

TREE SPARROW CONSERVATION NEWS 2002

The aim of this newsletter is to give brief details of the activity at study sites where there are specific Tree Sparrow conservation or ringing projects. There is no intention of providing full details of the results from these sites, but rather merely to give a flavour of the activity and give details of contacts from whom further information can be obtained. While there is no claim to complete cover, nevertheless the list of sites should give a good impression of the main distribution of the bird in Britain. The picture for 2002 should be better than that given last year when visits to several of the studies were hampered by foot and mouth disease.

Personnel

1 . Dr Rob Field continues as the RSPB Research Biologist at Rutland Water, where the Tree Sparrow project has been extended for a fourth year to complete the analysis of faecal samples and complete work hampered by foot and mouth disease.

2. Conor O'Gorman has completed the one-year RSPB/Severn Trent Water Tree Sparrow Project aimed at involving Severn Trent employees and local communities in supplying food and nest boxes for Tree Sparrows at the water board sites. Four tonnes of seed have been provided and 400 nest boxes put up.

Severn Trent employees are now putting out food at 32 sewage works and reservoirs in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands and Wales, with nest boxes erected at 32 sites. A further 48 sites have been identified at which it is hoped the company employees will be involved in 2003.

Conor and his sponsors are to be congratulated for this injection of effort into Tree Sparrow conservation in the Midlands.

Conor has moved on and is now working as Conservation Officer for the British Association for Conservation and Shooting.

The Sites

The sites are listed alphabetically, by county. Sites that were listed in 2001 are included for completeness even if no information was received for that site in 2002. Sites listed as new for TSCN are not necessarily newly established schemes. The counties for which returns were received are shown on the following map. It is encouraging that the 'outlier' colonies in Flintshire and Dyfed are all doing well. This does not suggest a species under serious threat.

1. Aberdeenshire: South Tillyeve

A new site for TSCN.

2002: 5 pairs at this site reared 10 broods, from which at least 27 young fledged. 27 chicks were ringed. Another two boxes have been erected at a garden site at Bridge of Alford. One pair nested here in 2002, rearing 2 broods

2. Buckinghamshire: North Buckinghamshire

A new site for TSCN.

2000: 8 boxes erected early spring after 1 pair found in natural site in 1999. 2 pairs bred in summer 2000. A winter flock of around 60 birds was seen.

2001: No access because of foot and mouth

2002: 5 pairs bred in nest boxes (plus one in a natural site), producing 11 broods and 43 chicks.

3. Derbyshire: Carsington Water

2002: The maximum flock recorded in the early part of the year was 18. 20 nest boxes, out of the 35 provided, were used by Tree Sparrows. No checks were made of eggs or young, but 60 free-flying birds were seen in August suggesting a successful breeding season.

4. Co. Durham: Green Lane, Barnard Castle

A new site for TSCN.

2000: 20 nest boxes erected in hedgerow trees

2002: 8-11 (most probably 9) pairs bred with 68 young fledged from 106 eggs laid (64.2%). 67 of the young were ringed.

5. Dyfed: Twyi Valley Tree Sparrow Group

2002: 48 pairs found (40 in nest boxes), although this does not represent a full census of all boxes. The 40 box-nesting pairs produced 64 broods, 82% of which were successful, fledging an average of 4.03 chicks per attempt.

6. Flintshire: Bodelwyddan

2002: The maximum flock recorded in the winter of 2001 was 74. 151 eggs were laid in 33 nesting attempts (4.58 per attempt). 117 eggs hatched (77.5%) from which 113 young were fledged, giving an overall success rate of 74.8%.

7. Hampshire: East Hampshire

2002: No breeding reports at all from Hampshire and it is feared that, despite having both breeding Honey Buzzard and Goshawk, tree sparrows are extinct as a breeding bird in Hampshire. Nevertheless, a small winter flock of 4-5 birds has returned to the

same area as last winter and is utilising the feeding station there. It is hoped that some of these birds may stay to breed in the, as yet, unused nest boxes erected in winter 2001/2.

8. Hertfordshire: Herts Bird Club/Maple Cross Ringing Group

8.1 Coursers Road.

2002: Up to 50 birds were present in December 2001. There were 22 breeding attempts in 2002 with 112 eggs laid by at least 6 (probably 8) females. 70 young were reared (62.5% of eggs laid) of which 65 were ringed. 27 eggs did not hatch. 5 young died in the nest and 10 were predated. (This compares with 37 young from 14 breeding attempts in 2001.)

8.2 Tyttenhanger Farm

A colony of Tree Sparrows was located at this nearby site. It is planned to establish a feeder and erect 20 nest boxes in spring 2003

9. Kinross

A new site for TSCN.

A nest box scheme with local schools, comprising around 80 boxes, mostly monitored by local ringers. At least one box used in 2002.

10. Lancashire:

10.1 Martin Mere WWT

2002: 20-30 birds were recorded in the study area in the winter. 13 pairs nested, with a further number wintering and nesting at another site on the Reserve.

10.2 Pilling/Preesall

A new site for TSCN.

A total of 27 subsites around the villages of Pilling and Preesall in Lancashire. Boxes and monitoring began in 1980 at two sites with 8 pairs and has increased since to around 27 sites and 100 pairs.

2002: 100 pairs made 202 attempts, fledging 634 chicks, 616 of which were ringed.

11. Leicestershire

11.1 Wanlip Gravel (Willows Farm)

Tree Sparrows have been studied at this site since 1994. Initially 20 boxes were put up; this was increased to 30 in 1996 and 44 in 2000.

2002. Approximately 50-60 birds were present in the winter flock, 16 pairs laid 114 eggs with 43 young fledged (37.7%). The low productivity was largely due to the fact that 65 of the eggs did not produce young, either because they went missing, were infertile or were abandoned. There was evidence that weasels may have been involved.

This is a worrying development and recalls the way that a colony of about 25 pairs established in the 1930s by A W Boyd in Cheshire in nest boxes in a 250 m length of hedgerow trees was virtually exterminated in the early 1940s by weasels that had become habituated on rectangular boxes as sources of food (A W Boyd *British Birds* 1949 42: 213-214).

11.2 Loddington

A new site for TSCN.

2002: 8 pairs nested in nest boxes on the Allerton Trust's farm at Loddington. These pairs made 14 nesting attempts, fledging 39 chicks. All chicks were ringed with a single pink ring on the left leg and a BTO ring on the right.

11.3 Stonesby

A new Site for TSCN

2002: 8 nest boxes, at least 3 pairs (3 first broods, 2 second broods). Thirteen chicks fledged, all were ringed with a single yellow ring on the left leg and BTO ring on the right. A winter flock of at least 40 birds was resident in late 2002 associated with the feeding station at this garden site, and game cover crops and stubbles nearby (<2km).

11.4 Eyebrook Reservoir.

2002: 37 nest boxes, at least 19 pairs (19 first broods, 16 second broods, 11 third broods) fledging 152 young. All young were ringed with a single orange ring on the left leg and a BTO ring on the right. A bird fledged from the Eyebrook colony in 2000 bred at a Rutland sub-colony in 2002, and another Eyebrook bird fledged in 2001 was re-trapped in Suffolk in 2002.

12. Lothian: Hallyards

It is good news that the study started at Hallyards by the late Alan Hilton is being continued.

2002: Tree Sparrows bred in 11 of 25 boxes, laying 115 eggs from which 67 young (57 pulli ringed) were thought to have fledged (58.3%).
A number of birds colour-ringed in 2001 and 2002 were seen at the site in the winter of 2002.

13. Norfolk: Abbey Farm

A new site for TSCN.

2002: A flock of around 60 birds are present around the farm, but none as yet have nested in recently erected nest boxes.

14. Northamptonshire

14.1 Pitsford Reservoir.

2002: 10 pairs nested in boxes, making 15 attempts. From these, 78 eggs were laid and 50 chicks fledged.

14.2 Summer Leys Nature Reserve

2002: 32 pairs nested in boxes, making 65 attempts, including 5 possible 4th brood attempts. 322 eggs were laid, leading to 202 young fledging. Chicks ringed were colour marked with a single light blue ring in addition to the BTO ring.

14.3 South Lodge, Park Farm

2002: 3 pairs nested in nest boxes, making three first brood attempts, fledging 10 chicks.

15. Nottinghamshire.

15.1 Hawton

A new site for TSCN.

2002: 22 boxes put up at 2 sites on a south Notts farm in March 2002 (some provided by Conor O'Gorman) in response to a winter flock of at least 17 birds. At least 6 pairs nested, fledging 72 chicks, all of which were ringed. Chicks were colour marked with a red/white striped ring on the left leg in addition to the BTO ring on the right.

15.2 Bunny

A new site for TSCN.

2002: 19 boxes held at least six pairs, making 15 breeding attempts. At least 100 chicks fledged, 84 of which were ringed.

16. Perthshire:

16.1 Scone (Redfield) Tay Ringing Group

A new site for TSCN.

A small colony of Tree Sparrows has nested in old farm buildings at this site for many years. In 1991, after collapse of the buildings, 7 boxes were put up; 6 of these were used by Tree Sparrows.

2002: 4 more nest boxes were put up, but still only 6 were used; 31 young were reared from 8 nesting attempts (mean 3.9).

16.2 Monks Mire, Blairgowrie

A new site for TSCN.

Six nest boxes were put up in Autumn 1999. The site has been maintained and monitored by Euan Cameron. Pulli are now ringed by Alan Barclay,

2000: One nesting attempt; failed at egg stage.

2001: 3 or 4 pairs laid 6 clutches and fledged 14 young (2.3 per nesting attempt).

2002: 3 pairs laid 5 clutches, but fledged only 4 young from one clutch.

16.3 Muirton of Ardblair, Blairgowrie

A new site for TSCN.

12 boxes were put up in 1980/81. The boxes were put up by Sandra Hacker and monitoring has been carried out by her and Euan Cameron. Pulli were ringed by Euan up to 2001, but now by Alan Barclay. In addition to using the boxes, Tree Sparrows also nest in natural sites. The following numbers of pulli have been ringed in the boxes.

1983 5

1984 9

1985 17

1986 29

1987 64

1988 101

1989 170

1990 186

1991 104

1992 92

1993 78
1994 68
1995 79
1996 51
1997 61
1998 81 1999 69
2000 41
2001 31
2002 52

This study, that has been going on at one colony for 20 years, lends some support to the reputation the Tree Sparrow has in the UK for forming colonies that wax and then wane over a period of years.

17. Ross & Cromarty

17.1 Allan/Rhynie

A new site for TSCN.

2002: 45 nesting attempts produced 243 eggs (mean 5.4). 153 young were reared (63.0%).

17.2 Alness

A new site for TSCN.

2002: Farmland site originally set up in 2000, when 7 pairs nested. More boxes have been put up since and 14 pairs nested in 2002.

18. Rutland: Rutland Water Nature Reserve

2002. 270 nest boxes, at least 86 pairs (86 first broods, 63 second broods, 32 third broods) fledging 651 young. All bar 3 chicks were ringed, and of these, all bar 8 were individually colour marked with three colours and a metal BTO ring. Rutland Water ringed Tree Sparrows have been seen, re-trapped or recovered at sites in Leicestershire (5), in Cambridgeshire (1), Northamptonshire (2), Nottinghamshire (1) and Norfolk (1).

19. Surrey: Beddington Farm Sewage Works

2002: Breeding information is only available, as yet, for part of this site (approx. 40 of the 230 boxes). Details for the remainder of the site will be available in future issues of TSCN. 28 pairs nested in the 37 boxes reported here, making 60 breeding attempts, from which 163 young were ringed. Initial estimates suggest the final 2002 totals will be an increase on 2001. Over 200 birds are reported to be wintering on the Farm

20. Tyne & Wear: Big Waters Nature Reserve

2002: At least 28 pairs made 77 breeding attempts, laying 379 eggs and fledging 241 chicks. The majority of these chicks were ringed.

21. Wexford, Ireland: Wexford Slob Nature Reserve

No details have been received for 2002.

22. Wiltshire.

Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Conservation Project

RSPB Wessex has set up a conservation project for Tree Sparrows involving the RSPB, DEFRA (through the Country Stewardship scheme), FWAG (Wiltshire Farmland Biodiversity Project), the Wiltshire Ornithological Society and the Maiden Bradley Bird Club with the Support of English Nature. (See: Julia Gallagher, Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Conservation Strategy Report 2002, January 2003.

The current Wiltshire population is estimated as between 100 and 200 pairs. The target is to increase the breeding population to 210 by 2006 with a winter flock exceeding 600 birds.

The following entries cover the existing Wiltshire Ornithological Society (WOS) initiative and the new West Wiltshire Tree Sparrow project

22.1 Marlborough Downs. Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Recovery Group

This is an extensive survey covering a large part of the County.

2002: Information was supplied for thirteen sites with a probable wintering total of over 300 birds. In addition to 40 pairs in natural sites, 83 pairs nested in boxes, laying 1107 eggs (12.6 per pair), from which 728 young fledged (8.3 per pair) giving a success rate of 65.8%. (In 2001, coincidentally, the success rate from 19 pairs was also 8.3 young per pair.)

This is a magnificent effort covering a large area with 450 nest boxes put up for Tree Sparrows.

22.2 West Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Project

This is a new site for TSCN, part of the RSPB Wildlife Biodiversity Action Plan. Flocks of 25 and 14 birds were located in the winter of 2001-02. Winter feeding stations have also been established and 59 nest boxes were put up in March. One box was occupied by a pair of Tree Sparrows that raised broods of 4 and 3 young.

23. Yorkshire

23.1 Filey Tree Sparrow Project, East Yorkshire Ringing Group

2002: A Great Spotted Woodpecker took up residence in the colony at the beginning of the breeding season, making most of the boxes uninhabitable. 5 of the boxes produced 6 broods and a total of 25 fledged young (4.2 young per nesting attempt). New boxes have been put up and it is hoped that 2003 will see a recovery (there were 12 broods in 2001).

23.2 North Yorks Tree Sparrow Study Group

This study is based on 5 sites (Eastleigh, Oneholmes, Seamer Carr, Windy Hill, Crabtree farms) lying within a radius of about 4 km. Food is put out in winter at Crabtree Farm. Different colour rings are used for the pulli and free-flying birds at the different sites. Results from controls and recoveries have shown 5 pulli subsequently nesting at distances of 3 to 17 km. Of 68 free-flying birds ringed in the winter, 3 have been found subsequently in breeding areas 1 to 3 km away.

2002. The winter flock at Crabtree Farm peaked at c 100 birds, but only 1 pair remained to breed. The size of the winter flock at Seamer Carr/Windy Hill Farm is not known, but 11 pairs (plus 3 in natural sites) had 29 nesting attempts with 151 eggs laid (mean 5.2), producing 90 fledglings (59.6% of eggs laid).

23.3 Manor Farm, Eddlethorpe near Malton.

A new site for TSCN.

The Farmed Environment Company, based at Manor Farm, is establishing examples of wildlife seed crops, and other arable options, so that farmers and others can learn about them first hand. Grain tailings are put out in the winter for birds, About 60 Tree Sparrows were present in the winter 2001/02.

2002: There were 18 breeding attempts in 12 boxes (also 3 or 4 pairs nesting under eaves), with 76 pulli ringed, an overall average of 4.2 per nesting attempt.

23.4 Wakefield, West Yorkshire

Two sites that are new for TSCN

Grange Farm, near Pugney's Country Park

2002. Maximum number recorded in winter 2001/02 was 8. 5 pairs bred (2 in nest boxes, 3 in farm buildings, with an end of season flock of 15-16.

Wintersett/Cold Hendley area

2002. 34 recorded in winter flock 2001/02. 13+ pairs bred in three separate colonies.

23.5 Birthwaite Hall Farm, Darton, Barnsley, South Yorkshire

A new site for TSCN.

Colour-ringing has been going on at this site for 4 years, using a single colour on the right leg. Observations of the post-breeding flock have shown very few colour-ringed birds,

2000: 30 birds maximum were present during the winter, increasing to 40 prior to breeding. c.20 pairs bred at the site (mostly in boxes) with about 15 accessible for ringing. 130 pulli were ringed.

Concluding Remarks

The studies described in this Newsletter are helping to build up a comprehensive picture of the breeding ecology of the Tree Sparrow in Britain with data now from 40-50 sites. We are still, however, largely ignorant of the dispersal of the young birds, their subsequent recruitment to the breeding population and the relationship between the winter flocks and the local breeding populations. Hopefully, the intensive ringing activities will help to fill these gaps in our knowledge that are essential to any conservation strategy.

We should be pleased to hear of further sites where Tree Sparrow studies and ringing projects are in hand.

Many thanks to the contributors with apologies for any errors that have crept in.

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