

CAITLIN MORAN

What I miss most? A small, brown bird

Sparrows were the sound of my childhood, and they're vanishing

This is the age where you start to become obsessed with the things from childhood you feel you have lost, and, in recent years, the thing I have missed above all else is sparrows.

In the early Eighties, the sparrow supply was plentiful. Small, brown and numerous, sparrows were the spare change of the garden, and the hedgerows. Like hundreds of penny and tuppenny bits jangling in your pocket, or chirping up in your eaves, in their nests. Of course sparrows were tuppennies and pennies – because the smaller brown bird, the wren, was embossed on the back of the old farthing, so this brown bird/brown coin thing was presumably established fact. Something adults had sorted and we merely acknowledged.

And because pennies and tuppences are the coins of children – a sticky, hot handful to buy your sweets, your stickers and your Snaps – it was obvious that sparrows were the birds of children too. Sparrows were for us. Sparrows lead their small, chirruping sparrow-lives in the same marginal places children do: by the bushes in the front garden; in the hedges on the wasteland; on the wide grass verges of every postwar housing estate. We all engaged in scuffling about in the dust, or collecting sticks, or singing at each other.

Cheerful little birds, and cheerful little children, with their incessant cheeping. A hedge full of sparrows is the sound of tiny busyness.

We had a lot of plans to cement the unofficial sympathies between children and sparrows: most summer holidays would see the continuation of Operation Get Sparrows, where we would try to... get sparrows. Steal a blue bread crate from behind the supermarket, prop it up on a stick with a string attached, scatter breadcrumbs beneath. When the sparrows hopped in for breakfast – bam! Pull the string, drop the crate and go harvest your flock of sparrows.

There were never sparrows under the crate, of course: a sparrow is faster and possibly cleverer than a bunch of kids trying to catch it. We were secretly relieved we never caught one – when we found the pigeon with the broken wing, however much milk we fed it and however much we stroked it, its heart beat faster and faster until it died, and so we were aware that it is still impossible, even in this day and age, to inform birds that you



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love them and that you are on their side. It does not matter how many pretty daisies and lilac blossoms you put beside them in the cardboard box, or biscuits you leave on a plate. The only way you can show birds you love them, we figured out eventually, is by leaving them alone, to their bird-business. We put the bread crates away. We grew taller. We stopped trying to get sparrows.

Now I'm 46. I'm trying to get sparrows again. The cities of sparrows this island had 30 years ago are gone, like jangling pockets of loose brown change, they are equally rare. Phased out by technology. Insulation has filled the eaves they used to live in; the hedgerows have been rooted up and thrown in the chipper. The population has plummeted, and the way you show birds you love them now isn't to leave them alone: it is, with any scrap of land you have, to make a small sparrow-world they can live in. And then... tempt them over.

The nearest sparrow colony to me is in the hedges at Alexandra Palace – every dog walk, I go past so I can overhear them chirping to each other. They sound like a phone call to 1982, to the birds that nested right above my bedroom window. The broken half-eggshells on the porch roof, in the morning. The feather flurry, as I opened the postbox.

I've been trying to lure the Alexandra Palace sparrows to my house, half a mile away. Sparrows – the books tell me – love hawthorn hedges; they love "sparrow terrace" bird-boxes, so the gang can stay together. They're ground-feeders – so hanging towers of seed and grain need a handful taken from them and thrown on the lawn. I have planted and installed and done all these small sparrow-things.

And because they're ground-feeders, when the cat died, I did not replace it – 27 million birds are killed every spring and summer by cats, and whatever the majesty of the cat, I do not long for a cat in the way I long for sparrows. I started Operation Get Sparrows 2.0 in 2018 – for nearly half a decade, my morning cup of tea has been spent staring out of the window and being disproportionately disappointed when the brown bird in the tree turns round and I see its red robin chest. For four years I've tried to open a portal back to a world of plentiful, cheerful sparrows, making the garden bustle with their busy-work.

And then yesterday, finally – bursting out of the new hedgerow like they had a big secret – sparrows. Three sparrows. Three small brown coins. A fortune. ■