

There has been a steep decline in the numbers of Tree Sparrows across the United Kingdom, resulting in the species being included on the IUCN Red List of species of high conservation concern at both the UK and Wales level.

The Tywi Valley Tree Sparrow population is particularly important because it is the only one remaining in Wales with substantially more than 100 individuals - thought to be the minimum level for long-term survival of a population.

Identification

Both the male and female tree sparrows are similar in plumage. Distinct features of this species are the chestnut cap with the absence of any grey, white cheeks with a black cheek spot and a richness in the browns.



Tree Sparrow © Derek Moore



Male House Sparrow © Derek Moore

Confusion can arise between male house sparrows and both male & female tree sparrows. Although similar, the male house sparrow has more grey in its brown plumage, grey on the cap, and the cheeks are dusky without any black spot. The female house sparrow is distinctly different.

Ecology

The Tree Sparrow population in the Tywi Valley is highly tied to the floodplain of the River Tywi, with records even a few hundred metres away from the floodplain being rare. The floodplain is bisected by slow-flowing or static ditches, ox-bow lakes and backwaters of the main river channel - habitats that are rare in the rest of inland Carmarthenshire.

Tree Sparrows make up to three breeding attempts in a year, with the breeding season stretching from April to August. Research has shown that the Tree Sparrows are more likely to make more breeding attempts on the floodplain than anywhere else. Nest failure is also more likely in sites away from the floodplain. Adult Trees Sparrows are totally dependant on seeds for food, but invertebrates are essential for feeding their young. These invertebrates are strongly associated with the static or slow-flowing waterbodies and channels found on the floodplain and it is believed that it is the availability of these prey items that ties the birds to the floodplain.

Management Advice

- Still or slow flowing water features such as ponds, oxbow lakes and ditches should be retained as they are essential foraging areas for Tree Sparrows during the breeding season, providing insect food for the young. These waterbodies and channels need irregular clearing approximately every four to five years.
- Sources of food for the adult birds need to be maintained, e.g. cereal cropping.
- Feeding seeds in the winter is important in maintaining the population at its current level.
- Patches of weeds on the floodplain need to be retained. These may be around water features, on shingle banks, or in corners of fields cut off from the rest of the field by ditches.
- Overgrown, straggly hedges with no bottom in them should not be cleared.
- Suitable trees should be retained as nesting areas for Tree Sparrows. Old trees should not be felled - these can provide important nesting sites.
- Nest box provision is recommended where possible. They can be erected on
- standard trees in the flood plain, especially where there may be a lack of natural breeding sites.

Further information can be obtained from Anna Hobbs, Landscape and Biodiversity Officer for the Tywi Afon yr Oesoedd project (01558 824271 or ahobbs@carmarthenshire.gov.uk) or by contacting Isabel Macho, Carmarthenshire Biodiversity Officer (01267 224653 or IMacho@carmarthenshire.gov.uk)



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