

TREE SPARROW

Breeding Guidelines

Nicholas Watts, at Vine House Farm, has had great success during the last five years in attracting Tree Sparrows to his farm. The breeding population has rapidly increased from 65 young in 2010, to 900 birds being ringed in 2016.



Here Nicholas describes what has happened to the Tree Sparrow population and what measures should be taken to provide the right habitat and conditions to ensure successful breeding.

A Woodland Species

Slightly smaller than a House Sparrow and also less associated with human habitation, the Tree Sparrow is a bird of woodland edges and hedgerows. Along with its smaller size and generally different habitat, Tree Sparrows are easy to distinguish from House Sparrows by their black spot on each cheek. In addition, both sexes are virtually identical. The population and range of the species has suffered a huge decline in recent decades. Tree Sparrows are now absent from the south west and are mainly found in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Durham, Cumbria, Northumberland and various parts of Scotland. In the 1970s, I can remember Tree Sparrows everywhere, as there were more insects around and more seeds in the winter for them to feed on. There were also more old farm buildings around where they could find crevices to nest in. In the 1980s the population crashed, but if we look after them I believe we can bring them back.



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Red Data Species

Tree Sparrows are a red data species. This means they are, or have been, in severe decline. The reason for this decline is because the British countryside is no longer suitable for them due to less insects and lack of winter seed, which results in their food running out at some point in the year. If you don't already have Tree Sparrows, you probably never will, unless you take measures to attract them.



Tree Sparrow Dispersal

All young Tree Sparrows disperse from their natal site; in the autumn they will be roaming the countryside, initially to feed, but later in the winter to find a place to breed. They will disperse a minimum of three miles and we have had a recovery from 60 miles away - proving they can disperse quite far.



Red Millet

The favourite food of the Tree Sparrow is Red Millet. The best way of providing this seed is to hang a feeder near a prickly hedge. This means nearly touching the hedge or actually placed in it. We have a feeder only six metres from a hawthorn hedge which has been completely ignored, even when other feeders closer to the hedge have been emptied. This prickly hedge would ideally need to be near a pond or a watercourse, with the addition of Tree Sparrow nesting boxes. These nest boxes should have a 28mm or 32mm hole and placed in a position that does not face the midday sun.

The decline of the Tree Sparrow

One of the reasons for the Tree Sparrows' decline is the lack of invertebrates in our countryside. Ponds, or watercourses, and native bushes together will produce more insects than either on their own. Couple this with Red Millet and nest boxes and this should attract any passing Tree Sparrow. Unfortunately, only the Tree Sparrow knows if there are enough invertebrates in an area to rear a family. They may have already visited your site and made the decision it would be unsuitable. They are not a bird that stands out in a crowd; in fact I would say that they are quite secretive, so you may never see them visit.



Tree Sparrow Colony

At Vine House Farm, I ringed 300 nestlings in 2014 and 500 nestlings, from 65 nest boxes, in 2015. Resulting from this, we put a further 35 nest boxes up in Autumn 2015, which meant ringing around 900 nestlings in 2016. I'm delighted to say that a number of people have now reported back that, after following these guidelines, they now have Tree Sparrows.

Act now to increase population

If you want to see Tree Sparrows, then don't delay. Tree Sparrows roam the countryside during autumn and winter looking for somewhere to make their home. The sooner the four requirements of a diverse hedge, Red Millet, nest box and a water source are available, the sooner you will see Tree Sparrows. A householder cannot be expected to create enough habitat to attract Tree Sparrows but if you think there is enough existing habitat around you, the addition of nest boxes and feeding Red Millet could well attract them.

"The Tree Sparrow population will continue to decline unless we act by offering more breeding habitats."

Nicholas Watts



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