

## SHORT NOTES

### House Sparrows collecting feathers from live feral pigeons

House Sparrows are known to pluck feathers from living birds to line their nests, which may contain 200-300 and up to 1200 feathers (Summers-Smith 1963).

During November 1992 a nest of feral Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*) sited on a 5.5 metre long concrete ledge on the New Kirk Building at Victoria University, Wellington, was observed at close quarters from a window in an adjacent building. Over the period 16 - 23 November several sparrows were observed collecting feathers – evidently for nest lining – directly from the rump area of an incubating adult pigeon. Typically the sparrow would arrive on the ledge, hop up onto the back of the pigeon, pull out a single contour feather and then fly away. On some occasions, the feather would be dropped and the sparrow would return and collect a further feather. Sometimes the incubating pigeon showed little reaction to having its feather removed, though often it would shuffle and reposition itself afterwards. Both male and female sparrows were observed plucking feathers in this way, though mostly females. Up to three sparrows were seen by the pigeon nest at any one time. During the late morning and mid-afternoon on 20 November, female sparrows were observed collecting single feathers 6-7 times an hour, while over 45 minutes the following morning 5 feathers were taken by single females, one visit involving 2 feathers being taken (first one dropped). At least 10 feathers were plucked by the sparrows on other occasions. This behaviour was observed over 8 days during the nest-building phase of the House Sparrows, and if it had taken place throughout the day then scores of feathers may have been taken from the incubating pigeon. Despite this, no obvious sign of damage was evident on the rump area of the pigeon.

At Victoria University on 14.15 hrs on 31 August 1993 a House Sparrow chased a pigeon in flight and attempted to pluck feathers from its rear flanks at the base of the tail. It was not successful. Other single sparrows, also possibly after feathers, were seen at 09.00-10.00 hrs on 28 October 1993 and 9 May 1994, in central Wellington, determinedly chasing a pigeon in flight, which twisted and turned to try and dodge them.

Similar instances are reported in the literature. Summers-Smith (1963) noted that in Britain several writers had observed House Sparrows chasing larger birds, particularly pigeons and starlings, and that (p.207) “in the case of the pigeon, the sparrow at times seems to be attempting to pluck out feathers for its nest”. More specifically he noted (p.54) that House Sparrows have been recorded plucking feathers for their nests from the flanks of Wood Pigeons (*Columba palumbus*) and feral pigeons. In New Zealand Stidolph (1974) reported a male House Sparrow plucking feathers from a Barbary Dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) perched on powerlines in Masterton. Again, the feathers were evidently being collected for nest material, the sparrow making repeated visits to the host, each time collecting several feathers from the base of the dove’s tail.

Given the frequent proximity of nests of House Sparrows and feral pigeons on structures in urban areas, this opportunistic habit may be more widespread than the few reports suggest. A live pigeon incubating for many days on an open ledge provides a regular, concentrated and seemingly easy source of feathers for local sparrows which otherwise might have to search more widely for them.

#### LITERATURE CITED

STIDOLPH, R.H.D. 1974. House Sparrow plucking Barbary Dove. *Notornis* 21: 263-264.  
SUMMERS-SMITH, J.D. 1963. The House Sparrow. Collins, The New Naturalist series, Monograph 19.

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#### Recapture of 2-year-old Chatham Petrel at Natal colony

Rangatira (South East) Island in the Chatham group (44°21' S, 176° 10' W) is the only breeding location for the Chatham Petrel (*Pterodroma axillaris*). On 26 February 1993, I spotlighted a flying Chatham Petrel in the upper valley of Kokopu Creek about 100m from its natal burrow. The bird had been banded (D-67612) as a chick by G. Murman on 4 April 1991 in study burrow #11; one of only two successful burrows found that year.

Chatham Petrel chicks start hatching in early February and the peak is in late February (pers. obs.). This petrel was therefore approximately 2 years old although the recapture was 1 year 10 months and 22 days after banding. This is the youngest known Chatham Petrel back at the breeding colony. The bird had a downy brood patch indicating that it was unlikely to be breeding when recaptured.

A 3-year-old Galapagos Dark-rumped Petrel (*Pterodroma phaeopygia*), caught in a mist net, is the youngest published age for which *Pterodroma* petrels have been recorded returning to a natal colony (Podolsky and Kress 1992). Several other species of Procellariiformes are known to return to colonies at 2 years, eg. Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*) (Brooke 1990), Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) (Serventy (1967) and Laysan Albatross (*Diomedea immutabilis*) (Fisher and Fisher 1969). Serventy (1967) showed that less than 2% of Short-tailed Shearwaters first return as 2-year-olds and these birds visit only in February (just after the hatching period in mid - to late January). Interestingly this young Chatham Petrel was caught at the same period in the breeding cycle. Common Diving Petrels (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*) appear to be the earliest returning species in the order; some visit breeding colonies as yearlings and begin breeding as 2-year-olds (Richdale 1965).

Mike Imber, Alan Tennyson and Hugh Robertson provided helpful comments on this short note.