

SHORT NOTE

House sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) opening autodoors.

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In 1990, two cock house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) were seen opening an automatic glass sliding door to reach crumbs in a Hamilton bus station cafeteria. The birds activated the sensor by flying past it, or by landing on its top, leaning forward and using their heads to trigger the doors (Breitwisch & Breitwisch, 1991).

In 1993, one of us (B.O'B) saw male and female sparrows triggering autodoors to enter a shopping mall at Halfmoon Bay, Auckland. Shopkeepers recalled seeing the birds doing this for "several years". In August 1995, a cock sparrow was seen hovering momentarily in front of the sensor to open autodoors leading into the foyer of the Dowse art gallery and museum at Lower Hutt (Fig. 1). His progress was blocked by a second set of autodoors, which he also opened, giving him access to the cafeteria. A few minutes later the sparrow activated both sensors to return outside. Staff at the cafeteria said they had noticed the bird (whom they called 'Nigel') triggering the sensors over the previous nine months. The bird continued his frequent visits to the cafeteria in all seasons but he disappeared in August 2000 when the cafeteria was closed for about six weeks during renovations. A 1993 report of sparrows opening autodoors in Dunedin shops was confirmed in September 2000 when Mr Tony Harris and Miss Anne Clifford saw birds triggering sensors at two supermarkets in Great King Street, Dunedin. These birds hovered in front of the sensors to open the doors. We have another reliable 1992 report of several sparrows triggering autodoors to reach a factory cafeteria at Wiri, Auckland.

The question arises whether these sparrows learned to open the doors themselves or if they imitated other skilful birds. The sparrows opening doors at Hamilton, Halfmoon Bay and Wiri may

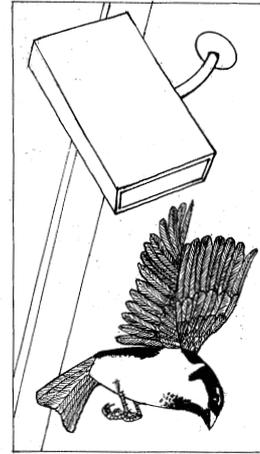


Figure 1 Nigel the house sparrow fluttering in front of the sensor to open an autodoor at the Dowse Museum and Art Gallery, Lower Hutt (from a photograph).

have learned from each other but, although many other birds followed the Lower Hutt bird into the cafeteria over five years, none of them learned the knack of opening the doors themselves.

House sparrows sometimes fly long distances from New Zealand (Williams 1953). However, it seems altogether improbable that a skilled bird would abandon an assured source of food, be one of the few to fly to a distant city, find another supermarket or cafeteria with autodoors, there to pass its skills on to another bird. The skill appears to have developed separately in the different cities.

Despite the presence of sparrows and autodoors in many countries we can find no reports of them opening doors anywhere but New Zealand, though some welcome swallows (*Hirundo tahitica*) were reported triggering autodoors in Australia (McKnight & McKnight, 1991). At first this led us to think that electronic sensors installed in New Zealand differed from those in other countries. However, our enquiries reveal that they are the same as those widely used in Australia, Japan and USA.

It seems that either foreign ornithologists have not reported sightings, or that some sparrows in New Zealand are smarter than those in other countries.

LITERATURE CITED

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