

Tree Sparrows in the Lough Neagh Wetlands

This locally important bird thrives as part of the rich biodiversity of the Lough Neagh area at a time when they are in decline elsewhere. The rich mix of habitats around the Lough shore provides the nest sites and the sources of food that the birds need to survive.

LOUGH NEAGH and TREE SPARROWS

The Lough Neagh Wetlands are ideally suited to tree sparrows. The area surrounding Lough Neagh has been a stronghold for the species for many years at a time when they have been in decline across much of Britain and Ireland. The Lough Neagh area provides everything that a thriving population requires. They find nesting sites in areas of mature hedgerow, woodland and in holes in old stone buildings and walls. They can survive over the lean winter months by foraging for seeds in rough grass areas and in cereal stubble fields. Very importantly, the area provides lots of flying insects in the spring and summer, which help the birds to successfully rear their chicks.

In the past, the birds relied on the area's small traditional mixed farms by foraging in hayfields, cereal fields and hedgerows. If the birds are to continue to thrive alongside modern agriculture, we will need to give them a helping hand.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

The tree sparrow bears close resemblance to the following birds. Look closely in particular for differences in body shape, plumage and beak shape.



HOW TO IDENTIFY TREE SPARROWS

This smaller relative of the house sparrow is distinguished by its copper coloured head, black cheek patch and white collar. The male and female both have the same markings. They are shy and easily disturbed, which can make them difficult to spot. They stay in the area all year round. In spring and summer, they nest in holes in trees and old buildings, sometimes in colonies. In winter, they may be seen in flocks with other small seed eating birds, foraging for seeds.

TREE SPARROW CALENDAR

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Feeding on cereal grains and weeds in stubble fields. Also grass and weed seeds from rough grass areas.				Brooding season, nesting in holes in trees and farm buildings. Feeding chicks on insects found in grass and hedges along the edge of houghs, ponds, rivers and ditches.				Feeding on insects and seeds.		Feeding on cereal grains and weeds in stubble fields. Also grass and weed seeds from rough grass areas.	



LOUGH NEAGH

Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in Britain and Ireland, measuring 20 miles long and 9 miles wide. It is surrounded by farmland with areas of rough grassland, hedgerows, wet woodland and wet grassland. Much of this land is liable to winter flooding. Tree sparrows depend on these wetlands and the nearby farms for their survival.

RSPB's Portmarnock Lough Reserve is a good example of wet grassland habitat.

IMPORTANT TREE SPARROW HABITATS

CEREAL FIELDS

Look out for flocks of small birds feeding in cereal stubble fields in the winter. There may be tree sparrows in the flock, easily overlooked among the other species. In summer, the ripening grain is a good source of insects.



WET GRASSLAND

Wet grass areas near loughs, ponds, rivers and ditches are a rich source of insects and seed.



HEDGEROWS, WOODLAND AND BUILDINGS

There are many dense mature hedgerows and areas of woodland around the shores of Lough Neagh. Older trees have holes that provide ideal nest sites for the tree sparrows. Old abandoned stone buildings and walls also provide ideal tree sparrow nesting habitat. Their cavities provide safe nest sites.

