RESEARCH: A scientific team is heading to Mount Isa to track and record data on the house sparrow.

Scientific look at life of house sparrow

A SCIENTIFIC team from Macquarie University will be in Mount Isa this week, catching and tracking sparrows.

New research will track and record data on the house sparrow, a species which has demonstrated an unusual ability to adapt and thrive in all parts of Eastern Australia despite the vast differences in climate across their habitats.

"Australia's harsher climate is in stark contrast to the sparrow's native England. Their introduction to Australia in the 1860s unintentionally started a science experiment we can now pursue in earnest, so that we can learn the secrets of adaption from one of our most versatile introduced bird species," said researcher Dr Monica Awasathy.

"This will have important implications for our understanding of how our native birds will cope with climate change."

Dr Awasathy is part of a small team of scientists from Macquarie University's Department of Biological Studies touring regional New South Wales and Queensland in August, with stop-offs including Armidale, Toowoomba, Roma, Charleville, Longreach, Mount Isa and Tennant Creek.

"We'll be visiting areas across their range all the way to the northern edge in Tennant Creek, in both coastal and arid areas," Dr Awasathy said.

In each location, the team will frequent local stock feed stores, stables, racetracks and residents' backyards, on the hunt for the little birds.

Once caught, the team will record population and genetics data on each of the birds before releasing them back into the wild.

"So far they have not been too difficult to find, and we catch on average 50 birds in each town we visit," Dr Awasathy said.

"Fortunately for us the house sparrow, or Passer domesticus, prefer to settle around people – they love our food, and our animals' food."

This tour is one in an ongoing series, joined by collaborators from Australia and New Zealand, towards understanding the breeding habits of the birds across the region.

Future citizen science projects may engage local communities in calling for tip-offs for the team of where nesting sparrows have been spotted and when.

"We find that many Australians are quite affectionate towards these little birds, and are happy to offer what information they have. In line with global trends, many people have noticed a decline in sparrow numbers," Dr Awasathy said.