

Controlling House Sparrows and Starlings Humanely

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For most Purple Martin landlords, controlling House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) is a necessary component of colony management. These birds compete aggressively, and usually successfully, against Purple Martins for nest compartments. In some cases, they kill martins. Aside from the trauma inflicted on martins, unchecked House Sparrows and starlings can discourage people from providing the housing that is so critical to the Purple Martin's survival. Starling-resistant entrances on nest compartments can be very effective in excluding this species, but many landlords rely on trapping and removal to control both House Sparrows and starlings.

Landlords who opt for trapping and removal must make a personal decision on what to do with captured birds. Some choose to transport and release them. Although this choice is easy on the conscience, it may not be effective, because birds have a strong homing ability. Other landlords choose to euthanize them, believing that, although it is a more difficult choice, it is the more responsible choice. Euthanization of House Sparrows and starlings is legal, because they are not protected by law.

Once a landlord has chosen to euthanize these birds, the question becomes how to do so in a humane manner. *PMCA* has long advocated controlling House Sparrows and starlings, and has suggested some methods of euthanasia. It has been brought to our attention that two of the methods suggested by *PMCA*, namely thoracic compression and drowning, are not recognized universally as being humane methods of euthanasia. Several prominent organizations involved with animal care issues, including the *American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)*, the *National Wildlife Health Center*, the *National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association*, and the *International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council*, view drowning as an unacceptable method, and the latter two organizations do not endorse thoracic compression. However, these organizations do suggest acceptable, alternative methods of euthanasia. The methods recommended by the *AVMA* are of particular importance, and are well regarded, because they are based on an objective review of scientific research, and they meet the critical criteria of producing rapid unconsciousness and death while causing minimal stress.

Among physical methods recommended by these organizations for use on small birds, cervical dislocation will likely be the most practical method for martin landlords to use. Cervical dislocation causes death by severing the spinal cord, resulting in rapid depression of the central nervous system, and respiratory and cardiac functions. Put simply, the bird's neck is broken at the base of the skull, and it dies very quickly.

Several inhalation agents are also acceptable for euthanizing small birds, however, most are not available to lay persons. Ether, in the form of engine starter fluid, is readily available and effective, but must be used cautiously, because it can be explosive. Carbon monoxide is also effective and acceptable, but is not recommended in ordinary situations, because it is hazardous to human health.

PMCA will continue to recommend that martin landlords control House Sparrows and starlings, but in view of the above, we will no longer suggest thoracic compression, drowning, or carbon monoxide for euthanasia. Our literature will be altered to suggest the effective and more widely accepted methods of cervical dislocation or ether. In the meantime, we trust that landlords who choose to euthanize House Sparrows and starlings will give thought to using methods deemed acceptable by the above recognized organizations.

For more about these organizations and their animal care guidelines, see:



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National Wildlife Health Center
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www.nwhc.usgs.gov/

National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association
14 North 7th Avenue
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www.nwrawildlife.org/

International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council
829 Bancroft Way
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