

Winning the Battle or Losing the War?

By Larry Hyslop



A male House Sparrow feeding at a modified feeder

Maybe, just maybe, I am winning this winter's battle against my arch nemesis, the House Sparrow. It has been a rough winter for feeding wild birds in my backyard. The large number of House Sparrows attacking my feeders drove away other bird species. The House Sparrows could empty all my feeders, including the thistle seed feeder, within a day. They became the only species of wild bird in my backyard.

So I decided it was time to take back my backyard (a maniacal laugh escapes me as I write this). Cindy says I am obsessed but she is so wrong! In an earlier column I wrote of genteel ideas to counteract the deluge of House Sparrows but those ideas did not work, so I took my fight to a new level.

I now have one feeder only for House Sparrows. This commercial model has no perches, and I stock it with the cheapest mixed seed mix I can find. The birds must cling to a vertical lip, which House Sparrows will do although my guess is this setup is not their favorite. I wrapped the feeder in duct tape, leaving only a 1 ½" opening. This does not deter them from using this feeder, it just means only one bird at a time can stick its head through the opening to grab seed. They also cannot fling seed sideways, littering the ground and feeding other House Sparrows. I moved the feeder away from the deck and trees, to further slow down their feeding.

As long as their feeder contains seed they leave the thistle feeder alone. It takes them about two days to empty it, one bird at a time, and if it runs out, they are soon on the deck eyeing the thistle feeder.

Then I tried experiments to further their torment (another maniacal laugh escapes me). I ran a string from the bottom of their feeder and wound it around the hook it hangs from, so when I tightened the string the feeder tilted away from the opening. It was harder for the House Sparrows to cling to this tilted surface, requiring them to pull their tails forward and brace against the feeder's bottom, but it did not stop them. I also tried tilting the feeder opening upward, but that just made it easier, so I gave up.

The end result is I continue to feed my rowdy gang of 50 House Sparrows. They are doing just fine, not starving by any means. Any extra food they need is easily supplemented by seeds found in my neighbor's hay. But House Finches are beginning to return to a quiet thistle feeder. So am I winning the battle or giving up on the war? I have no idea.

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