

1. House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)



Photograph: *House Sparrow*

1. Aims

- To raise awareness of the decline of the house sparrow and the need for its conservation.
- To preserve existing populations and undertake measures to raise numbers within the borough.

2. Introduction

Of all the British birds the house sparrow has the closest relationship with people and no where is this more evident than in London. Almost synonymous with urban living and the countries capital the cockney 'sparrer' or house sparrow has a place in the hearts of many Londoners. The house sparrow with its relatively tame nature and lively social behaviour is a regular visitor to garden bird tables.

In W.H Hudson's day house sparrows could be found in their thousands however the Bird Breeding Survey (BTO, JNCC and RSPB) run between 1994 and 2000 showed a different picture with a fall in sparrow numbers by as much as 59% in some parts of London.

As a native species, the house sparrow extends from North Africa through Central Europe and Central Asia, northwards beyond the Arctic Circle. It has also established in a number of other countries as a result of introduction by man. House sparrow distribution is related to human settlement and they nest mainly in buildings, in cracks and crevices as well as roofs. It also may nest in climbers and creepers on walls or in tress and shrubberies. In a good year a pair of house sparrows can raise between two and five broods. It's food sources vary from scraps and bread from garden bird tables as well as seeds

and flowers in parks and gardens. When feeding young, insects such as aphids and caterpillars are a more important part of it's diet.

3. Current Status

Until about ten years ago the house sparrow was one of the most familiar and common of urban British birds. The house sparrow population in London and the rest of the UK is declining fast. There are still between 6 and 7 million pairs of house sparrows in Britain, however, in the 1970's there were 12 million pairs^[1]. Declines in suburban and urban gardens started in about 1984 and are still continuing with reports as part of the BTO Garden Bird Feeding survey and the RSPB Wildlife Explorers Big Garden Bird Watch both showing a 50% decline since the late seventies. As a result of house sparrow populations falling by more than a half the house sparrow is now on the 'Red List of British Birds', which lists species of highest conservation concern^[2].

The London Biodiversity Partnership undertook one of the largest wildlife surveys in London named 'Where have all the sparrows gone?' which provides a detailed picture of how the house sparrow is doing in London with worrying results.

Although there is little known about the current status of house sparrows in the borough, Islington was ranked 30th within the survey with only 54% of homes that responded to the survey recording house sparrow sightings.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Species

4.1 Factors relating to food supply

Food supplies in towns and cities may have been reduced with the development of new buildings on previously derelict land. House sparrows need aphids, weevils, grasshoppers and caterpillars to feed their young and these may now be harder to find in our towns and cities.

The intensified use of pesticides and herbicides which reduces the amount of insects and weed seed food. Changes in agricultural practice such as a switch to autumn sowing of cereals and a lack of stubble as autumn and winter-feeding habitat may have an impact. Such practice would especially affect house sparrows within London particularly in late summer / autumn when the birds disperse from their nesting sites to seed-feeding sites. The reduction in Aphid numbers as a result of the effects of lead-free petrol. Competition by other birds for food could also play a role.

4.2 Availability of Nest Sites

Reduction in the availability of nest sites through the renovation of old buildings especially roofs with a reduction in access to roof space. Clearance of shrubberies in parks and removal of creepers from wall.

4.3 Population Shift

Decreased immigration of house sparrows from outside London.

4.4 Predation

The effect of predation by sparrow hawks, magpies, grey squirrels, crows, jays and the domestic cat.

4.5 Pest Control

The house sparrow is still recognised as a pest species in some quarters and is controlled legally.

4.6 Disease

A virus or salmonella infection has been suggested as this has often been attributed to declines of this scale amongst other species. Few diseased birds have ever been recorded in this country however corpses would quickly be disposed of by carrion feeders. If birds were weakened however through disease this would make them more susceptible to predation which would mean that a rise in predator numbers would have a greater effect upon their population.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal Status

Like all other native birds 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. Preventing the birds from gaining access to their nests may also be viewed as illegal by the courts. However, general licences issued under the Act (Statutory Instrument no 3010 1992) allow for the control of house sparrows by an authorised person in three specific circumstances: for the prevention of serious damage to agriculture, for the preservation of public health/air safety, and to conserve wild birds. An authorised person is usually the landowner or occupier or his/her agent. In the opinion of the RSPB nuisance is not a legitimate reason for control, and as such a roof nest cannot legally be removed unless it can be demonstrated that removal was undertaken under the terms of one of the government licences.

5.2 National Action

5.2.1 British Trust for Ornithology

The BTO is currently running a house sparrow appeal with the aim of a new nationwide sparrow survey, volunteer-led surveys in a range of key areas and supporting detailed scientific research. The BTO also carries out the Common Bird Census, Garden Bird Feeding Survey and Breeding Birds Survey which is carried out jointly with the BTO/JNCC/RSPB and aims to

keep track of bird breeding populations of widespread bird species across the UK.

The BTO has also been working nationally to improve knowledge of the current status of the house sparrow with a research project funded by DEFRA.

5.2.2 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

The RSPB carried out the a survey of house sparrows across the UK called Sparrow Watch, undertaken in 2003, to find out where house sparrow nesting sites are. The RSPB also runs the Big Garden Bird Watch getting people all over the country to record bird numbers during 2 weeks in January. As part of this the Big Schools Bird Watch has also been initiated both of which aim to get as many people as possible to watch birds.

5.3 Local Action

Launched at the Islington Ecology Centre, the London Biodiversity Partnership undertook a survey of the status of house sparrows in London. Nearly 12,000 people filled in the survey forms between 18th June and 19th July 2002 providing information about house sparrows in 9,172 homes and 3,698 other places in London. More analysis of the results is taking place and further studies are planned with the aim of directing future action in London

As part of this a number of awareness raising events were undertaken by the London Borough of Islington Nature Conservation Team including schools workshops, distribution of house sparrow information material and borough wide poetry competition. The NCT has also worked with a number of youth groups as part of the CSV Action Earth award scheme in producing House Sparrow boxes for Islington's local nature reserves. The NCT has also produced supplementary planning guidance for sustainable building construction including the incorporation of artificial nesting sites for birds such as the house sparrow.

The London BAP has a Species Action Plan for the house sparrow.

The London Wildlife Trust has carried out a garden bird watch scheme and the London Natural History Society is conducting a monitoring programme of house sparrows in London gardens.

The RSPB offers schools visits, focused on sparrows (Charlie the Sparrow Detective) and other London Wildlife, through their London Sparrows Schools Liaison Officer. A 'Sparrow Champion' network is also being established across the London Boroughs, with the aim of putting up between 400 and 2000 nest boxes across London for detailed studies. This is being undertaken as part of the City Birds Project delivered by RSPB.

5.4 Advice

Further advice can be sought from English Nature, the RSPB, the British Trust for Ornithology, London Wildlife Trust and the London Natural History Society.

6. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Objective 1

Encourage the spread of the house sparrow population through the provision of suitable nesting sites and food sources.

Target

Carry out a house sparrow nesting box scheme by 2007.

Actions	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Produce guidance notes for land managers' inc. schools on retaining and increasing potential natural nest sites for house sparrows. To include guidance on pesticide reduction and alternatives.	2005	NCT	RSPB IWG PAN GL AA
Encourage local residents to provide appropriate food sources in feeders and set up park feeding stations.	2005	NCT	GR
Design a nest box scheme to run across the borough and to involve local schools and other educational centres to promote the idea of 'Sparrow Champions'.	2006	NCT	RSPB CEA ILEA GR
Set up network of 'Sparrow Champions' within the borough to undertake sparrow monitoring	2006	NCT	RSPB IWG GR

Objective 2

To promote a greater awareness of house sparrows and their decline locally and nationally.

Target

Produce public information about the house sparrow for Islington by 2005.

Actions	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Conduct a number of awareness raising events, activities and workshops highlighting what residents can do to help the house sparrow – to include working with schools.	Ongoing	NCT	RSPB IWG GR

To disseminate existing information and resources on the House Sparrow and how residents can help. Inc information on the LBI website.	2005	NCT	RSPB IWG GR
Encourage the public to report sightings of house sparrows as part of the London-wide campaign and the 'Sparrow Champions' programme.	2005	NCT	RSPB IWG GR
Promote and undertake an Islington-wide house sparrow survey as a follow up to the survey undertaken in 2002 via schools, community centres, local press and other outlets.	2006	NCT	RSPB LWT FCF SCG GR IWG

Objective 3

Monitor existing house sparrow populations within Islington.

Target

Maintain a database compatible with the LWT system for recording and monitoring in Islington by 2006.

Actions	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Undertake regular surveys to establish the current distribution of house sparrows within the borough.	2005 Ongoing	NCT	FCF SCG CCG GR IWG
Increase the numbers of volunteers locally able to carry out surveys through training and support	2005	NCT	FCF SCG CCG IGR IWG
Ensure that the nest box scheme includes monitoring	2006	NCT	FCF SCG CCG GR IWG
Compile annual report and disseminate survey results	2006	NCT	FCF SCG CCG GR IWG

Links with other Habitat and Species Action Plans

Habitats

Private Gardens
Parks and Open Spaces
School Grounds

Species

Hedgehog
Stag Beetle
Bats

Links with National and Regional Policies

- Islington Unitary Development Plan
- London Borough of Islington Supplementary Planning Guidance on Sustainable Building Construction
- London Borough of Islington Sustainable Planting Policy
- London Borough of Islington Grounds Maintenance Contract
- London Borough of Islington Tree Policy
- Local Nature Reserve site Management Plans
- London Biodiversity Action Plan, Vol 2: House Sparrow Action Plan
- PPG 9 (Planning Policy Guidance: Nature Conservation, 1994)

Key References

1. House Sparrow Information Sheet. British Trust for Ornithology 2003.
2. Population status of birds in the UK - Birds of conservation concern: 2002-2007: Red list species - high conservation concern. Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Abbreviations

BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
CCG	Culpepper Community Garden
CEA	Cambridge Education Authority
CIC	City and Islington College
DEFRA	Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
FCF	Freightliners City Farm
GL	Glendales Grounds Management
GCI	Groundwork Camden and Islington
GLA	Greater London Authority
HAP	Habitat Action Plan
AA	Islington Allotment Association
IWG	Islington Wildlife Group
LBI	London Borough of Islington
PPP	Planning, Policy and Performance
LWT	London Wildlife Trust
DLO	Direct Labour Organisation
GR	Islington Greenspace Rangers
SU	Islington Greenspace Sustainability Team
NCT	Islington Nature Conservation Team
JNCC	Join Nature Conservation Committee
PAN	Pesticides Action Network
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SCG	Sunnyside Community Garden
SAP	Species Action Plan