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Tree sparrow - *Passer montanus*

The tree sparrow is similar to the ubiquitous house sparrow and is slightly but distinctly smaller. Like the house sparrow, it has a black-streaked brown back, a white wing bar, black bib and bill and dusky underparts. It differs by having an entirely brown-red crown, pure white head sides with a black cheek patch and a narrow white neck collar. Unlike the house sparrow, the sexes are alike. Tree sparrows do not have a distinctive song as such, but they give an excited chatter of 'chirp' calls, which is higher pitched than that of the house sparrow.

Tree sparrows eat a variety of plant and invertebrate material. Seeds provide the majority of the plant material, with fewer buds and berries. Food is generally sought on the ground, although seeds are also eaten from low-growing plants.

Tree sparrows are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as all birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law. It is also listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) Red List, which holds species whose breeding population has decreased and/or whose breeding range has contracted by 50% or more in the preceding 25

years. Tree sparrows are also listed in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable.

Tree sparrows nest predominantly in a hole, either in a tree, building, earth bank or nestbox. In the UK, the tree sparrow is primarily a bird of farmland and lightly wooded countryside and is patchily distributed throughout England, and southern Scotland. Like other characteristic farmland species, it has undergone a rapid decline. During the 25 year period 1975 – 2000, the UK population has declined by 97% and by 57% during 1990 – 2000 alone. Declines have occurred in all areas, including the traditional stronghold of central and southern England. Tree sparrows are now absent from the south-west, the north-west and Wales. Declines have also been recorded in adjacent continental Europe, although it is still common and widespread in many areas. In Kent, the tree sparrow's status has changed from being widespread to uncommon, with the decline beginning in the early 1970s. The current population stands at possibly no more than 250 pairs.

sparrow



The now widespread use of herbicides in weed control on farmland is probably a major contributor to tree sparrows decline. Other farmland seed eating birds, which share the tree sparrow's diet of seeds and also feed their young on insects, have shown similar population decreases. Other factors could include the shift from spring-sown to autumn-sown crops, which has meant the loss of winter stubble fields and the more intensive management of grassland. However it appears that tree sparrows undergo regular fluctuations in numbers. They are predominantly resident in the UK, though large numbers of passage birds occur in occasional autumns. It has therefore been suggested that upsurges in the UK of the tree sparrow population are due to influx from continental Europe, with the population subsiding again once immigration has ceased.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan aims to allow a long term sustained recovery of tree sparrows by sympathetic farming practices, seeking more targeted and cautious use of pesticides and management of protected areas (e.g. safeguarding of large tree sparrow colonies, nestbox schemes and retention of dead trees). The incorporation of new management prescriptions when reviewing agri-environment schemes, in order to reverse recent changes in farmland management, is likely to be beneficial for tree sparrows.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

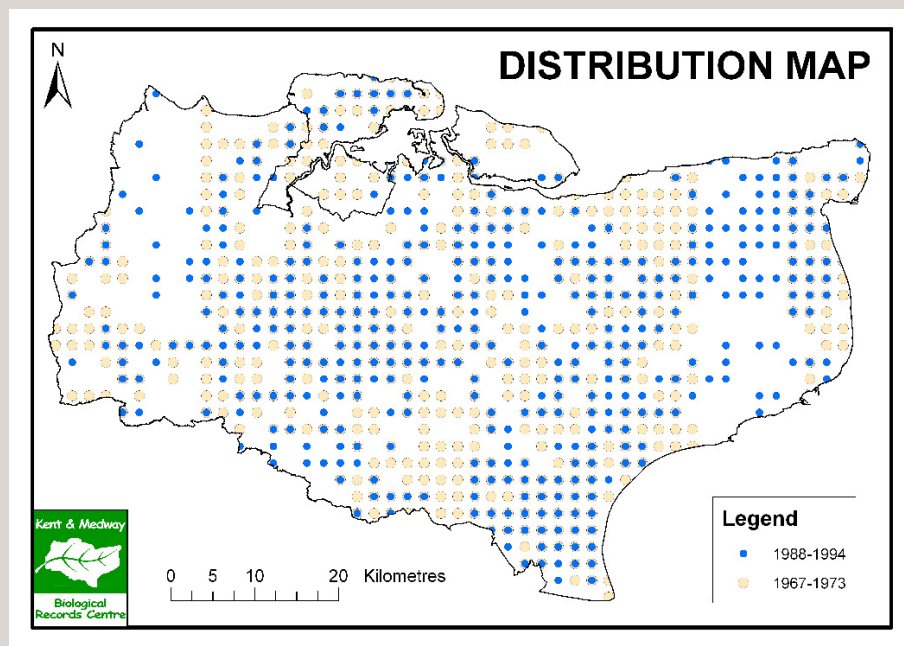
Kent Ornithological Society: www.kentos.org.uk

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: www.rspb.org.uk

British Trust for Ornithology: www.bto.org.uk

Kent Landscape Information System: www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre: www.kmbrc.org.uk



Data courtesy of Kent Ornithological Society

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