

British Trust for Ornithology
The Nunnery
Thetford
Norfolk IP24 2PU
01842-750050
sparrows@bto.org

House Sparrow Information Sheet

Facts and figures

- There are still between six and seven million pairs of House Sparrow in Britain.
- In the 1970s there were 12 million pairs.
- Just over half of British House Sparrows occur in southern and central-eastern England.
- House Sparrow populations have declined most in eastern England (90%) and south-east England (65%).
- Numbers are currently thought to be increasing in Scotland and Wales.
- Rural gardens appear to be the most favoured habitat for the species.
- Declines in the wider countryside took place between 1980 and 1995.
- Declines in suburban and urban gardens started in about 1984 and are still continuing.
- There are particular hotspots where declines are greatest. In London there was a 59% decline in House Sparrow numbers between 1994 and 2000.

What might be happening in the countryside?

- In the wider countryside, more efficient grain harvesting has reduced food availability.
- More recently, sealing grain storage barns has reduced both feeding and nesting opportunities.
- Earlier appearance of flocks of House Sparrows in the wintertime in rural gardens supports the theory that food supplies have been reduced.
- Breeding performance per nesting attempt has increased over the past 40 years in all regions.
- As with several other declining species, it is the inability of young House Sparrows to survive to breeding age that has driven population declines.

House Sparrows in towns and cities

- Breeding performance in suburban and urban habitats appears to be poorer than in farmland.
- House Sparrows suffer greatest mortality during the breeding season, when adult birds appear to incur greater risks as they try to find food for their youngsters.
- With declining populations in suburban gardens, one might expect to see an increase in breeding success, as there is less competition for the available food.
- Not only is breeding success poor in suburban areas, there has also been no increase in that success in the past 20 years.
- Predation by cats and Sparrowhawks could be a factor affecting populations in suburban and urban situations, as cat ownership has risen and Sparrowhawks have colonised urban areas.
- Lack of nest sites has been proposed as a factor reducing the number of House Sparrows in our towns and villages. Although modern buildings contain fewer nest sites, House Sparrows will also nest in thick bushes.
- Food supplies in our towns and cities may have been reduced with the development of new buildings on previously derelict land.
- House Sparrows need aphids, weevils, grasshoppers and caterpillars to feed their young and these may now be harder to find in our towns and cities.

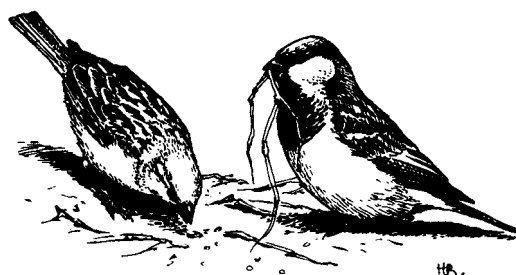
(continued overleaf)

How can you help?

- We need to know more about House Sparrows. By joining the BTO's Garden BirdWatch and sending in weekly records of House Sparrow numbers every three months, together with numbers of other common birds, you can help us to understand when birds need to turn to gardens for food.
- House Sparrows are social birds. They feed, roost and breed colonially and need space to live together.
- Ideally food should be provided all year round. Use feeders which have several feeding ports or put out sufficient food on the ground for many birds to feed at once.
- Hygiene is important. Cleaning up spilt grain and uneaten food will reduce the chance of disease transmission.
- House Sparrows like to spend time in thick bushes between feeding bouts. Siting feeders near to bushes reduces predation by Sparrowhawks but provides somewhere for a cat to hide.
- Roosting sites are important too. Birds often gather for the night or during the day in thick evergreen bushes or in climbing plants, such as honeysuckle or ivy, on the walls of houses.
- When providing homes for House Sparrows remember that they nest colonially. You can buy special 'sparrow hotels' where several boxes are built into the same structure. The entrance holes in such boxes need to be about 32mm in diameter, larger than that which would be used for a Blue Tit box.
- House Sparrows choose their nest-sites very early in the year so try to put up new boxes before Christmas.
- Some people create nesting spaces for House Sparrows, Starlings and Swifts when repairing or redeveloping their houses.
- Water is important to all birds, both for drinking and for bathing. House Sparrows also like to dust-bathe.

The House Sparrow Appeal

- The House Sparrow appeal will support a range of new sparrow projects.
- We want to support a national survey to get a better estimate of House Sparrow numbers in the variety of different habitats in which they are found.
- Money is needed for special projects to look at why House Sparrows are doing so badly in some suburban and urban areas.
- House Sparrow numbers are changing rapidly and we need to monitor populations at local and national levels.
- It is particularly important that we look at House Sparrows which are doing well, for instance in Welsh towns and Scottish farmland, so that we can assess how best to help sparrows in other parts of the country.



House Sparrows by Hilary Burn