

# Turtle doves and house martins



The turtle dove is believed to have declined by more than 90% in the last 20 years and its range in Sussex has halved in the same time. It is one of the species thought most likely to become extinct in Britain in the next few years. For some years, it has been included in the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern. Locally, it may have been hanging on quite well, but we really need to know more about its current status. A survey of birds on the College farm in 1982 identified five pairs, as did a similar survey in 2006, but it is thought that last year (and probably also for the last two or three years) there was none. There are a few other places where it has maintained established territories, including one pair that has regularly been feeding on bird seed in a villager's back garden, but last year, although birds arrived in spring at two of the three main local sites I am aware of, they seemed to disappear and were not seen as the summer progressed.

The RSPB has been running a project focused on Kent to try to identify means of encouraging the bird here in UK, although it is recognised that part of the problem may lie with longer-term issues relating to its annual migration to and from Africa. A similar project is developing in Sussex and there is a detailed survey being undertaken this year of the Adur valley.

It would be good if we can get a clear idea of its occurrence here around Plumpton and East Chiltington. We appeal for any records people may have of observations of the bird in the local area. Details of locality will enable us to follow up the records and make further observations to try to establish the presence of a pair and their breeding success.

The turtle dove is about the size of a collared dove, but has bright orange-brown feather edges on the back. In the adult, the head is quite blue and the chest has a pink hue. Both upper and lower surfaces of the tail are largely dark (almost black) with a distinctive white band at the end. The soft purring call is also quite characteristic, but easy to overlook as it is quite quiet. You can see photographs and to hear the call [here](#).

The species feeds mainly on the ground, on small seeds of arable weeds, and habitat changes may have forced it to expand its diet to feed on larger crop seeds. It is thought this may have led to reduced breeding success, and that

in the UK this may be the major factor contributing to its decline. They like short vegetation and bare ground, such as fallow areas and tracks. They also like a supply of clean fresh water, with shallow areas for drinking and bathing. They nest in wide, dense, mature hedgerow and scrub, particularly in thorny areas of hawthorn and black thorn, and also seem to favour additional cover from climbing plants such as wild clematis ('old man's beard') and honeysuckle. The best time to find them is in the first couple of hours after dawn, but they can be seen or heard at almost any time of day. Although they start arriving in late April, the best time to record them is in the second half of May and first half of June. Records of their occurrence at this time can be followed up to confirm their presence through the breeding season and possibly their breeding success.

### **House martin**

Last year six people in Plumpton contributed to a British Trust for Ornithology study of house martins, which may be making a slow recovery in this area. This involves making short (15 minute) observations of the nest(s) once a week to record the birds' comings and goings. The BTO would like those observations to be repeated this year at the sites done last year, but also at new sites. If you feel you can devote 15 minutes a week to observing your house martins (or we may be able to offer somebody else's nest(s) for you to observe), please let us know. If you know you are going to be away for more than a week, we can probably provide cover for that period.

To pass on information on turtle doves or to volunteer for the house martin study, please contact me (01273 890341, email [hutson.t@btinternet.com](mailto:hutson.t@btinternet.com)).

*Tony Hutson*