



Is the Sparrow a Canary?



In the 1960s birds were a constant backdrop to the games I played as a child in my parent's garden. There were Starlings, Thrushes, Blackbirds and, my favourites, Sparrows.

I live in London now and have recently noticed that the House Sparrow has effectively disappeared.

My anecdotal observations have recently been confirmed by a report on "The State of the UK's Birds." This shows that over the period 1977 to 2010 the UK population of House Sparrows fell by a staggering 64%.

Its cousin, the Tree Sparrow, has fared even worse. It has seen an estimated reduction of population of some 91% over the same period.¹ The British Trust for Ornithology places the House Sparrow on its Red List due to its

"statistically significant population decline"²

The sad fact that the House Sparrow is struggling to survive in modern Britain should have alarm bells ringing.

Historically, with the introduction of intensive mixed farming methods of the 18th Century, the House Sparrow was a very common bird to the degree that it was declared a pest. Bounties were even paid for dead birds.⁴

The first major setback to the House Sparrow numbers occurred in the 1920s with the introduction of the petrol engine and the replacement of the horse as a means of transport. The consequential loss of food, in the form of seeds from nose bags or bedding, resulted in a major decline in urban populations.⁴

Since the 1950s intermittent data for several towns has indicated a trend of slow population loss.⁴

Monitoring House Sparrow populations did not commence until 1976 and surveys since then have identified the long term trend in England as being one of rapid decline. This is most pronounced in the South-East.⁵

This was first noticed in farmland areas in 1979. It is believed that this decline in rural areas was due to changes in farming practices and a reduction in food supply.⁴

The collapse in populations started in the early 1990s and has led to the almost complete disappearance of the once ubiquitous House Sparrow in many large towns and cities for example in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow.⁴

A more gradual decline is probably also taking place in many other small towns though it has not yet become catastrophic.⁶

“With a continuing fall in numbers of House Sparrows in all built-up areas the future looks rather bleak for the bird”⁴

Many reasons have been proposed for the dramatic decline of the House Sparrow including predation by cats and Sparrow Hawks, a lack of nesting sites in modern homes, and reduced food availability. This latter may include a decline in insect populations to feed the fledglings due to the use of insecticides in parks and gardens.

Another factor may be the social nature of the Sparrow. They breed in loose colonies and depend on social stimulation for successful breeding. It has been suggested that once a colony falls below a certain size the birds cease to breed due to lack of social simulation and the colony collapses.⁴⁷

The decline in population is probably due to a combination of all these factors but whatever the reason the fact that such a common bird has experienced such steep declines and is now an endangered species should be of a cause for concern.

Scientists consider bird populations as a good indication of the general state of wildlife because they occupy a range of habitats. As such wild bird indicators provide an important high level measure of the state of biodiversity in the United Kingdom.⁸

The UK Government states that across Britain there have been...

“large losses in once abundant species.”⁸

Many other, once common, garden birds have seen falls in population. Between 1970 and 2010 Starling numbers fell by some 80%, the Song Thrush by 54% and the Blackbird by 15%.¹

House Sparrows were once a familiar sight across Britain. They were regular visitors to our gardens where we would hear their distinctive chirping. The disappearance of such a common bird, unthinkable years ago, is now a sad reality!

In former times the canary was carried into mines to warn of dangerous gases. Maybe we should take more notice of the impending disappearance of the humble Sparrow and heed the warning that all is not well with the ecology of our country.

Dean



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4. Summers-Smith. *Decline of the House Sparrow: A Review*
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