



How to Help

Song Sparrows

The Song Sparrow is a resident or wintering bird over most of the United States. It needs thick low vegetation for shelter and eats mostly small seeds. Birds can be attracted and sustained in urban or suburban areas if planted with low shrubs, native plants and grasses. Also attracted to water, including ornamental ponds and low bird baths. Will come to millet and other commercial seeds scattered on the ground, especially in winter.

What Song Sparrows Need

Food: Forages mostly on the ground in or near dense shrubs, especially near water. Eats mostly small seeds (roughly 50-95 percent, lowest in spring, highest in fall), fruit (mostly summer), and insects and other small animals (highest in spring and summer). In most areas rarely forages more than 30 feet from cover. In spring and summer, also eats many beetles, caterpillars, and other small insects.

Nesting: Usually builds its nest on the ground or low in shrubs, usually concealed from predators and sheltered from weather by grass or heavy overhead vegetation. Most important nest site criteria is apparently sturdy support and concealment. Males require song perches to establish territory boundaries—usually bare branches of trees or shrubs with overhead cover and a good view their territory.

Shelter: Roosts in thick vegetation, usually close to the ground. Spends much of its time hidden in low vegetation or brush, especially when molting (June-September).

Other: May suffer from increased predation by housecats in urban and suburban settings, especially where attracted to seed scattered on ground or spilled from feeders. Most likely to be attracted to yards in neighborhoods with more shrubs and bushes, especially if a stream or other water source is nearby.

How You Can Help

- Scatter millet or other small commercial seed on ground near bushes or other cover, especially in winter.
- Plant or maintain native forbes (including smartweed, ragweed, pigweed, and knotweed) or grasses under and around bushes and shrubs.
- Plant berry bushes for summer forage.
- Avoid use of pesticides that will kill or poison insects and other small animals eaten by sparrows.
- Plant or maintain patches of thick native shrubs and ground covers.
- Some authors (starting with Gilbert Trafton in 1916) have recommended creating supplemental nest sites by mounting a 6 x 6 inch roofed platform (open on all four sides) on a 6 inch stake in thick vegetation, but the value of these platforms apparently requires more testing.
- Plant patches (preferably at least 15 x 15 feet) or strips (at least 6 feet wide along a fence or property boundary) of native shrubs and ground cover.
- Build a brush pile for additional cover.
- Maintain small pond or bird bath, preferably close to shrubs or other shelter.
- Encourage neighbors to plant additional native shrubs and bushes for cover.
- Keep pet cats indoors and remove feral cats from neighborhood.