

Using Sparrow Spookers

By Ellen Lafouge

Having read how effective a sparrow spooker can be in preventing House Sparrows from entering active bluebird nest boxes to attack eggs, incubating adults or nestlings, I decided to use one for the first time last summer to protect the Eastern Bluebird pair who had taken up residence in our yard. They fledged 5 young from the spookered nest box, despite the ubiquitous presence of House Sparrows. The iridescent, fluttering mylar streamers suspended above the nest box roof deterred and discouraged the HOSP, but when installed after the first egg was laid didn't bother the bluebirds at all.

Bluebirds nesting close to your house allows easy (and captivating) observation of their behaviors and reactions. Only 5 minutes after installation of the sparrow spooker, the male was at the entrance of the nest box checking that all was still well with the first egg inside. It took the less courageous female 20 minutes of mild anxiety and literal fence sitting on the nearby split rail before she flew back and entered the box despite the mylar scare tape streamers now adorning it. Monitoring the nest box the following morning revealed a second egg had been laid, the best confirmation of all that the spooker was accepted. Once habituated, the male even saw the inherent advantage of using the spooker dowels as an occasional insect hunting perch. I observed HOSP flying reconnaissance close to the box on several occasions during the nesting cycle, but they never landed, and were quickly rebuffed by the bluebirds when they happened to be nearby.



The sparrow spooker lived up to its name.

If you don't have House Sparrows, you don't need a sparrow spooker. For our residential situation a combination of active (Van Ert in-box live trap) and passive HOSP control worked best. But if you are interested in adding the sparrow spooker to your House Sparrow deterrent arsenal, the following is useful to know:

- Install the spooker as soon as the first bluebird egg is laid. Installation before is not recommended.
- Closely monitor the nest box initially to confirm acceptance of the spooker by the bluebirds. It's rare for it to take longer than one hour or so if they have an egg inside the nest box, and very seldom will they reject the box because of it. In the rare case of difficult acceptance, put up the streamers one at a time to accustom the birds to the spooker.
- Install the mylar strips so they flutter over the top and entrance of the nest box.
- Don't install the spooker when it's very windy, as it may take longer for the bluebirds to accept it.
- Use mylar vs. ribbon, monofilament, tape or plastic flagging.

(Our spooker used 3/4 inch-wide silver mylar.)

- Streamers should hang OVER the roof and ABOVE the entrance hole, not from a single pole at the back of the nest box.
- Remove the spooker as soon as the bluebird young have fledged so HOSP do not become accustomed to it.

Sparrow spookers DO NOT deter House Wren predation of active bluebird nests.

When properly installed, sparrow spookers are one of the passive House Sparrow controls that really work. While nothing is 100% effective against preventing House Sparrow predation of active bluebird nests, I found the sparrow spooker lives up to its name, and stands guard duty for you 24/7.

Acknowledgements, Sources and Resources

Thanks to Bet Zimmerman for her vast compilation of information on "all things bluebird" at her web site, www.sialis.org.

For more information on sparrow spookers visit Sialis.org at: <http://www.sialis.org/sparrowspooker.htm>

Info on how to make your own sparrow spooker is available at <http://www.sialis.org/sparrowspooker.htm>

A *universal* sparrow spooker is commercially available from Sparrowtraps.net. (This is the sparrow spooker we used, as shown in the photo.) They also sell 25-foot rolls of mylar tape: <http://www.sparrowtraps.net/spookers.htm>

The Audubon Society of Omaha's *The Bluebird Box* has an email-based question and answer site on sparrow spookers: <http://audubon-omaha.org/bestoffbml/spookers.htm>