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### Eurasian Tree Sparrow -- A First Record for Nebraska

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On Thursday, 01 February 2007, Scott Raasch of rural Madison County called to say he had what he believed to be a Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) coming to a feeder at his house just east of Enola. The bird had been present for about a week, although he had just identified the species upon purchasing a new field guide. He reported that the bird was very wary and only stayed for a short time at the feeder. The bird was most often observed in the early morning or just before dusk.

Dave Heidt and I arrived the following evening and were told we had just missed the bird by a few minutes. We saw a photo that Scott had taken of the bird earlier in the day and it was clearly an adult Eurasian Tree Sparrow. We waited until dusk without seeing the bird.

Ellen Brogie, Dave Heidt, and I arrived before sunrise on 03 February, and after a wait of about an hour the bird appeared. Ellen was able to get several photographs of the bird during the few minutes it spent at the feeder. We waited for another hour or more without the bird reappearing.

The bird was in the company of several House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and had the general body structure and appearance of a male House Sparrow, but with very distinct differences. The most notable feature that stood out was the black auricular spot surrounded by white. The bird was noticeably smaller than a House Sparrow and nearby House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*). The bird had a brown crown rather than gray of a male House Sparrow. The bird did not possess as much black on the throat as a House Sparrow and the white neck collar was also very distinctive. From the back, the bird appeared to be a small House Sparrow. Although Eurasian Tree Sparrow is known to hybridize with the House Sparrow (Leckie, 2001) the bird appeared phenotypically pure and showed no characteristics of hybridization discussed by Leckie.



Eurasian Tree Sparrow Photo by Ellen L. Brogie

On the morning of 04 February, while in the company of Anne Brogie, Scott Raasch, and Dave Stage, I was again able to study carefully and photograph the bird. Multiple observers viewed the bird over the following two weeks, although with warmer weather it became a less frequent visitor to the feeder. It was last observed on 15 February 2007.

The above constitutes the first documentation of Eurasian Tree Sparrow in Nebraska. In conjunction with the only South Dakota record (Thompson and Tallman 2005) and the one Manitoba record (Koess 1988), it also represents one of the most westward mid-continent sightings of this species.

Eurasian Tree Sparrows were introduced to North America in 1870 when birds of German origin were released in Lafayette Park, St. Louis, Missouri (Leckie 2001). The offspring of these birds persist to this day, but the population appears to have remained localized to eastern Missouri, west-central Illinois, and southeastern Iowa (Barlow and Leckie 2000). Recent reports indicate increasing numbers and expansion of Eurasian Tree Sparrow range in Iowa (Castor 2005, Dinsmore 2007) and Illinois (Johnson 2006). The 106th (2005-2006) Christmas Bird Count established a new high (763) in southeast Iowa (Caster 2006).

Eurasian Tree Sparrows are essentially non-migratory, both in North America and in their natural range across Europe and temperate Asia. However, recent records show that individuals wander, especially in winter (Johnson 2005, Svingen 2006, Eddleman 2007). Competition with the larger House Sparrow for nest sites and winter food is possibly the major reason in limiting Eurasian Tree Sparrow expansion (Anderson 1978). Recent declines in House Sparrow populations may be a contributing factor in current expansion and out-of-range sightings of Eurasian Tree Sparrows.

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