



Looking out for birds

The House Sparrow

I find it ironic that up to, and including, the years of the Second World War, the House Sparrow was considered to be a pest and there was, in many parishes, a bounty on their heads. Sparrow Clubs were established in the 18th century and in return for a reward, people stole their eggs and either killed them or caught them for target practice. Some were also eaten. During the Second World War, they were killed because it was feared they would affect the productivity of crops at such a crucial time. Over the last few decades, however, there has been such a drastic decline of this species that it is on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) and we now actively encourage them in to our gardens. The further irony is that man has introduced them to some parts of the world, e.g. North America, where they are flourishing.

We should all be familiar with this bird. The male has a streaky brown back and grey underparts. Its crown is grey, not to be confused with the brown cap of the Tree Sparrow. It also has a dark grey bib and the bigger the bib, the more dominant the bird. The female also has a streaky brown back and grey breast but lacks the bib and grey crown. They are a gregarious species and have always lived in close proximity to man. They live in colonies and are quite a sedentary bird in that they do not migrate or move far from their original nest sites. You always know when they are around because of their constant chirping, cheeping and squabbling.

So what has led to the declining populations of the House Sparrow? It is very complex but what we do know is that urban birds have been worst affected and the greatest decline has been in the south-east of Britain. In 2002, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) undertook some research to find out the reasons behind the decline. In rural areas, changes in agricultural practices, (particularly the loss of winter stubble), loss of nest sites due to the destruction of hedges and reduced food availability as a result of improved hygienic measures around grain stores were put forward as the main causes. In urban areas, it is less clear but it could be to do with a loss of available food for adults and chicks, increased levels of pollution, loss of suitable nesting sites due to modern housing construction and renovation, increased prevalence of disease and increased levels of predation.

If you do have them in your garden, consider yourself fortunate as there are quite a few people that do not get them at all. If you would like to encourage them, erect a terrace type nest box so they can socialise with each other. They are such characterful birds, and life, would be very dull without them.



House Sparrow ©Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary BTO Garden BirdWatch Ambassador for Nottinghamshire.

If you would like to help the BTO by recording birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, please contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net

Jean is also able to arrange talks to groups.