

## **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**

To halt the current decline in Tree Sparrow population, maintaining the population at 1996/97 levels as a minimum.

To restore the population to 1970 levels by 2020.

## **15.6 PROPOSED ACTIONS**

### **15.6.1 Policy and Legislation**

**TS1.** Promote increased take-up of hedgerow incentive schemes, particularly in areas where Tree Sparrows are present.

**Action:** MAFF, RSPB, FRCA, HMWT, WCCF, CMS, FWAG.

### **15.6.2 Site Safeguard and Management**

**TS2.** Identify areas with concentrations of breeding and / or wintering Tree Sparrows by 1998.

**Action:** HertsBC, HMWT.

### **15.6.3 Species Management and Protection**

**TS3.** Significant remaining colonies to be encouraged through the provision of nestboxes by 1999. Local groups of birdwatchers to be encouraged to implement such schemes.

**Action:** HertsBC, RSPB groups.

### **15.6.4 Advisory**

**TS4.** Landowners should be made aware of any significant nesting colonies by 2001 and given advice on maintenance of nesting and wintering habitat if required. If new colonies are discovered, advice should be given to landowners within 1 year.

**Action:** HertsBC, HMWT, CMS, FWAG, RSPB.

**TS5.** Farmland conservation advisers in the county to be made aware of the Tree Sparrow Action Plan, its objectives and the requirements of Tree Sparrows. Advisers should promote hedgerow and farmland tree conservation in target areas.

**Action:** RSPB.

### **15.6.5 Future Research and Monitoring**

**TS6.** Birdwatchers to be encouraged to submit all records of Tree Sparrows to the county bird recorder.

**Action:** HertsBC, RSPB groups.

**TS7.** The current level of monitoring within the Breeding Bird Survey in Hertfordshire should be maintained if not enhanced.

**Action:** HertsBC, RSPB groups.

**TS8.** Bird ringers to be encouraged to carry out studies of breeding Tree Sparrows, for example the British Trust for Ornithology's Nest Record Scheme, in order to increase information on the species' ecology.

**Action:** HertsBC, RSPB groups.

**TS9.** Studies of the habitat around surviving breeding colonies and/or wintering flocks to be initiated, by 2000, to ascertain detailed habitat requirements.

**Action:** HertsBC.

#### **15.6.6 Communication and Publicity**

**TS10.** Raise awareness of the plight of the Tree Sparrow and other farmland birds by the publication of information leaflets, articles, press-releases and events.

**Action:** RSPB, BTO, HMWT.

**TS11.** Organise a conference in 1998 to promote work on the bird species targeted through the local biodiversity action plan.

**Action:** HertsBC.