

# HOUSE SPARROW CONTROL MYTHS



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Since 2007, I've hosted Purple Martins, chickadees, bluebirds, Tufted Titmice and Tree Swallows on my 23 acres in Licking, MO. I currently host 75 pairs of martins. In my years of hosting all these birds, I've become acutely aware of the damage that European Starlings and House Sparrows (HOSP) can inflict on our native birds, not just from the research I've done, but also from the up-close and personal encounters I've had in dealing with the aftermath.

Starlings are much easier to deal with than HOSP because of the use of starling-resistant entrance holes (SREH) for Purple Martin housing and the fact that the entrance holes on bluebird and other nest boxes are small enough that a starling cannot enter. Unlike starlings, however, HOSP can enter any entrance hole larger than approximately 1.25". It has been painful dealing with dead and injured Tree Swallow nestlings, broken bluebird and Purple Martin eggs and watching the narrow escapes of both adult chickadees and bluebirds from certain death by a male HOSP determined to steal their nest boxes.

I've learned to shoot and trap them very effectively and have worked with the 60+ Purple Martin and bluebird landlords that I mentor to eliminate HOSP from their yards so the native birds could nest safely. During the course of having to deal with HOSP in different environments and

varying circumstances with numerous landlords with different opinions on how to handle the non-natives, I've learned what works and what doesn't work. I've tried a lot of the suggestions shared by posters on the PMCA forum and became frustrated when I found that many of them, while they may have worked for the poster, do not consistently work for everyone. Some of these myths and their potential impacts are addressed below:

## **HOSP and starlings can nest alongside martins with no problems.**

I can see where people who don't do nest checks would think that this is true. They wouldn't know how many eggs were laid, how many were destroyed by the HOSP, or how many nestlings were killed by HOSP. Then one day, they post on a Purple Martin forum and wonder, "Why didn't my martins come back this year?" and when quizzed often reply, "Yes, my house is full of HOSP/starlings, but they've never bothered my martins."

## **Martins will/should/why don't they?/fight off the HOSP and make them leave.**

While the Purple Martin is indeed a larger bird and they may tussle and knock the House Sparrow to the ground, the martins are not often successful at getting the

tenacious HOSP to leave the site. The HOSP may leave the site in the short term, but once the martins leave to feed, he/she will return to try to claim a nest cavity, often puncturing martin eggs or killing nestlings and throwing them from the nest.

I have also watched my bluebirds and Tree Swallows drive the HOSP off the site, only to find the HOSP has claimed their nestbox the next morning and killed either the adults or the adults and their young. These birds are physically not suited for battle inside a nest cavity when matched against a HOSP, whose conical finch beak can crush like a miniature vise and who has a strong desire to kill all nest competitors.

This study by a group from Fargo, North Dakota found that HOSP stay within 2.5 miles of their natal site.

[http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife\\_damage/nwrc/publications/08pubs/linz088.pdf](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nwrc/publications/08pubs/linz088.pdf).

With their explosive birth rates (they can breed up to four times a year), there will be intense competition for nest sites if they are allowed to breed.

### **Providing separate housing for starlings and HOSP will prevent them from invading the martin housing.**

Starlings and HOSP are super-competitors and will compete for housing and territory. They know that increased populations of other cavity-nesting birds means increased competition for them. I have had 5-day old Tree Swallow nestlings killed and thrown out of their nest by a male HOSP when there were three empty nest boxes he could have chosen, and I have seen this phenomenon over and over at other landlords' sites.

Providing them with housing only allows them to increase their numbers and create more super-competitors for your nest cavities.

### **Closing all rooms not used by martins will send HOSP elsewhere/or, blocking off any rooms the HOSP try to use will make them look elsewhere for a nest site.**

New landlords often ask if closing off any rooms not being used by martins will send House Sparrows in search

of nest sites elsewhere. Instead, this approach will almost certainly send House Sparrows into active martin nests to destroy eggs and young, to claim a cavity for their own nest.

### **Relocating the HOSP will get rid of your problem.**

This method does not work. It has two drawbacks. The HOSP will typically arrive back at your site before you do. In the small chance that they don't, you are simply dumping your problem in another area to attack other native birds, where someone else will either have to deal with the problem, or will ignore the problem, letting them kill at will and breed.

### **Pull their nests and they will leave.**

This is probably one of the most dangerous myths, especially when your martins or other birds have eggs. The first thing you will see after pulling a nest is the HOSP vigorously rebuilding his nest within a few hours and possibly a few martin, bluebird or other native bird's eggs/nestlings destroyed. Continuous pulling of their nests only serves to frustrate the HOSP, since the male bonds with the nestbox. House Sparrow Revenge syndrome has been experienced by many landlords that have tried to control HOSP by pulling nests, in the interest of using only passive methods.



**Above: After a House Sparrow raided a Tree Swallow box, killing all five young, Kathy switched to a sparrow-resistant slot entrance, 7/8" tall by about 2 1/4" wide. The slots help, but are only HOSP-resistant; sometimes a smaller HOSP manages to get through the slot, therefore you can't rely on these 100%. Slots are for Tree Swallows only, bluebirds cannot enter them.**

### **Smash the HOSP eggs in the nest cavity and the pair will leave.**

This strategy has the same risk as pulling HOSP nests once they have eggs, sending the HOSP on a rampage through your colony. The HOSP will perceive that the other nest competitors at the site (Purple Martins, bluebirds, etc.) were the culprits that destroyed their eggs and will begin fighting back against the perceived threats.

### **Sparrows won't nest in a swinging gourd.**

This is one myth that makes me chuckle as I do site visits with people whom I'm mentoring and we try to pull HOSP nests out of those small, old gourds that don't have access caps on them. Some of these landlords have just strung

them along cables, freely swinging and they're barely hanging on anymore, yet they're packed with HOSP nests.

### **HOSP won't nest in a light-filled cavity.**

This theory led to the use of open-topped nestboxes, which caused bluebird nestling deaths due to exposure to heat, rain, etc., and which are no longer recommended.

HOSP will nest anywhere they can build a nest. One of the characteristics of their nest construction is that it creates a dark cavity.

### **Shoot the male and the female will leave.**

Time after time I've tried this one and time after time, it failed. The only guarantee that HOSP won't harm your other birds, their eggs or their nestlings, is to provide frequent monitoring and when a HOSP is spotted, either shoot it, or trap and euthanize it.

### **Martins won't enter a unit that has a complete HOSP nest inside, meaning it would be safe to use a glue trap or mouse trap, if you leave the intact nest in front it.**

Martins will indeed enter a unit with a House Sparrow nest in it, so use a hole reducer on any unit with any kind of trap in it, to make sure martins cannot enter. Reduced entrance holes should be smaller than 1-1/2 inches to also exclude bluebirds and Tree Swallows; 1-1/4 inches is a good size, but remember, wrens [and chickadees?] could get in, since they are smaller than House Sparrows.

The evidence is clear and there is no question as to the negative impact of allowing these non-native birds to breed. The decision for many Purple Martin landlords comes down to choosing between active measures and eliminating them, or employing passive measures. For the landlords that wish to use only passive (no kill) measures, a few landlords have found that HOSP tend to become docile when their wings are trimmed and this will keep him/her out of their nestboxes for the rest of the season. Keep in mind that the birds' feathers will regrow within 6 months and during the next nesting season, the HOSP may become trap-shy and more difficult to trap. For more information on wing trimming, visit the [Sialis.org](http://Sialis.org) website.

Even if you have used one of the above methods and you believe that it has worked, the war has not been won. Just because you have evicted the HOSP from your yard does not make him any less lethal to other native birds



**A homemade, two-chamber nestbox trap. On the left is a Trio Spare-O-Door trap, mounted to a box that I screwed together out of some leftover wood. The chamber on the right, has a Van Ert trap in it. On the back are two access doors, one for each chamber.**

Bluebirds and Tree Swallows kept insisting on trying to nest here, so I finally closed down the trap on the right, which was attracting the swallows more than HOSP, and cut a smaller hole (1-5/16") out of a sour cream lid, then duct-taped it over the larger hole on the left trap chamber. Since then, I've only caught HOSP in this trap. The roof rests on top of the two T-posts and to keep it from tipping, I have 2 screws on each side, just far enough apart to let the trap slide down the t-posts.

Either I've been very lucky, or my idea of 'distract & intercept the HOSP' before they get to the other nest boxes was spot on. I like the portability of this trap too. If I open the door and HOSP refuse to come out, I lift the trap off the posts, take it home and put it in a large garbage bag, open the back door to get him/her out, then return the trap to the mounting posts.

outside your back yard. You have only moved the battle out of your view. The HOSP will continue to breed, increase its numbers and continue their assault on all our native birds.

I understand some landlords' desire to not kill one species so that another may thrive and survive, and everyone must make their own personal choices that work for them. However, in the case of the House Sparrow and the European Starling, landlords need a workable solution, or our native songbirds will undeniably be the ones to suffer the consequences.

For online information about trapping and humane control of House Sparrows and starlings, see: [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org)

