

House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* eating Honeybees *Apis mellifera*

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On the 30th June 2015 a female House Sparrow was seen catching Honeybees as they approached or left the entrance to a long established nest in the apex of a neighbour's house. The bird's method of catching the unsuspecting insects was mainly to pick them from the sloping tiles chosen as the preferred approach or exit to and from one of three entrance holes to the roof, although on occasions bees were taken in the air flycatcher-like.

On catching a bee the bird would on every occasion fly down to the lawn to despatch its catch, then fly off around the north side of the house carrying its prey item. It then always returned about two minutes later via the south side of the building. The bird was seen to repeat this action many times at a rate of c10 times in each twenty minute period. Obviously these food items were being fed to youngsters at a nearby nest site. The described behaviour carried on into July, although it became apparent the young family were now being fed in trees and shrubs in neighbouring gardens.

On 12th May 2016 five adult House Sparrows were seen performing in a similar manner as the lone female in 2015. The question that arises is, are these last year's youngsters that have developed a taste for these protein-filled packages, or have other adults watched and learnt this trick to gain an easy and satisfying meal?

Editor's comment:

In a fairly short search the only reference to House Sparrows taking honeybees I have come across so far is in a paper by Birkhead (1974) as follows:

“Manley (1948) recorded Great Tits, Blue Tits and sparrows (House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*?) taking bees in the vicinity of hives. These observations raise the possibility that birds may take advantage of torpid insects. Under certain weather conditions, particularly on damp, misty days, I have observed torpid social wasps and bumblebees on flower heads. Stinging insects in a torpid condition would be relatively easy prey for birds Manley, R. O. B. (1948): *Bee Keeping in Britain* (London)”.

Reference

Birkhead, T. R. 1974. Predation by birds on social wasps. *British Birds* 67:221-229.