

## Introduction

Tree and House Sparrows are native birds of the UK and were, only a short time ago, a common sight on farmland, in parks, gardens and other areas. However, these popular birds have, as a result of numerous factors, suffered a dramatic decline over the past 20 years.

### The Tree Sparrow

The Tree Sparrow is patchily distributed on farmland across Britain and Ireland. The main populations are now found across the Midlands, southern and eastern England. There are small populations within the region. Historical data suggests that the Tree Sparrow might undergo a long-term cycle of high numbers followed by low.

### Our objective for Tree & House Sparrows is:

To reverse the decline in Tree and House Sparrow populations in Scarborough.

Numbers increased between 1960 and 1978, possibly due to an influx of birds from mainland Europe. Since then, the population has witnessed an estimated 85% - 95% decline (based on the Common Bird Census/Breeding Bird Survey, collated by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)). This is the largest decline within the group of declining common farmland species. The recent downward trend is of concern.

The Tree Sparrow also decreased in range by 20% over the same period, with particular losses in Wales and Scotland. It is a UK BAP priority species and is also RSPB red listed. The species is still common and widespread across mainland Europe. The Tree Sparrow is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (W&CA) and the EC Birds Directive.

This is a hole-nesting species, and birds often nest in colonies. The number of suitable nest sites is a limiting factor in some areas. Like most

seed-eating birds, Tree Sparrows need to feed their nestlings on invertebrate prey. This means that in addition to arable crops they must have access to semi-natural habitat such as woodland or wetlands. In the modern farmed landscape this has become a limiting factor to population expansion.

Flocks feed in arable areas for most of the year. Large numbers used to be associated with stubble fields and grain stores. However in recent times harvesters have become much more efficient, leading to less grain being left in the fields, and European Union regulations have led to the sealing of grain stores to minimise pests and contamination. Seed-eating birds have, however, benefited from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme option to retain winter stubbles. These provide a habitat for annual weeds such as Groundsel, Common Chickweed and Scentless Mayweed, on which finches feed throughout the winter.

### House Sparrow

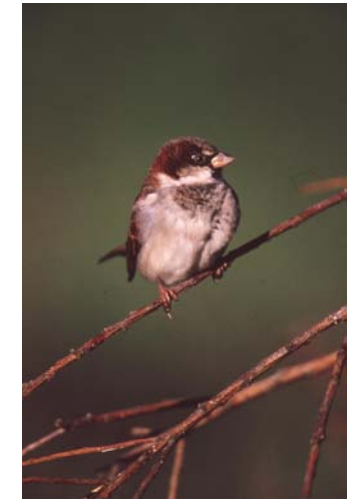
Whilst not showing as dramatic a decline as the Tree Sparrow, the House Sparrow is also decreasing. The RSPB reports that over the last 25 years the population has more than halved. This decline has been most dramatic in urban areas and this was confirmed by the recent London House Sparrow survey and other urban surveys. This bird thrived earlier in the 20th Century exploiting man's waste, however, there is no doubt that they are declining in gardens and countryside locations. Whilst it is not a UK BAP species, its recent rapid decline has warranted it the classification of a RSPB red listed species. Unfortunately, it is also classified as a pest species under the General Licence system to kill or take pest birds in the W&CA. This needs to be reviewed, although there are probably few instances where it is controlled.

House Sparrows tend to breed in built up areas, nesting in buildings which are accessed through holes. During the winter months the House Sparrow may form large flocks in arable areas. Their feeding requirements, including invertebrate prey for nestlings, is the same as for the Tree Sparrow given above.

There are a number of theories for the decline in Tree and House Sparrows including:

- The lack of available grains in the wider countryside due to more efficient farming methods and changing agricultural

## Tree & House Sparrow



House Sparrow:  
(Photograph by Whitfield Benson)

### Links to Habitat Action Plans and Guidance Notes.

Priority habitats associated with Tree & House Sparrows:

**All habitats included in BAP.**

Action Plans have been prepared for those in bold.



Tree Sparrow:  
(Photograph by Whitfield Benson)

### What you can do to help:

**Put up nest boxes and maintain year-round seed feeders.**

**Provide dense bushes and wild, pesticide free areas of garden.**

**Encourage wild flowers in gardens and on farmland, to provide seeds and insects.**

**Farmers can help by winter-feeding with waste corn.**

practices (including the change from spring sown to winter sown crops which reduces the amount of stubble in the winter).

- The loss of semi-natural habitat in the wider countryside leading to the loss of invertebrate prey.
- The lack of nest sites modern buildings offer sparrows fewer nesting opportunities.
- Predation by domestic cats.
- Loss of hedgerows and mature trees. Dutch Elms Disease wiped out many trees containing suitable nest cavities in the 1980s.
- Development of previously used ('derelict') land may have reduced food availability through the loss of invertebrate-rich, weedy areas.
- Increased use of pesticides in the countryside and gardens may have reduced the number of insects, which sparrows need to feed their young.

In order for sparrows to reverse their decline in numbers and increase their distribution, the following requirements are necessary:

- A good diversity of habitats.
- Less intensive agricultural practices, such as rotational cutting of cereal field margins and other marginal habitats.
- Widespread endorsement of Environmental Stewardship (due from 2005), which includes basic environmental standards for farming under the Entry Level Scheme and advanced conservation options under the Higher Level Scheme.
- Winter-feeding (for example with waste grain called tailings) and nest box schemes.

### Status and Distribution

Regionally, the Tree Sparrow is widely distributed in the lowland areas. However, the 1994 - 2004 Breeding Bird Survey figures for House Sparrow, show that the number in Yorkshire and Humberside is down by 11%.

Locally, the full status of Tree Sparrow and House Sparrow is not known. However, Tree Sparrows occur on the edges of Filey, Scalby and Burniston.

House Sparrows definitely occur in Whitby, Burniston, Scarborough and Filey, and possibly in the majority of villages.

### Threats

The key threat to both species of sparrow is the continuation of intensive agricultural practices, which tend to reduce habitat diversity on farmland, due to the loss of mixed farming and increased specialisation. For example the switch from spring sown to winter sown crops reduces winter stubbles, which provide grain and weeds for finches. Increasing use of pesticides reduces the abundance of weed seed and insects. The availability of insect prey for sparrow chicks is crucial, and birds will fly considerable distances to find these. The presence therefore, of islands and corridors of semi-natural habitat within the farmed landscape is critical. The loss of suitable nest sites, largely due to the loss of hedgerow trees is a further concern. Dutch Elm Disease wiped out many suitable nest sites in the 1980s. Predation by non-native species such as domestic cats adds to the pressure on declining populations. However, many farmers are improving the farmed landscape for wildlife, particularly with the un-coupling of subsidies from production and through agri-environment schemes.

### Current Action

The RSPB, in association with FWAG and the Game Conservancy Trust, have published sheets on the management of farmland birds, including the Tree Sparrow. These are available from the RSPB (and online) and provide advice to farmers.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and Joint Nature Conservancy Committee (JNCC) organise the annual winter farmland bird survey. This encourages the public to record winter numbers, winter flock locations and aims to identify which farm habitats are being used by these species. The RSPB has carried out 'sparrow counts' with the assistance of its members, though not in this area.

The RSPB 'bird aid' winter-feeding projects aim to provide grain or tailings to key Tree Sparrow populations throughout Britain to aid winter survival and increase breeding success.

Agri-environmental schemes, such as Countryside Stewardship, Set-aside and Spring-Sowing are on-going.