

The false sparrow that is rarely faithful



By Bill Naylor

Secretive yet common. The hedge sparrow is as much a familiar bird in urban areas as in the countryside, every park and acre of farmland.

Even tree-lined streets have their resident hedge sparrows, usually seen on the ground, foraging, wing flicking and tail twitching in a shuffling manner, hence the name 'shuffle-wing'.

Throughout the centuries it has amassed over fifty local names. The oldest and most well-known was hedge sparrow, but now it's more commonly called dunnoek. Dunnoek is derived from the Old English 'dunn' meaning dingy brown. But that's a bit unfair. The male, unlike the female, has a richer, brown plumage with more grey on its underparts, and in summer more grey on its head. Hedge derives from the Icelandic word 'hege'. Hedges have been part of the British landscape since the Bronze Age with the function of partitioning land, indicating ownership and providing shelter for livestock. Sparrow comes from the word 'sporr' meaning to flutter.

It's obvious from its pointed beak that the dunnoek feeds on insects, apart from in winter when it eats mainly weed seeds. Dunnoeks are regular visitors to bird feeders, but mainly scavenge on the ground.

Their breeding behaviour has been described as the most complex of any British bird, shattering the illusion that fidelity is common among birds. DNA analysis has shown it's not unusual for the eggs in any species of bird's nest to

contain DNA of birds other than the nesting pair. The dunnoek's mating arrangements involves various pairings. There is the two females and a single male arrangement (polygyny), a female and two or three males (polyandry), and two or three males sharing two, three, or even four females (polygynandry).

Even in an apparent monogamous pairing, a second male is often allowed to mate with the resident female in the breeding territory. The female is aware mating with the two males means both males will assist in feeding her nestlings, allowing the female more time to see her friends and mate with other males. But the dominant male, while appreciating child-rearing assistance, wants to produce nestlings with his genes. If he witnesses the second male mating with the female, he waits until the interloper has left the scene. Then, using his beak carefully, he removes the recently deposited sperm from the female and immediately mates with her, eliminating the competition and increasing his genes' chances.

During the breeding season dunnoeks mate more than any other small bird, once or twice an hour throughout a ten-day period. Mating is extremely swift lasting a fraction of a second. Each male involved is under the impression the nestlings he helps raise are his offspring. Often none of the dunnoek's nestlings will survive. A nestling of another species will destroy the bright blue eggs and nestlings of the dunnoek, because the dunnoek is one of favourite hosts of the cuckoo.

Not surprising as the nesting cuckoo benefits from the more than the usual number of foster parents eager to feed it!

