

# Tree Sparrows – in name only

J. MAXWELL



Plate 328. Pair of Tree Sparrows. © Lang Stewart

In the course of Clyde SOC survey work, further to the 2007–11 Atlas coverage, I've been travelling extensively around Lanarkshire. The farms in each tetrad became an obvious focus, being the predictable source of varied bird activity and also of local wildlife knowledge. I have been surprised and encouraged by the prevalence of so many House Sparrow colonies around the farm buildings when by all accounts the species seemed to have been in severe trouble.

On visiting a farmhouse near Stonehouse (Plate 329) well into May this year, I met the farmer who explained that this building was no longer inhabited but that he owned and worked another farm just along the road. He was really interested in the birdlife of the area and remarked on the presence of the House Sparrows, owl pellets in one of the sheds and the Swallows which had just arrived. He pointed out a round hole cut in a sliding barn door and explained it had been cut to facilitate the



Plate 330. Swallow access. © Jimmy Maxwell



Plate 329. The farmhouse near Stonehouse, Clyde. © Jimmy Maxwell

Swallows' access. I later saw them streaking in and out with no reduction of speed or apparent reaction to the narrowness of the opening. However, as we spoke, I was beginning to pick up the high-pitched sounds of not House but Tree Sparrows from the surrounding hedges. I asked permission to have a look at the group of trees around the farm for possible nesting holes.



Plate 331. Rone nester. © Lang Stewart

The building which fronted on to the road (Plate 332 [with arrows]) afforded the most nest holes. Two were under the loose slates giving very narrow squeezing entrances. One was in under the rone where further along a House Sparrow was living, very obviously a larger bird - there was no obvious interaction or friction between the two species. The fourth Tree Sparrow was under the coping stones of the gable edge and could enter either there or at the other side through a gap in the gable itself (Plate 333). Apart from two under the main house rone and another round at the rear of the house, the last



Plate 332. Outer building. © Jimmy Maxwell

The trees were mostly Scots Pine and the others had no obvious holes, so my attention returned to the farm itself where I discovered that the Tree Sparrows were actually using holes and cracks in the various buildings. BWP mentions that occasionally the species does nest in man-built structures. Some of the birds were bringing in a variety of plant fibres and hair etc for nest-lining, others were only coming and going very occasionally and I guessed that the females of these pairs were probably already incubating. I found gender roles difficult to identify as male and female of this species look so alike.



Plate 333. Gable access to nest. © Lang Stewart

two of the nine pairs had nested above the swallow-hole in the sloped metal roof edging, where you could look up and just make out the rough hay structures through the narrow gap, including an extra one there which belonged to another House Sparrow.

This little Tree Sparrow colony seemed very gregarious and the birds spent lots of time at the early building stage sitting on top of the roadside beech hedge in little chattering groups huddled closely together. In Clyde generally, Tree Sparrow breeding pairs declined in the

1990s and in the 2008–11 Atlas, the species in Lanarkshire shows very sparse breeding density compared to the east of Scotland. There are many successful nest-box colonies but a little further south in the Dungavel area, such a scheme, supporting 32 pairs, was deserted by 1995 and in recently covering many tetrads there, I have not recorded the species. To find nine pairs together in such suitable accommodation was encouraging, interesting and an absolutely enjoyable experience.

*Jimmy Maxwell*



Plate 334. Tree Sparrow with roots. © Lang Stewart