



Thorndon Birdlife

February 2024

The Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) is a 'little brown job' of a bird that can be found throughout Britain & Ireland all year round, except on the highest Scottish peaks. It is a passerine, or perching bird, also found throughout temperate Europe and into Asian Russia. Dunnocks have also been successfully introduced into New Zealand. It is by far the most widespread member of the accentor family; most other accentors are limited to mountain habitats.

The dunnock possesses variable mating systems. Females are often polyandrous, breeding with two or more males at once, which is quite rare among birds. This multiple mating system leads to the development of sperm competition amongst the male suitors. DNA fingerprinting has shown that chicks within a brood often have different fathers, depending on the success of the males at monopolising the female. Males try to ensure their paternity by pecking at the cloaca of the female to stimulate ejection of rival males' sperm. Dunnocks take just one-tenth of a second to copulate and can mate more than 100 times a day. Males provide parental care in proportion to their mating success, so two males and a female can commonly be seen feeding nestlings at one nest.

Other mating systems also exist within dunnock populations, depending on the ratio of male to females and the overlap of territories. When only one female and one male territory overlap, monogamy is preferred. Sometimes, two or three adjacent female territories overlap one male territory, and so polygyny is favoured, with the male monopolising several females. Polygynandry also exists, in which two males jointly defend a territory containing several females. Polyandry, though, is the most common mating system of dunnocks found in nature. Depending on the population, males generally have the best reproductive success in polygynous populations, while females have the advantage during polyandry.

Studies have illustrated the fluidity of dunnock mating systems. When given food in abundance, female territory size is reduced drastically. Consequently, males can more easily monopolise the females. Thus, the mating system can be shifted from one that favours female success (polyandry), to one that promotes male success (monogamy, polygynandry, or polygyny)

It's a very complicated species to say the least!



A robin-sized bird, it possesses a streaked back, somewhat resembling a small house sparrow. Like that species, the dunnock has a drab appearance which may have evolved to avoid predation. It is brownish underneath and has a fine pointed bill. Adults have a grey head, and both sexes are similarly coloured. Unlike any similar sized small brown bird, dunnocks exhibit frequent wing flicking, especially when engaged in territorial disputes or when competing for mating rights, this gave rise to a common name of 'shuffle-wing'.

They are quite shy and often seen on the ground, under low vegetation, giving them the colloquial name 'hedge sparrow'. In spring, males can be found on high perches singing a repetitive, squeaky song.

Dunnocks will prospect for insects and arachnids such as ants and spiders during summer, and seek out berries and seeds over winter. However, it's perfectly acceptable to put out juicy equivalents like live mealworm, or even soaked dried mealworms, which make for an ideal summertime treat. Over winter, consider energy-boosting supplements, like insect suet blends or the popular Sunflower hearts seed mix; the dunnocks will come back for more and more. Dunnocks rarely visit bird feeders, but will take food scattered on the ground or on bird tables.

Dunnocks nest in dense vegetation, building a nest out of twigs and moss. Four to five blue eggs are normally laid from late April to June. The chicks will hatch after around two weeks and fledge two weeks later. It is not just their own young that dunnocks will raise, however. The species is a favoured host for the cuckoo, which often lays its eggs in the smaller bird's nest. Once hatched, the cuckoo chick will push any dunnock eggs and chicks out of the nest, ensuring it receives the full attention of its surrogate parents, who will continue to feed it as if it were their own offspring.

Garden sightings this month; Redpolls, a large flock of Long-tailed tits and lots of Blackbirds (some of these will be continental) 4 Waxwings in Sproughton and a single along the A140 this week. 2 Ravens over Thorndon.

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