

## Current Status - UK and Local

UK Biodiversity Status: High Conservation Concern – on RSPB's Red List of species because of a rapid decline in its UK breeding population: >50% over the last 25 years.

LBAP partnership area status: Local Priority Species.

The House Sparrow is a resident breeding bird in the UK, which used to be very common in both urban and agricultural areas. The bird's close association with human beings has become one of its most distinctive features: it is often viewed as a creature exploiting our wastefulness. The House Sparrow's use of habitats created by human beings suggests that it is a versatile and productive species, which would be expected to be thriving today. Indeed its estimated 2.8 million to 4.9 million pairs breeding in the UK looks like a healthy population compared with many bird species. On the other hand, the UK population was estimated at 9.5 million in the 1950s and this was reckoned to have risen to 12 million by the early 1970s. Clearly there has been a nationwide population crash (of the order of 62%) in the past 25 years.

Local experts suggest that the House Sparrow population crash occurred earlier in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. The marginal increase in Scotland recorded between 1994 and 2006 by the BTO's Breeding Birds survey is viewed as representing a minor recovery from a dangerously low population base. No systematic population surveys of House Sparrows have been published for Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde. Anecdotal reports suggest, however, that there have been selective declines at a local level, with observers claiming that House Sparrows have disappeared from previously well populated urban and suburban haunts in particular. These perceptions are reinforced by survey results, in that the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey has shown dramatic declines in suburban Glasgow. In fact, a long term decline of almost 98% has been observed in suburban Glasgow, from 4.9 birds/ha in 1959 to less than 0.1 per ha in 1997 (*Summers-Smith 1999 Current status of the House Sparrow in Britain. British Wildlife, 10: 381-386*). Overall, it can be concluded that the Local Biodiversity Action Plan area shares the acute population decline which has been particularly well recorded in London.

The Steering Group has started to collect and compile information about known House Sparrow

colonies. Whilst the data remains very patchy so far, there is a suggestion that some nesting "hot spots" persist in the LBAP area.

## Ecology and Management

The House Sparrow's ecology is relatively well documented. They nest in loose colonies and exhibit a strong preference for nesting in holes or cavities in built structures. They also exhibit strong fidelity towards nest sites and breeding partners, which could be a factor limiting their ability to colonise suitable habitat when it is created outside existing colonies' home ranges.

Nestlings are fed on aphids, caterpillars, weevils and grasshoppers. By the time they fledge, however, seeds and grain become the most important foods. Such food requirements suggest that a successful breeding colony needs a relatively complex mosaic of vegetation types within easy foraging distance of the nest sites. Fledged young are unable to feed themselves for about a week, so parental feeding continues for up to a fortnight and is usually carried out by the male as females start preparing for the next brood of eggs to be laid.

Once independent, the young gather in large flocks and these flocks move to areas with plentiful seed supplies and other food sources, e.g. waste ground, hayfields. Later, flocks move on to cereal crop fields, if available, to feed on ripening grain. Here they are joined by adult birds once they have completed nesting. By October, however, nesting colonies are starting to reform, with any adults which fail to return being replaced by juvenile birds.

Multiple broods and an ability to take advantage of nest sites and food sources created by people suggest that this adaptable species should be thriving, like other species which live commensally with human beings. On the other hand, there is evidence that the House Sparrow's adopted habitats have been changing in recent decades and that fewer of these scruffy patchwork mosaics of habitat are now available for nesting colonies in urban or rural areas. Agricultural production is also much more efficient, providing flocks with fewer opportunities to forage for cereal grain, in particular.

## Factors causing loss or decline



Inverclyde  
Renfrewshire  
East Renfrewshire  
LBAP



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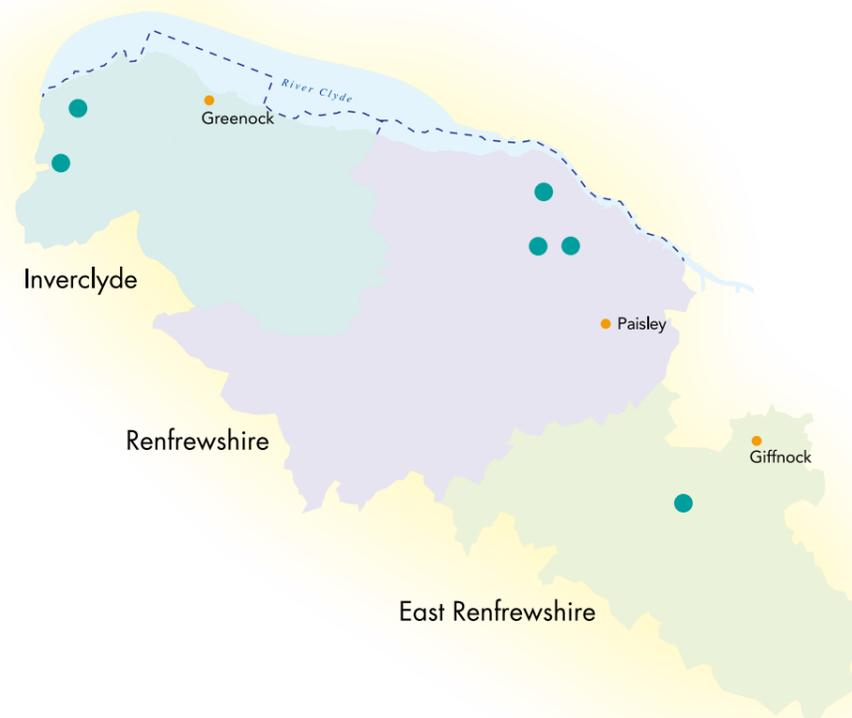
# HOUSE SPARROW

*Passer domesticus*

The House Sparrow is a small brown and grey bird. The male is more striking, with a prominent black bib and eye mask, plus a chocolate hood which is divided in half by a broad grey band running from the beak to the nape of its neck. Length 14cm, Weight 34g, Wingspan 24 cm.

The House Sparrow's behaviour is quite unwary. Constantly chirping, they move about in boisterously noisy groups. Their long association with people means that they rarely hide from view and will hop confidently amongst people's feet if suitable food is lying on the ground.

## DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSE SPARROWS



Across the UK a number of factors have been cited as potentially contributing towards the dramatic decline in House Sparrow populations. These factors can be grouped under four main headings:

- ★ Reduced food supplies, particularly of aphids which are an essential part of the young nestlings' diet in early spring.
- ★ Reduced aphid numbers could have been caused by a number of factors, e.g. direct habitat destruction as urban gap sites are regenerated or perhaps by toxic chemicals contained in lead-free petrol. Outside breeding areas feeding flocks may have been adversely affected by agricultural changes, including the large scale switchover to grass silage production from hay making in the west of Scotland, as well as the switch to autumn sown cereals, meaning that few stubble fields remain.
- ★ Loss of nest sites through various types of urban renewal programmes and activities, affecting both commercial and domestic properties.
- ★ Disease, with both Salmonella and Trichomonosis (a protozoan parasite carried by Feral Pigeons) being mentioned by a number of sources.
- ★ Predation, although the usual three urban predators which have been cited as potentially adversely affecting House Sparrow populations: Magpies, Sparrowhawks and domestic cats have been dismissed by ornithologists as having an insignificant effect.

### Opportunities and Current Action

There is currently no national House Sparrow Action Plan responding to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

At the time of writing no action has been taken in the LBAP Partnership area to conserve the House Sparrow and little survey information seems to be available.

The main opportunity seems to be the possibility of exploiting national media coverage about the plight of the House Sparrow to discover more about the status and requirements of the species in this Local Biodiversity Action Plan area.

### Objectives and Targets

Objective 1	Increase knowledge of the status, distribution and population trends of the House Sparrow in the LBAP area.
Objective 2	Increase knowledge of the habitat requirements of the House Sparrow in LBAP area. – Particularly at its surviving urban nesting colony sites
Objective 3	Increase awareness of the House Sparrow and its conservation requirements in LBAP area.
Objective 4	Establishment of productive dialogue with land and site owners who are potentially sympathetic to the plight of the House Sparrow in the UK.
Objective 5	Implementation of trial House Sparrow conservation projects, concentrating on the establishment, re-establishment and reinforcement of nesting colonies in suitable habitats within urban areas.
Objective 6	Ensure House Sparrow information and data is recorded and disseminated appropriately.

We will achieve these objectives by:

Action	Actioned by	Timescale
Carry out field surveys to identify locations and sizes of as many House Sparrow nesting colonies as possible.	Greenspace teams RSPB SOC Ranger Services UWS	2009 - 2011
Encourage, commission or complete ornithological field surveys on a selective sample of nesting colonies to investigate habitat requirements of House Sparrows during the nesting season (and outside if feasible).	Greenspace teams UWS RSPB SOC Biodiversity Officer Ranger Services	2010 - 2012
Compilation, launch and management of public information appeal about locations of House Sparrow colonies in various formats: survey forms on partners' web-sites; e-mails to contact lists (including established citizens' panels; local members' groups); printed recording forms and leaflets made available in libraries, community centres, visitor centres; press appeals as opportunities arise.	LAs RSPB SOC Ranger Services	2009 - 2011
Production of materials which increase the positive perception of House Sparrows in East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde and Renfrewshire, e.g. leaflets, newsletter and press articles, local media appearances	Urban LBAP Group	2009-2012
Launch of a schools nest box erection project to supplement work already being completed in enhancing school grounds.	Greenspace teams Starling Learning	2009-2012
Monitor research happening at a national level and in other parts of the UK. Participate in this research where appropriate and when resources permit at a local level.	UWS Carts Greenspace/Inverclyde Greenspace RSPB SOC Biodiversity Officer	2009-2012

### Links with Other Action Plans

Urban, Farmland Passerines, Pipistrelle Bat.

Further information can be obtained from the Biodiversity Officer 0141 842 5281.



