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Chapter Author(s): HELEN WHALE and FRANKLIN GINN

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In the Absence of Sparrows

HELEN WHALE AND FRANKLIN GINN

Introduction

Colourful flocks and feathered shapes make their way across a page. They are moving yet motionless, left to hang forever from a branch, their trajectory of flight suspended in time. The illustrations are from Hume and Walters's 2012 *Extinct Birds*, said to be the first study to document every avian species' demise to have occurred over the last thousand years. As this volume demonstrates, extinction haunts our time as never before. The extinction that pervades popular nature-writing and the environmental sections of our newspapers, and which confronts us through screens, is not about the past. The blurry shot of a species on the brink (*Guardian* 2012), the secret blooming of a rare flower (Challenger 2011), the "last chance to see" (Adams and Carwardine 1991): these things instead suggest that the nagging *presence* of that which threatens to disappear – a disappearance both happening and perpetually threatening – captures the imagination even more.

In times of both abundance and scarcity, birds have been a source of inspiration and fascination for the human imagination. In the UK, home of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), now the largest conservation charity in Europe, bird-watching and feeding birds are ever popular. Around 50 per cent of the British public are now said to provide food for the birds visiting their yards (Cammack et al. 2011). At the same time, many bird species are in severe decline. At the most recent count, fifty-two of 246 assessed species were coded "Red" on the

UK list of birds at greatest risk of national extinction (RSPB 2009). This Red List has itself attracted popular interest. In 2007, the journalist Charlie Elder travelled the UK with a checklist of Red birds, determined to see and document those species under threat. More than just appealing to the “twitching” sensibility (Lorimer 2007), however, Elder’s (2009) *While Flocks Last* poses some important questions: while they may be rapidly disappearing from the UK, he observes, many of the Red List species are not at risk of global extinction. What does the presence or absence of a particular bird *in a particular place* mean, Elder appears to be asking – and why should we care? Later, as a mere aside, he offers a thought: Birds and their songs, he suggests, “evoke a vivid sense of place” (2009, 53). If birds are evocative of place, what happens when birds disappear? Is it merely a question of loss, or is there more happening? How do we experience that which is absent? This chapter addresses such questions, attending to the decline and conservation of one species in particular: the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) in London, UK.

The decline of the house sparrow in the UK is a relatively recent phenomenon. From around 13 million pairs in the early 1970s, numbers are now estimated to stand somewhere between 2.1 and 3.7 million: a 71 per cent drop in the national breeding population from 1977 to 2008 (Shaw et al. 2008; RSPB 2012). While both urban and rural populations have changed, it is the decline in city centres that has attracted the most attention. Central London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow appear to be reporting near-extinction locally (RSPB 2012). In 2002, in the midst of this documentation of its disappearance, therefore, the house sparrow made its way onto the UK Red List.

Potential causes of sparrow decline have been the subject of extensive research (Summers-Smith 2003). As their name suggests, house sparrows have long been associated with human settlements and ways of life (Shaw et al. 2008). Theories put forth for the urban decline have therefore largely been anthropogenic: loss of nesting sites, lack of invertebrates for chicks owing to increased pollution, changes in particulate pollution following the switch to unleaded petrol, and interference to chick-rearing from traffic noise (although increased predation by other birds is another suspect) (Summers-Smith 2003; Shaw et al. 2008; Tufrey 2012). The exact ecological underpinnings remain complex and contested; however, many sources suggest that a combination of the

above factors is likely (Summers-Smith 2003). Research and conservation of house sparrows is ongoing.

In 2009, in conjunction with borough councils and the Royal Parks, the RSPB launched the London House Sparrows Parks Project (LHSPP). Grassland plots or “meadows” of three different types (long grass, native wildflower, and wildlife seed) were cultivated in twenty-five public parks across London. The RSPB hoped that, by increasing potential invertebrate numbers and providing seed, the plots would encourage house sparrows and other birds. In addition to the staff and researchers in charge of monitoring invertebrate and pollinator numbers, the LHSPP had volunteers, each of whom was assigned a local plot to survey, recording all birds landing in the designated area during a forty-five minute timeslot each month. To provide a control, adjacent plots of unseeded short grass were also surveyed.

This chapter does not concern itself directly with the ecological complexities of house sparrow decline. Through interviews with those involved with the LHSPP, it explores how house sparrow decline can be understood in terms of mourning, landscape, and experiences of absence and presence. We argue, in essence, that the absence of sparrows is not simply about a loss. Rather than being simply a subtraction, the absence of sparrows creates something new: haunted and spectral sparrow places.

Place, Conservation, and Disappearing Birds

Seeking to broaden understandings beyond notions of a space filled with objects, geographers have historically underlined the importance of how ideology and meaning is encoded into the landscape (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988). More recently, within geography and anthropology much work has drawn upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings (1962 [1945]) on phenomenology and perception to rethink place as dwelling and being-in-the-world (Feld and Basso 1996; Ingold 2000; Rose and Wylie 2006). Rather than pre-existing the individual, place here is constituted by and constitutive of embodied engagement (Rosenberg 2007). That is to say, place arises through presence – both of the body and of the multi-sensory landscape that surrounds it. In phenomenological understandings, therefore, the body acts as a sensing vehicle “fusing” self, time, and

world, and thus enabling space and landscape to become place (Wylie 2009). For Feld (2005), place is not only landscape seen, smelled, heard, touched, and tasted but also landscape *remembered* through these very senses. As he argues, “senses make place” (179). Place might not only arise through the body being *in* place, in full sensory, sensing mode, then, but also through the evoking of “a feeling that we ... know what it is like to ‘be there’” (Cresswell 2004, 7–8). As particular sense experiences come to be associated with particular times and places, sensory feeling entwines itself with emotional feeling; memory and sense congeal in place, and place congeals memory and sense (Casey 2000). This notion of place owes much to what might be called the rootedness of sense and memory. As Tuan (2004) sees it, however, the very notion of rootedness that place can connote is more complex than it first appears. Sense of place in his view emerges as a projection of the human psyche, an unconscious attempt to stabilize place against a backdrop of unavoidable change – change in terms of both self and time. Accordingly, then, the trouble for Tuan is that “place must stop changing for a human being to be able to grasp it and so have a sense of it” (2004, 45).

This is of course an impossible demand. Non-representational and mobilities geography have stressed the fleeting nature of place, and its complex relation with memory (Laurier and Lorimer 2012). One important feature of such work has been the attempt to portray places as having complex, non-linear temporalities (Dodgshon 2008). Places are not just congealed by memory, they do not just come to weigh down experiences of place; rather, new associations are simultaneously made through every experience, resulting in “an articulation of presence as ‘the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences’” (Gordon in Thrift 1999, 316–7). Place, in this sense, is a slippery *becoming* that “can never be completed” (Thrift 1999, 317). For Thrift, to get a grip on an “ecology of place” is to recognize that “places are ‘passings’ that ‘haunt’ us,” forever slipping out of reach (*ibid.*, 310). To speak of a sense of place, then, might be to speak of the conjuring up of such hauntings.

Indeed, recent spectral geographies have sought to conceptualize place as haunted and/or haunting (Maddern and Adey 2008). Much writing has concerned encounters with the city, where material traces of past lives and industries within the landscape speak of the absent, the ghostly, and the disappearing (Edensor 2005; Ginn 2013a), but also

other spaces of everyday ruin (DeSilvey 2007; MacDonald 2013; and a 2013 special issue of the journal *Cultural Geographies* 20: 423–539).

John Wylie has explored absence through an account of his own experiences walking along a Cornish clifftop. Coming across a set of memorial benches, he finds himself witness to “blind-spots,” as his own ways of seeing the landscape meet – yet fail to coincide with – the perspectives of absent loved ones. It is in this sense, he argues, that notions of absence come to problematize the supposed “co-presence of self and landscape” described in phenomenological accounts (Wylie 2009, 278). Yet, as Wylie sees it, spectral geographies themselves might also have neglected ways in which *absence itself* can enter into – and disrupt – the frame of perception (ibid., 279). In his view, the real challenge to a phenomenological understanding of landscape is not just unearthing memory, “bringing-to-presence [and] making the invisible visible,” but rather coming to see “absence at the heart of the point of view” (ibid.).

Wylie’s writing on absence draws heavily upon the work of Jacques Derrida, for whom “the phenomenal form of the world itself is spectral” (Derrida 1994, 135). For Derrida, place is something conjured and so can only be conceived within terms of “hauntology,” an understanding of history and temporality in which the present is haunted both by the past and the future. Rather than an ontological matter of what *is*, the present is caught between what *was* and what *might be*, throwing into question the “contemporaneity of the present to itself” (ibid., xix). Central to Derrida’s deconstruction of notions of presence and absence is the supplement (Royle 2003), which marks – adds to – an absence, whilst simultaneously attempting to make up for this absence. In this sense in an apparently illogical twist of logic an absence is simultaneously both revealed *and* filled. The supplement might appear to be both presence and absence but as Derrida tells us, it is actually neither. In Wylie’s Derridean reading, pasts, presents, and futures – simultaneously timespaces *and* places – come to interrupt and erupt into one another in a supplemental relation (Wylie 2007). Accordingly, Wylie suggests that “haunting is a pre-requisite to place”; it appears “as a sudden and displacing *punctum* of pasts and presents” (ibid., 181–2).

Where Wylie suggests that spectral geographies have largely been concerned with a “bringing to light [of] things previously hidden or lost” (Wylie 2009, 279), a similar process of making the invisible visible has

been identified within the theory and practice of wildlife conservation. Geographers interested in nature, or with entanglements of human and non-human lives, have begun to turn their critical eye to the representational practices focused on the rare and the declining. Studies have examined the modes of framing such as monitoring, surveying and recording, and how they might seek to bring presence to light. Lorimer (2008, 380), for example, has identified such a pattern within RSPB corncrake conservation, arguing that particular modes of representing “sought to disentangle the mystery of the corncrake.” In his urban political ecology of black redstart and water vole conservation, Hinchliffe (2008, 88) argues that “nature conservation is concerned with revealing presence and rendering the present eternal.” This very process of present-ing, as he sees it, points to a problematic at the heart of nature conservation. That is, as he sees it, while nature “has to be present” to be saved, many species resist the reductive binaries of absence and presence, defying the static spatialities of modes of recording, protecting, and sheltering (ibid.).

In general, endangered species are brought into view not only through processes of recording and monitoring, but more widely through archives and public campaign materials: photographs, critter cams, leaflets, and Red Lists. Yusoff’s (2011) examination of what she calls the “aesthetics of loss” reveals a subtlety in this very process of “making present.” In bringing the “absent one” into the field of vision, she argues, visual materials only render species *more* spectral, for the creatures “are not present in this encounter as themselves ... but as a kind of haunting configured around a profoundly human sensibility” (Yusoff 2011, 8). In seeking to “connect” us, such prosthetics merely underline the absent other’s distance and disconnect (Candea 2010; Ginn 2013b). For Yusoff, presence and absence are not only dialectically engaged, but “part of a relation with possibility – the ability of the subject to be sensible to the constitution of the other” (2011, 3). In this sense, she contends, conservation practice seeks to replace the melancholy of absence with an ever-sought-after encounter of presence.

And so, the melancholy of absence has begun to receive critical attention. Ryan’s (2009 and chapter 5) works on threatened Australian flora are some of the few to have addressed it more directly. For him, the “disappearance of species, as a complete extinction or as a gradual

decline in occurrence, has emotional and aesthetic consequences that entail dealing with loss, silence and absence” (Ryan 2009, 51). He considers the double presence of species in the world – both as listed taxonomies, the “reified aspect of the species,” and as lively material things “on the ground and in actuality” (Ryan 2009, 53). For Ryan, then, absence in the context of species loss emerges as twofold. Yet both Ryan and Yusoff contend that a species, as a taxonomic representation, cannot be grieved. Rather, sadness hinges upon a relational conception of human connections with the more-than-human world(s); “one mourns the loss of self, the loss of the other and the loss of the connectivity” (ibid., 75).

Mourning in this Derridean sense is not the traditional psychoanalytic return to “normal” after a loss, but a diminishment of the prospects for becoming. Derrida suggested that to internalize someone in memory denies their independence, it erases their autonomy, but on the other hand not to remember them means that we lose them completely. In the traditional psychoanalytic understanding of mourning, Derrida argues, we end up losing the deceased a second time, as they are acknowledged, but then put away again “in us” – their otherness is removed. We have to mourn, but if we fully internalize the other we are no longer faithful to that which we mourn. The solution, Derrida suggests, is not to transcend or reconcile this tension, but to recognize it, and to retain a sense of the irretrievability of the lives of others. Retaining a sense of the irretrievability of the past “challenges the survivor to be faithful not just to ... memory but also to singularity and alterity” (Kennedy 2007, 118). Allowing absent creatures to circulate as ghost, spirit, memory, or material trace sits paradoxically between an attempt to keep hold of that which has passed, and the recognition that it is impossible to do so faithfully without in some way diminishing that which is mourned.

In contrast to the positive possibilities of conservation practice, the idea of the absent or the lost has long been a poignant subject for nature and landscape writing. Perhaps as a result of their (seemingly) obvious presence yet simultaneous flightiness, birds have attracted particular attention. In the revered *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold (1949) articulates the grief felt in the aftermath of the extinction of the passenger pigeon, a species once present in billion-strong flocks. With the passing of those who lived to experience the pigeons, he suggests, the memory

of the birds will come to lodge itself instead in the trees and landscapes in which they once abounded. Another piece in the same book, “Marshland Elegy,” takes this further. Here grief is visible, imbued in the landscape itself: the “sadness discernible in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harboured cranes” (Leopold 1949, 97). Without their feathered former inhabitants, we read, the marshes are left “adrift in history” (ibid.). Leopold’s title itself is revealing: it is the place – the marsh, and not the crane – for which we grieve. In the absence of the cranes themselves, absence and grief arise through perception of landscape, but also from the *knowledge* that it was once a place of cranes.¹

Birds have not only been associated with particular places, but also with particular times in human history. For example Price contends that in the context of rapid urbanization and change, the loss of the passenger pigeon flock came to stand for a wider loss: that of the rural landscape and way of life. Her archival research uncovers elegies shot through with nostalgia from those who encountered (and often hunted) pigeons while growing up in the country: “When young Mershon had gone out pigeon hunting ... he’d gone off to shoot a bird that soon would be as irretrievable as his childhood” (Price 1999, 47). In contrast to Leopold, however, whose elegiac writing mourns the loss of the pigeons as pigeons, Price’s research suggests that an expressed nostalgia for pigeons spoke more of human responses to change than of the birds themselves.

Of course, Leopold himself never experienced flocks of passenger pigeons darkening the sky or weighing down trees: they were already on their way out when he was born. As Heise explains, then, there is also a tendency for extinction literature surrounding birds to “foreground feelings of loss and mourning, even on the part of individuals who have never themselves laid eyes on the bird” (2010, 66). In addition to Elder’s (2009) *While Flocks Last*, recent nature writing has seen authors documenting their own journeys in search of rare species, as they attempt to witness for themselves that which threatens to disappear and “tumble beyond reach” (Challenger 2011, 58). Seeking out the elusive corncrake on a Scottish isle, for example, the poet Kathleen Jamie feels “denied one of the sounds of summer that all our forebears would have known” (2005, 98); for her, the corncrake-less mainland becomes a “diminished place.” Indeed, Lorimer’s (2008, 392) work has also pointed to this potential for the corncrake to emerge as “an aurally aesthetic, evocative

and poetic fragment of the landscape that triggers the popular imagination ... a symbol of a shattered pastoral past.”

Such cultural-historical undertones are raised more explicitly in Heise's (2010) own delineation of literature responding to the decline and (likely) extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker. She suggests that the bird became entwined with a yearning for a way of life specific to a particular place, even and especially on the part of those who – like Leopold with the pigeons – had never actually experienced it. In the narratives of extinction, Heise argues, “part of human identity and culture itself seems to be lost along with the disappearance of a non-human species” (2010, 69). It seems, paradoxically, that as decline rendered them materially absent, the passenger pigeon, the ivory-billed woodpecker, and the corncrake became *more* “present” in the collective consciousness, as aesthetic objects of mourning around which nostalgic longings for a particular cultural-historical landscape and place-based identity could crystallize (Heise 2010). That is, in their very disappearance these particular birds seem not to disappear. Rather, they linger on: in the imagined landscape, but also through vocalized human desires for what such landscapes, in their very disappearance, have come to represent. Conservation practice, in rendering species either present or absent, is predicated on future nostalgia for lost species and their companion worlds.

In what follows, we address how place might be understood as a disruptive unsettling, both arising through and resulting in complications of what we understand as presence. We suggest that the absence of sparrows is not just about a loss; rather, the ways that sparrows circulate – as mnemonics, on signs, as half-heard trills, half-glimpsed flutters in memory, imagination, or place and, crucially, in their absent presence – are generative of place. The chapter draws on fieldwork conducted by one of the authors, Whale, in London, UK in 2012. Twelve bird enthusiasts were recruited through the RSPB and an online networking site for London birders: seven were volunteers on the House Sparrows Parks Project, four were RSPB staff members, and one was a freelance ornithologist. All but one of these interviews took place outside. The practice of walking is well suited to exploring notions of place, self, memory, and haunting, both alone and with participants (Wylie 2009; Butler 2006; Kusenbach 2003), as well as nature experiences (Waitt et

al. 2008). Accordingly, most interviews took place while walking around the site of sparrow plots. Our analysis suggests that in many ways the House Sparrows Parks Project was as much about mourning as about conservation, and that something of the paradoxical nature of mourning haunts conservation practice itself. The project was both faithful to that which was absent (the house sparrow), but also refused to admit that the absent sparrow really was totally absent. Conservation practice encompasses the preserve, of course, but also, we suggest, hinges on a less-acknowledged recognition of the impossibility to preserve fully. Conservation, then, is always already mourning its own failure.

Although this story is faithful to the testimony of interviewees it is also our own story and perhaps, therefore, one that project volunteers might not recognize. We hope it is clear, nonetheless, that we empathize with their practice and their labour, and that we share with them a love of sparrows in all their guises. The rest of this chapter evokes the absence of sparrows in five ways: meadow, hedge, flock, childhood, and London.

Meadow

By the summer of 2012 the London House Sparrows Parks Project was over and the sparrow meadows themselves were starting to disappear. Several interviewees were returning for the first time since it ended and, wandering around their sites, they remarked on changes. They spoke of daisies, poppies, and sunflowers, long grass (often still present), thistles. Some spoke of fences and signs, now long removed or stolen, separating the trial areas from the surrounding park. And yet as Sarah, the House Sparrows Parks Project co-ordinator, pointed out some of these signs remained. For the volunteers, the sign's role is simple: to provide information and raise public awareness. In this first encounter with the sparrow, then, it is this seemingly simple role of the sign that we wish both to explore and challenge.

What happens when one looks at this sign? To us, what seems clear is that it is not only the person looking who is looking: the sparrow meets one's gaze, commanding that you draw your attention in. This very drawing in of the gaze – which is met by the sparrow – encourages one to look more closely at the details of the sign,² which in turn precipitates

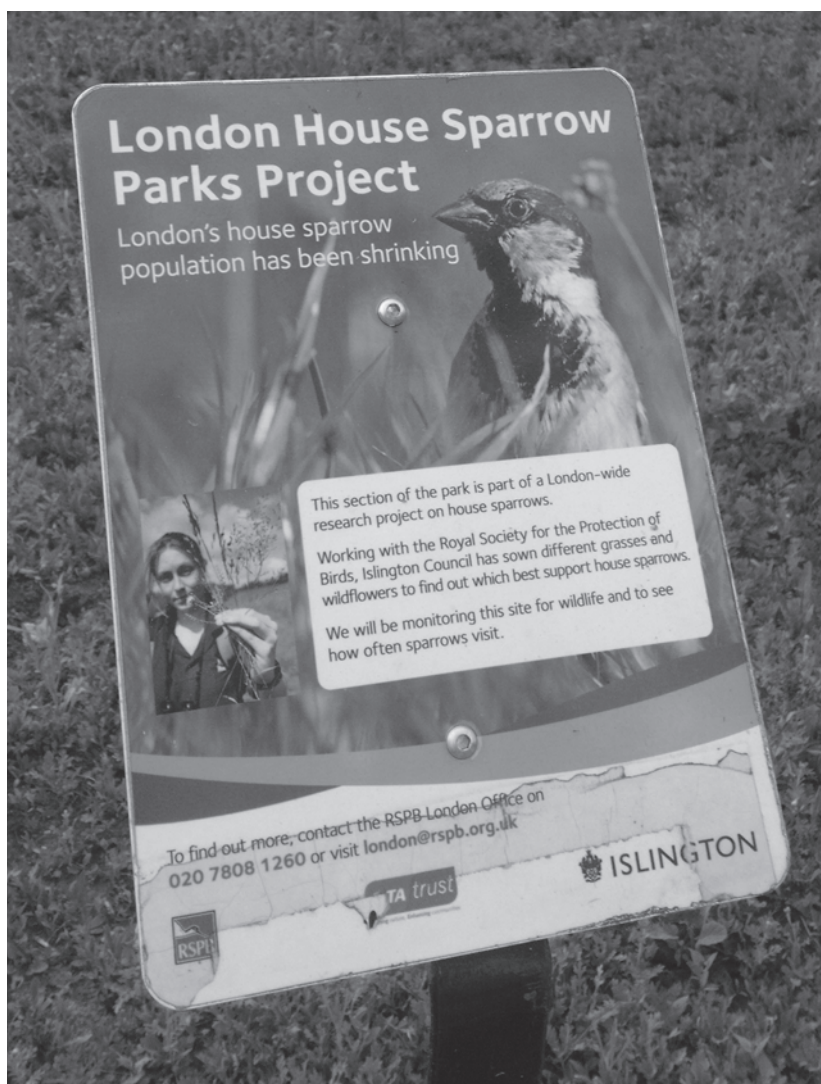


Figure 4.1 | Sign marking the “first encounter” with a sparrow.

another response: the casting out of the gaze to take in the landscape that both surrounds and lies beyond the sign. As Yusoff (2011, 9) has identified, it is this “bringing into view” of the face of the absent one that prepares the human sensibility for the *possible*; for meeting with “the anticipated one.” As Butler (in *ibid.*, 5) contends, “the senses are

part of any recruitment effort.” Certainly as this larger-than-life, more-than-visible sparrow watches, we are inclined to scan the meadow for its “material” counterpart, looking and listening. Yet might it be possible to see something more here – or rather, something less? That is, through its words as well as its imagery, the sign is also telling us of sparrow decline; we simultaneously look for *absence*. Something strange is happening, then: one is both looking for (searching) and looking at (projecting). The sparrow on the sign is not the final resting stop for the gaze; rather the sign acts as a medium to direct the senses to both witness sparrows *and* their absence. The sign does something more than gather in the gaze: it seems to radiate outwards. To elaborate, we will return to Sarah. When we met at the RSPB office, the obvious question was: what was the LHSPP trying to do? She explained it by saying that, “with the communications part of the project, I think it might just sort of make people notice, and realise there’s something missing.” What Sarah seems to be suggesting here is that rather than just making absent sparrows present, the LHSPP strove to direct the public gaze towards absence, to make absence itself something visible. It should be made clear that Sarah is not talking exclusively about the meadows and the signs; communications also included public events, leafletting, and widespread publicity. With Sarah’s words in mind, though, what we can suggest is that the sign – in offering a face *and* a story of decline – goes beyond “making present” to enact something more akin to Leopold’s (1949) description of the crane(less) marsh. As a space supposedly occupied by sparrows, as the sign tells us, the meadow inherits a history full of sparrows, of sparrow-fullness, which immediately sets it at odds with its own (apparent) sparrow-less present.

Furthermore, in this present, the meadow appears to be lost in time. The meadow lingers between a conjured sparrow past and an imagined sparrow future; indeed the RSPB describes the past as something to work towards in the future. Recall from our earlier discussion that this tension between fidelity to the past and the impossibility of continuing on, ever-faithful to that which has vanished, is a key part of the work of mourning. The meadow, through this work of mourning, becomes a haunted – and haunting – sparrow *place*. Experiencing the meadow alongside the sign, we look for and at both presence and absence, and yet, it seems, neither is really there.

Hedge

For the volunteers, of course, the meadows were also places of looking. Unsurprisingly, conversations quickly turned to birds. Interviewees were keen to describe what they had seen. Gulls, pigeons, crows, the odd exciting rarity; no one recorded a house sparrow, save Barbara, at the very beginning of the project. They were looking, but in the absence of sparrows.

And yet only one or two of the volunteers expressed sadness about a lack of sparrows. Instead many offered likely reasons for this absence: dog walkers, soccer games, disturbance from works or roads. Furthermore, as Michael was keen to point out, “sparrows don’t come out into the open in the way that they used to.” The plots themselves, at least when the volunteers were watching them, were not necessarily conducive to sparrow presence. Chris said that, “behind the plot, there’s hedgerows, and when I was sitting there not seeing anything I was ... I’d think, if I was a bird I wouldn’t come into this ... plot of longish grass; I’d live in the hedgerow behind.” Chris often didn’t record birds of any kind on his plot.

While the surveying process requires the bird to make itself known, Chris tries to picture where birds might be hiding. He balances his not seeing anything by taking an imaginative leap into small bird sensibility. In other words, Chris wants to say that a lack of visible birds in the plot does not necessarily denote absence from the park; as Hinchliffe (2008, 91) contends, absence “from records does not necessarily mean ‘not present.’” If the sign, as examined in the preceding section, transforms the meadow into a clearly demarcated place where sparrows are absent, Chris’s bird-watching sensibility, on the other hand, works to undo this. He engages not only with the plot itself, but also with the surrounding landscape and the possible, hoped-for presence of sparrows in the hedge (“if I were a bird I’d live in the hedge behind,” he says). Small birds, it seems, are no more obviously “present” in the hedgerow than they are in the haunted meadow. Further, the hedge does not easily present itself to sensory exploration; Chris does not look, and instead he imagines. What Chris’s comment is pointing towards, we suggest, is that being on the lookout for sparrows – and experiencing an (apparent)



Figure 4.2 | One of the “hidden” spaces of sparrows.

absence of sparrows – involves not only watching, but a feeling of being watched: maybe.

To see how this works, we turn to Jim, a freelance ornithologist and bird surveyor, who spoke about the difficulties of conducting sparrow counts. “You may not be aware of them,” Jim said, “unless you see them fly, or you see them moving around, but in a sort of dense privet hedge, even if you walk up to them, like a lot of birds, they’ll shut up, because of safety, they know you’re there.” Sparrows today, it seems, like lurking in hedges. Given this, Jim is explaining, not only are they difficult to survey visually, but auditory counts can be unreliable as well. Even for the trained birder, sparrows resist any easy numerical representation. Looking more closely at Jim’s words, however, we uncover something stranger than the practical difficulties of recording non-human presence. Jim is saying that as surveyor he is not always aware of sparrows hiding in the hedge. Yet at the same time, he is *aware that he might not be*

aware. For the surveyor, gifted with this double, framed awareness, the sparrow is neither simply absent nor simply present. Rather it is something possible; something that might be there and might be watching but which might not make itself known. The sparrow itself, meanwhile, becomes the knowing subject.

How might we understand this sparrow, then, and the possible sparrows that interviewees referenced when attempting to explain their sparrow-less plots? Here we might turn to Wylie's (2007, 172) reading of Derrida. The spectre, Wylie explains, "is invisible, but it watches, it is the unseen seeing." As Derrida (1994, 136) himself wrote: "one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see." It has been our contention in this chapter that the act of looking for sparrows is both contingent upon and unsettled by a sparrow that always might be lurking somewhere in the foliage. Based on the experiences of interviewees, we might thus come to see absence in the context of sparrow decline as a hiding, rather than a loss. Accordingly, we might also come to feel that places "are always already haunted insofar as 'they' [spectres] are everywhere where there is watching" (Wylie 2007, 172). Loss then should not be seen as the subtraction of sparrows from the world, but as a displacement, as a shift into less certain terrain and a production of haunted place.

Flock

In the last section, we quoted Michael, who said that sparrows "don't come out into the open in the way that they used to." Others spoke of the "poignancy" (Barbara, Maria) of seeing a single individual – a sparrow without other sparrows, a sparrow out of the flock. While the sparrow on the RSPB sign (figure 4.1) we saw earlier is a single individual – typical of conservation campaign literature – what some interviewees seemed to be implying was that sparrows *should come in flocks*. Like the passenger pigeon, Jim and Julia were both keen to point out, they are a colony species; breeding in a flock is desirable for survival. Not only therefore does the apparent absence of a sparrow seem to speak of other times, other places, but also about a loss of something else: of specific ways of being-sparrow, of absent flocking, nesting, and movement behaviours.

The sight of a single sparrow also seems to speak of – or perhaps *for* – other sparrows; in the context of decline, it supplements the house

sparrow as species, opening up a space for an absence to be *made present*. There is something particular to the house sparrow as a species – or at least to our human conceptions of what it is to be a sparrow – which means that witnessing one involves something more than merely ticking a name off a list. Sparrows, like some of the species Hinchliffe (2008) identifies, resist a straightforward binary of absence and presence. Yet this is not only when presence might be fleeting or numbers difficult to determine, but even when they seem to present themselves directly to the perceiving eye.

With this “single sparrow” in mind let us turn to Barbara. Here she is describing a rare encounter with a flock of sparrows at a garden cafe in Essex. Helen asked her, “When you do visit a place where there are lots, what’s it like, to experience that?” Barbara responded: “Well, it’s ... it’s quite nostalgic really. I remember being at Hyde Hall which is one of the RHS show gardens, and there were lots of sparrows flocking around the cafe there where we were, sneaking the crumbs and so on, and it’s just, yes it’s quite a nostalgic sort of sight, you sort of remember what it was like having these little brown things everywhere. And yeah, you sort of miss them, really.” Seeing a flock of sparrows at a cafe table creates a feeling of nostalgia in Barbara. Unlike those who mourned the loss of the passenger pigeon (Price, 1999), however, it is the supposedly direct and immediate sight of the birds that Barbara describes. That is, she seems to yearn for something that appears still to be there; their present “presence” testifies to a wider loss or absence of the very spectacle that appears before her. That is, being witness to this sight allows memory to do its work, moving her between her past, in which the “little brown things” were everywhere, and her present, in which sparrows are more generally absent. Earlier, we saw how invisible “possible sparrows” might be understood in the light of the spectral. Seeking to understand Barbara’s experience, as well as the experience of witnessing a single sparrow, we suggest, we might again turn to Derrida, and come to see that “the spectre is visible, it appears, but ‘there is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed’” (Wylie 2007, 172) When it comes to sparrows today, it seems, neither presence nor absence alone can fully describe how they make themselves known in the world. What is missing, then, is not just birds. What is missing is sparrows that are like what sparrows used to be like (they used to flock;

they no longer flock). The realization is that what is absent, and what may be hiding, is not the same as itself. We can see how, then, the very object of mourning is unstable, shifting, and continuing to change.

Childhood

Many LHSPP volunteers had been regular visitors to a particular spot in London and had been keeping records of declining numbers. For most of them, however, an absence of sparrows had only been noticed when visiting elsewhere – often when returning to the family home in another city or the countryside. When discussing their recent encounters with sparrows in London, a certain sense of comfort at something “still being there” emerged: chirruping was described as “reassuring” (Daniel); “comforting” (Sarah); “homely” (Michael). As well as confirming the continued lively presence of the house sparrow as species, it seemed that many of participants delighted in sparrow presence in that it transported a sense of home to the urban environment: it made the landscape a home away from home.

Later, as attention turned away from direct surroundings, many interviewees began to reminisce: feeding sparrows at home with the family, counting them as a child, sometimes even firing at them with catapults. More often than not, though, it was sparrow *sounds* that were described as triggering memories of childhood. We begin with Charlie, who wants to explain why sparrow sounds are important to him. “It’s not necessarily the prettiest of calls or songs, if you can call it a song, but there is something ... and perhaps it is just going back to childhood. I was so used to hearing that, that was just the sound of ... well I suppose the sound of my childhood, it was just always there, always chirruping away in the background.” Charlie cannot identify precisely why he likes sparrow chirruping, but he suspects that it is likely to stem from its ubiquitous presence when he was a child. What is notable here, perhaps, is the reference to “background.” In his study of soundscapes, R. Murray Schafer divides the sounds of the environment into different categories. Birdsongs he classifies as background keynotes; sounds which may be “noticed” and “remembered with affection” when they disappear (Schafer 1977, 31, 60).

For some of interviewees, however, sparrow sounds were not just fondly remembered, but a *way of remembering*. Here's Daniel: "Yeah, I mentioned my mum sending me a DVD of a carnival in Broadbottom where I was brought up in Manchester ... and you know, the video quality was rubbish but the sound on it was actually really good – through the sort of, blurry pictures of me being dressed up as a birthday cake ... you know, through those blurry images all you could hear in the background were house sparrows, and that really took me back to the time when I was growing up, because that was the background noise, that was you know, the din of East Manchester when I grew up was house sparrows." Like Charlie, Daniel describes sparrow chirruping as "background." Yet in this story, might we not see sparrow sound as foreground rather than background? It flies from the blurry images to carry Daniel back to his childhood; as background sound on the DVD itself, it opens up a wider space of memory than that which the foreground visuals of the recorded event can provide.

Daniel was not the only interviewee to point towards this transporting quality. Maria, too, spoke about her early memories: "One of my earliest memories is of house sparrows, because on the front of the house, it was covered in really dense ivy, and there were loads of house sparrows nesting in there and my bedroom was just above some of the ivy so I used to wake up and hear the sparrows chirping and, so whenever I hear them still it kind of takes me back to my childhood." For Maria, too, chirruping sparrows were a constant feature of childhood. Accordingly, just as it does for Daniel, the sound "takes her back." Certainly, all three stories here present examples of evocative sensory memory; interviewees know what it was like to "be there" (Jones 2000). This "being there," or being *back* there, certainly seems suggestive of a rooted sense of place; the sound has firmly imprinted in memory to connect the subject to their past (Casey 2000). As Bernie Krause articulates in chapter 1, changes in the soundscapes that surround us can trigger feelings of loss, grief, and sadness, as well as disorient our sense and understanding of place. The absence of sparrow chirruping, then, may be more than just a loss of sound; it may signal the absence of (the sense of) a greater connection to a previous time or place, and the longing to return to a time of sparrow presence.

But what does it mean to be taken back? Might we think of it as something other than a simple journey back in time? If sparrow sounds take Daniel and Maria into the past, do they not simultaneously bring the past into the present?

Let us look a little more closely at how this works in Maria's narrative, for there is a subtle difference between her story and Daniel's. It rests, perhaps, in the phrase "whenever I hear them still." Where the chirruping on Daniel's DVD was produced by recorded sparrows during his childhood, Maria is trying to say that *any* sparrow sound today has this effect upon her. Sparrow sound has, for Maria, become "undone" from the present. In this sense, we suggest, sparrow sound simultaneously serves to undo the present from itself. We can say that the absence of sparrows has heightened these people's senses and produced a new way of experiencing place. This new sense of place hovers between a memory of what was and the recognition of a present that has lost something. More than that, even: their sense of "loss in place" – resonating with Albrecht's concept of solastalgia in chapter 11 – is such that were that loss to be filled, they would still sense that the present would still not be as it might otherwise have been. The present here is not a container into which the past is recalled; the sparrow sound works to *distance the present from itself*.

London

We have seen that remembered experiences of sparrows work to (dis)place the self. Yet it is not only through individual memory that these little birds have become entwined with place. This final section finds the sparrow in "Cockney" London.³ In doing so, it suggests not only that place may arise through the inherited memories passed down in language and stories, but that the cultural identity of Cockney London is perhaps itself spectral (Pile 2005; Sinclair 2006).

This is how Maria describes witnessing a small group of sparrows on a Covent Garden rooftop: "it was genuinely exciting, because it just felt like, you know, like proper London, this is how it was, and how it should be." Maria delights in seeing sparrows in central London. Her joy corresponds to the birds being *in place*; it gives her a sense of experiencing "authentic" London (see Ackroyd 2001, 415). Maria's excitement

here might be understood as a manifestation of *jouissance* – a term from Jacques Lacan that Julia Kristeva uses to describe “the pleasure experienced in the presence of meaning” (Lorimer 2007, 922). What is important here, though, is that Maria herself is not from London, nor did she speak of ever experiencing a London filled with sparrows. Maria’s sense of proper London corresponds not to “how it used to be” for her, but to how she imagines it used to be. What Maria’s anecdote tells us, then, is that “we conceive of places not only as we ourselves see them, but also as we have heard and read about them” (Lowenthal 1975, 6). Her sense of place arises through a memory of inheritance, from associations made through narrative.

As conversations drew to a close, interviewees were asked what they thought would be lost if sparrows continued to decline. Elisabeth responded by saying that “Well, they figure quite a lot in our culture, I mean there’s Cockney London, and they’re mentioned there in connection with Cockney people who were born within a certain distance of Bow Bells or something in the east end of London, Cockney sparrows, they call them Cockney sparrows, and that would go, people wouldn’t be able to relate to and understand what that meant.” So Elisabeth suggests that something will indeed be lost. Yet she also points out that the term “Cockney sparrow” will remain for awhile as a tangible link to that which has been lost. Her concern here seems to be that the Cockney sparrow will remain present in language, for awhile anyway, despite the absence of real sparrows on London soil. The sparrow will linger as a ghostly linguistic presence, Elisabeth appears to be suggesting. Yet Elisabeth’s use of the phrase is ambiguous. Cockney sparrow might also refer to a *person* – as in “hello me old cock sparrow,” a Cockney greeting. Even without establishing to what exactly she is referring, however, we might uncover something interesting. What Elisabeth wants to say is that if sparrows are lost from London, the term Cockney sparrow – whether referring to birds or people – will be released from any visible ecological mooring, left to free-float mysteriously. What this is pointing towards, perhaps, is a longing not just for sparrows to be in London, but for Cockney London – or place – to be in the sparrows.

Yet the Cockney identity itself resists easy definition. Indeed, a stable cultural identity of place is something to which we often cling, though it remains fleeting and cannot be reduced to some “thing” (Nyoongah

2002; Till 2010). In the light of this, we might come to see that Cockney London – this imagined place to which both Elisabeth and the RSPB make reference – is itself spectral. In referencing the Cockney mythology, the RSPB is tapping into a ghost story that already haunts the popular imagination. Yet there is something else here. As with Maria's Covent Garden story, what is implied is that the original meaning of Cockney sparrow is still tangibly out there somewhere, waiting to be seen and experienced, just as Maria experienced "proper" London. In conducting the Cockney Sparrow Count, then, the RSPB is doing more than attempting to make the absent sparrow "present" (Hinchliffe 2008). What is suggested is that Cockney identity itself is still perhaps *materially* present: it is the sparrow that might be lurking in one's own back garden, and the sparrow is Cockney. It is in this sense, then, that spectral stories of cultural identity might come into play in the work of conservation. They are also, perhaps, already there: they creep into the very narratives of those involved and emotionally invested in the absence of sparrows.

Conclusion

We began this chapter musing upon the connection between birds and place. How might the presence or absence of a particular bird shape human conceptions of place and landscape? How might conservation negotiate notions of absence, presence, and place? How might we talk about that which is absent? It was with such thoughts in mind that this study turned its attention to the decline and conservation of the house sparrow in London and the experiences of those involved in it. Various stories have been explored to suggest ways in which places – and sparrows themselves – are haunted and haunting. This haunting effect arises in a variety of ways: through the work of memory and its unsettling effects upon self and time, through memories at second hand, through the representational public aspects of conservation and perhaps even through being involved in the monitoring and recording work of conservation itself. Though it cannot hope to have spoken fully on the behalf of others, what this spectral account has hoped to point towards is an understanding of the near extinction of the house sparrow in central London as something more than a straightforward absence

of a particular bird from one place. To reiterate, conservation in this case was not about preventing loss. The house sparrows project was more a response to loss in process, to the threat of disappearance, which worked to create a new, haunted landscape.

Where, then, is the sparrow? The sparrow, even though it is being lost across London, paradoxically becomes more present through a heightened awareness of its absence. Or rather, better to say that the sparrow becomes differently present: possibly present, flitting up through memory, or lurking silently in hedges, or glimpsed in signs in meadows, and in the sparrows of memory and stories. In this chapter sparrows have flitted at the edges of our writing, our sense, and our attention. Not only this, but haunting the chapter has been the fact that sparrows aren't just spectres: they are little birds that fly and eat and breed and shit. It is only through the very conjuration of absence – of a creature that is missing or missed – that presence might come into view.

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NOTES

- 1 Indeed, the subject of nature mourning has its own postcolonial geography (Rose and Doreen 2011). That this volume emerges out of a settler colony is perhaps not incidental, but is instead a working out of the centuries-long work of mourning for lost ways of being with non-humans.
- 2 The text on the sign reads: "London House Sparrows Parks Project. London's House Sparrow Population has been shrinking. This section of the park is part of a London-wide project on house sparrows. Working with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Islington Council has sown different grasses and wildflowers to find out which best support house sparrows."

We will be monitoring this site for wildlife and to see how often sparrows visit.”

- 3 London biographer and historian Peter Ackroyd describes the Cockney as “that chirpy and resourceful stereotype ... once the native of all London but in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries identified more and more closely with the East End” (2001, 682).

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