



15 Tree Sparrow species action plan

15.1 Introduction

The Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* is a similar bird to the more familiar House Sparrow but with a chestnut cap rather than a grey one, black spots on the ear coverts and a neat black bib. It is a bird of open farmland with well spaced mature deciduous trees in hedges or on roadsides, isolated small woods, or pollarded willows along slow flowing rivers and ditches. In winter it gathers in mixed flocks with finches and buntings on farmland stubbles and other weedy areas. The Tree Sparrow is a colonial nester, mostly in holes in trees but it will use nestboxes. It feeds on small seeds and insects.

Along with many other farmland birds the Tree Sparrow has declined sharply in recent years, disappearing from many of its former haunts. The reasons for this are unclear but are thought to be linked to the ever increasing intensity of agricultural practices.

15.2 Current status

Nationally, Tree Sparrows have declined by 86% on farmland over the last 20 years. This decline is mirrored in Hertfordshire with the number of occupied tetrads (2 x 2 km grid squares) declining from 88% during 1967-73 to 35% in 1988-92 (Smith *et al*, 1993). It is estimated that only around 320 pairs remain thinly spread throughout the county. Many recent records

come from the St Albans area, although this may reflect observer bias.

15.3 Current factors causing current decline or loss

The following factors may be involved in the decline of Tree Sparrows.

15.3.1 Changes in agricultural practices

The move towards autumn rather than spring sowing has reduced the amount of winter stubbles and thus the available food sources.

15.3.2 Increasing use of pesticides

The increasing use of insecticides and herbicides on farmland has reduced the quantity of arable weeds and insects. Fat-hen is thought to be an important food source (T. James pers. comm.), but this has declined rapidly.

15.3.3 Inappropriate hedgerow management

Many hedges have lost their traditional function of stock control. Management often means little more than keeping them short, neat and tidy, far removed from the tall bushy hedges favoured by Tree Sparrows. In addition, hedgerow and scattered farmland trees are increasingly neglected. There has been a major loss of mature hedgerow Elms due to Dutch Elm disease. Dead and veteran trees with suitable nesting cavities are being felled but not being replaced. The maximum occurrence of Tree Sparrow coincided with the wide availability of dead elms about 1970, though there had been a dramatic increase 10 years previously, before that outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease.

15.3.4 Population fluctuations

There have previously been several long-term fluctuations in Tree Sparrow populations. It has been suggested that UK populations reflect those on the continent, being supported by immigration when continental numbers are high (Summers-Smith, 1989).

15.4 Current action

The RSPB, in association with FWAG, ADAS and the Game Conservancy, has published a series of information sheets on the management of farmland birds, including the Tree Sparrow.

Nest boxes have been erected at two key sites, Beech Farm, St Albans and Coursers Road, London Colney. Studies of breeding Tree Sparrows are being carried out and discussions have been had with local farmers on improvement to habitats at these sites.

15.5 Tree Sparrow Action Plan

Objectives, actions and targets

Objective 1: To protect and reverse the decline of the Tree Sparrow in the County

Target: a) Relocate known existing population by 2011
b) Double the breeding population by 2008

Action code	Action	Target start date	Target end date	Lead partner	Other partners
TS/A/1.1	Set up a Tree Sparrow Working Group to oversee the review of the species action plan	2003	2003	HBC	BTO, RSPB, HCC Minerals, HBRC, landowners
TS/A/1.2	Liaise with the national Tree Sparrow projects to find best available information for winter feeding and nest box schemes	2001	2003	HBC	RSPB, Rutland Water
TS/A/1.3	Monitor the breeding success and maintain winter feeding stations at Coursers Farm and Tyttenhanger Farm	2000	Annually	HBC	
TS/A/1.4	Survey for and identify other potential breeding areas (including habitat quality) in the location from Shenleybury eastward to Colney Heath	2003	Ongoing	HBC	Volunteers
TS/A/1.5	Draw up a relocation strategy to protect the only known breeding colony (Coursers Farm)	2004	2005	Tree Sparrow Working Group	
TS/A/1.6	Contact relevant landowners to provide habitat management advice. Discuss the potential of Environmental Stewardship; Entry Level and Higher Level Schemes	2004	Ongoing	HBC	Farmland HAP Group, FWAG, CMS
TS/A/1.7	Set up three new nest box schemes and winter feeding stations at appropriate sites	2005	2008	HBC	Landowners

Relevant Action Plans:

Hertfordshire Plans

Farmland

National Plans

Tree Sparrow; Ancient and/or species-rich hedgerows; Arable and horticulture Habitat Statement

Abbreviations (Partners)

BTO – British Trust for Ornithology

CMS – Countryside Management Service

FWAG – Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

HBC – Herts Bird Club

HBRC – Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

HCC – Hertfordshire County Council

RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Contact:

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