

Focus on the Dunnock

“Why are they focusing on such a boring bird...?” The poor Dunnock has been an object of derision for snooty-bird-watchers for many years. The Dunnock (literally ‘dun-coloured bird’) looks no better than an avian mouse and appears terribly dull scuttling around the base of the shrubbery and the borders in the garden. The Reverend Morris, some 140 years ago, held up the Dunnock as a sober bird whose behaviour his parishioners would do well to emulate. Little did he know!

To the casual observer they do look almost mouse-like. They are quite chubby, bigger than a Great Tit though far less acrobatic and are really ground hugging birds. If you see an adult in good light, it has stunning mahogany-red eyes. The young birds have a rather spottier plumage until the moult in early autumn and dull, olive brown eyes until their first Christmas.

It may come as a surprise to learn that such a dowdy exterior should conceal some of the most extraordinary behaviour ever found in a common British bird. And the Dunnock is common. The latest breeding bird atlas estimated 2,000,000 territories in Britain (and more than 800,000 in Ireland). Some people still call them hedgerows but this is a very inappropriate name for them. Hedge yes, sparrow no. They belong to a family called the accentors, of which the Dunnock is the only British representative. A family of birds originating in the Himalayas, the accentors are cover-loving insectivorous birds with sharp, pointed bills and not the conical seed-eating ones sported by sparrows.

So what makes the Dunnock’s behaviour so extraordinary? It all has to do with sex and breeding. Those of a sensitive disposition should go direct to the ‘Fascinating facts’ box. For many years a peculiar piece of Dunnock behaviour had been noted by many people – vent or cloaca pecking. One Dunnock was seen to peck under the tail of another but there was no explanation of what was happening.

A few years ago Nick Davies, working in Cambridge Botanical Garden, found out the absolutely stunning explanation for this behaviour. Dunnock breeding behaviour has evolved into an amazing melange of systems. We often think of the birds from a human viewpoint and rather expect that the birds will be monogamous – one hen and one cock bird to each nest. By careful study of Dunnocks, Nick was able to show that, in the case of the humble Dunnock, almost anything goes. He colour-ringed the individual birds and, because he caught them in the breeding season, he was able to sex them too. The females develop a full brood patch and the males have a very swollen cloacal region. He found territories with one of each sex, with two of each sex, with two of one sex and one of the other – even with two of each!

The males were trying to father chicks by the hen birds in other territories too. This was one of the reasons for the swollen cloacal region – the males were storing lots and lots of sperm to use in multiple copulations with their own female(s) and any other they could persuade. Before mating, they would peck at the female cloaca to displace any sperm from a previous mate that would be competing with their own offering. Cloaca pecking was all about the cock bird trying to ensure that he was going to fertilise as many eggs as possible. Nick’s book *Dunnock Behaviour and Social Evolution* (Oxford) is a rare phenomenon, a scientific treatise which is also a fascinating read.

Chris Mead



Dunnock by Tommy Holden © BTO

Dunnock

Fascinating Facts

Absolute jewels

The Dunnock’s nest is generally low down in a bush in scrub or shrubbery or in a climbing plant like ivy or honeysuckle. It is neat and well concealed but the eggs are stunning. They are a very clear and bright blue! There are two or three clutches per year from April through to July.

Not just residents

Few British Dunnocks ever move far but we regularly have visitors during the winter and at migration time. There are about a dozen records of ringed birds moving to or from Norway and twice as many in relation to movements to or from other countries bordering the southern North Sea.

The Cuckoo’s favourite

One might expect rather few Cuckoos to parasitise garden nests but quite a few do. Indeed together with the Reed Warbler in wetlands and Meadow Pipit in moorlands the Dunnock, in gardens and farmland, is the bird’s top of the pops. They may be rather recent hosts because female Cuckoos do not yet produce eggs which mimic the Dunnock’s blue.