

House Sparrows in Great Britain



Front cover picture by – Tommy Holden/BTO

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Many of us take house sparrows for granted and are unaware that their numbers are declining. This booklet highlights possible causes of the house sparrow decline and suggests ways you can help them recover.

Why do sparrows need help?

At their peak in the early 1970s, there were estimated to be approximately 25 million house sparrows breeding in Britain. The number is now closer to 13 million. The question now is 'Where have all the house sparrows gone?'

In general, the house sparrow is an unadventurous sort, with most travelling no more than a few hundred yards from where they are born. This means that house sparrow populations in different areas (and habitats) may change in very different ways, as there is little interchange between different geographical populations.

This view is supported by the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) long-running surveys. In Scotland, house sparrows seem to be holding their own; the greatest declines have been in the strongholds of the south and east of England. Nation-wide, the decline in numbers became apparent in the mid 1980s; but in some places, like London, there has been a steady decrease since the 1930s. House sparrows that live in towns appear to be most in danger and this loss is continuing. Seven out of ten Cockney sparrows disappeared between 1994 and 2000.



Picture by – Tommy Holden/BTO

Why are sparrow numbers declining?

In looking for reasons for the sparrow's plight, we need to consider those occurring in towns and gardens separately from those occurring in the countryside, as the problems are almost certainly different.

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The actual reasons for loss of house sparrows in urban areas are unclear, but a number of culprits have been suggested. There are likely to be fewer nest sites, as the eaves on older houses are replaced and blocked up, and many modern houses lack eaves or other access points. Cats and sparrowhawks take some house sparrows, but their impact on sparrow populations is unknown. Changes in gardens, however, are probably an important reason for their decline. There are fewer weedy corners for birds to feed in, and there seem to be fewer insects around to feed the chicks. House sparrows also like resting and hiding in old, dense, ivy and other bushes, many of which are disappearing as gardens are 'made-over'. Development of inner-city, 'brownfield', sites may also mean that there are fewer places for the house sparrow to find food.

In the countryside, the problem is clearer. There is simply less food around for house sparrows to eat. Cereal harvesting has increased in efficiency with less spillage, and tighter hygiene regulations mean that barns and silos are sealed against birds. There are also fewer weeds, and weed seeds for them to eat.



Picture by – Tommy Holderv/BTO

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What can you do to help house sparrows?

You can help house sparrows to thrive in your garden by providing shelter, food and somewhere to nest. House sparrows shelter and roost in thick bushes and in the wall cavities of buildings. They feed mainly on small seeds, but young chicks need insects like craneflies ('daddy long-legs'), beetles, caterpillars, aphids and ants. Below are some easy ways you can help house sparrows:

1. Provide shelter

The following trees, shrubs and climbers are examples of plants that can provide the thick cover, as well as food, that house sparrows need:

- Birch, elder, spindle, hawthorn, honeysuckle, ivy, bramble and wild roses.

Lightly trim the branches of bushes in winter to encourage thick growth for nesting, but remember to delay trimming until most berries have gone. Also, avoid trimming between March and August when birds may be nesting.

2. Provide food

The following plants provide seeds, fruits or insects that are suitable for house sparrows:

- Small annual plants, often considered to be weeds, such as: chickweed, charlock, fat hen, groundsel, shepherd's purse, dandelion, plantains and vetches;
- Herbaceous plants, such as: nettle, geranium, honeysuckle and nightshade;
- Ornamental plants, such as: cotoneaster, firethorn (pyracantha), wallflower, antirrhinum, stock and borage.

When you plan changes to your garden, consider whether you can include any of these beneficial species. Leaving a small weedy patch in your garden through winter could also provide food to house sparrows and other birds.

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Lawns can provide a source of seed and insect food, if you manage them appropriately. The following guidelines should help house sparrows:

- Try to avoid intense mowing during summer. Preferably, mow fortnightly or no more than weekly;
- Maintain the grass at a height of between 3cm to 6cm. Besides retaining its 'green-ness' for longer during dry spells, this allows grasses and low growing plants such as dandelion and plantain to seed;
- Leather-jackets are insect larvae commonly found in garden lawns. These become free-flying 'daddy long-legs', which provide a vital source of protein for young house sparrows;
- In some parts of the garden, allow grass to grow to a height of 20–30cm. This provides seeds and shelter for important insects (such as grasshoppers, lacewings, caterpillars, beetles and weevils, as well as spiders);
- Leave areas of long grass during winter and try not to cut before March. This will give shelter and hibernation sites for insects;
- Rake off grass cuttings and either compost or mulch under shrubs and trees. This also encourages insects.



Picture by – John Harding/BTO

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Try to avoid or minimise the use of chemicals in your garden. Lawn treatments often kill insects and weeds and insecticides will remove vital food, such as aphids, which are important for house sparrow chicks.

Ponds also provide house sparrows with insect and plant food. Any permanent water is soon colonised by midges, and often by damselflies and dragonflies. The seeds of reed mace and rushes are eaten by house sparrows during autumn and winter.

If you provide additional seed food to hungry house sparrows, you should help them survive during periods of food shortage. Some suggestions for food are:

- Seed mixes with sunflower hearts, millet and canary. Seeds are preferred and can be provided throughout the year;
- Bird tables or hanging feeders can be used to feed house sparrows;
- Mealworms can provide extra protein for hungry chicks between May and August;
- A daily supply of fresh water for drinking and bathing is also helpful.

Health and hygiene are important to maintain house sparrow numbers. Careless provision of artificial food can increase the chances of disease spreading between birds. If you have a bird table or other feeding areas, regularly brush or sweep the area clean to ensure there is no build up of food particles or droppings. Only put out enough food to last a day or two and regularly clean bird tables and other surfaces with 10% disinfectant solution, but rinse several times to wash the chemical away. Always wear gloves and clean bird tables outdoors. Try to change house sparrows' drinking and bathing water daily, especially during warm weather.

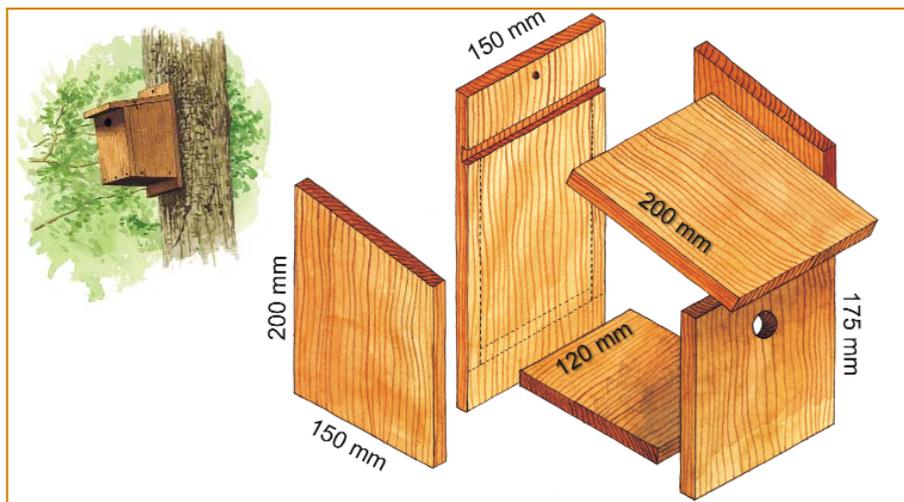
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3. Provide nesting sites

It is difficult for house sparrows to find suitable nesting sites, particularly on modern houses or older roofs that have been repaired or improved. House sparrows will build nests in thick vegetation, but seem to prefer cavities in buildings, particularly behind the fascias and soffits of roofs. House sparrows will use nest boxes, but they may be slow to move into the boxes when suitable cavities are available.



Drawings by Tim Bernhard. This image comes from the 'BTO Nestbox Guide' publication, which has further information on house sparrows. It can be ordered from BTO and costs £8.99 incl. p&p.

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The following tips should encourage house sparrows to nest on your house:

- External nest boxes should be securely fastened below the eaves of the house (or at least 3m above ground level), preferably facing an easterly direction. Avoid the direct heat of the sun and prevailing wind and rain. House sparrows breed in loose colonies, so try putting up several boxes a few feet apart. Boxes should be wooden with a 32mm diameter entrance hole. The box itself should be about 30cm tall and 15cm deep;

- When replacing fascias and soffits on older buildings, try to retain access to existing nest sites. This can be done by making a hole in the replacement material to allow house sparrows to have continued access;



Photo by Tony Jenkins/BTO

- Internal nest boxes can be incorporated behind soffits and fascias when your house is being constructed.

In spring, you can help supply nesting material to house sparrows by putting out straw, hair, fur from groomed pets, moss raked from the lawn, and other natural materials or non-synthetic fibres. Tying these materials to trees or inside hanging baskets will stop them being blown away by the wind.

Remember not to disturb birds nesting during March through to September, unless contributing to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme.

4. Provide safety from predators

Although the impact of predators on sparrow populations is unknown, measures can be taken to minimise the risks.

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When you provide food on bird tables, make access for cats difficult. Wherever possible, position the feeding tables close enough to thick, thorny cover to allow birds a quick escape, but not close enough to allow cats to pounce straight onto the table.

If you own a cat, keep it indoors when birds are most vulnerable. This period is generally the hours before sunset and after sunrise, especially between March and July, and during cold weather. Putting bells on your cat's collar will also reduce the risk of predators, but use a quick-release buckle and take care to fit the collar correctly.

Sparrows and the law

Sparrows, like all wild birds, are protected by the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981*, which implements the EC Birds Directive in Great Britain. Under the *1981 Act*, it is an offence to kill, injure or take any wild bird; take or destroy their nests or take or destroy their eggs. In addition to protecting birds from being killed or taken from the wild, it is also an offence to possess any bird or its eggs, unless you can show that they had been legally acquired.

However, if you come across a sparrow which is injured, it is not an offence to take it into your possession - provided that it is for the sole purpose of tending and releasing it when it is no longer disabled. If any sparrow you find is so seriously disabled that it has no reasonable chance of recovery again, it is not an offence to mercifully and humanely dispatch the bird.

Where can I get more information?

Further advice on how to make your garden attractive and safe for birds is available at www.rspb.org.uk

Information on garden birds and bird gardening can also be found on www.bto.org/gbw



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