

## SHORT NOTE

# Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*) recently established on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands

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The Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*) is a widespread species, naturally occurring across most of Europe and Asia, including South-East Asia (Summers-Smith 1988; del Hoyo *et al.* 2016). It has been naturalised in many parts of the World including the south-western Pacific region where it has been introduced into parts of Micronesia, New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, and Australia (Pratt *et al.* 1987; van Perlo 2011; Pratt & Beehler 2015; BirdLife International 2017). Introductions have been both deliberate and accidental, the latter

usually attributed to birds carried to new locations aboard ships (Summers-Smith 1988; Clement *et al.* 1993).

Eurasian tree sparrows were not known from the Solomon Islands until one bird was reported from Henderson Airport near Honiara, Guadalcanal, on 18 September 2004 (Dutson 2011; Tarburton 2017). Another was reported (date unknown) at Auki on Malaita (Dutson 2011), but all subsequent records were from Guadalcanal (Van Beirs 2013, 2015; Lagerqvist 2013; Hottola 2014; Gregory 2015; Van Beirs & Bergmark 2017) until very recent records of 15 birds around the docks at Buala, Santa Isabel, on 27 June 2018 (DeCicco 2018) and one bird on

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the edge of a residential area on Tulagi, Central Province, on 15 October 2019 (SCB *pers. obs.*).

From October 2014 to March 2015, November to December 2017, and October 2019 we recorded sightings of Eurasian tree sparrows on Guadalcanal in order to ascertain the distribution of this species on the island. We found birds in low numbers (single birds or small groups) in various parts of Honiara city, including the harbour and the surrounding central business district, in the hotel and business zone along Mendana Avenue, industrial areas along the Kukum Highway, the Rove Police Headquarters, and the airport terminal carpark and surrounding service areas. The species has also been reported by several ebird observers in suburban parts of Honiara. These sites are encompassed within an urban and peri-urban area measuring approximately 17 x 3 km.

On 18 October 2014, SCB located an outlying population at the Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil 2 Ltd (GPPOL2) processing plant near Tetere Village.

This is located 19 km east of Henderson airport in the middle of the oil palm plantation belt. On this first visit he found seven birds close to the main gate. We returned on 1 March 2015 and counted a minimum 67 birds (Fig. 1) feeding around the entrance gate and roosting along the security fence on the western side of the 4.6 ha facility. More tree sparrows may have been present elsewhere within the GPPOL2 site, but we did not see any along roadsides in the surrounding extensive oil palm plantations or in nearby settlements. Between 13 and 20 October 2019 SCB searched the plains east of Honiara for Eurasian tree sparrows. He confirmed their continued presence (15+ birds observed) around buildings and shipping containers at the GPPOL2 plant and also observed a single bird 500 m away at the intersection of the Tetere Beach road with the main east-west road. Despite several days searching, he did not find the species at any other location east of Honiara.

These observations confirm that, since the first



**Figure 1.** Sixteen of 67 Eurasian tree sparrows roosting on the eastern security fence at GPPOL2 palm oil processing plant, Guadalcanal, 1 March 2015. Inset: Eurasian tree sparrows, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands.

sighting in 2004, the Eurasian tree sparrow has successfully established a feral population within Honiara city environs and has crossed almost 20 km of intervening agricultural and plantation areas to establish at least one outlier population at a large industrial site (Fig. 1). We estimate that the population is currently in the low hundreds with a slow incremental spread. The potential for substantial further range expansion, however, may be limited once the species fully occupies the agricultural areas on the plains east of Honiara. This is because much of Guadalcanal beyond these lowlands comprise unsuitable habitat for Eurasian tree sparrows, being mountainous and densely forested. The preferred habitat of this species in the Asia-Pacific region is around human habitation, particularly buildings, road-sides and gardens (Summers-Smith 1988). Further spread would therefore likely be confined to inland road corridors and to scattered villages around the coastline.

As has been the case in other parts of the Pacific and New Guinea where this species has colonised, dispersal between islands seems most often to be ship-assisted (Summers-Smith 1988; Pratt & Beehler 2015; del Hoyo *et al.* 2016). They could therefore reach any of the many islands in the Solomons Archipelago, particularly in areas where ships arrive directly from Honiara or from overseas ports where the species is common. We encourage other ornithologists visiting the Solomons to continue to document the spread of Eurasian tree sparrows on Guadalcanal, and to report sightings on other islands.

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