

# Spare a Space for Sparrows!

## How to keep House Sparrows thriving ...

We grew up with sparrows everywhere. We didn't give them a second thought. Nowadays they are among the fastest-disappearing species in Britain. But why? And what can we do about it?

The national distribution picture shows that here and there large pockets of house sparrows carry on as normal, while in many other places they have decline steeply or have disappeared completely.

There are various pieces of research underway, to discover why they are declining. An article in 'The Independent' newspaper (6 February 2006) implicated a shortage of live food (insect larvae) which are the sole food of the sparrow nestlings.

## What sparrows need

Close observation of our local sparrows has led us to identify a group of features, all of which they seem to need in order to breed successfully:

### 1) Nesting sites

Sparrows like to nest in nooks and crannies at the top of old buildings, or under certain kinds of roofing tiles, or behind loose slates or loose flashing.

- Older houses that have not been re-pointed recently often have nooks and crannies, missing bricks, or gaps under the eaves where sparrows can build their nests. Sparrows will also build under the edge of modern roofs where the roofing tiles are *curved* and the voids under the curves have not been blocked.
- Modern roofs with *flat* tiles are no good, as they do not provide any spaces under which sparrows can make their nests.
- Recently re-pointed buildings are also generally no good, as the builders neatly fill in all the nooks and crannies.
- Special communal house sparrow nest boxes are available from the on-line bird food supply companies. The best ones are the 'Schwegler' or 'Woodcrete' types of box made out of a concrete-like substance, as these do not overheat in hot weather. However they are very heavy and tricky to fix high up under the eaves of a house. For this reason we are trying out a wooden one.

### 2) Dense hedges

Sparrows love to sit inside dense hedges for hours on end, chirping loudly. There they can hide from cats and other predators such as magpies and sparrowhawks. Almost any kind of thick hedge will do, including clipped privet hedges, and clipped conifer hedges, preferably at least 2 metres high. Dense twiggy hawthorns (bushes or small trees) or Pyracanthas are also ideal, as is thick, tall ivy against a wall. Ivy is an excellent plant for wildlife in general.

### 3) A source of live food

Invertebrates (small caterpillars etc) are vital for the young during the breeding season.

- Although adult sparrows seem to eat almost anything, their nestlings must have invertebrate food such as small caterpillars, small worms, or centipedes. The young cannot survive on seeds, and breeding attempts will fail if not enough live food is available in the vicinity.
- Over-tidy gardening and the use of chemical sprays by gardeners (including organic sprays, if the result is a caterpillar-free garden) spells doom for young sparrows.
- In the longer term, gardening in a nature-friendly way, encouraging through your management techniques the maximum range of ecological niches, and allowing a natural balance to develop throughout the garden, is very good news for sparrows (and many other birds). It allows you to cut down or eliminate the need for spraying and will encourage a diverse range of invertebrates.
- In the short term, putting out dishes of mealworms during nesting time can be a lifeline for sparrows. Nesting time is from April to July. If you are squeamish, you can obtain dried mealworms (which don't wriggle around!!) from the online bird-food suppliers. Normally we simply put a dish of dried mealworms on the lawn. Within 10 minutes, our sparrows will have cleared the dish, carrying the mealworms in their beaks back to their nests to feed their young.
- The bird organisations such as the RSPB and British Trust for Ornithology also recommend putting out high-energy seed mixes for adult sparrows during the breeding season, especially if your local sparrow population seems to be on the decline. The adults can then feed themselves readily and concentrate their efforts on locating invertebrate food for their young.

### Avoid feeding bread or whole peanuts

Dried bread is a poor food for birds, as it is low in nourishment and difficult for some birds to digest. Peanuts are also not recommended by the bird organisations unless they are finely chopped, as some birds can choke on them .

### The Value of native hedging shrubs

Hawthorns, Hazel, Birch, Willows such as Goat Willow, and Oak all provide sources of spring caterpillars. Oaks are excellent in this respect, supporting a large caterpillar population, which is why wildlife gardeners advocate them so much, but it must be the wild oaks (*Quercus robur* or *Q. petraea*). All of these species can be grown in hedges and pruned or coppiced (cut to the ground) during winter if they grow too large. This won't harm them and they will soon grow again. This is one case where native species are distinctly more valuable than introduced ones. For example, the commonly naturalised Holm Oak (*Q. ilex*) and Turkey Oak (*Q. cerris*) which are found in a lot of city parks and gardens, don't support nearly as many kinds of caterpillar.

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