

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

House sparrows are resident throughout the UK, living in groups often first noticed by their noisy cheeping. They live for 3-4 years (occasionally for much longer), mate for life and often return to the same nest site every year, building nests quite close together of dry grass lined with feathers and hair in holes, crevices or hedges. They will also use nestboxes. Between April and August each pair may lay 2-3 clutches of 2-5 eggs. The young are fed on invertebrates, including aphids, caterpillars, beetles and grasshoppers. When these are scarce, seeds and vegetable matter are also given, but the adults rarely travel more than 60-80metres from the nest site. Young birds leave the nest after 14-16 days, but the parents continue to feed them until they are fully independent at about 4 weeks. They then often form small flocks. Adult birds are mainly seed eaters but they also eat insects. According to the RSPB, UK house sparrow numbers fell 71% between 1977-2008. In urban areas experiments have shown that lack of invertebrates for birds in the nest is one factor, but although providing supplementary mealworms improved the numbers of fledging birds, the numbers surviving to breed the following year only showed marginal improvements even when seeds were supplied. Research is ongoing, with a reduction in colony numbers noted to coincide with areas where air pollution from vehicle emissions is high.

55 records were submitted for the 2018 survey, from many parts of the borough of which 7 reported that they had started seeing house sparrows again following a gap when none had been seen for a number of years. 1 resident from Beckenham stated that 2018 was the first time she had seen them since moving into her current house 14 years ago, another reported, '1st time in years'. Residents from West Wickham recorded 'the first siting for 10 years', 'the first for a very long time' and 'Yes they are coming back'. A population in Leaves Green, Biggin Hill has grown to over 30. So may be some good news here. Records included 20 from West Wickham – thanks, in part, to an article in the residents association newsletter, but there were also 6 from Orpington, 5 from Beckenham and records from Penge East Station, Petts Wood, South Norwood, Norman Park, St. Paul's Cray, Downe, Hayes, Coney Hall, Chislehurst, Gravel Road, Lovibonds Ave., Crown Lane, near Hoblingwell Wood and near Sundridge Park. In 2019 short articles asking for records of priority species in the London Borough of Bromley, including house sparrow, will be submitted to some residents association newsletters.

Threats to House Sparrow

Reduction in invertebrates for developing young.

Loss of habitat for both adult birds (loss of long grass providing seeds) and for invertebrates which provide food for young (loss of *native hedgerow and tree species).

Reduction in availability of 'weed' seeds due to herbicide use and frequently mown turf.

Loss of nesting sites: reduction of scrub & hedgerows, over-trimming of hedges, tidying up.

Improved house insulation – loss of nesting opportunities in eaves etc.

Air pollution

Measures to help House Sparrow in Bromley

- Increased planting of *native species; shrubs, trees and other plants to increase invertebrate numbers, e.g planting of *native species rich hedgerows, planting/encouraging the growth of native species in gardens.
- More and larger *wild areas in local parks, school and sports grounds and gardens, including long grass, to provide invertebrates and seeds.
- Maintain some areas of scrub and manage climbing plants to provide multiple nesting sites.

- Provide nest boxes: note the entrance hole needs to have a slightly wider diameter than that of blue tits – i.e 32 mm rather than 30mm. For instructions to make and site sparrow boxes (you need more than one as they live in colonies), see www.bto.org/sites/default/files/house_sparrow_nest_box_plan.pdf
- Link wild areas via thick hedgerows, scrub and/or rough grassland.
- Decrease pesticide and herbicide use and encourage others to do the same.
- Feed birds in your garden. If you know you have sparrows nearby, put out seeds and suet balls for adult birds, mealworms during the nesting season. They will feed on the ground or from a table.
- If you have a cat, keep it indoors between dusk and dawn and use a collar with a bell or ultrasonic device.

*More invertebrates in the UK are adapted to feed on native plants than non-native plants so these are more valuable for wildlife.

Reference, and to find out more, see RSPB website at www.rspb.org.uk

Bromley Biodiversity Partnership Species & Habitats Subgroup
January 2019