

Prairie Harvest by Coralee Bodeker

Early this morning I spent a few minutes watching a handful of birds as they scavenged for food across my yard. A mixed flock of sparrows were feeding on the big bluestem planted in the front flower bed—about ten individual House and American Tree Sparrows. It was interesting to watch these birds as they vigorously stripped the tiny seeds off this native grass. Like daring, little acrobats, they clung to their spots on the lanky, nearly-six-foot-tall golden stalks. A few sudden gusts of wind blew, but deterred the acrobats none. These birds were not the only ones, however, I witnessed taking advantage of our ripe prairie plants. In the garden a flock of rowdy chickadees were gorging themselves on the dying prairie sunflowers that line the wire fence. The little black-capped birds were simultaneously chasing each other away from their chosen flower heads and turning summersaults in the air. The chickadees would then show off their nuthatch-like talents by hanging upside down in order to best access the delicious seeds.



... Across my yard there are birds feeding on the ripened seeds of native prairie plants, particularly the invasive House Sparrows, which got me thinking...

To many people in the Midwest, House Sparrows (and Eurasian Tree Sparrows to an extent) are not the most desirable of their tribe. Birds of these species are rather loud and obnoxious, terribly messy at the feeders, and are not exactly the prettiest birds on the block. And yet, House Sparrows are decidedly here to stay, leading me (after several years) to finally embrace the *good* aspects of their residence —yes, I feel these invasive species do possess at least one good trait.

House Sparrows obviously are not cute, timid American Tree Sparrows, nor are they bold, fuzzy Black-capped Chickadees, but they can do the same things for nature as our native bird species. Sparrows and other seed- and fruit-eaters are, in a way, nature's "farmers"—they "harvest" seeds when they are ripe and often "plant" them somewhere else or spread the seeds around due to their unrefined feeder habits. It has struck me that these, well, let's face it, *unwanted* birds' messy habits could be put to better use by filling our feeders (and planting our yards) with the native seeds and plants Iowa has long been missing. Perhaps the House Sparrow could become a tool in our quest to revive Iowa's native tallgrass prairie species? It is estimated that around 40% of American households feed backyard birds (*The Nature Conservancy*)—is it time for a rethinking of what is placed in those feeders? My own observations seem to indicate a genuine liking of big bluestem seeds in particular by these European immigrants...



*Just some thoughts from a native Iowa Prairie Girl.
Feeder season is upon us...*