

London House Sparrow Parks Project - Summary



Wildlife Seed Meadow, Waterlow Park,
Photo by Tim Webb



Male House Sparrow
Photo by RSPB



Wildflower Meadow, Parliament Hill,
Photo by Lyndon Parker



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1. Background

- ◆ House sparrows have seen a dramatic national decline in recent years, with the worst declines in the east and south east of England. In Greater London they **declined by 68 % between 1994 and 2009**. Reasons for the decline appear to be different between urban and rural areas, and are still not fully understood. Recently though, it has been shown that in urban areas young house sparrow chicks often suffer from a **lack of insects and other invertebrates** in their diet. This leads to poor development and survival of the chicks. Boosting local numbers of invertebrates can improve this.
- ◆ In response to this, the RSPB ran the London House Sparrow Parks Project (Sept 08 - May 12) to find out which of three habitat types was most beneficial to house sparrows.

2. Project Aims

- ◆ This project aimed to **test three different ways that urban parks could manage their land, to see which was best for invertebrates, and which of them were most used by house sparrows and other birds**. We also wanted to find out how easy it was for the parks to manage their land in these ways.
- ◆ The project was run in partnership with eight land management organisations across London (Camden Council, City of London, Islington Council, Lee Valley Regional Park, The Royal Parks, Southwark Council, Sutton Council and Wandsworth Council).

3. Habitat creation and monitoring

- ◆ Three types of habitat were created **at 25 sites in 19 parks across London**, and monitored by staff and volunteers to see how much food (invertebrates and seed) they contained for birds, as well as how often birds used them. We also looked at what kind of invertebrates were in them, as conservation of invertebrates is important in its own right, and relatively little is known about these in urban areas. We collected feedback from the project partners on managing the different habitats, as well as the reactions of park users, so that we could advise people about this in future.
- ◆ The kinds of habitats we tested were: **long grass, native wildflower meadows, and a specially designed 'wildlife seed' mix**, which contained plants that bear a lot of seed in the winter. The idea was to provide habitat for invertebrates to survive in over the winter in the longer vegetation, nectar sources (wildflowers) for invertebrates, and seeds which adult birds might eat in the autumn and winter. Each trial habitat plot was paired up with an area of the same park that had similar local conditions, but which was managed in the normal way – in other words an area of short grass. We could then compare our results for the different habitat types against the short grass usually found in the parks.
- ◆ Staff and volunteers carried out timed watches on the trial and control areas, and recorded the numbers and kinds of birds using them. We also identified and counted the invertebrates that were in the trial and control plots, counted seeds, and did surveys of the local house sparrow populations.

4. Results

- ◆ **All three habitat types had a lot more invertebrates in them than the short grass plots**. This was highest in the wildflower meadows, and these also had more different kinds of some of the invertebrates in them. The long grass plots also had a lot of invertebrates in them, followed by the wildlife seed plots. The **wildlife seed plots were most visited by house sparrows**, but **all the habitat types would provide benefits for birds by improving the quality of the local habitat and local invertebrate numbers**.
- ◆ House sparrows appeared to use the wildlife seed plots for gathering invertebrates rather than seed, even though the numbers of invertebrates were higher in the wildflower meadow and long grass habitats. We suspect this may be because birds can find their way into the varied vegetation of the wildlife seed plots more easily than the meadows or long grass plots, where the vegetation is quite dense. Mowing paths through areas of long grass or wildflower meadows might help birds to get to the invertebrates that are in them. In any case it would help

the invertebrates themselves by increasing the diversity of habitat within the plots. Cutting paths may also help to channel movements of people through the areas, so that the whole plots do not get too trampled.

The amount of effort and cost needed to put the three different habitat types in place and is summarised below.

- ◆ **Long grass:** Costs were low for long grass plots, but our partners still found it difficult to find areas of their parks where they were allowed to let new areas of grass grow long. Hopefully the project results will give park managers more back-up in persuading people that long grass is actually a really useful habitat. Public reaction to the long grass areas in the project was a bit mixed, but usually when people understood the aims of the project their reactions were good. It is important to provide information for the public about what is done in their local park.
- ◆ **Wildflower meadows:** The effort and cost needed to create the wildflower meadows were high in the first year, as the plots have to be cultivated, sown and weeded. After the first year though, when they have become more established, the amount of effort and cost needed becomes much lower. Because the meadows take some time to become established, and contain areas of bare ground in the first year, public reaction to these was mixed in the first year of the project. However as the meadows established better and flowered in the summer, public reaction to them became very good.
- ◆ **Wildlife seed plots:** The wildlife seed plots were expensive and required a lot of effort, as they had to be re-created every year. This also meant they contained a lot of bare ground, so thistles and other dominant plants could establish in them, and had to be weeded out a bit. However these plots had many advantages, as they were used directly by house sparrows the most, and also received a really positive reaction from the public, as they are very colourful. The wildlife seed plots do contain plants such as barley and millet, which some managers may not want in their parks.

5. People Engagement and Advice

- ◆ **Public engagement events** were held with each project partner, highlighting the house sparrow decline to the public and providing **wildlife friendly gardening advice**. In addition, **24 talks** were given, including to Friends Groups, local RSPB groups and Wildlife Groups, at internal RSPB meetings and at external events.
- ◆ **Land management advice** has been provided to a number of organisations and site visits undertaken. These have included Transport for London, Dawoodi Bohra Mosque in north west London, The Royal Palaces, Channel Four and Avon Wildlife Trust.
- ◆ Over the project, around **40 volunteers** were engaged, mostly in assisting with trial plot monitoring. Volunteers also assisted with public engagement events, delivering leaflets, data entry, invertebrate identification, and education sheet production. In addition, **five interns** worked on the project and undertook a development programme. Three of the interns have now gone on to paid work in the environmental sector, (one of whom is about to start a PhD in urban ecology) and one has gone on to a further internship with a conservation organisation (Bat Conservation Trust).

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

- ◆ This project has successfully demonstrated that ***all three habitat types showed significant benefits for biodiversity and the establishment any of these three habitat types will help to improve local habitat quality and to increase local invertebrate abundance, compared with short grass***. The relative benefits of each habitat type in terms of wildlife value, management requirements, financial cost and public reaction need to be weighed up by land managers according to their site priorities, so they can identify the most appropriate one to use at their site.
- ◆ Positive feedback has been received from partners and they are looking to maintain the majority of their meadows (subject to funding), although some indicated minor changes to the shape, location or management regime of the plots. Feedback from Friends groups was also very encouraging, with unanimous agreement on the value of wildlife areas in parks.
- ◆ The people engagement work has highlighted the plight of house sparrows and the positive actions members of the public and green space managers can undertake for house sparrows and other wildlife.
- ◆ RSPB will continue to disseminate the results of this project through advisory work to encourage organisations and members of the public to take positive actions for house sparrows and other wildlife, through creating different kinds of habitats for invertebrates i.e. long grass, wildflower meadows or wildlife seed plots.

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