

The House Sparrow

You may think the house sparrow a common bird, being the bird with the largest recorded numbers in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. However this belies the fact that their numbers have declined dramatically since the 1970s and they have been on the *Red List of Conservation Concern* since 1996. Surveys have shown that between 1977 and 2008 numbers fell by 71% in England, and that fall continues.* Paul Selby, Chair of NESST, was concerned about their plight and in 2022 called for members to survey the populations in Nether Edge and Sharrow. The NESST house sparrow group then formed, making biennial surveys since, with the third survey taking place this year.

The house sparrow is an omnivorous bird, gregarious, living in colonies and usually found near to where people live. Males are light brown and marked distinctively with chestnut, black and grey; females and young are subtly striated in light brown and grey. Their call is easily identified and is described as chirruping (cheep-cheep), individually or in noisy colonies. Fledglings are fed with insects, the quantity and quality of which partly determines survival rates. Unkempt gardens and wastelands are good sources of seeds and insects. Nests are usually found several metres above ground, often in buildings. They tend to keep away from large trees and woodland where predators such as sparrowhawks and crows might be, preferring shrubs and hedges.

Evolution and people

The house sparrow evolved 10,000 years ago into the bird that we know today. Originating in the middle east, they developed an association with humans as populations moved across to Europe along with the growth of agriculture. This relationship included the use of buildings for nesting, easy access to grain and the eating of insect pests but they were also caught as a source of food (sparrow pie!). In 1760 the house sparrow was given the scientific name of *Passer Domesticus* (sparrow of the house). House sparrows became one of the most successful species of birds and this is what makes their steep decline so concerning. Once a rural bird, house sparrows increased in population in towns and cities due to the availability of food sources and nesting sites. Buildings with eaves, roof slates, water pipes, holes in masonry and so on make good nesting sites, which shows how adaptable these birds can be.

Decline

Mid 20th century changes in farming practices, such as the removal of hedges and the use of pesticides, have had a devastating effect on farmland populations. Reasons for their decline overall may include a shortage of insect food for their fledglings, as a large proportion of insects and other invertebrates have declined and many are in danger of extinction.* Climate change, pollution and pesticides all affect insects which impact the sparrow population. Modern building practices and house repairs can block nest holes. Other factors include light pollution, nitrogen dioxide from diesel and petrol vehicles and loss of gardens and hedges.

Local action

Following the surveys, the NESST house sparrow group distributed leaflets to raise awareness and offer wildflower seeds and nest boxes in areas with house sparrow populations. These areas were targeted as sparrows live in colonies and when numbers reduce, they are vulnerable. Sparrows do not move to other areas when habitat is lost and whole colonies can disappear, so it is important to maintain the colonies we have. Recently the sparrow group changed its name to the *Biodiversity Action Group* (BAG) to reflect the wide range of actions by the group to address the reasons for the decline of the sparrows. Actions taken have included the planting of meadows, gardens and planters with native plants and flowers to attract pollinators and other insects, as boosting the insect population helps sparrows and other wildlife. Additionally a campaign against pesticides included public talks and a lobby of builders, architects and garden designers. The next survey will be between April and May this year and results will be added to our interactive map, hopefully beginning to give an indication of trends in the local sparrow population.