try. Then again... "Ah, for the good ol' days" might just not apply here!

Editor's note: It should be noted that back when these extreme measures were written they weren't trying to get rid House Sparrows because of competition with Eastern Bluebirds. Back then it was known as "The Sparrow Wars" and bird enthusiasts took sides some favoring House Sparrows for their cheery song and desire to live near people while others thought them to be vermin. In those days people still used horses to get around and every town had a livery stable. The messy straw nest that sparrows built in the stables could catch fire from blacksmith embers or from a lit cigar butt. So sparrow haters wanted them killed for the safety of their towns. Here in Stoughton the fire brigade was called out to flush sparrow nests out of factories to prevent possible fires from old nest material built up in the rafters.