

Tree Sparrow Tribune



The Newsletter of Ireland's Tree Sparrow Enquiry

Introducing Ireland's Tree Sparrows

Tree Sparrow populations in Ireland have experienced many ups and downs since they were first recorded breeding in 1852. By the late 19th Century, although only known to be resident between Dublin and Malahide, the Irish population were increasing in range and numbers. By the early 20th Century, colonies were present in Dublin and on the west coast (in Donegal, Sligo, Mayo and Kerry), but these had all disappeared by the 1950s, with no confirmed breeding between 1955 and 1960. In 1961 Tree Sparrows were recorded breeding again in Donegal and Mayo, and the following year in Dublin, and by 1965 breeding was reported from about 35 localities (mostly near the coast) in 13 counties. The 1968-72 Breeding Bird Atlas showed Tree Sparrow distribution in Ireland remained predominantly coastal, although there were a few inland records in Co. Kildare and Co. Roscommon; Hutchinson (1989) remarked that *"the population was obviously growing rapidly"*. Although by 1988-91, birds had disappeared from several coastal localities in Cos. Donegal, Mayo, Kerry and Waterford, substantial increases on the east coast and inland population (in Cos. Louth, Meath, Dublin, Kildare and Laois) were recorded during fieldwork for the breeding bird atlas.



Tree Sparrow at nest box

Provisional data from the 2007-11 bird breeding atlas has shown trends highlighted by the 1988-91 atlas have continued, with slight declines noted on west coast sites (in Cos Donegal and Kerry), and substantial increases on the east coast and adjoining inland counties, including Louth, Meath, Wexford, Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny and Laois, with first confirmed breeding also noted in Cos. Tipperary and Offaly. The range increase (number of occupied 10km squares) in Ireland between the 1968-72 and 2007-11 Atlases is 65%. These increases in Ireland are all the more dramatic when compared to a range contraction in Britain over the same period of 41%.

To report sightings of Tree Sparrows in Ireland, or just to find out more about them or this project, please contact:

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Ireland's Tree Sparrow Enquiry

Due to the recent increase in Tree Sparrows in Ireland, we want to try and find out more about them. Some studies on Tree Sparrows have been done in Co. Wexford, but we actually know very little about their ecology in Ireland. We hope to address this in three main ways:

Breeding productivity monitoring

Tree Sparrow colonies will be selected at core sites in the established (historic) range of the species on the east coast and colonies towards the edge of the current expansion. Productivity monitoring will typically be undertaken using Tree Sparrows occupying nest boxes, as this will allow clutch and brood size to be recorded, along with other nesting data (such as first egg dates, multiple brooding, fledging success, etc.).

Adult survival

To determine the numbers of adults that survive within a colony from year-to-year, full-grown Tree Sparrows will be trapped and colour-ringed. Each bird will be fitted with a standard BTO metal ring along with a colour ring with a unique alpha-numeric combination that can be read in the field.



© Alex Copland

Colour-ringed Tree Sparrow "A33"

Dispersal and movements

Adults and pulli (chicks in the nest) will be colour-ringed during the summer (breeding) and winter seasons. This will allow individual birds to be tracked, allowing us to see how Irish Tree Sparrows move around the country.



© Charles Tweeney

Colour-ringed Tree Sparrow "A34"

How to get involved

With this project just starting off, we need as many people as possible out looking for Tree Sparrows and reporting locations back to us. Whether all you are seeing is just a couple of birds at a bird table in the winter or you have a breeding colony we want to know! Also, although the project is largely based on the east coast and Midlands, we still want to hear about Tree Sparrows anywhere in Ireland, from Malin to Mizen, and everywhere in between. However, please make sure they are Tree Sparrows and not their easily-confused House Sparrow cousins!

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As this is being put together, we have our first birds colour-ringed – two adults in Co. Laois (see photographs to the left and above). We hope the bright red rings do not detract too much from their appearance. Please keep an eye out for any and all Tree Sparrows, and make sure to check their legs for any of these rings!