

House Sparrow

Passer domesticus

The House Sparrow is a classic example of how an introduced bird can have a devastating effect on our native avifauna. In Ohio, they were initially released at Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Warren during 1869, with additional releases at Marietta in 1870, Coshocton and Portsmouth in 1874, Steubenville in 1880–1881, and Wapakoneta in 1882 (Hicks 1935). Their numbers increased dramatically and by the turn of the century, House Sparrows were widely distributed and abundant residents throughout Ohio (Jones 1903). This population increased at the expense of our native cavity nesters. The declines of various species such as House Wren, Eastern Bluebird, chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, Downy Woodpecker, and Cliff Swallow were directly attributable to their inability to compete with the more aggressive House Sparrow for nest sites.

House Sparrows probably peaked within Ohio between 1900 and 1920 but declined somewhat during the 1920s as horses were replaced by automobiles and mechanized farm machinery. Despite this decline, they remained abundant residents in every county during the mid–1930s. Their status was similar in rural and urban areas (Hicks 1935, 1937). During subsequent years, their numbers continued to slowly decline as a result of cleaner farming operations and fewer livestock on farms. This trend was evident throughout eastern North America between 1965 and 1979, especially during the late 1970s when severe winter weather caused further reductions in their populations (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986). Competition with an expanding House Finch population contributed to reduced numbers of House Sparrows during the 1980s.

Despite their gradually declining numbers, House Sparrows remain widespread residents within Ohio. The Atlas Project produced records from 762 priority blocks. They were missed in only two blocks on the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau. These blocks were heavily forested and/or partial blocks along the Ohio River that contained few residences and farms. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate House Sparrows are most numerous in the Illinoian Till Plain region, although the relatively small number of surveys in this region may exaggerate their relative abundance in southwestern Ohio. Substantially fewer sparrows are recorded on the surveys in the heavily farmed Till Plain region. Additional declines are evident in the Lake Plain and Glaciated Plateau regions, but the Unglaciated Plateau easily hosts the fewest House Sparrows of any physiographic region. Their relative scarcity in unglaciated Ohio reflects the small number of farms and sparse human population in most of these counties.

House Sparrows have always been closely associated with human habitations. Both densely populated urban areas and rural farmlands support sizable populations. They are seldom found far from buildings, especially during the breeding season when many pairs choose to nest in crevices within houses and outbuildings. They also frequently usurp bird houses and natural cavities in trees. Some pairs place their bulky nests in open trees, while others may choose bridge girders, highway signs, and traffic

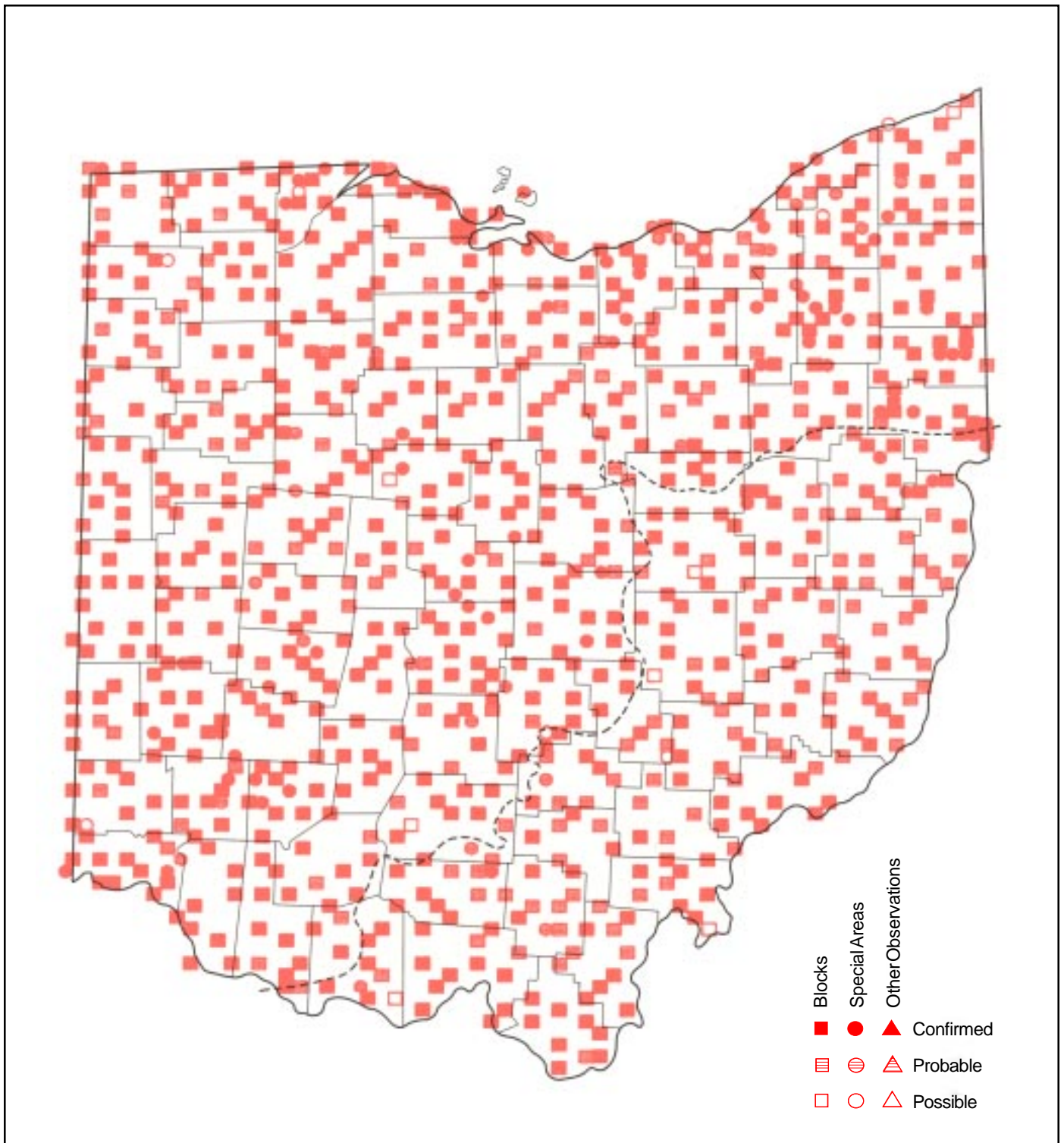
lights. On rare occasions, they may occupy more natural habitats such as the pair that cleverly built their nest at the base of a large Bald Eagle aerie (Campbell 1968). House Sparrows may nest as isolated pairs but are usually somewhat colonial with as many as 3–12 pairs breeding in a relatively small area.



Mike Williams - ODNR Photographer

Pairs of House Sparrows have been observed nest building as early as January 7 (Campbell 1968), but mid–winter nests are very rare. Nest construction usually begins during March, frequently by the first week of the month. The earliest nest with eggs was discovered on March 8 and the first fledgling was noted on April 10 (Campbell 1968, Williams 1950). However, most first clutches are not completed until March 25–April 15 and fledglings are regularly observed by May 15–20. House Sparrows regularly raise 2–3 broods annually. Nests with eggs have been reported through August 18 and recently fledged young until September 23 (Campbell 1968, Williams 1950).

Breeding House Sparrows were easily confirmed during the Atlas Project, a result of their close association with human habitations. Of the 564 confirmed records in priority blocks, there were 434 reports of active nests. Other confirmed records included adults carrying food for young in 71 blocks, 32 sightings of recently fledged young, and 20 used nests. The “30” code was not accepted for this species. Possible breeders provided most other records, primarily pairs in suitable habitats and observations of nest building activities.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	95	100.0	12.5	168.2
Till Plain	271	271	100.0	35.6	245.1
Ill. Till Plain	46	46	100.0	6.0	410.2
Glaciated Plateau	140	140	100.0	18.4	109.0
Unglaciated Plateau	212	210	99.1	27.6	35.3

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	762	99.7%
Confirmed	564	74.0%
Probable	191	25.1%
Possible	7	0.9%