Controlling House Sparrows and Starlings Humanely

John Tautin
Purple Martin Conservation Association
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
Edinboro PA 16444

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 euthanasia. 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.

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American Veterinary Medical Association
931 North Meacham Road - Ste 100
Schaumburg, IL 60173
http://www.avma.org/

National Wildlife Health Center
6006 Schroeder Road
Madison, Wisconsin 53711
www.nwhc.usgs.gov/

National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association
14 North 7th Avenue
St. Cloud, Minnesota 56303-4766
www.nwrawildlife.org/

International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council
829 Bancroft Way
Berkeley, CA 94710
www.iwrc-online.org/