

Nature note: a little local murder mystery

My neighbour, Patrick, called me over the other day to help investigate a murder mystery. He showed me the crime scene, right outside his house, and pointed to the three corpses. No incriminating evidence and everyone had a good alibi, so was it suicide, murder or avicide? Yes, they were three birds, all house sparrows, only recently expired. None of them showed signs of mutilation, so one could rule out sparrow hawks and cats as the suspects. There were no other signs of a violent death either. I fancy it was from *natural causes*, as we say when we don't really know the answer, maybe a virus of some kind. We shall never know, but it reminded me of a much larger mystery about house sparrows.

Sparrows used to be one of our commonest birds. From the earliest historical times they thrived around human habitations in cities and farms, so much so that they were often regarded as a pest. We exported them to the USA in the mid-nineteenth century (a few were released in Brooklyn in 1853) and in no time at all they had spread from coast to coast. And in the early twentieth century in Britain there were *sparrow clubs* devoted to slaughtering them in their thousands as a public service, but they had little effect on the numbers overall. Only 30 years ago they were still as common as ... sparrows. But something strange has happened. You can search for them in vain in London now. A friend of mine used to birdwatch in Hyde Park every day and in ten years, he never saw a single sparrow! The *Cockney sparrow* became not only an affectionate symbol for a small, cheeky little bird with a touch of endearing vulgarity, but an endangered species. So whodunnit?



House Sparrow

Jeremy Mynott

Scientists have been trying to figure this out and have considered explanations ranging from climate change, improvements in domestic architecture (so fewer nesting holes), growing predator numbers (like magpies and cats), pesticides and poisons. But none of these has seemed a sufficient cause. The latest theory is that it may be air pollution. The sharp decline in sparrow populations from the 1990s matches exactly the uptake of diesel vehicles in Britain, whose exhaust gases are now known to pose a serious threat to air quality, as any visitor to London can testify.

Here in Shingle Street we still have a flourishing colony of house sparrows, I'm glad to say, and the air is certainly better in this Street than in Oxford Street. Anyway, our three dead sparrows were buried with due solemnity, remembering the words in Hamlet, *There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.*

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