Nesting with Lotus:
A Personal Account of Human-Sparrow Friendship

Annie Potts (with Lotus Sparrow)

Lotus and Annie (Author's collection)

In 2014 a fledgling house sparrow entered my life. I named him Lotus, wishing him a peaceful life with the other disabled birds inhabiting an aviary-room in my home. But it soon became clear that sparrows don't crave peace. They love noisiness, adventure and mischief: just three days after sparrow met human, I was rushed to an emergency clinic, having had my eyeball punctured by a cheeky peck. During his first winter, as dusk approached each evening, Lotus would fly at my face screeching loudly, declaring his desire for me to leave his space; it was a different story in his second spring, when he chased me

endlessly with quite different intentions, performing amorous dances, and expressing another kind of desire. Over the past ten years, Lotus and I have become firm friends. He likes to pull skin from my cuticles and hair from my head. He enjoys pecking my thumb and having a swing on my feet. I have laughed as he's built huge nests the size of termites' mounds from paper he has shredded, as he's bathed with joy in sand and water, and as he's danced and sung for the sake of 'romance'. Lotus is my heart-bird and my deepest connection to other-than-human worlds when I'm too 'humanful' or 'human-full'. To Lotus, I guess I am a safe-ish tree, a warm snuggle in big hair, a springtime lover, a featherless companion and sometimes a nuisance.

For many people, sparrows are non-descript birds – often around but not really noticed. In this essay I want to share the extraordinary beauty of sparrows, the magic of these birds, that I have discovered more about during my relationship with Lotus, and from observing his wild friends and learning about sparrow histories. Many humans live close to sparrows, but this does not usually translate to any real knowledge about them or respect for them, as the brief cultural history below will show. My tracing of the different representations of, beliefs about, attitudes towards, and treatment of sparrows in different eras and global locations is interspersed with stories from my eleven-year friendship with Lotus. In this way, this piece explores the various relationships we have with sparrows – from killing them as 'pests' to loving them as companions, from scapegoating and hatred to close affection and admiration.

The ancestors of today's house sparrows originated in Africa (Dunn) and are now found almost everywhere across the globe. They are 'human specialists' (Barnes 389), having naturally spread their range north and west into Europe and east across Asia, following people and exploiting our early horticultural farming practices, particularly wheat-farming, for around 12,000 years (Beer 17). Eventually as towns and cities emerged, built off the backs of grain-fed horses, sparrows settled in urbanized areas. The adaptability of these birds is demonstrated by the variety of places they choose to flock and nest, from six hundred meters underground in a Yorkshire coal mine (Beer 17) to 4,500 meters high in the

Himalayan mountains (Cocker and Tipling). Their spread across the planet continues: as recently as 1990 sparrows established themselves in Iceland (Beer).

The history of sparrow relocation is not always voluntary, however. Sometimes birds are blown on strong winds to new regions; sometimes they are accidental stowaways on ships. House sparrows have been also forcibly introduced by humans to North and South America, South Africa, Australasia, Oceania and Hawai'i (Beer). Lotus lives in Aotearoa New Zealand where one hundred of his kind were brought from England and released between 1866 and 1871. The birds' introduction to these alien islands in the South Pacific was one result of the whimsy of colonial acclimatization projects which aimed to facilitate a comfortable familiarity for the increasing settler population missing the fauna and flora of the British Isles. It was also hoped that sparrows (called *tiu* by Māori) would dine on insects that were destroying crops planted for human consumption in the new colony ('Introduced Birds'). This latter aspiration was born of ignorance, as sparrows feast on bugs and worms only for the first few weeks of life, after which they much prefer seeds and fruit. Therefore, just a few years after their introduction to New Zealand, Lotus's ancestors acquired the label of 'pest', partly because of their inclination to eat the same crops they were imported to protect, and partly because they loved to devour the grain reserved for humans, horses and other animals. By the late 1880s Sparrow Clubs were established. These clubs did not foster an enjoyment of sparrows, as their name might suggest; rather, they operated to stamp these birds out of New Zealand and were involved in poisoning grain that sparrows ate and paying schoolboys a bounty to crush sparrows' eggs ('Introduced Birds').

Over time, then, since Aotearoa's colonization by the British, and like many other species introduced to New Zealand (including brushtail possums, stoats and cats), sparrows have become scapegoats of this nation's troubled colonial history (Potts, Armstrong and Brown). Instead of respecting these remarkably adaptable birds for their ability to survive long caged journeys by sea or as accidental stowaways on ships – instead of admiring their vibrant and cheeky presence across our islands – we have too often denigrated and

persecuted them. Today in areas where they are vilified as pests they may be 'controlled' by using an anaesthetic in their food, which renders them unconscious or paralyzed and easily collected off the ground for so-called 'humane' disposal ('Use of Alphachloralose').

It is important to point out that this pest narrative is not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand. In the 19th century, a similar fate befell sparrows forcibly introduced to New York from Liverpool, in the hope that these birds would control the voracious caterpillars who feasted on Linden trees (Moulton et al.; see also Beer 23). Specifically, in 1856, fifty pairs of imported house sparrows received the utmost care in the home of the Brooklyn Institute's caretaker, John McGeorge, as they waited out the cold winter months (do Campo). According to sparrow historian Fernando do Campo, the birds were housed in a hidden backroom accessible via a dressing room, provided with plants and shrubbery indoors for their pleasure, and successfully released in the spring of 1857. Within thirty years of these initial liberations, however, sparrows were, like the caterpillars they were tasked with killing, declared to be vermin. They were outlawed for displacing native birds, 'stealing' grain, and leaving excrement around homes and other city buildings. Today in the USA, pest companies set up glue-traps at birdbaths and other sites where sparrows are known to perch; these cruel contraptions, as their name suggests, capture and hold fast to sparrows, eventually resulting in the death of birds due to starvation or dehydration ('Glue Traps FAQs').

Even in regions where sparrows are considered to be indigenous, they may face denigration and exile (Barnes). For example, the prominent 18th century French naturalist, Count de Buffon, condemned them in his 1749 treatise on birds, stating '[the sparrow] is extremely destructive, its plumage is entirely useless, its flesh indifferent food, its notes grating to the ear, and its familiarity and petulance disgusting' (Bradley, 'Wretched Sparrows'). Similarly, for centuries in the United Kingdom, sparrows were viewed as 'pests' and more bounty money was paid by clergy in South England for the slaughter of sparrows than for all other 'wild vermin' put together (Cocker and Tipling, 485). Lotus and I abhor discrimination against sparrows. We prefer the more generous take of 21st century

ornithologist Mark Cocker, who argues, with respect to sparrows, that 'we [humans] have made the whole world into their habitat, and dividing the bird's range into places where it [sic] can be approved or condemned is arbitrary and possibly even meaningless' (Cocker and Tipling 484). It is also deeply anthropocentric: sparrows followed humans wherever we went, so if they are pests then many of us are too.[i]

Since 1758 house sparrows have also been known by their western scientific name of *Passer domesticus*, 'passer' being the Latin word for 'sparrow' and referring to the quick and active nature of these birds, and 'domesticus' meaning 'of the home'. In fact, *Passer domesticus* was one of the first creatures to be taxonomized. These tiny descendants of dinosaurs carry more colloquial names, of course, associated with the regions they exist in, including *spatzie* or *spotsie* in North America (from the German *'spatz'* for 'sparrow'), *spugs* or *spuggies* in North England and *sparr*, *spadger*, *phip* or *philip* in the South (Bradley, 'House Sparrow Nicknames'), the etymology of the latter two names possibly stemming from the sounds sparrows make.

Sparrows possess some remarkable anatomical and physiological features. Their triangular beaks are finely developed for seed eating, along with the tip of their tongue which is equipped with an additional stiff bone (not present in other passerines) that permits seeds to be held more firmly for cracking (Barnes). The brownish plumage of sparrows, and especially the supposedly drab feathers of females, is actually a very clever form of camouflage, protecting them from the myriad predators they encounter on a daily basis. Sparrows shut their eyes when sleeping but when awake they do not blink; their eyes stay open and are cleaned and lubricated by the frequent sweeping of a transparent nictitating membrane. Like many other birds they have near panoramic vision, able to see 340 degrees without moving their heads (Barnes), thereby viewing what is immediately in front (seeds) at the same time as they can make sense of what is approaching from behind (possible predators) (Potts).

Sparrows have been symbolically significant across cultures. In ancient Egypt they were considered important mediators between the worlds of the living and the dead (however, a sparrow hieroglyph referred to negative qualities such as meanness or badness) (Beer). Given their natural inclination to extravagant courtship dances and repeated matings over a season, these birds have for centuries been symbolically connected to lust, lechery and romance. Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, travelled in a chariot propelled by sparrows, while Cupid, the Roman god of erotic love, rode them bareback (Cocker and Tipling). Sparrow meat was considered an aphrodisiac in 16th century Europe while up until recently, Chinese physicians recommended consumption of sparrows' eggs as a remedy for erectile difficulties (Cocker and Tipling). In contemporary Italy the term *passerina* (from *passero*, sparrow) is sexual slang similar to the use of 'pussy' in English. In the century before Christ's birth, Roman poet Catullus wrote 'To Lesbia's Pet Sparrow', a poem begging the companion sparrow of his lover Lesbia to exchange places with him so that he might be welcomed on to her lap and enjoy her affection (during this time sparrows were often kept as pets by privileged women). A thousand or so years later and Australians use the term *'spadger'*, derived from sparrow, as slang for the vagina (Cocker and Tipling). Sparrows have also represented traitors: in 1958 Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward campaign declared sparrows to be 'public animals of capitalism' in China (along with flies, rats and mosquitoes); these birds were chased, harassed and worried by the devout until they died of exhaustion; their eggs were broken and chicks were killed, until the population reached near national extinction levels (Barnes 392, see also Todd).

Too often today's house sparrows are also understood and treated in paradoxical and typically anthropocentric ways. They are the everyday birds populating many cities, normally disregarded because they are so ubiquitous and familiar, and sometimes even becoming unwanted and targeted 'intruders' in natural spaces that humans selfishly claim as their own or under their control. Wild or domestically raised, they are the 'objects' of painful laboratory experiments, one recent example involving wounding sparrows to determine the benefit of steroids for the treatment of injuries in other 'more important' bird

species (sparrows can be used without compunction in such studies because they are categorized by humans as 'invasive') (Lattin, Durant and Romero). As mentioned above, there is also a long history of eating these small songbirds, whole or dismembered. In the early twentieth century, Sparrow Pie was a popular dish in some parts of the USA and Britain; in contemporary Kyoto skewered and grilled sparrows are served as somewhat pricey street food, sought after by tourists with self-proclaimed adventurous palates.

Thankfully, there are people across the globe who also respect, protect and care for sparrows. For example, On World Sparrow Day, which fell on the 21st of March in 2021, *The Times of India* ran a piece about the need to protect and preserve house sparrows across the country. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) had just declared house sparrows to be on its Red List of endangered creatures edging towards extinction. India had witnessed a startling drop in sparrow numbers – up to 80% decline over three decades, according to Vibhu Prakash of the Bombay Natural History Society. Prakash attributed the dramatic fall in sparrow populations in part to changing human lifestyles; for example, new architectural designs resulted in houses that were no longer friendly for nesting birds. He also blamed the increasing use of pesticides (which may poison adult sparrows) and insecticides (which kill off insects, an important food-source for baby sparrows in the first days of life). Other possible factors disturbing the breeding success and overall survival of sparrows in India were also suggested, including the effects of noise and air pollution (Aragwal), and the shrinking of green spaces (Jeshi and Ganguly). Conservationist Mohammed Dilawar from the Nature Forever Society (NFS), an organization focused on helping common birds, who had lamented the relentless decrease in sparrow numbers over many years, spearheaded a 'micro-level conservation movement' in urban locations; the task: to create secondary habitats for the birds by setting up nest boxes, bird feeders and water bowls in cities across the country (Jeshi and Ganguly). Another initiative by the Save Sparrows Campaign in India addresses the finding that sixty percent of baby sparrows die in the first fifteen days following hatching, as a result of falling from trees. Founder Gaurav Bajpal has established what is in effect a 'sparrow nursery', which consists

of numerous nesting boxes inside a safe building where parents can raise their young without fear of predation or injury from falling. Once old enough the offspring and their parents leave the nursery to get on with life on the outside ('Sparrows Return').

Sometimes after being orphaned while young or following an accident, sparrows find themselves living in human homes as companion birds, unable to be released into the wild due to the risks of predation, starvation, dehydration or injury. It is perhaps in these situations, where people spend more time with individual birds, that distinct personalities come to the fore for humans (although Dennis Summers-Smith, who observed sparrows in the wild for many years would be the first to endorse free living birds as individual characters too)(see the many books on sparrows by Dennis Summers-Smith: 1963; 1988; 1992; 1995). While sparrows tend to be stereotyped as sociable, busy, noisy and cheeky, individual birds may be quiet and less gregarious. When Whetū, a female sparrow whose name means 'star' in te reo Māori (the Māori language), came as a nestling to live with Lotus several years ago, I observed her to be quieter and less humanized than Lotus, but also more adventurous and independent. Similarly, writing over sixty years ago, English author Clare Kipps' delightful accounts of her companion sparrows Clarence (who travelled with Kipps to entertain people during the Blitz) and Timmy (who refused to leave the bedroom where he lived) demonstrate clear personality differences. Clarence would sit on Kipps' hands and 'quiver with delight' when she played Chopin on the piano, while Timmy preferred to repeat his own signature tune, comprised of notes that Kipps could not find on the piano, and mimic human speech (Kipps, *Timmy* 32; see also Kipps, *Sold for a Farthing*, based on the life of Clarence the sparrow).

While Lotus has shown no interest in talking like a human (he does mimic the resident cockatiel), he is devoted to playing with one. Companion sparrows love to spar in the evenings; both Kipps and I can attest to this. Lotus flies at me, squawking and flapping, sometimes becoming entangled in my hair. Kipps noted a similar 'game' initiated by Timmy in the evenings. She wrote: '[he] bombards my head and face from every possible angle … bumping continually into my face until, exhausted with effort and emotion, [Timmy] comes

suddenly to rest at the back of my neck…' (40). My own ignorance of sparrows ten years ago during Lotus's first spring as an adult resulted in a moment of sheer horror, believing that my beloved young sparrow had injured himself following a particularly exuberant sparring session against my hand, preceded by a bobbing dance. What I assumed to be blood turned out to be sparrow ejaculate, a dark brown substance I have become accustomed to having deposited on me across the months of November to March each year as Lotus turns from a curious, comical and cheeky companion to a frantic, squabbling and absolutely obsessive lover preoccupied with mating my right hand. Kipps noticed this over-night change of behaviour in Timmy come springtime, but she expressed his behaviour then in a more refined way. If you live with a male companion sparrow (termed a cock), be prepared for an eventful spring and summer. There have been numerous occasions when I've worried that Lotus's irrepressible and vigorous sexual activity will tip him over the edge, and he will die from exhaustion or a stroke before his 12-14 expected years of life come to a more peaceful end.[ii] I needn't have fretted. As happens to all of us who are privileged to live into older age, Lotus decided in the summer of 2024 that he was finished with full-on flirtations and copulations. He spent more time bathing in his pool and singing outside in the sun than courting my hand. I don't know if he experiences this as a loss, but I am sad that he is no longer as vibrant as he used to be.

The kind of closeness that Lotus and I share does not lend itself well to the constraints of anthropocentric theory; or perhaps I should say that neither of us care for anything too analytical. Our relationship has never prioritized meaning-making; it's been more about experiencing human-sparrow coexistence – little moments together each day, in different seasons and even different homes. The obvious determining factor in this story is that Lotus is captive, a decision made by humans wanting to keep him safe from predation after he had been raised as an orphaned nestling in a domestic home (in fact, it was in this same home, where he was assumed to be safe, that he lost several toes and acquired a distorted wing due to misadventures and skirmishes with other rescued sparrows and parakeets). Importantly, the notion of freedom is fraught in his situation – Lotus is 'free' to

fly in an area prescribed for him – sometimes outside, mostly inside; I control the temperature in his room, what foods he eats, who he keeps company with, and when he gets to go outside. This is not to say that Lotus does not have some choice – he makes decisions about movement and activities within his limited enclosure, he forms memories of, and reenacts, the things he likes to do; and he also stops doing some things and takes up new activities and prefers novel spaces to sit, fly or nest. In the wild, however, his choices would have been much different: he would have joined a group (or colony) of up to forty other sparrows, and lived amongst them for life; he might have found a mate, also for life (although both would have enjoyed dalliances with others of their species); he might have claimed a nest site that he and his mate returned to each year to raise their own hatchlings. Lotus has not developed a substantial display of black feathers on his chest, but if he had, he might have been a designated leader of his sparrow colony. Ultimately, however, his life, and our friendship, has been determined by its anthropocentric beginning and ongoing nature.

Recently Lotus protested at being taken to the emergency vet after suffering a split beak which had been caused by a fight with his younger frenemy, Luna, a disabled female budgerigar who also lives in the aviary-room. Luna's mate is Migo, a female cockatiel, who was unable to be rehomed. Each year Luna and Migo nest together throughout spring and summer, and sometimes into winter, taking turns at laying eggs and sitting on them expectantly. Lotus appears to be frustrated at their maternal zealousness. He is preoccupied with luring them out of their nest and chasing them around. Whenever the parakeets do venture into the room, he races back and forth in his part of the aviary[iii], chittering loudly. At these times he totally ignores me, no matter where I am or what I'm doing. In a way this is reassuring as it shows he is still so amazingly birdly that our relationship has not humanized him in an extreme way.

…. And then, just as I write this, Lotus perversely lands and poops on my laptop, finds a place beneath the warmth of the machine which sits upon my knee, snuggles in and pecks around a bit … as if to prove me wrong.

Notes

[i] In today's Britain, populations of sparrows have decreased by 71% since the late 1970s, largely the result of fewer green spaces and changing agricultural practices leading to poor provision of seeds for sparrows. This is also a worrying pattern in other regions where sparrows have been natural inhabitants. To raise awareness of threats to the house sparrow, World Sparrow Day has been celebrated globally every March 20th since 2010.

[ii] In the wild sparrows live for 2-5 years, although there is a record of a monitored wild house sparrow living until thirteen. In captivity, they are doing well to live beyond twelve, but there one account of one companion sparrow living until 23 years of age (Camfield).

[iii] When the female birds are sitting on eggs, Lotus is separated from them by a transparent screen, mainly for his welfare, since budgerigars are fiercely territorial and can easily injure smaller birds.

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