

HOUSE SPARROW

Fanny Kajela, 2023



I am a birdwatcher. This has not been a part of my identity for long but it is something that has enriched my life and made me constantly more aware of my surroundings and the creatures that we inhabit this planet with. In my short time of birdwatching, my instinct has been to go into nature to see the birds. My newfound excitement led me to forests and bays filled with wildlife to search for species I had never seen before. I was so focused on discovering the new that I neglected to look deeper at the birds that had been the starting point of my interest; the birds around my neighbourhood. So, in deciding on a more-than-human place to study and co-create in, I looked to the birds in my neighbourhood and chose to focus on the house sparrow which is abundant in numbers in the hawthorn bushes near my home in Kallio, Helsinki. To me, the house sparrow has always been a very common sight. I see them on the streets huddling under cars for warmth in the winter or at my feet in outdoor cafes looking for crumbs to eat. I never took much notice of them. They always just existed, feeling like a constant in city life. In looking for a more-than-human place to study, I looked at my surroundings and woke up to my lack of knowledge of this creature that I encounter every day. I wanted to learn about their life in the thicket of the hawthorn bushes and understand how this creature fits into the neighbourhood we both share.

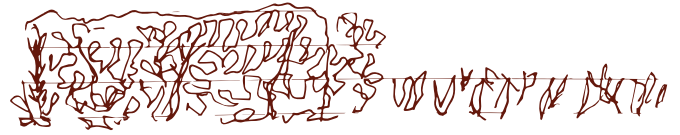
Upon choosing the house sparrow as a subject and co-creator for my project, I started to research it and was surprised by what I found. This bird that felt like the most commonplace and resilient creature has been the subject to the biggest population loss of the bird species in Europe. In Finland, its population has declined by 70% in the past 40 years. (Ellilä 2023.) Most likely the house sparrow has lived alongside humans ever since the beginning of agricultural practices 10,000 years ago and it is unknown how it used to live before its residence alongside humans (Saunio 2010).

Because of the house sparrow's evolution to cohabitation with humans, it is sensitive to the changes we make to our human structures and environments. The radical decline in population has been speculated to be caused by changes and repairs made to buildings when eliminating cracks and holes in facades that serve as nesting spots for the house sparrows. Other reasons have been speculated to be the lessening popularity of hawthorn hedges, which are a crucial safety cover from predators. Bird feeding is important for the house sparrow's survival in the winter because food is not as easily found in cities when temperatures drop. The combination of hawthorn and a bird feeding spot is ideal for a sparrow's winter survival, so the lessening popularity of both is detrimental to the house sparrow population. (Ellilä 2023.)

I had taken these creatures for granted. Their reality was far from what I had perceived it to be just by my daily observations. If I had made this mistake, I can only imagine how many other humans are living in a state of unknowing. In my research on house sparrows, I discovered that the problem with protecting this species is the lack of knowledge of their situation and general disinterest (Saunio 2010). I wonder how much of the apathy towards the house sparrow can be attributed to a lack of knowledge instead of a genuine disinterest in what this creature's future looks like. I believe that knowing is caring and without adequate knowledge of a situation, it can be difficult to want to protect it. I also know that for some, simply knowing is not enough to elicit interest. Unfortunately, sometimes it comes down to the question of "How do I benefit from this?". I am interested in discovering how to make people care even if the benefits to them might not be obvious or even when it seems as if there are no benefits at all. The eternal benefit is seeing nature survive and thrive, no more should ever be needed.

My more-than-human place started as a row of hawthorn hedges that provided shelter for the house sparrows. However, a few days into starting my project, a long stretch of the hedge was cut down to short stumps, just barely rising from the ground. The cutting was done on the cusp of winter, the time when the hedges are most important in terms of providing cover for the house sparrows. I was confused about the reason and later found out that the cutting was done to prepare for a landscaping project that is still nowhere to be seen after nearly two months. I am left wondering whether the sparrows were even considered when their habitat was cut down. Who are these changes truly catering to? These hawthorn hedges were planted by humans most likely solely for decoration, but can we justify cutting down the hedges we planted when they have evolved to house and protect more-than-human life? Is this a case of not realizing the realities of the house sparrow or willfully ignoring the situation in the face of wishing to make the city's landscape more visually appealing to humans?

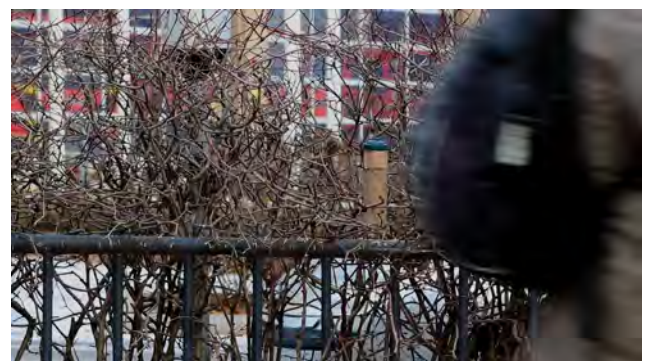
In order to learn how the house sparrows behave and occupy our neighbourhood, I set out to observe them and record my observations in video form. As a big problem in the protection of the house sparrows is the lack of knowledge and interest, I wanted to zoom into their world and see what I had missed when sparing them only a passing glance. Video format allowed me to capture their life and show others what I had witnessed in an attempt to generate more interest.



Observing the house sparrows was very special and I believe I learned a lot about them even though I am sure it would require longer than the few weeks I had to observe them to be able to begin to know them truly. While I believe I learned many things, I am left with just as many questions. While filming them I couldn't help but wonder whether they knew they were being filmed. I am sure they were aware of my presence as they quickly flew away upon my arrival but seemed to deem me as unthreatening since they flew back after seconds. I am left wondering if they knew they were intentionally being perceived and whether this possible awareness changed how they behaved. What do they think of us or do they even think of us? Do they know it was us who cut down their home? Do they mourn for it? I know that I can't get answers to these questions since there is no way for me to know their experience as it truly is. I am also projecting my thoughts and feelings as a human onto this non-human being who does not experience life as I do. How could I know whether they mourn for the loss of their home? Did they ever even identify the now cut-down hawthorn hedge as their home? I can only guess.



While my observations and the following questions feel valuable to my process of learning, the most intriguing part of spending time with the house sparrows was my interactions with the other humans of the neighbourhood. During the times I filmed the sparrows, I interacted with more people than I ever had before in the nearly three years living in Kallio. People asked me what I was doing and some stopped to watch the sparrows with me. Some were delighted by the sparrows, some were concerned for their future and some simply walked past. One person asked whether I was filming rats. They were concerned about the birdfeeders set up next to the hawthorn inviting rats to feed on the fallen scraps. Around the area where the bird feeding is happening in Kallio, there are signs banning animal feeding. This person I met was frustrated by the rules not being followed even when I argued for the importance of properly maintained feeding since it is keeping the house sparrows alive through winter. The concern was not for the benefit of the birds but for the unsavory possibility of bringing forth another creature that we humans have deemed a pest. Who are these rules serving and whose wellbeing is left out of the consideration? Whatever the individual interactions included and however they preceded, the simple act of stopping to observe and film the sparrows attracted people to observe with me or at the least stop to wonder why someone would be inclined to film these ordinary-seeming creatures. I hope some even walked away questioning their own feelings for the house sparrow.



When thinking of the narrative for my video, I wished to highlight what I had witnessed of the house sparrow's life. I wanted to showcase the loveliness I had begun to see which is often missed when taking little notice of them. In showing this creature in a light many have not seen before, I wanted to build interest and appreciation in the viewer. In solely showing charming scenes from the house sparrow's life, achieving an image of an endangered species in need of help would be impossible. The conditions and numbers of the house sparrow don't indicate any sort of stress which is why so many are unaware of the problem in the first place. So, I had to rely on narrative to convey a message. The outward appearance of the sparrows is very active, quickly flying about from place to place with their song sometimes getting so loud it can be heard from a hundred meters away. I wanted to speculate what a reality without this creature, which we often don't even notice, would look and sound like. The video consists of three parts:

1. The sparrows interacting with the environment with the gentle sound of their songs
2. Hawthorn hedges that have been cut down accompanied by silence
3. Cut-down hawthorn hedge shown in its entirety by walking the length of it layered with loud sparrow song

I wanted to play with contrast in all the parts both with sound and how the image is captured. The video starts calmly with soothing images of the house sparrows and their sound that cuts suddenly to silence, both in sound and stillness of the image. In the silence, I wanted to convey the effect of loss of habitat that comes with the disregard for the needs of this species and the suddenness of loss that is often only realized when something is already gone. I wanted to end the video with movement that conveyed both the physical length of destruction of habitat and the human pace it takes to walk the length. I filmed the first two parts with a still camera which allows the viewer to focus on what is happening in the image. I wanted the last part to feel more impactful in a bodily sense, so I filmed it with a hand-held camera, with which hope to create a feeling of movement from the viewer's side as opposed to the the subject of filming being the only moving thing. I layered the movement with a loud sparrow's song to convey their sorrow and anger about the destruction of their environment. I of course am unable to know whether they are feeling these feelings and I am only mirroring my own perception of how it would feel to have my own environment destroyed. While my human lens may never provide a true interpretation of the house sparrow's experience, it may have the advantage of appealing to other humans, hopefully making them feel sorrow and anger which leads to caring and action.



I hope to be able to spread the word on the critical conditions of the house sparrow with this video and get humans to question who is benefitting from the changes made to places deemed as human environments. Should the well-being of other-than-human creatures be considered and measured as equally important? Through this, I hope people will start noticing and caring for the house sparrows and not take them for granted.



I care so much now I smile whenever I see a house sparrow, feeling a sort of kinship with each one. I feel as though I see them now. I see their beauty and wonder at their ability to survive in an environment constantly being changed without their well-being in mind. I see them connected with the environment that we share. I notice now they breathe in the bushes and spread their wings to allow the sunlight to shine through. Instead of only happening upon the sparrows, I now look for them in the thicket of hawthorn and the cracks of buildings.

Sources:

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