

Winged hitch-hikers

Some alien bird pests can reach WA via commercial transport in the form of road or air freight and shipping. This month we look at three which often travel by these means and which, if they became established, would greatly harm our agriculture, native animals, lifestyle and possibly even health.

Please report sightings of unfamiliar birds to the Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA). Ring the Pest and Disease Information Service (PaDIS) on Freecall 1800 084 881 or email the team on info@agric.wa.gov.au.

If possible take a photograph to assist PaDIS officers with identification. A high resolution image is best, but a quick shot by mobile phone is better than nothing.

Free passage

Last year an **Indian house crow** (*Corvus splendens*) was spotted in Fremantle but it disappeared before it could be captured. These crows are highly likely to arrive on ships docking in WA because our state is close to ports in southern Asia where the species is established.

House crows damage crops including vegetables, fruit, cereals and oilseeds. They attack and can kill poultry, new-born calves and kid goats. They harass and may injure adult livestock.

This species has the potential to be a major environmental pest, taking the eggs and chicks of native birds and preying on small native animals. In urban areas house crows scatter garbage, damage wiring and block drainpipes with their nests.

House crows are suspected of spreading diseases to the human population and they have been known to attack people to steal food and even jewellery.

A risk assessment conducted by DAFWA and endorsed by the national Vertebrate Pests Committee has indicated house crows pose an extreme threat, the highest of four categories, to Australia.

Small stowaways

European **tree sparrows** (*Passer montanus*) and house sparrows (*P. domesticus*) have become established in all states except WA, where DAFWA's prevention measures continue to be successful.

Sparrows are often found in traps designed to catch starlings at the South Australian border. It's possible that some sparrows travel in freight on road-trains crossing the Nullarbor, but it is more likely that these birds have dispersed naturally from areas where they are established in South Australia.

It is common for sparrows to come in with shipping. On large vessels it would be easy for such little birds to go unnoticed.

Sparrows damage cereal and fruit crops and block gutters and downpipes with their nests. Also, as anyone who has sat at an outdoor café table in a sparrow occupied

area will know, they are cheeky birds that steal food off plates and soil everything with their droppings.

Major migrants

Hailing from India the **common myna** (*Acridotheres tristis*) has spread to many countries across the globe. It is established in eastern and south-eastern Australia.

The International Union for Conservation and Nature has only three birds on its list of the world's 100 worst invasive alien species, and this is one. Mynas are in the same "extreme threat" category as house crows.

Although they are described as a moderate pest in agriculture, damaging mainly fruit and cereal crops, in some countries mynas are also serious environmental pests, behaving in similar ways to Indian house crows.

The presence of mynas can affect the breeding success of native birds and mammals that nest in hollows. On islands they have been observed stealing the eggs and young of ground nesting birds such as terns.

Mynas are known to spread avian malaria to other birds and their threat to people is that they may carry and transmit various parasites including plasmodium that causes human malaria. When mynas nest in houses, mites from the nest can invade the home. Susceptible people may then develop dermatitis and allergies.

Two mynas were found on a plane at Perth airport in September 2013.

Watch out

Please be alert for unfamiliar birds when near a port or interstate commercial transport hub. One sharp pair of eyes and a call to PaDIS could make all the difference in preventing these pest birds from establishing here.

If you have a query or want to report something unfamiliar, ring the Pest and Disease Information Service (PaDIS) on Freecall 1800 084 881 or email info@agric.wa.gov.au

If sending a specimen include your contact details, where and when you found the specimen and any damage you observed. Post to PaDIS, Department of Agriculture and Food, 3 Baron-Hay Court, South Perth WA 6151. You are also welcome to bring in specimens in person. For further information visit www.agric.wa.gov.au