

A BTO Garden BirdWatch factsheet

House Sparrow



House Sparrows are real home-birds. Most individuals do not move more than a few hundred yards from where they were born. This means that if conditions become unfavourable, House Sparrows are not the most adept at wandering to find a better spot.



NOT IN MY BACKYARD

House Sparrows numbers have declined across Britain but BTO Garden BirdWatch records show that this downturn has not been equal across England, Scotland and Wales. Since Garden BirdWatch started, in 1995, one in four householders has lost their House Sparrows. This compares with one in ten householders in both Scotland and Wales.

While House Sparrow numbers have fallen in rural areas, with agricultural intensification – including loss of winter stubbles and less spilt grain – thought to be important, it is in urban areas where losses have been most acute.

Here, feeding spaces have been restricted by paving for off-street parking, building on gardens and the use of decking. Nest sites have also been lost, with many people now opting for plastic fascias and soffits instead of wooden ones, which would have gradually rotted, creating nesting holes.

Modern roof tiles differ in their design from traditional ones, again reducing nesting opportunities. Increased levels of cat predation and competition for food with species such as Collared Dove and Woodpigeon might also be causing problems.

How to spot a House Sparrow

House Sparrows are chunky birds, slightly bigger than Great Tits, with relatively large heads and stout beaks. The back and wings of both sexes are streaked brown and black.

Female House Sparrows have no black bib, are buff-grey underneath and have a pale supercilium (stripe above the eye). Recently-fledged young look like females, with young males moulting into their black bibs during late summer and early autumn.

Males have a black bib, which extends up the throat, and around the beak and eye. The crown of the male is grey with chestnut-brown sides – differing from that of the Tree Sparrow, which is all-chestnut-brown (male and female Tree Sparrows look identical to one another).





House Sparrows usually pair for life and often use the same nest site year after year. The black bib of the male is a signal of his quality – the bigger the bib, the more dominant the bird!

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

House Sparrows need thick cover to escape from predators, rest, roost and socialise. Hawthorn, ivy, bramble and wild roses can provide such cover. Research shows that the breeding success of House Sparrows improves in gardens with a higher proportion of deciduous shrubs and a smaller proportion of concrete.

Maintaining your lawn between 3–6 cm in height during spring and summer will allow low-growing plants such as dandelions and plantains to seed. In some areas, however, allow the grass to grow high – up to 30 cm – to provide shelter for invertebrates, such as beetles, weevils and spiders, as well as a source of seed. Keeping grass long overwinter also provides hibernation places for invertebrates. Weedy areas are also good. In short, don't be too tidy-minded!

Live mealworms provided during late spring and summer can be fed to chicks by adult House Sparrows. In addition, cereal-rich seed mixes and a reliable source of fresh water can give House Sparrows a boost all year round.

Please clean your bird feeders, tables and baths regularly to reduce the risk of disease transmission between these sociable individuals.

Finally, consider erecting a House Sparrow terrace under the eaves of your home.

Although House Sparrows are sometimes slow

to move in, these cavities help them to nest colonially.

Try siting your terrace facing east, away from the prevailing wind and rain, and not in the glare of the midday sun. A 32 mm entrance hole is best, with the box being around 30 cm high and 15 cm deep.

Do not disturb any nesting birds unless you are recording valuable data through the BTO's Nest Record Scheme.





Population: 6.7 million pairs
Conservation Status: Red-listed
Diet: seeds, shoots, scraps, insects.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan – 3 years

Max recorded – 12 years

Breeding Ecology

Clutch size – 4–5 eggs

No. broods – 2–3 (4)

Incubation – 13–15 days

Young in nest – 15–17 days



Make your garden count

The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation. Over 30,000 birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys and collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 100 at its offices in Norfolk, Stirling and Bangor, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry, conservation organisations and its supporters. The BTO is a Registered Charity No 216652 (England & Wales), No SC039193 (Scotland) and a Company Limited by Guarantee No 357284 (England & Wales). Registered Office: The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

BTO Garden BirdWatch is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. The project is funded by participants' contributions and is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the World. Participants receive the quarterly magazine *Bird Table*, have access to GBW Online and the expertise of the BTO's Garden Ecology Team. For more information, please visit www.bto.org/gbw

Contact us at:

BTO Garden BirdWatch, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

Tel: 01842 750050. E-mail: gbw@bto.org

Web: www.bto.org/gbw Follow us on Twitter: @BTO_GBW

