



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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lightly. Can you imagine the response if the experimental design called for the release of *Microtus* infected with plague? As far as *Plasmodium relictum* is concerned, this parasite may be just as serious in avian species as plague is in humans. I am really quite surprised the author's doctoral committee approved.

I would like to think that the majority of subscribers agree with my feelings concerning such procedures, and that the journal should somehow make it known that it does not support the releasing of infected animals and the possible introduction of a foreign parasite as a consequence.

Sincerely,

John N. Stuhrt
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Dr. Stuhrt is quite correct in urging careful consideration before disrupting a natural community. My committee and I feel that such consideration was made prior to starting the project. Because of the exigencies of publication, it was inappropriate to defend this aspect of the experimental design in my paper, but I welcome the opportunity to do so at this time.

Plasmodium relictum is the most common malaria parasite of English sparrows, in addition to occurring in many other song birds. I have personally found the parasite in every sparrow population I have surveyed (Pennsylvania, Maryland and New Jersey) with the single exception of the Penn State population in question. Even there, *P. relictum* was found commonly in song birds from a wood lot located approximately two miles from the sparrow site; and, in fact, one strain used in the study was isolated from a Robin in this wood lot. After five years of intensively studying malaria-bird interactions in the wood lot population, it was apparent to us that any bird which did not have malaria after its first year was exceptional.

The strains of *P. relictum* used in this study were tested in sparrows in the laboratory before release into the sparrow population. The test infections were generally of low intensity and short duration, and in none of 88 experimental birds was death attributed to a malaria infection. The bird-malaria relationship thus seems very well established, and we felt sure that the danger of releasing a serious pathogen into this sparrow population was non-existent.

Let me emphasize again that I am in complete agreement with Dr. Stuhrt's cautious attitude regarding pathogen introduction. If my experimental approach has been construed as license for wholesale parasite dissemination, then I am remiss as an author, for this was not my intention. I feel just as strongly, however, that a constraint as binding as never manipulating a natural community will limit the field biologist to endless descriptive studies. When the ramifications have been carefully considered and the dangers foreseen and avoided, a wealth of information can be obtained in an experimental approach to field problems.

JAMES E. APPLGATE, LT MSC USN
