

UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*)

Current status

The spotted flycatcher is an insectivorous summer migrant which breeds in open wooded habitats throughout the UK. Preferred habitats are mature broadleaved woodland (though it will also use mature conifers), hedgerows with mature trees, parkland and large gardens. The species is scarcer in the far north and west and is almost absent from the Western and Northern Isles. There are additional gaps in distribution elsewhere but with no clear pattern. The species has been in decline since the early 1960s. Common Bird Census data show a 62% decline in woodland and a 70% decline in farmland between 1968 and 1991, though the range had reduced by only 6.6% between the two breeding atlases (1968-72 and 1988-91). The UK population estimate derived from the New Breeding Bird Atlas is 130,000 territories which represents only one quarter of the estimate in the first atlas. The species is a common and widespread summer visitor across mainland Europe, except northern Scandinavia and densely forested, arid or mountainous areas. Numbers are fluctuating in some countries, such as Sweden and The Netherlands, and there is evidence of recent declines in others including Finland, Germany and Spain.

The spotted flycatcher is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and EC Birds Directive.

Current factors causing loss or decline

These are not well known, but may include one or more of the following:

Weather effects. These appear to be important and could have population impacts if long-term climate change occurs. The key factor appears to be summer weather conditions as more birds breed early if temperatures are warmer, and one study found that clutch sizes are larger when there is more sunshine. Drought in the Sahel region. This has been implicated in the declines of a number of trans-Saharan migrants. The spotted flycatcher passes through the Sahel region en route to wintering grounds in southern Africa. Changes in conditions in the Sahel or the wintering areas could be a factor in the species' decline but no clear link has been established.

Changes in agriculture. Firm data on the importance of this for spotted flycatcher are lacking, but there is growing evidence that a range of birds found on lowland farmland are affected by low invertebrate availability during the summer.

Loss of nest sites. Many spotted flycatchers nest in large trees and there has been a large-scale loss of these in woodland, parks and hedgerows (especially following Dutch elm disease), which are favoured habitats. However, there are no quantitative data on the effect of these losses.

Current action

Until recently the spotted flycatcher was not regarded as a species of conservation concern, so little action for it has been taken. However, some aspects of broadleaved woodland management, particularly the creation and maintenance of clearings and wide rides, will have benefited the species. Provision of nest-boxes (usually for other species) will also have helped spotted flycatchers, particularly in areas with a dearth of natural nest sites.

Action plan objectives and targets

In the short term, halt or reverse the decline in numbers of the spotted flycatcher by the year 2003 so that the Breeding Bird Survey index is at least at 1996 levels.

In the long term, see a sustained recovery in numbers, so that the BBS index is at least 50% higher than 1996 levels, by 2008.

Proposed actions with lead agencies

Policy and legislation

No action proposed until the outcome of research actions is available. However, it is expected that the species will benefit from the policy actions proposed for other declining farmland birds.

Site safeguard and management

None proposed.

Species management and protection

Consider the requirements of nesting spotted flycatchers when providing nest-boxes in nature reserves, country parks and other protected areas. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, FA, LAs, SNH)

Advisory

Consider the needs of spotted flycatchers in general advice on woodland management. These should include encouraging the provision of broadleaved stands with an open canopy and open spaces, including rides and tree fall gaps. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, FA, SNH)

Future Research and Monitoring

Analyse BTO Nest Record Cards from the 1960s to look for changes in productivity which might explain the recent population decline. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, JNCC, SNH)

Undertake a study into the summer ecology and habitat use of spotted flycatchers, including an investigation of the relationship between diet/insect availability, the growth/survival of chicks and fledging success. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, FC, JNCC, SNH, WOAD)

Ensure appropriate monitoring of spotted flycatcher numbers through continuation of the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, JNCC, SNH, WOAD)

Communications and Publicity

No action proposed until the results of research actions are available.