

Where have all the sparrows gone

You have probably read about the huge decrease in the House Sparrow population in parts of the UK, especially in the South East of England. There are no sparrows in the parks in central London any more – 20 years ago the ground used to be carpeted with them if you sprinkled a few breadcrumbs around. And we are talking about a bird here which has colonised most cities on earth and is generally astoundingly successful. After all, they can have 4 broods a year, of about 4 chicks per brood – well you can work the rest out! They are really the last bird that you would imagine would experience such a population crash.



There are a number of theories about this, ranging from the sensible to the loony, and there is much research being done. The favourite at the moment is that the birds cannot find enough insect food to feed their chicks. Whereas the adults feed on seed and grain and anything else they can find, they feed their chicks on insects. Trouble is, they are not well adapted to catching them, which is not really a problem when there are plenty around. But you never see a house fly or a bluebottle in a town or city these days, and these are the type of clumsy slow-flying insects that sparrows can catch.

In Wales and Scotland, the situation is different – House Sparrows are doing rather well. They are certainly not decreasing in any systematic way, though there may be local changes. We have plenty here – most farms have a little colony and they are quite common in the villages – and of course there is no shortage of flies!