



HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

Introduction

The house sparrow is one of our most familiar birds, thanks to its tendency for living in close proximity to humans. It is well known particularly for its frequent cheeping and chirruping from roofs and gutters.

House sparrows *Passer domesticus* mainly nest in buildings, in cracks and crevices as well as roofs. But they may also nest in climbers on walls or in trees and shrubberies. House sparrows mainly eat seeds in winter and insects in summer. They also often feed on food scraps put out in gardens, particularly in the winter months. Chicks require a protein diet of insects in the early stages of their growth to ensure adequate development occurs.

They often form loose colonies, typically of around 10 – 20 pairs. The birds in a colony are gregarious and will often gather in bushes and shrubs to call, bathe, squabble and feed together particularly outside the breeding season.

House sparrows are resident year round and are usually faithful to a breeding area, with nesting, roosting and foraging all taking place within a small area. They are prolific breeders and usually two to four broods will be produced per year.

Fifty years ago house sparrows were very abundant everywhere in Bristol, but their distribution is now largely focussed on the outskirts of the city.

Current Status

The house sparrow is still widely distributed in the UK but has declined by around 60%. The south and east of England have been most affected by the decline. In Bristol, numbers halved between 1980 and 1990, then stabilised for five years before falling slowly again to 2003, since when they have been largely stable (evidence from Bristol Bird Watch).

As a result of this significant fall in numbers, the house sparrow is now red listed in UK Birds of Conservation Concern. Significantly it is also now listed as a UK priority species following the UK BAP review in 2007.

House sparrows are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it illegal to intentionally kill, injure or take a house sparrow, or to take, damage or destroy an active nest or its contents. The provision to control house sparrows under a general licence was removed from the Act in early 2005 in England making the species fully protected in England.

House sparrows have all but disappeared from most of the city centre, and from the inner suburbs such as Bedminster, Easton, Redland and Clifton. The greatest density is now in the outer suburbs such as Bishopston, Southmead, Withywood, Hartcliffe and Stockwood.

Current Threats

- I House sparrows need invertebrate food, especially caterpillars, for their young, and these may have declined because of changes in gardening methods, use of insecticides, herbicides and the development of new buildings on previously derelict land
- I Fledgling sparrows and their parents switch to a seed diet from July through the winter, and this may have been affected by the use of herbicides on weeds, and changes in agricultural practice including the switch to autumn cereal sowing which reduced the stubble available for winter feeding
- I Car fumes may result in a reduction in invertebrate populations on which the house sparrows rely
- I In urban areas house sparrows are scavengers for waste food, and larger species, such as feral pigeons, magpies and crows, and more recently gulls, have over the past thirty years largely replaced them
- I Reduction in nest sites through the renovation of buildings especially roofs

Current Actions

- I Bristol Bird Watch annually records the presence of house sparrows in gardens across Bristol in the winter months
- I Detailed house sparrow breeding survey undertaken of houses in Westbury on Trym and Southmead
- I Annual Bristol Breeding Bird survey measures changes in the house sparrow population in the breeding season
- I A D Phil student funded by the BTO is looking into causes of the variation in density across the city

Objective 1: Monitor house sparrow populations in Bristol

Target:

- I Develop and implement monitoring programme for house sparrows

CHAPTER 5

HOUSE SPARROW

Objective 2: Maintain existing house sparrow populations

Target:

- Seek to protect known house sparrow populations through protection and sympathetic management of locations where they occur

Objective 3: To promote a greater awareness of house sparrows

Target:

- Develop awareness raising programme including events and activities

| HOUSE SPARROW SPECIES ACTIONS | OBJECTIVE | DATE | IMPLEMENTORS |
|---|-----------|----------------|--------------------|
| Undertake regular surveys to establish the current distribution of house sparrows within Bristol | 1 | annually | BOC, BNS |
| Develop citizen science house sparrow survey and promote | 1 | 2010 | BOC, BNS, AWT, BCC |
| Identify any major roosting sites and nesting colonies in parks, allotments, cemeteries | 1 | 2010 – ongoing | BOC, BNS, BCC |
| Produce guidance notes for land managers to raise awareness of house sparrow habitat requirements and management and distribute | 2 | 2010 | BOC, BNS, BCC |
| Encourage the incorporation of nest boxes and native planting in new developments, where appropriate | 2 | ongoing | BCC, Developers |
| Develop programme of awareness raising activities including events and activities | 3 | 2010 – ongoing | BOC, BNS, AWT, BCC |