

Focus on the Tree Sparrow

Of all our formerly common countryside birds the Tree Sparrow seems to have declined the most. As few as ten percent remain compared to twenty five years ago, but these elegant and strangely fascinating little birds can still be seen in some gardens.

To many people a sparrow is a sparrow but in fact there are two distinct species found in the British Isles, both of conservation interest. The House Sparrow is not as ubiquitous as it used to be while the smaller Tree Sparrow has declined even more. This is the only true sparrow in the genus *Passer* which has the same plumage for both sexes, both cock and hen having a 'gingernut' brown crown. House Sparrow males and females are quite different in plumage and the crown of the male is grey. Given a good look at a Tree Sparrow, you should also see a distinctive white collar and a small black 'splodge' on each cheek.

Tree Sparrows were birds of farmland and scrubby areas, often feeding on stubble fields in the autumn and winter and preferring smaller weed seeds to the larger cereal grains favoured by House Sparrows. This preference has probably made them very vulnerable to the increased use of selective herbicides and the switch from spring to autumn planting of wheat and barley. However there have been earlier fluctuations in the overall population of this bird in the British Isles. The late 1950's saw the species at a bad low with no breeding records at all in Ireland. However they increased again in the next ten years and many colonies in Ireland had been established by the time the first BTO Breeding Atlas was published in 1976. There were 130 10km- squares in Ireland with Tree Sparrows recorded for the most recent Atlas (1988-1991) but British records were down by almost 20%. What may have been a population of almost a million pairs at its maximum has now probably dropped to about 100,000.

If you suspect Tree Sparrows are around the garden but not coming close enough to see easily, their call is a sharper 'tcheck' or 'tchup' than the chirp of the House Sparrow and becomes a dead giveaway with a little experience. Despite the general decline of this species in farmland, in some areas more and more of you seem to have Tree Sparrows visiting your gardens especially in the Midlands and southwest Scotland. In Ireland the species is holding its own and even increasing in some areas, according to a paper by BTO Ireland Officer Ken Perry recently published in *Irish Birds*. There are still a few of



Tree Sparrows by Tommy Holden © BTO

these birds around in Norfolk, in fact there is one outside my window feeding, as I write. They readily use nest boxes and seem quite able to exploit the food we put out, competing successfully with other species at feeders although still rather wary of humans. The improved availability and quality of the smaller seeds such as black sunflower should help us to help them. Could the Tree Sparrow become a garden bird conservation success story over the next few years?

Chris Mead

Tree Sparrow Fascinating Facts

Holes, holes, holes!

Tree Sparrows can construct free-standing nests but they very much prefer holes and will use nest boxes with an entrance hole of 28 mm diameter or larger. Being semi-colonial nesters they often do well in groups of half a dozen or more boxes placed closely together. Avoid disturbing Tree Sparrow boxes as they will desert nests much more readily than tits. My own tit project near Tring was disrupted by Tree Sparrows when they took over more than 50 of the nest boxes and reared 309 nestlings with up to three broods per box! However four years later there were none left and this nomadic existence with colonies arriving at sites then inexplicably moving on is typical and has been recorded for many years. I now have over 400 nest boxes of various different designs up to tempt them but the only one they used last year was a special Swift box on my house!

Little wrigglers

When we used to catch Tree Sparrows regularly for ringing I discovered they are the avian equivalent of a snake! Not because they hiss or bite but because they are incredibly difficult to keep hold of — ideal for testing a trainee ringer's handling skills. The merest hint of daylight round the back of the hand entering a bird bag and whoosh, one less Tree Sparrow on the day's ringing list! Being only a little smaller than a House Sparrow, it is obviously very important for the Tree Sparrow to be able to wriggle into as small a nesting hole as possible and avoid competition with the bigger species.

World wide bird

Tree Sparrows may be declining here but across much of Europe and Asia they are still abundant. In some areas there is an absolutely fascinating role reversal, the Tree Sparrow being the urban bird whereas House Sparrows are confined to the countryside. If you want to know more about the complex and intriguing life and distribution of this charming species we recommend Garden BirdWatch participant Dr J.Denis Summers-Smith's excellent book *The Tree Sparrow* (ISBN 0-952-5383-0-X).