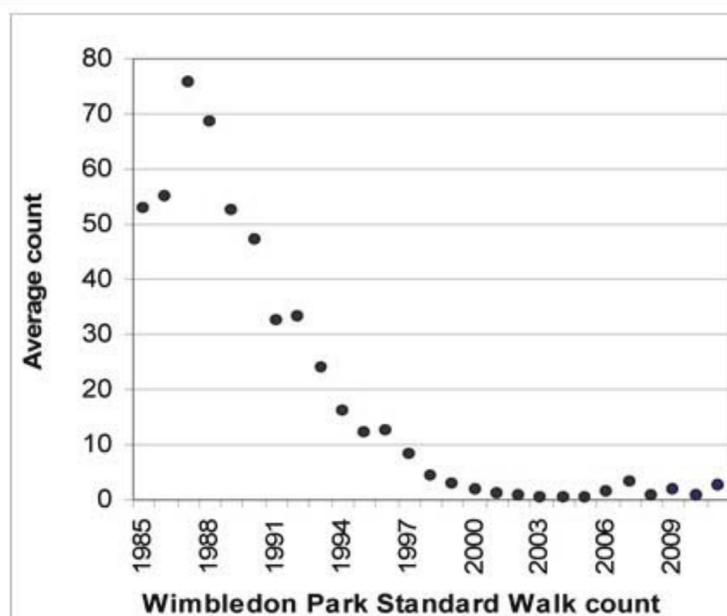


NATURAL HISTORY



House sparrow populations have declined across the south and east of Britain, especially in cities and notably in London. The decline has been well documented locally as **DAVE DAWSON** has been counting birds via a monthly visit to Wimbledon Park and a daily count in his nearby back garden since 1985. He writes.

In the 1980s my standard count in the park averaged around 60 birds, but then a steep decline began. By the millennium, the numbers in the park had declined to one or two birds at most.

The average loss year-on-year over the 90s was 20%, a very steep rate of decline. In the last five years there has been a minor recovery of sparrow numbers in the park, but the average count is still below five birds.

The national bird monitoring scheme, the *Breeding Bird Survey*, didn't begin until 1994, but the results for London mirror the second half of my graph from Wimbledon Park.

In my back garden, the decline was even more pronounced. There it took only two years for sparrows to disappear totally. My ten-minute morning count averaged around 10 sparrows up until 1993. In 1994 the average was seven birds, in

1995 it was four birds and from 1996 to 2008 it was zero.

In the last four years the odd sparrow has returned, but the average count remains well under one bird. Remarkably, sparrows remained present in a breeding colony only 175 metres away over the whole period when they were missing from my garden.

The same patchy pattern of loss was seen elsewhere in London as some places lost their sparrows while others retained them. The decline in Wimbledon Park represents an average over many such areas, showing that the surviving colonies are few in number compared with those lost.

In 2007 I began counting along a walking route from Chessington South to Nine Elms to study the distribution of house sparrows in south-west London. Locally, the route passes through Raynes Park, skirts Wimbledon Hill and leaves our area at Earlsfield. Beyond there towards central London, sparrows are rare, but along the rest of the route from Chessington South to Earlsfield they average between

two and 10 birds a kilometre, with one notable exception.

Few or none are seen between Raynes Park and Wimbledon Park, where the route traverses Wimbledon Hill. This chimes with findings in other cities. For example in Bristol, sparrows are also missing in the leafy suburbs with large gardens.

In 2000, the *Daily Telegraph* offered a reward for whoever found the cause of the decline, but no-one has yet convinced the judges they know the answer. Unfortunately, house sparrows were once so abundant that no-one bothered to study their breeding and mortality, so we don't have good information on these over the period of the decline.

Studies have generated many theories: food shortage, loss of gardens, wasteland or allotments, predation by cats or sparrowhawks, disease, loss of shrubby cover, competition with other birds and even adverse effects from mobile phone masts.

As yet no study has been able to dismiss all but one of the theories, so the search for an answer continues.

Where have all the Sparrows gone?