

My Battle against House Sparrows



Success at last as two House Finches sit on my feeder

Maybe, just maybe, I am winning my battle against House Sparrows. During past winters, I fed quite a few House Sparrows but my feeders also got House Finches, Goldfinches, White-crowned Sparrows and Juncos. However, this year I had so many House Sparrows, they dominated the feeders and chased off the other birds. A full seed feeder was emptied in a couple hours by a mob of more than 100 House Sparrows while other, more desirable, bird types had vanished.

The House Sparrow is an introduced species that has spread across the country and taken over both feeding and nesting opportunities from native birds. During the 2009 Elko Christmas Bird Count, volunteers recorded 505 House Finches, 25 White Crowned Sparrows and 1,608 House Sparrows so House Sparrows do not need my feeding help.

Even in winter, House Sparrow males are easy to spot by their tan caps, black bibs and brown and white faces. Females are nondescript but have no striping on the belly. Their loud “cheeps” are heard all over town where they are often seen around dumpsters and parked cars.

At first, I tried different approaches to control House Sparrows. I cut off the perches on my thistle feeder to no more than half an inch. Internet searches advised me to use better, more expensive, seed and make sure no seed falls to the ground. I considered buying a thistle feeder that requires finches and goldfinches to hang upside down to reach the seed.

But then I ran across a commercial device called a Magic Halo. Using its design, I created a smaller, cruder version using the metal ring from the top of an old lamp shade. I slipped the feeder’s cord through the small, inner ring so it sat on top of my feeder. The outer ring extends farther out than the perches. Then I suspended four fishing lines from the outer ring, weighed down by fishing weights so the lines hung lower than the perches.

The results were almost instantaneous and few House Sparrow have since visited the feeder. Unfortunately, neither did any other bird until I experimented with its design. I cut off the lines so the weights hang high above the perches, as seen in the above photo.

Since then two House Finches have begun using the feeder. A few House Sparrows clean up fallen seed on the ground but three White-crowned Sparrows have joined them. I hung a smaller version of the device over a thistle seed feeder but no finches have yet visited it.

As I write this, a single House Finch sits on the feeder perch while 20-30 House Sparrows line a nearby spruce tree. Now it is just a waiting game to see if more desirable birds return and the House Sparrows do not return to the feeders.

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