August: sparrows

House sparrows

We often think of house sparrows as common – and there are indeed lots around the church and village. Counting them is tricky as they don't stand still for long ('like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest') but all the various methods used to count them show that, overall, house sparrow numbers in Britain (rather like those other 'common' birds, starlings) have declined enormously.

Male house sparrows with their smart black bibs and grey heads

It's reckoned there are only about a third as many as there were fifty years ago, although populations seem to have stabilised over the past five or so years. Indeed, they are back to number one in the RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch league table, and they are certainly doing well both in the churchyard, between the north side of the church and the treed drop to the cart wash, and in our back garden, despite a regularly visiting sparrowhawk. A flock of around thirty makes a happy if argumentative racket every morning in the overgrown hedge just outside our kitchen. They are especially noisy if we're late providing toast crumbs.

Female and juvenile house sparrows looking for toast. They lack a black bib (which develops in males with age), have a pale stripe above the eye, and adult females have a smart white stripe on their brown wings.

There seems to be no single, simple reason why numbers fell so much. Pollution is one possibility, especially in towns, and also diseases such as avian malaria, which particularly affects the survival of nestling sparrows. It's transmitted by mosquitoes, who rather like the extra warmth and humidity found in towns and cities such as London, where the loss of iconic

cockney sparrows led to a campaign to save them. In more rural and windy places (like Gretton) malaria probably isn't such a problem though, not least as mosquitoes are not strong fliers and don't like all that wind. Studies of farm sparrows suggest that winter starvation is the big problem, likely because animal feeds are stored more securely nowadays and cereal crops being sown in autumn rather than spring, meaning fewer seed heads in fields over the winter. In both rural and urban areas, insecticides might also play a role as in addition to grain (and toast) sparrows eat lots of insects, mainly aphids and caterpillars, especially for their young.

Of course, there might be further clues as to why sparrows seem to be doing relatively OK in Gretton, both in the name – house sparrow – and my mentioning overgrown hedges. House sparrows are associated particularly with humans. Their cheeky use of our buildings for nesting and protection (not least from sparrowhawks) and the food we supply, whether farm grain stores or garden toast crumbs, make them more successful where we are less house proud. They like to nest in overgrown hedges and holes in walls so one lesson seems to be that we should all do less DIY, less house maintenance and definitely less hedge trimming. The churchyard is full of places to hide, seed heads and insects (no insecticides here), and there's a flock of sparrows living between the north side of the church and the trees and shrubs on the edge of the churchyard.

According to Bede, in his 731 book, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Edwin, King of Northumbria (and after whom Edinburgh is named) decided to convert to Christianity partly thanks to a parable told by his 'wisest advisor'. Allegedly (most scholars think Bede actually made the story up) this counsellor suggested that life was short and might be compared to a sparrow that flies through a window into the great hall, where the king and his noblemen are feasting and fires are burning, in from the cold dark winter outside, and then back out through another window.

'Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec noua doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur.'

'So this life of men appears for a short time; what came before or what follows after, we do not know. Therefore, if this new religion brings anything more certain and more wise, perhaps we should follow it.'

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Rather less transactional, Matthew and Luke also say how important sparrows are, but disagree on the how much people think they are worth: 'are not two sparrows sold for a penny[1]? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's knowledge', was Matthew's memory of what Jesus said, while Luke claims it was, 'are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?' Maybe Luke's is an early example of 'buy four and get one free', or perhaps it's a reflection of different professional approaches to pricing (tax collector and private physician). The point is, though, that sparrows might be small, fluttery and 'common', but they are still important (although maybe not as important as you).

Once they've gone, it's quite hard to get sparrows back as they live in large, family-based colonies with little movement over even quite short distances – if they do move to another colony, it rarely more than half a kilometre away. So once a colony has gone, it takes a long time, maybe years, before new birds recolonise the patch.

Along with a lazier approach to DIY, another way to help is to provide extra food. This can, of course be done to excess – it's estimated that we provide enough peanuts in British gardens each year to feed all the green finches in the world several times over. What's more, not all birds will come to feeders, so those that do can outcompete those that don't for nesting sites. If you do feed the birds[2] (don't forget that the saints and apostles will smile each time someone shows that they care…), it's also worth thinking about hygiene –multi-storey bird feeders and water baths can bring together large numbers of different types of birds, and spreading disease. And some of the bacteria in bird droppings can infect people too, so wash your hands afterwards. Anyhow - moderation is, as usual, key. Just enough food to attract in small-ish numbers of birds, and not enough to attract non-avian visitors.

Because grey squirrels and rats also enjoy the food you put out for the birds, and it can be very frustrating to see them destroy your feeders and steal all the food before any birds have even reached your garden. One way to stop this is to mix in some dried chilli or hotter peppers with the bird food. While birds can taste chilli, they don't get the burn so are fine, but the squirrels and rats, like us, most definitely do get the burn - and they don't like it.

[1] The original Greek says 'assarion', a small, low-value bronze coin, variously translated into English as a farthing or penny.

[2] If a small bag of bird feed in around 1910 cost tuppence (2d) then the Bank of England inflation calculator suggests that would be the equivalent of around 45p nowadays, which would buy about 200g of the cheapest wild bird food – which sounds about right? Especially as that would be London prices for Edwardian breadcrumbs.

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The only other type of sparrow found in Britain is the tree sparrow, but I've not seen any in the churchyard. They are smaller, with brown heads and black spots on their cheeks. More countryside than garden, they sometimes join house sparrow flocks, so it's worth looking out for them. But they are not common, having fared even worse than house sparrows, their population having fallen by more than 90% in the last 50 years.

You will, however, see and hear 'hedge sparrows', although they are not really sparrows at all and should properly be called dunnocks. Unlike the chirping of sparrows, dunnocks have a piping, scratchy song. Sparrow-like, but with longer more pointy beaks and a thunder-cloud-grey head (but brown crown), they run shyly through the undergrowth in ones or twos, sometimes mistaken for mice, eating mainly spiders and small insects. They will also eat seeds, but rather than coming to bird feeders, you'll see them on the ground beneath, eating what's been dropped. Close up (like wrens) they are stunningly beautiful. As well as being a common victim of parasitic cuckoos (see April), they have a 'complicated' sex life, that we should probably not go into here.

Bird watchers sometimes refer to LBJs – Little Brown Jobs – when they are not sure quite what that bird they glimpsed was. If you're confused too, then try this quick guide from the RSPB – all the above birds plus juveniles of birds like robins that can look similar until they've developed their adult plumage.