

# Tree Sparrow

*Passer montanus*



## Description

The Tree Sparrow is slightly smaller than its more familiar cousin the House Sparrow and has a chestnut crown.

A bird of colonial habits, it has a restricted distribution in rural districts, preferring relatively open countryside with old timber (for nest sites) and old buildings where it will nest in holes and cavities. Occasionally, they build nests of dried grass and feathers in dense bushes and will also use nest boxes.

Tree Sparrow usually have two to three broods between April and August and feed the chicks on insects from a wide range of habitats including hedges, crops and waterside vegetation.

Adults feed mainly on seeds which they seek from rotational set-aside, winter stubbles, root crops, crop margins and weed areas.

In the past, Tree Sparrow populations have fluctuated, but recently at a more alarming rate. It is likely the reason for the decline is two-fold: changing agricultural practices and loss of available nest sites, the latter being borne out by the fact that nest boxes are readily occupied.

## National Status

Patchily distributed on farmland across Britain. The main populations are now found across the Midlands and southern and eastern England. There have been irregular fluctuations in numbers. In Britain there was a high population in the 1880s to the 1930s, but numbers then decreased to a low point around 1950. Numbers then increased again from 1960 to 1978, possibly due to an influx of birds from mainland Europe. There was a decline of 85% in numbers in Britain between the two breeding surveys of 1968–72 and 1988–91, the largest decline of any common species during this period. The Tree Sparrow also decreased in range in Britain by 20% over the same period. Populations are mainly sedentary but large-scale autumnal movements occasionally occur.

## Local Status

There are known colonies at RPSB Old Moor, Birthwaite Hall Farm, Edderthorpe and other small local populations, thriving partly due to nest box provision and winter feeding. A survey in 2005 found 84 pairs breeding within the Barnsley borough.

## Legal Status

The Tree Sparrow is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 and EC Birds Directive.

## Links with other Action Plans

- HAP4 Wood Pasture and Parkland
- HAP5 Hedgerows
- HAP6 Arable Field Margins
- HAP17 Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land

### **Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline**

- Changing agricultural practices, particularly the increased use of herbicides.
- Shift from spring-sown to autumn-sown crops and the consequent loss of winter stubble fields.
- More intensive management of grassland.
- Reduction of habitat diversity on farmland due to the loss of mixed farming and increased specialisation.
- Availability of nest sites may be a limiting factor.
- The loss of Elm trees from lowland Britain removed large numbers of potential nest sites.

### **Current Local Action**

- Nest box schemes and winter feeding have been successfully implemented at RSPB Old Moor and Birthwaite Hall Farm.
- DEFRA will continue to manage Environmental Stewardship land sensitively for this species.
- A survey conducted by Barnsley Biodiversity Trust and Barnsley Bird Study Group found 84 pairs breeding in the Barnsley borough. This was published by Barnsley Biodiversity Trust, entitled, *Birds of Conservation Concern*.
- Funding from Voluntary Action Barnsley provided 165 nest boxes which were installed at sustainable locations around the Barnsley borough.
- Current survey by members of Barnsley Bird Study Group towards the forthcoming *Breeding Bird Atlas*.

### **Proposed Local Action**

- Provide and install nest boxes at suitable locations.
- Assess current coverage of DEFRA Stewardship Schemes that support Tree Sparrow options (with Natural England).
- Encourage landowners to take up a Stewardship Scheme to support Tree Sparrow (Natural England lead).
- Extract information from the *Barnsley Bird Study Group Breeding Bird Survey* to provide populations and mapping of breeding Tree Sparrow.