



House Sparrow



Aims of the House Sparrow Action Plan

- Raise awareness in Lambeth of the decline in house sparrow populations and the importance of the house sparrow as a cultural emblem for London and the UK.
- Assist national programmes in establishing the cause(s) of decline in the population of house sparrows and, if possible, contribute to measures to halt or reverse this decline.

A) The house sparrow – the ‘Cockney Sparrer’

Until recently the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) was one of the commonest birds in London and a regular on garden bird tables. The ‘Cockney sparrer’ has been a favourite with Londoners, with its lively social behaviour and tame nature. The house sparrow’s distribution is related to patterns of human settlement.

House sparrows traditionally take bread and scraps from bird tables as well as seeds of grasses and flowers in parks and gardens, brownfield sites or road and railside land. However, when feeding its young, insects such as aphids and caterpillars become significant. In towns, house sparrows nest mainly in buildings in roofs, cracks and crevices, or amongst creepers on walls and in shrubbery or trees. Under good conditions, sparrows raise up to 5 broods per year, although 2-3 is more typical.

B) House sparrows in Lambeth

There is substantial evidence that the once abundant house sparrow has declined dramatically in London in recent years, having disappeared or become far less common in places where once abundant. The decline in Lambeth has probably mirrored this citywide phenomenon. A number of surveys in London indicated a clear decline in house sparrow numbers or distribution. Late autumn bird counts carried out in Kensington Gardens dating back to the 1920s show that in 1925, 2,603 birds were recorded but by 1948 the count had fallen to 885.

For the next 20-30 years, the Kensington records suggest a continuing decline, from 544 birds in 1975 to just 81 in 1995, with a fall of around 85% between 1975 and 1995 - just 8 birds were recorded in the October 2000 autumn bird count. There is little doubt the same pattern has been occurring in many other London Boroughs, Lambeth included.

The National Breeding Birds Survey showed a significant decline of 7% between 1994 and 2002 in Britain in house sparrow populations. Within London, the BBS decline was even more substantial, with a fall of about 70% between 1994-2002 - the highest decline for any English Region. When the survey began in 1994 the house sparrow was the most numerous species in the London samples.

By 1999 it had been overtaken by feral pigeon, wood pigeon, blackbird, carrion crow and starling. By 2002 statistics from the Common Birds Census and Breeding Bird Survey show that over 25 years the decline in the UK population of house sparrow had reached over 60% and the species was placed on the Red List of Species of Conservation Concern.

C) Why do we need an Action Plan for the house sparrow?

A number of factors have been put forward to account for changes in the London and UK sparrow population, possibly acting in combination to drive the decline.

A reduction in insect food supply for young house sparrows in early spring may be a major factor in house sparrow decline. There is also a theory that lead-free petrol might contain chemicals which reduce the supply of aphids and other invertebrates.

Changes in agricultural practice might affect London's house sparrow population especially in late summer/autumn, when birds leave nesting territories in residential areas and move off in flocks to more rural or suburban locations. Changes in agricultural practice such as a switch to autumn sowing of cereals and lack of stubble may have some impact.

In both London and the suburbs there has been a reduction in brownfield land in recent decades. Given the importance of wasteland in providing a resource for seed-bearing plants, there may be a net reduction in the available autumn seed supply at a critical time for house sparrows.

House sparrow declines may also relate to recent increases in predation by sparrowhawk and magpie in cities and urban areas, however, no link has been proven. Another significant predator is the domestic cat.

However, no evidence of a significant increase in the cat population, or an increase in the number of attacks or kills by cats on house sparrows, has been forthcoming so far to justify this as a cause.

Declines in house sparrow numbers have been blamed on either a new or a recurrent disease. A virus or Salmonella infection is suggested, more research and evidence on this as a cause of London house sparrow population declines still needs to be undertaken.

Changes in availability of nest sites, driven by changes in roof design may be an issue in some areas of older housing undergoing renovation, as modern roof repairs prevent access to the roof space for birds. In addition, roofs are subject to pesticide treatment and this may also have an effect.

Although the house sparrow is still recognised as a pest species in some quarters and is controlled legally, there is not thought to be an appreciable amount of control undertaken in London at present.

Changes to gardens is probably an important factor in the decline of house sparrows as gardens are 'tidied up' and lost to provide parking. This means that there are fewer weedy corners providing seed food, and fewer old bushes and rambling ivy providing roosting cover and nest sites.

D) What is the legal status of the house sparrow?

House sparrows are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird. It is an offence under the same legislation to intentionally take, damage or destroy the eggs, young or nest of a house sparrow while being built or in use. It is therefore essential to ensure nests are not destroyed if hedge trimming or tree felling has to be carried out in the breeding season.



E) What will the House Sparrow Action Plan do?

Objective 1. We will work to help understand key factors affecting the population and distribution of house sparrows in Lambeth, contributing to and supporting London and UK-wide research and surveys. A programme of scientifically valid research to explain the decline in house sparrow populations will be delivered by 2010.

Objective 2. We will involve local people in projects and activities to raise awareness of house sparrows, including commissioning and completing a Borough survey by the end of 2006.

F) Who is involved in the House Sparrow Action Plan?

1. Partnerships

The Lead Partner for the Lambeth House Sparrow Action Plan is Lambeth Council's Parks and Greenspaces Business Unit (Lambeth Parks).

The Lead Community Partner would be the Central London Local Group of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and/or British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Other Partners include the London Wildlife Trust, Greater London Authority, London Natural History Society and the Council's Grounds Maintenance Contractor.

2. Contact for information

For more information on the Lambeth House Sparrow Action Plan, including copies of this plan in paper or electronic format, please contact:

Dr Iain Boulton, Environmental Education Officer

Lambeth Parks & Greenspaces

4th Floor Blue Star House, 234-244 Stockwell Road, London SW9 9SP

Tel: 020 7926 6209; **Fax:** 020 7926 6201; **email:** iboulton@lambeth.gov.uk

3. Further information and advice

Further advice on the house sparrow, its ecology and conservation, and the management of habitats to protect the house sparrow and other British bird species, can be found on the following websites.

- DEFRA (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/resprog/findings/sparrow/chapter3.pdf>)
- RSPB Sparrow Watch (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/sparrowwatch/>)
- London Wildlife Trust (<http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/>)
- Greater London Authority – House Sparrow Survey Findings (http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=1572)
- "Wild About Gardens" (<http://www.wildaboutgardens.org/>)
- British Trust for Ornithology (<http://www.bto.org/gbw/HOUSP/>)
- BBC Nature – (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/252.shtml>)

