The BTO magazine for **Garden BirdWatchers**

Bird Table

25 years of Garden BirdWatch

The rise of Goldfinches, the loss of Song Thrushes, and more ups and downs of Britain's garden birds

GBW 25 years

ALSO

- The BTO's exciting urban research programme
- How Blackbirds are adapted to city life

BTO Looking out for birds

Issue 101 | Spring 2020

Garden BirdWatch calendar for **2019/20**

Finishing: Q1 2020		Starting: Q2 2020	
2021	Q1	2021	Q1
2022	Q2	2022	Q2
2019	Q3	2019	Q3
2020	Q4	2020	Q4

Please use this calendar to work out which Garden BirdWatch week you are entering records for. The dates shown are the Sunday on which each count week STARTS. A downloadable version of this calendar is available on our website: www.bto.org/gbw.

Week Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
2019 Quarter 4		October				November				December			
	29	6	13	20	27	3	10	17	24	1	8	15	22
2020 Quarter 1		January				February				March			
	29	5	12	19	26	2	9	16	23	1	8	15	22
2020 Quarter 2		April				May					June		
	29	5	12	19	26	3	10	17	24	31	7	14	21
2020 Quarter 3		July				August					September		
	28	5	12	19	26	2	9	16	23	30	6	13	20
2020 Quarter 4		October				November					December		
	27	4	11	18	25	1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20
Week Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13

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In this issue...

Get involved

BTO Garden BirdWatch

If you have access to a garden and can recognise common garden birds and other wildlife, we would welcome your help with the project. An annual subscription costs just £17 and all new joiners will also receive a free book. Contact us to join or to request a free enquiry pack.

Welcome

GBW 25 years

We are very happy to have reached a quarter century of Garden BirdWatch! To celebrate the achievements of the survey we have created this bumper issue of *Bird Table*, allowing us to look over the results of the survey, and to remember how our bird communities looked 25 years ago, and how our gardens are different today in 2020. Reviewing these changes brings home the losses of birds such as Song Thrush and Greenfinch, but also the success of now-familiar visitors including Goldfinch and Nuthatch. We also wanted to highlight the scale of the data set that our dedicated Garden BirdWatchers have built, from the number of gardens that have been monitored through the survey, to the total number of birds counted (page 22).

Our Director of Science here at BTO, James Pearce-Higgins, has written about our work with urban birds, an increasingly important field as we see urban areas continuing to expand, and one in which Garden BirdWatch plays an important role (page 24).

The species focus in this issue is a familiar face to nearly all of our Garden BirdWatchers, the Blackbird. As confiding birds which are common in both urban and rural habitats, Blackbirds make ideal subjects when investigating the effects of urban living. For this reason, many new discoveries have been made in recent years, making for an interesting review of the latest findings (page 28).

The work of Garden BirdWatchers, from those who have taken part for the entire 25 years of the survey to those who have only recently begun to monitor their garden wildlife, is vital for our science, and we are very grateful to everyone who takes part.

Robert Jaques
GBW Supporter Development Officer

Watching brief

What to look out for in your garden this **Spring**

Watch out for **returning Swallows**

April sees Swallows start returning to gardens. Before the appearance of human environments, Swallows would have used caves, tunnels and hollow trees for nesting sites, but now they mainly nest on buildings. Farm animals and their droppings attract insects, making barns and farm buildings especially popular nest sites for Swallows. These well-loved migrants have a darker side; unpaired male Swallows will destroy nests in the hope of separating the parents, and thereby making the female available to mate again.

SWALLOW: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, ROOK: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, SONG THRUSH: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, CHIFFCHAFF: SARAH KELLMAN/BTO, PALMATE NEWT: AFRICA GOMEZ

Rooks on feeders

Rook numbers in gardens increase during the spring, peaking in April. Large, rural gardens hold Rooks most regularly, due to the the birds' preference for large tracts of agricultural land, but they will also make use of suburban gardens. Their diet is less varied than many other crows, specialising in probing the earth for seeds and invertebrates, such as cranefly larvae (leatherjackets), but they will visit garden feeders. We have had previous reports of Rooks waiting for nimbler birds to dislodge seed and pieces of fat from feeders so they can leisurely feast on it themselves.

Song Thrushes and their nests

The loud, confident and repetitive notes of the Song Thrush, used to establish territories, can begin as early as December; however, most will not nest until late March. A male singing in the spring could indicate the location of a nest while the female incubates her eggs. These can be found in trees, hedges and thick vegetation at least a metre above the ground.

In constructing their nest, Song Thrushes will line the cup with a layer of mud, rotten wood or dung mixed with saliva, which when it hardens creates a smooth clay-like bowl, in which three to five eggs will be laid.

12% Percentage of GBW gardens reporting Blackcaps in April.

Chiffchaff calls

One of the earliest-arriving spring migrants is the Chiffchaff. Their onomatopoeic songs can be heard on sunny February days, although these likely belong to overwintering birds as opposed to returning breeders, who make landfall from March onwards. Chiffchaffs typically breed in open woodland or scrubby areas, nesting amongst dense vegetation close to the ground. They will occasionally nest in large gardens and parks, using thick patches of bramble.

Palmate Newt

Smooth Newts are the most common of the three native newt species that can be recorded in British gardens. Great Crested Newts are easily separated due to their large size (coming close to 15 cm). The most often overlooked are Palmate Newts, which can be found throughout the UK but are most common in upland areas or where the soil is more acidic. While very similar to Smooth Newts, male Palmate Newts have large dark fringes on their hind feet, noticeable as they float through ponds, and a fine filament that emerges from the end of the tail. The females are trickier to tell apart, with female Palmate Newts having a plain pink or yellow throat, as opposed to the spotted throat of female Smooth Newts.

Seasonal review

Q4 October–December 2019

Tawny Owls were often recorded in gardens in the last quarter of 2019, as were Long-tailed Tits and Wrens, which both did better than in the same period the year before.

YOUNG TAWNY OWLS: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, ADULT TAWNY OWL: TOM STREETER/BTO

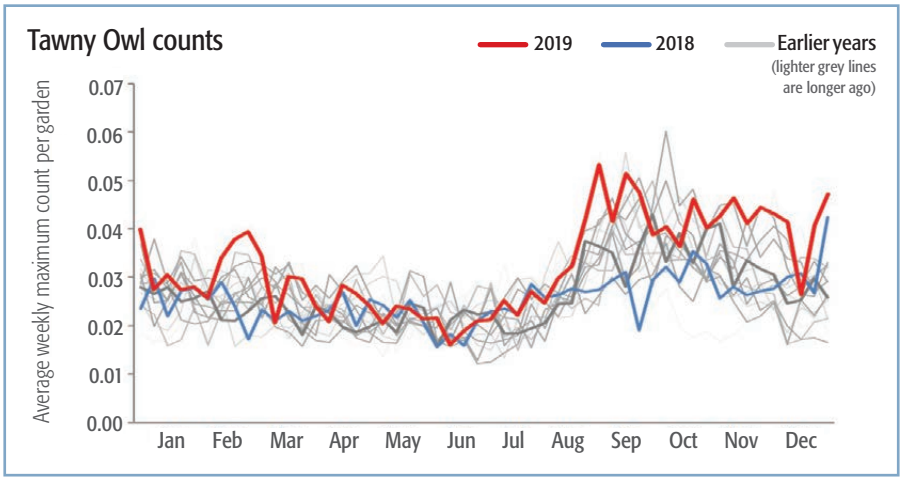
A good winter for Tawny Owls

Winter is the season when Tawny Owls are most often recorded in gardens. At this time of year Tawny Owls become more vocal, with pairs establishing territories in preparation for the breeding season in early spring. Young birds which fledged earlier in the year will also be trying to find a territory and a mate, adding to the activity.

Reporting rates of Tawny Owls were unusually high at the end of 2019 compared to most previous years, being recorded in nearly 5% of gardens. The red line on the graph shows the average number of Tawny Owls per GBW garden in 2019, compared to previous years (blue and grey lines). Some of the peaks on the graph might indicate weeks with more clear skies; the BTO Tawny Owl Calling Survey of 2018/19 revealed that they are more active on nights with these weather conditions.

Overall it could also be that the higher-than-normal numbers last winter are a result of a successful breeding season earlier in the year. February 2019 was mild and dry, conditions that are ideal for owls since they often struggle to hunt in wet weather, and this may have led to a successful early breeding season for Tawny Owls. The peak on the

Reporting rates of Tawny Owls were unusually high at the end of 2019 compared to previous years.



4.9%
the highest-ever Tawny Owl reporting rate for this time of year.

graph in late February may indicate the early fledging of chicks, an occurrence that was reported to us by several Garden BirdWatchers.

WIDER DECLINES

There have been concerns over the Tawny Owl population, with several surveys showing declines. The BTO Tawny Owl Point Count Survey showed the percentage of surveyed squares recording Tawny Owls dropped to 54% in 2018 from 64% in 1989. Results from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey have also shown a significant drop. While we are currently unsure of the reasons behind this decline, they could be affected by increasing urbanisation (and the light and noise pollution it creates), changes in forestry practice or availability of prey. Despite this, numbers in gardens appear to have remained steady.

BRAMBLING ON FEEDER: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, BRAMBLING IN TREE: LIZ CUTTING/BTO

Bramblings

This winter we have received very few reports of Bramblings in gardens. Only 0.4% of GBW gardens recorded Bramblings, the lowest reporting rate since the winter of 2001/02. The average count of Bramblings per garden is also much lower than usual. Unlike the Chaffinch, its close relative, which is resident throughout some of its range, Bramblings are more strongly migratory. These colourful finches are winter visitors, and the visiting population is thought to vary hugely, from estimates of 50,000 to up to nearly two million birds.

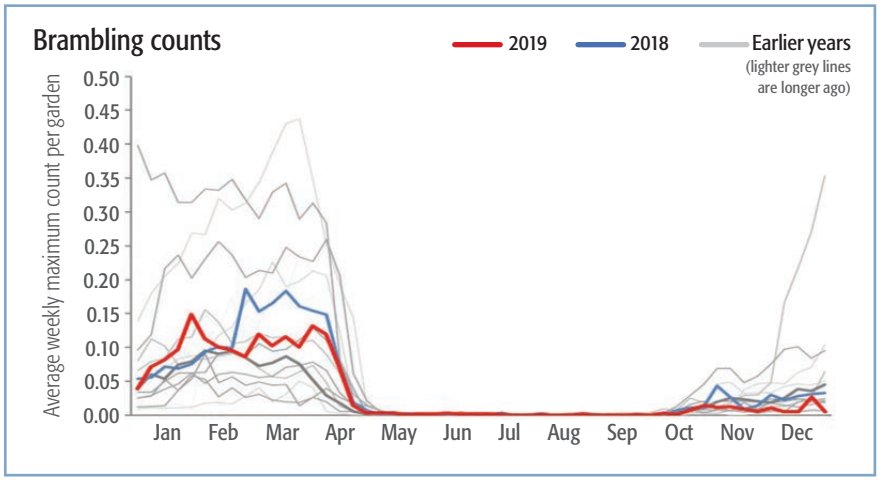
FOOD CLOSE TO HOME

In winter 2019 there were plenty of easterly winds that would have assisted Bramblings across the North Sea, so the low numbers cannot be attributed to weather conditions. The most likely explanation for the dearth of sightings is that there is currently enough food for them in southern Scandinavia, meaning that birds are less likely inclined to make the perilous journey across the North Sea.

The presence of Bramblings is often linked with the production of seeds by Beech trees. Beechmast crop is widely considered the explanation for the huge flocks seen last year in Slovenia, where five million Bramblings were witnessed coming into roost together. Such enormous numbers are not seen in the UK, with the largest roost on record estimated at 150,000 birds near Merseyside. Snow cover has also been shown to affect these mass gatherings, as heavy snowfall denies access to beechmast, forcing birds to cluster in snow free areas.

Only 0.4% of GBW gardens recorded Bramblings, the lowest reporting rate since the winter of 2001/02.

We usually see a peak in reporting rates during February and March. This occurs as the Beech crop begins to dwindle and Bramblings disperse to more diverse sources of food, including garden bird feeders, as well as farmland stubble and game cover strips. This means there might still be time for Bramblings to be seen in more gardens in spring 2020, particularly if the weather remains cold into March, but this seems unlikely.



Long-tailed Tit and Wren

We have seen an increase in Long-tailed Tits and Wrens after decreased reporting rates since the beginning of 2018. These smaller birds are often negatively affected by spells of cold weather. During the worst weather from 2018's 'Beast from the East', we saw numbers in gardens rise as they moved into gardens in search of warmth and reliable food. This was followed by a substantial drop as the cold weather continued and mortality increased. This lower number continued throughout 2018 as birds struggled to regain the numbers lost during the winter.

We began to see an improvement in 2019 for a range of small birds. 2019 started with a mild winter which likely increased the number of birds surviving. This decreased mortality and continued fair weather throughout the 2019 summer has allowed for a productive breeding season. Other species, such as Blue Tit, Great Tit and Coal Tit have all seen increases over 2019 compared to 2018, likely for the same reason.

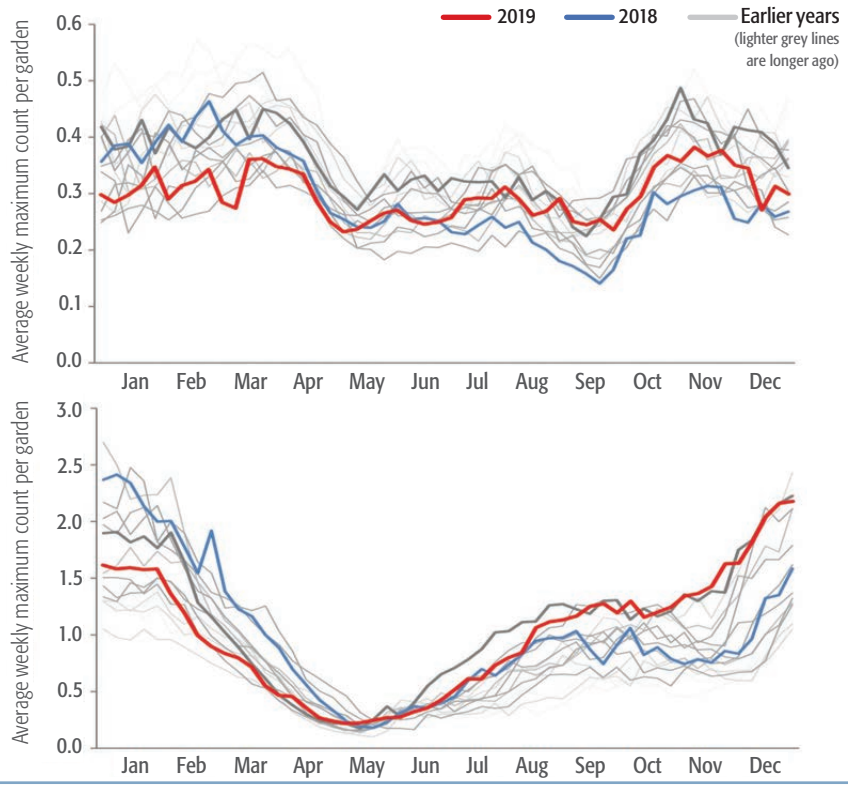
A GOOD YEAR FOR INSECTS?

The warm weather throughout 2019 would have benefitted many common invertebrates, increasing a vital food source for breeding birds. Though Wrens will occasionally take seeds from feeders, they are much more dependent on invertebrates throughout the year than the tit family. This return to form implies that 2019 was a good year for accessing invertebrates in all seasons, allowing the birds to hunt continuously and consistently provide food for young birds.

The recent BTO-led report on avian population estimates revealed that Wrens are the most numerous birds in the UK, with 11 million pairs in 2016. They are found in a wide variety of habitats, including woodland, scrub, reedbeds and the uplands. This adaptability likely allows them to recover quickly from the loss in population caused by cold weather.

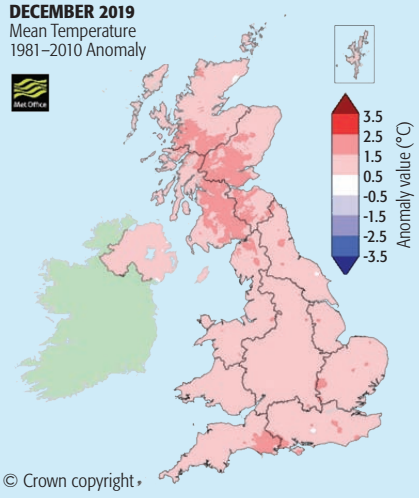
Long-tailed Tits have a smaller British population than Wrens but have a higher average count in our gardens and a higher reporting rate for much of a typical year. This is likely to be because they are more easily seen in gardens, enjoying the fat balls we put out. Long-tailed Tits are rarely seen individually, preferring to move in small noisy flocks, particularly in the winter months, where flocks of over 10 birds aren't unusual. They will join other garden birds, such as Blue Tits and Great Tits, increasing their visibility further.

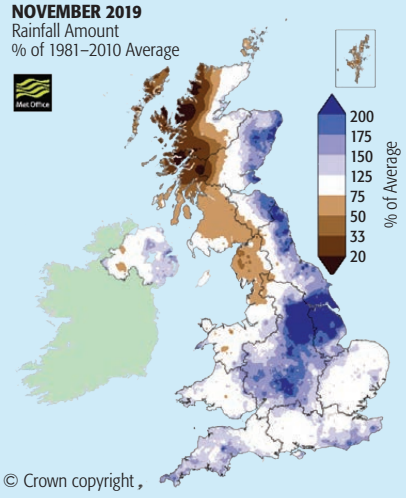
Wren (top) and Long-tailed Tit (bottom) counts



Weather

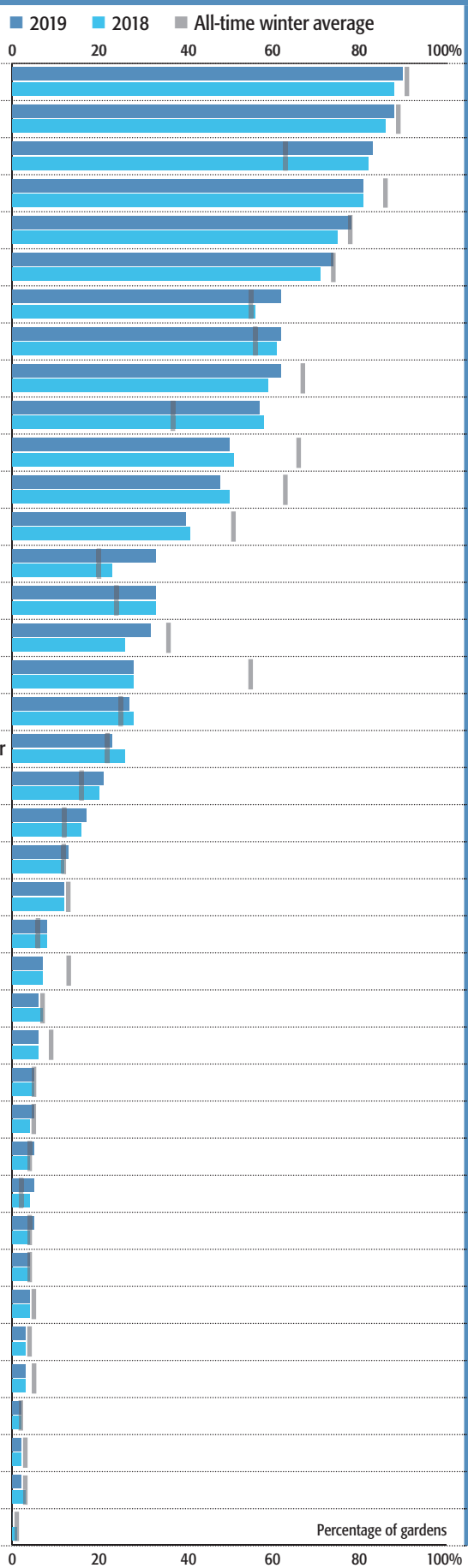
The quarter began with a colder and wetter October than is typical. November had flurries of snow in higher places and showed stark contrasts in rainfall, with some areas of England experiencing twice as much rain as is typical for the month. However, western Scotland was well below average and with sunny conditions. December was a much warmer month, with the mean temperature 1°C higher than average.





WREN: CHRIS KNIGHTS/BTO

GBW Seasonal Results: Winter 2019 (Q4: October–December)



SPECIES	Winter 2019	Winter 2018	Winter average	Change compared to 2018	Change compared to average
Blue Tit	90	88	91	3	-1
Robin	88	86	89	2	-1
Woodpigeon	83	82	63	1	31
Blackbird	81	81	86	0	-6
Great Tit	78	75	78	5	0
Dunnock	74	71	74	3	0
Coal Tit	62	56	55	10	13
Magpie	62	61	56	2	10
House Sparrow	62	59	67	4	-7
Goldfinch	57	58	37	0	55
Chaffinch	50	51	66	-2	-24
Collared Dove	48	50	63	-3	-24
Starling	40	41	51	-4	-22
Long-tailed Tit	33	23	20	44	65
Jackdaw	33	33	24	0	38
Wren	32	26	36	21	-13
Greenfinch	28	28	55	1	-49
Carrion Crow	27	28	25	-2	8
Great Spotted Woodpecker	23	26	22	-9	6
Nuthatch	21	20	16	5	32
Feral Pigeon	17	16	12	5	39
Sparrowhawk	13	12	12	10	8
Jay	12	12	13	2	-7
Bullfinch	8	8	6	2	38
Song Thrush	7	7	13	-8	-50
Rook	6	7	7	-12	-15
Pied/White Wagtail	6	6	9	-4	-38
Tree Sparrow	5	5	5	-4	17
Goldcrest	5	4	5	30	-10
Blackcap	5	4	4	15	15
Stock Dove	5	4	2	21	155
Tawny Owl	5	4	4	21	21
Redwing	4	4	4	7	8
Marsh/Willow Tit	4	4	5	-1	-27
Black-headed Gull	3	3	4	-14	-28
Mistle Thrush	3	3	5	7	-42
Green Woodpecker	2	2	2	-3	18
Fieldfare	2	2	3	-4	-25
Siskin	2	3	3	-25	-25
Brambling	<1	1	1	-49	-55

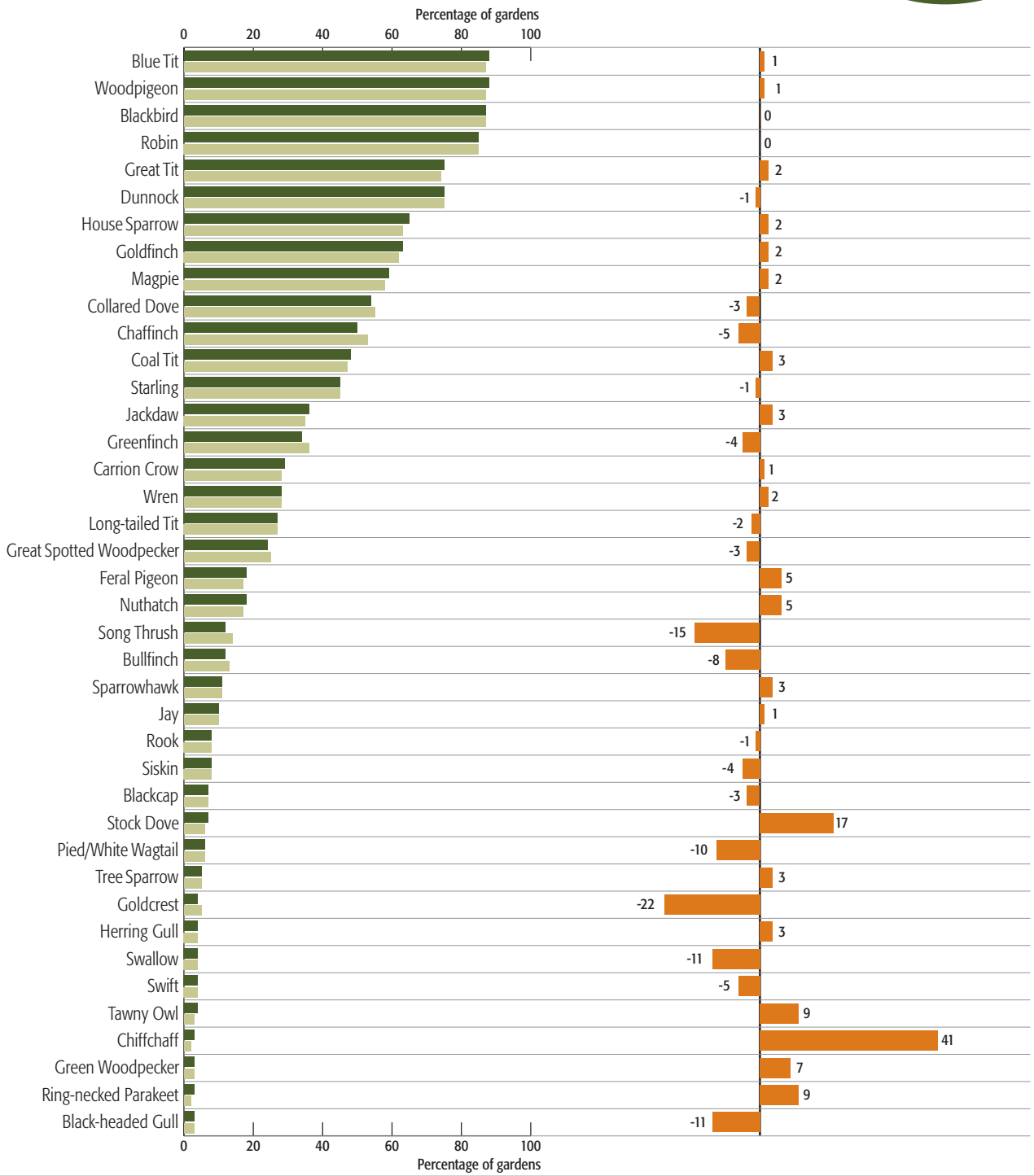
The table shows the average weekly percentage of gardens for each of our 'core' species, ranked highest to lowest. Also shown are the comparisons with the reporting rates for 1) the same quarter the previous year, and 2) the long-term average for the quarter, shown as percentage changes.
All figures are rounded to a whole number, with the percentage changes calculated on the original data.

2019 ANNUAL REVIEW

The results from 2019 are in! This chart shows the percentage of gardens that recorded each bird species, averaged across the whole year (dark green), and compared to the average for 2018 (light green). The percentage change from 2018 to 2019 is shown in orange.

15%
Decrease in Song Thrush reporting rate between 2018 and 2019.

GBW Annual Results: 2018–2019



2019

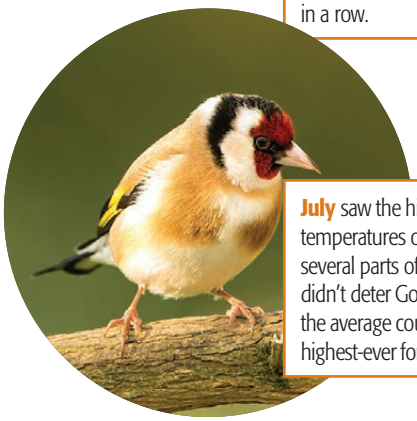
Siskins appeared in more gardens during **January** than the previous three years. Their appearances in gardens increase when it's hard for them to access Alder and Sitka Spruce seeds in the wider countryside.

The second-hottest **February** on record meant Buff-tailed and White-tailed Bumblebees emerged early with unusually high recording rates for the month.

Song Thrush showed continued declines and had their lowest ever average garden count in **March**. The dry conditions may have driven them to search for invertebrates elsewhere.

House Sparrows, after many years of decline, have experienced a small comeback, with an improved average count beginning in **April** and continuing throughout the year.

The warm dry weather over the past two summers has suited Holly Blues, allowing a record-breaking **May** for the second year in a row.



June saw our highest ever count data for Stock Dove. Their numbers often peak at this time as young birds fledge.

July saw the highest temperatures on record for several parts of Britain. This didn't deter Goldfinches, with the average count rate being the highest-ever for that month.

August saw our highest-ever recording rate of Painted Lady butterflies. These colourful migrants arrived en masse from southern Europe and were seen in over 35% of GBW gardens. Migrant Hawker and Hummingbird Hawk-moth saw a similar boost.

Chiffchaffs were most common in gardens during **September**, as they used our gardens to refuel before migrating south.

Great Spotted Woodpeckers abandoned gardens during **October**, in stark contrast to the record high numbers encountered during the summer.

November's mild temperatures meant traditional hibernators were more active. Hedgehogs were recorded in 7% of GBW gardens, their highest rate ever.

Rook numbers have shown declines, both in gardens and the wider countryside for the past 20 years. This is reflected in **December**'s rate, the lowest for the month for GBW.

SISKIN: GRAHAM CATLEY/BTO, HOUSE SPARROW: LIZ CUTTING/BTO, GOLDFINCH: TOM STREETER/BTO, PAINTED LADY: LIZ CUTTING/BTO, CHIFFCHAFF: ALLAN DREWITT/BTO, ROOK: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

Your gardens

Share what's going on in your garden with us and other **Garden BirdWatchers**

Email **gbw@bto.org**, write to **GBW, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU**, or tweet us on **@BTO_GBW**.

▲ RED KITE ON TABLE

I was fortunate enough to have a camera to hand earlier when a very hungry Red Kite landed on the bird table. They usually flash through grabbing a single piece of cut-up raw pork or chicken. You'll see from the pics that the bird has a defective left eye. Chris Lampard

▲ BATHING WOODPIGEON

I thought you might be interested to hear about some unusual Woodpigeon behaviour I observed back in October. At about 12.45 pm on 11 October I spotted a Woodpigeon sitting on the lawn of my garden during a torrential downpour. It was lifting up alternate wings vertically and fanning its tail, and I concluded that it was taking advantage of the weather to have a good wash. I managed to take some photos, after which the bird flew to a perch at the top of my neighbours' silver birch and continued to raise alternate wings in the same manner. Woodpigeons visit my garden regularly but this is the only time I have observed this behaviour. Ruth Newby

▼ WILLOW TITS

I have captured two Willow Tits on camera. It was very exciting to see them both together, our first sighting of two! Not the easiest to photograph. Clare Jones

▲ A LUCKY ESCAPE

This Great Spotted Woodpecker was lucky. She managed to escape the clutches of this male Sparrowhawk in our garden! He took her straight off the peanut feeder to the lawn. She managed to get away as I think she was just a bit too big and struggling too much to hold on. She rested in a tree for about an hour before flying away. I was just passing our front room window at the time and the camera was to hand.
Grahame Churchill

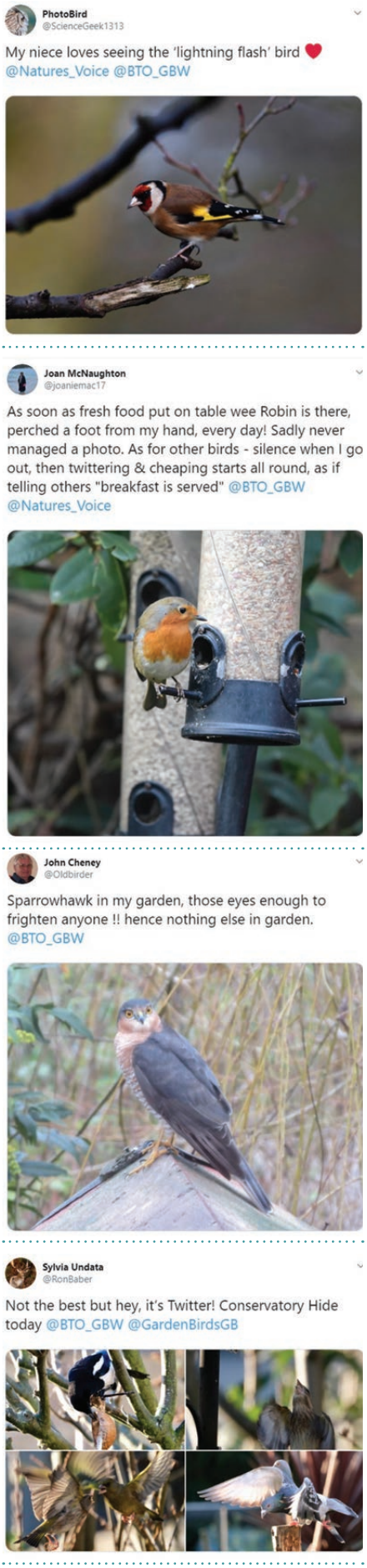
▲ BULLFINCH WITH FROZEN BEAK

I've found a picture I took ten years ago of a poor Bullfinch with a block of ice on its beak. I never saw it after that!
Andrew Conboy

▼ LINNET ON FEEDER

Here is a female Linnet I have photographed on our garden feeder. It came to the sunflower hearts every day for a week in January.
Blake Nicholls

Your tweets



Tweet us **@BTO_GBW**

Your questions **Answered**

Have a question about something you've seen in your garden? Email us at **gbw@bto.org** or write to **GBW, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.**

Finding one's feet

We are trying to identify a bird but, sadly, all we have are its feet! We found them yesterday, first thing in the morning, under one of the feeding stations. There wasn't a trace of anything else, not even a feather. We have a regular visit from a Sparrowhawk and there are rats around but the only cat is not ours and is 18 years old. I have attached a photograph and our only suggestion is a Great Spotted Woodpecker – our two regulars are still around I'm glad to say.
David and Pam Manger

Paul Stancliffe answers:
We are pretty sure that these legs belonged to a Great Tit. The colour fits perfectly as does the length of the hind toe compared with the leg. We can rule out any of the woodpeckers as these have two forward and two backward pointing toes, unlike the perching birds that have three forward and one backward. I think this bird was probably taken by a Sparrowhawk as they will often remove the legs and sometimes the head.

Sparrow ID

This male sparrow has been visiting my garden feed station each day since 9 January, it matches the description in my Collins guide of the Italian Sparrow. Over to you for your thoughts and information.
Steve Hopper

Rob Jaques answers:
The consensus here is that it is a hybrid between a House Sparrow and Tree Sparrow as it shares characteristics of both. The white 'collar' does not extend so far back on an Italian Sparrow, and the greyish smudge on the cheek looks intermediate between House Sparrow and Tree Sparrow. As Tree Sparrows are so scarce in Devon, it is more likely that a single bird would pair off with a House Sparrow in lieu of a typical mate.

Changing rooms

Robins have traditionally been thought to prefer open-fronted rather than round entrances to nestboxes. Is there evidence that Robins are changing to 'round' as a defence against predators in the garden environment? I'm only asking because my Robins seem to prefer 'round'. I have this photograph taken in my garden where she successfully raised her brood. Any thoughts greatly appreciated.
Robert Rand

Rob Jaques answers:
While open-fronted nestboxes are often recommended for Robins, they have been seen to use traditional round holed nestboxes (a hole size of 60 mm is recommended). There is no evidence of a shift in preference across the species, and could come down to a personal preference of the individual bird or what is available locally. Round-hole designs do likely create an advantage in protecting against predators, hence their popularity with other species but are often in high demand.

For pots, try to choose plants that don't need lots of water.

Wildlife-friendly containers

You can make patios more wildlife-friendly by planting dry-soil-loving flowering plants in containers. **Jenny Steel** recommends some of her favourites.

Encouraging wildlife to our gardens involves more than just feeding the birds, however important that is. As we plan ahead for warmer weather we could be thinking about how to include more plants to provide pollen and nectar, especially in gardens that may already be lacking space. Small gardens can present problems but even the tiniest outside space can support not just the birds we see by providing food and nestboxes, but also invertebrates such as bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths. The hard surfaces around our gardens, whether they are patios, decking or paths, benefit from the softening effect of an added injection of flowers and foliage, and there is no better way to do this than by using containers. Creating extra planting spaces also means we are making the most of the area available to us and more vegetation in our gardens gives us more opportunities to attract and support wildlife. Many plants can be grown in containers, as long as they have a good growing medium and are watered regularly. The key is to keep the planting simple and avoid plants that only thrive with large amounts of water.

Bumblebees love Climbing Nasturtiums.

If you are keen on your container plants having a permanent place in your garden you may want to concentrate on perennial herbs, many of which are of Mediterranean origin, and thyme, lavender, Marjoram and Rosemary are all happy in pots and require little water or looking after. They supply nectar and pollen for a good range of invertebrates especially butterflies, bumblebees and hoverflies. Lavender will also provide seeds for finches through the winter months. An easy annual herb for a large pot is Borage – it will get big and untidy but honeybees will love it.

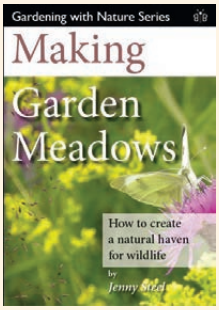
RECOMMENDED FLOWERS

Some wildlife-friendly garden centre plants can be grown in containers and the best of these is *Verbena bonariensis*, a butterfly attractant no garden should be without. The tall, slender stems are tough and windproof and Red Admiral butterflies and Hummingbird Hawk-moths love the tiny purple flowers. Two other plants I add to pots are single flowered Dahlias for bees and butterflies and an absolute favourite – Climbing Nasturtium – for bumblebees. This colourful annual will ramble widely through other plants and even hedges and grows easily from seed.

Tidy pots and top dress with new compost in spring, water sparingly and add another dimension to your wildlife garden. ■

Jenny Steel is a plant ecologist, author of several books on wildlife gardening and has been a Garden BirdWatcher for 21 years!
More from Jenny:
www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk
Twitter **@WildJennySteel**

More information, and book sales, can be found on Jenny's website.



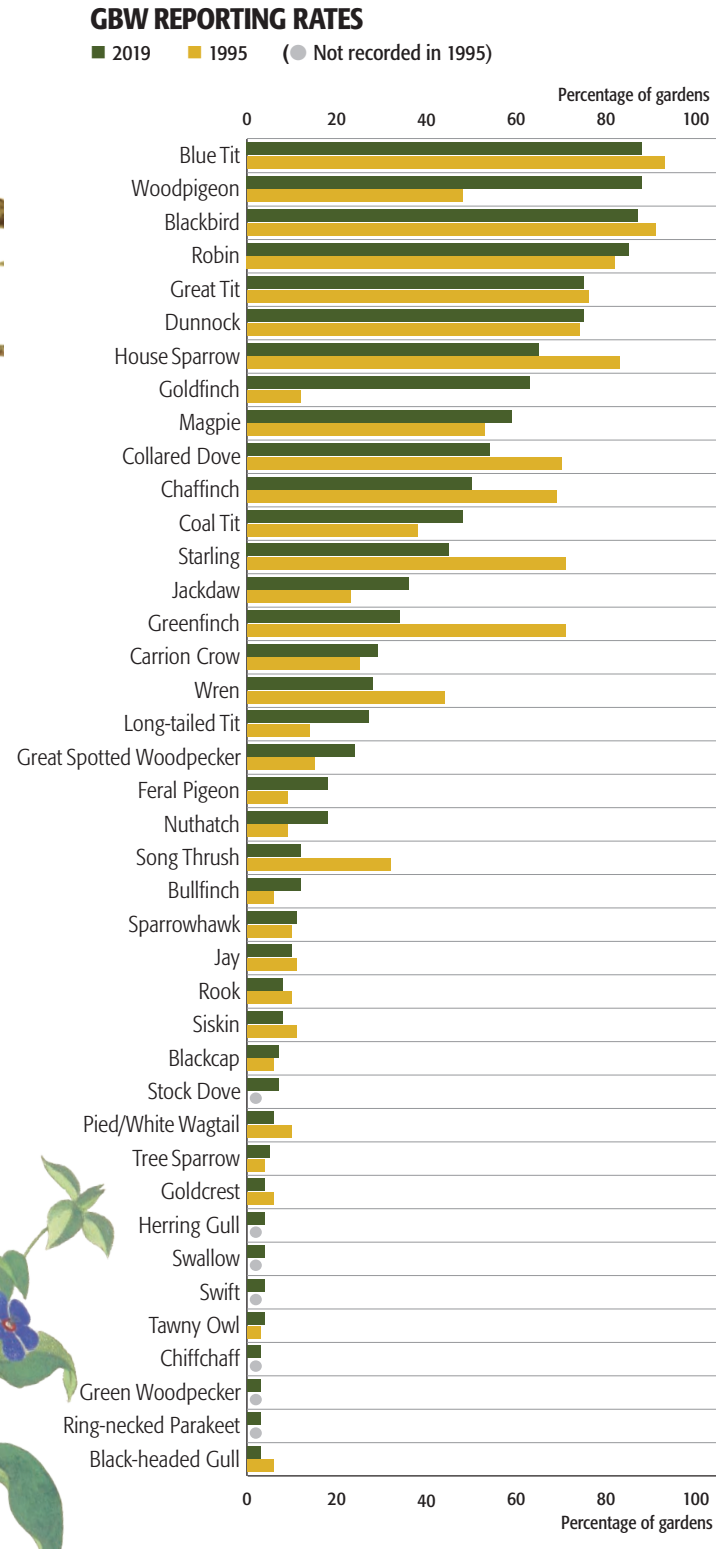
CLIMBING NASTURTIUM, CONTAINER POTS: JENNY STEEL

25 YEARS of Garden BirdWatch

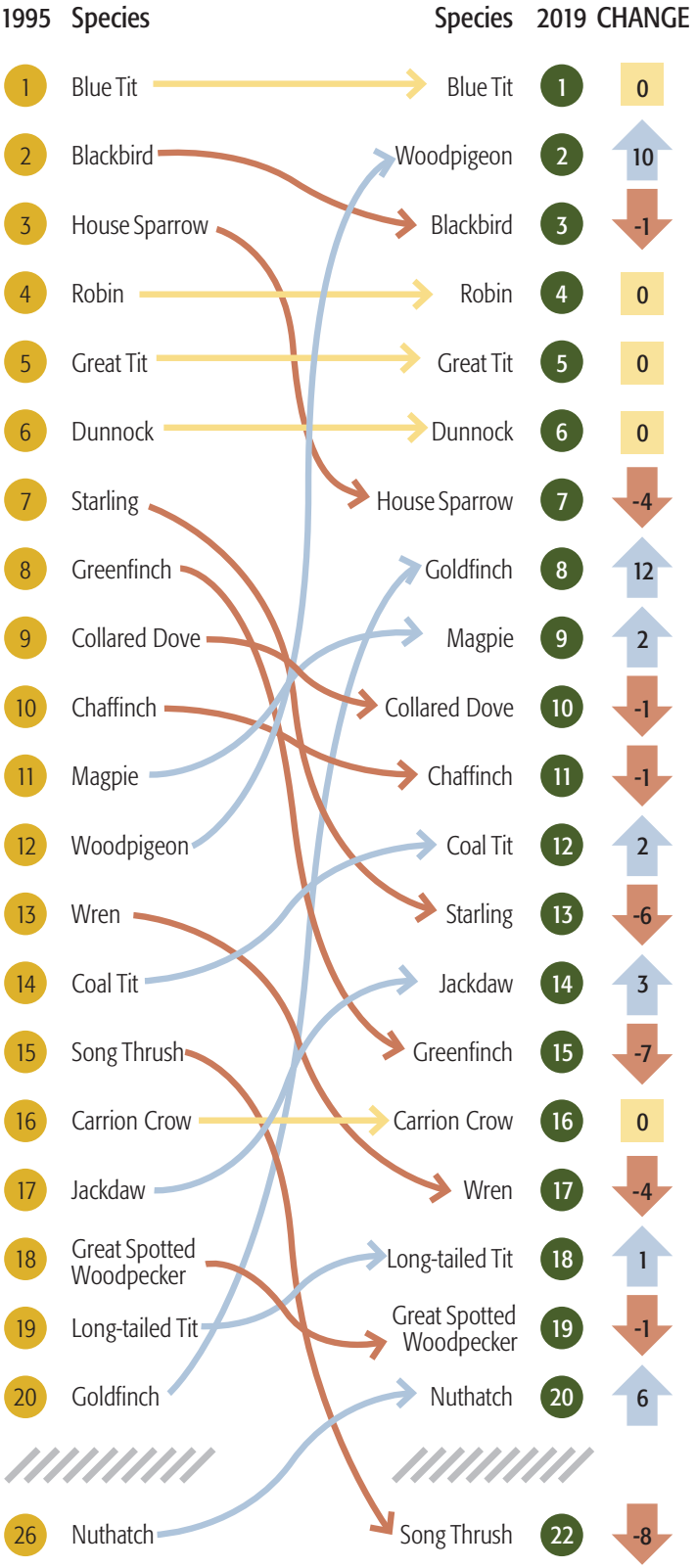
We now have a complete quarter-century of weekly garden bird observations from the length and breadth of the country, and this special feature highlights some of the major stories that have emerged over that time. We are very grateful to all the Garden BirdWatchers who have collected this incredibly detailed information.

Changes between 1995 and 2019

The bar chart shows the percentage of gardens that recorded each bird species for 2019 (dark green) compared to 1995 (yellow), illustrating changes such as the increase in the reporting rate of Woodpigeon and Goldfinch, and the decline of Starling and Greenfinch.



Species ranked from most common to least common in 1995 and 2019. The arrows show how their position has changed.



Nuthatch Ranking change: +6

British breeding population:
250,000 territories.

Once primarily woodland birds of southern areas, Nuthatches have increased rapidly across the UK since the 1970s, accompanied by an expanding range into northern England and southern Scotland, where previously they were not found. They often make use of peanut feeders in gardens, and are more common in gardens near established woodland or large trees. They are seen in more gardens in October and November, with particularly large peaks in years with poorer natural food supplies, when birds are driven to use the food provided in gardens. In the early years of Garden BirdWatch they were only seen in around 15% of gardens even at peak times, but now they are regularly seen in over 20% of gardens, and are now in the top 20 species recorded in GBW.

Population research has shown that Nuthatches are affected by very cold winter weather, and it may be that climate change and milder winters are helping with their expansion into more northerly areas. There is also some evidence that their populations are linked to over-winter food supplies, so it's possible that garden food supplies have helped fuel their population increase.

It may be that climate change and milder winters are helping with their expansion into more northerly areas.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

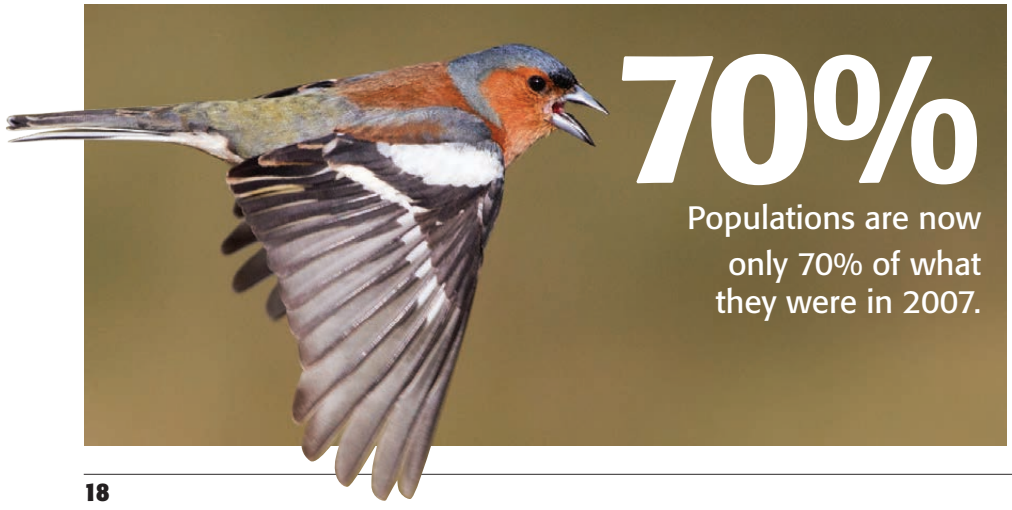
Nationally their numbers are continuing to increase, with their highest population ever recorded in 2018. Though the numbers in gardens fluctuate depending on natural food supplies, we can expect to see more in gardens, particularly in the north of the UK.

Chaffinch Ranking change: -1

British breeding population:
5,050,000 territories.

Although they are one of our commonest and most widespread birds, with over five million breeding territories, we have seen a worrying decline in Chaffinch numbers over the past eight years. Previously their populations had been increasing, reaching a peak in 2007, and at first they appeared to have escaped severe impact from the finch trichomonosis outbreak that affected the Greenfinch population from 2006, although it was clear at the time that Chaffinches were also susceptible to the disease. However, since 2012 their numbers, both nationally and in gardens, have been falling, and overall are now only 70% of what they were in 2007.

We don't know if trichomonosis is causing the Chaffinch decline, but through our work with the Garden Wildlife Health project we know that over 1,000 Chaffinches per year are reported as dead or affected by disease in gardens, and we hope to use our Garden BirdWatch network to keep a close eye on this situation.



WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Over the past eight years Chaffinches have gone from being seen in around 80% of GBW gardens, during their peak months of February and March, to only around 60%. If this decline continues, it may not be long until they are seen in under half of gardens in any given week. However, it should be remembered that they are still one of Britain's commonest birds, and we are not likely to lose Chaffinches from the countryside completely.

NUTHATCH: LIZ CUTTING/BTO, CHAFFINCH, GREENFINCH AND GOLDFINCH: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

Greenfinch Ranking change: -7

British breeding population:
785,000 pairs.

Twenty-five years ago sociable Greenfinches were in the ascendent, with numbers rapidly increasing nationally and in gardens, perhaps due to the rising popularity of sunflower hearts and other seed-based bird foods. They were in the top 10 of most commonly recorded birds in gardens, and national populations would go on to increase until 2006. However, they were then decimated by the emerging disease finch trichomonosis, and nationally numbers are now only a quarter of what they were in 2006. Due to the losses caused by disease, Garden BirdWatch reporting rates have decreased from around 80% of gardens in their peak of March and April to only around 40% of gardens now.

BTO research, together with our partners in the Garden Wildlife Health project, confirmed that it was the trichomonosis outbreak that drove the population declines, and this project is of continuing importance for wildlife disease surveillance. BTO and partners are working to highlight the importance of hygiene in garden bird care to try to reduce the impact of disease.

40%

of gardens now report Greenfinches, compared with 80% in 2006.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Greenfinch populations have been declining steadily for over a decade. While these birds are still seen in many gardens, we don't yet know at what level the population will stabilise.

Goldfinch Ranking change: +12

British breeding population:
1,650,000 pairs.

In the 1980s Goldfinches were in decline, and we were concerned about agricultural intensification affecting their ability to find food in farmland. However, from 1990 they saw a reversal in their fortunes, and their numbers have been increasing dramatically ever since. There are now two and a half times as many Goldfinches in the UK as there were 25 years ago, and they have moved from the 20th most common species in GBW to the eighth.

It's assumed that this is mainly due to these birds exploiting garden food supplies, initially niger seed and later sunflower hearts, though there may be other factors at play. BTO research has investigated the changes in garden bird feeding practices over the past 40 years, and shown that the diversification of foods has led to an increase in the numbers of different bird species taking advantage of bird feeders. Interestingly, the ecology of Goldfinches may have made them particularly well suited to shifting to a novel food source; in natural habitats they feed on ephemeral food supplies, seeds of annual plants and flowers that always pop up in different places. Flocks of Goldfinches are known to be particularly good at roaming areas looking for new feeding opportunities, and communicating to the rest of their flock when they see something interesting, behaviours which could have speeded up their move to using seed feeders in gardens.

It's assumed that this is mainly due to these birds exploiting garden food supplies, initially niger seed and later sunflower hearts.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Nationally Goldfinches are still increasing, and they are now seen in over 70% of GBW gardens in their peak month of April. They are now seen in the same proportion of gardens as House Sparrows, and so our prediction is that they will soon replace them as the seventh most common species recorded in GBW.

GBW 25 years

Song Thrush Ranking change: -8

British breeding population:
1,300,000 territories.

In February 1996 Song Thrushes were recorded in over half of GBW gardens; their habit of breaking snails on 'anvils' was well known, and no doubt endeared them to many gardeners for pest control services. In 2020 they were only recorded in under 15% of gardens in January, their peak month, and in September 2019 only 3% of GBW gardens held this species. Song Thrushes have shown the biggest drop down the GBW rankings in 25 years, going from the 15th most commonly-recorded species to dropping out of the top 20 altogether.

Song Thrushes have shown the biggest drop down the GBW rankings in 25 years.

Despite their loss from gardens, they are still a common bird in the wider countryside, and their characteristic song of repeated phrases is often heard in farmland and woodland areas. While their populations experienced declines in the 1960s and 70s, BTO monitoring data show that across all habitats their populations have remained stable over the past 25 years, or even slightly increased, so their disappearance from our gardens is a mystery. Presumably gardens have become less favourable habitats since the 1990s, and it has been speculated that these birds have been affected by the use of slug pellets to control slugs and snails, though this has not been investigated.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

We don't know why Song Thrushes have declined in gardens so much, but at current rates they could disappear from gardens altogether at certain times of year within a decade.

Blackcap Non-mover

British breeding population:
1,650,000 territories.
Numbers of wintering birds are unknown, but suggestions include over 10,000 individuals.

Since the start of Garden BirdWatch we have learned much about the fascinating story of wintering garden Blackcaps. It was once thought that the birds seen in gardens in winter were a small proportion of our breeding birds that hadn't migrated to the Mediterranean as normal, but we now know that some Blackcaps that breed in central Europe migrate to the UK for the winter, and these are the birds we see. They are most common in gardens in southern and western England, and Wales, and GBW reports peak in February and March. This is when they make the most use of garden food supplies, such as fats and sunflower hearts, and BTO research has shown that it is these garden foods, in conjunction with warmer winters, that have driven the increase in the wintering population. It's amazing to know that filling up our garden feeders has caused a species to evolve a new migration strategy!

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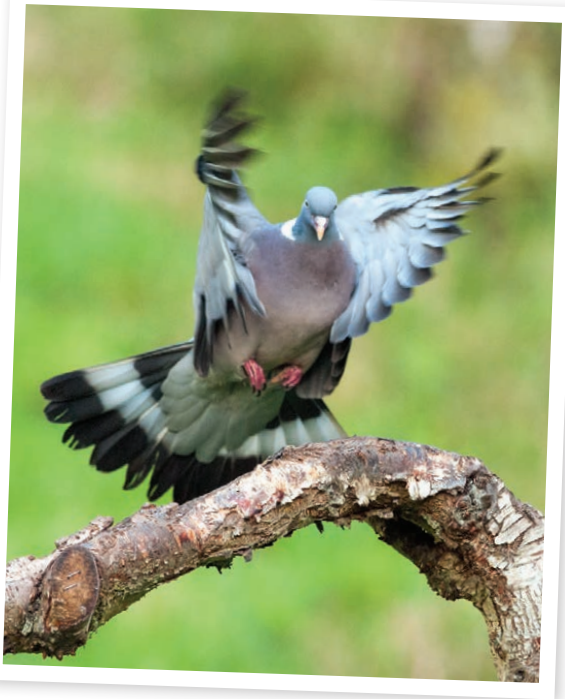
WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

The numbers of gardens with Blackcaps in winter has remained steady, normally peaking at around 15% of GBW gardens in February. However, if winters get milder, and people continue to provide high energy winter foods, we might start to see more Blackcaps visiting gardens in eastern and northern England.

SONG THRUSH: AMY LEWIS/BTO, BLACKCAP: DAVID TIPLING/BTO, WOODPIGEON: SARAH KELMAN/BTO, HOUSE SPARROW: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO



Woodpigeon Ranking change: +10

British breeding population:
5,150,000 pairs.

At the start of Garden BirdWatch, Woodpigeon was the 12th most commonly recorded species, but in 2019 it was nearly at the top of the list at number two, above Blackbird. The national increase in Woodpigeons over the past 40 years has been attributed to agricultural changes, particularly the introduction of oil seed rape and winter-sown cereal, meaning that Woodpigeons are no longer limited by food availability in winter.

In the past they were mainly a farmland bird, but their increasing numbers have been accompanied by a spread into urban areas, perhaps taking advantage of seed-based feeders like so many other birds. Their large size (and accompanying appetite) and bold nature means they can overwhelm bird feeders, particularly where seed is provided on bird tables or falls to the floor.

12th

Woodpigeon was the 12th most commonly recorded species in 1995, but by 2019 it was nearly at the top of the list at number two.

There have been suggestions that the decline in Feral Pigeons has allowed Woodpigeons to expand into urban areas, but this does not appear to be the case in gardens specifically, since the number of Feral Pigeons reported to GBW has remained very steady at around 15% of gardens throughout the survey.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Over the last few years Blue Tit, Blackbird and Woodpigeon have been tied for the top of the GBW list, all being seen in around 88% of gardens on average throughout the year, and over 90% at their peaks, and we can expect these three species to continue to top our garden bird lists.

House Sparrow Ranking change: -4

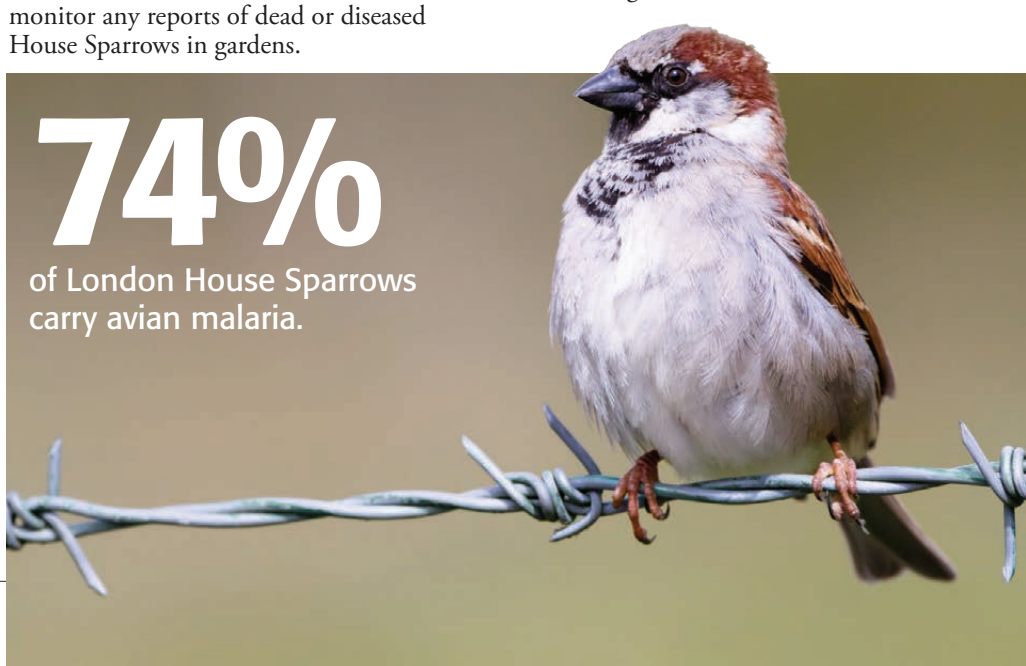
British breeding population:
5,300,000 pairs.

House Sparrows used to be incredibly common before the 1980s, with national populations three times the size they are today. They then suffered huge declines, for reasons that are still unclear, but these reasons are likely to have been different for urban and farmland populations. These declines continued until the 2000s, and for the past 15 years numbers have remained generally stable. At the start of Garden BirdWatch in 1995 House Sparrows were recorded in nearly 95% of gardens in their peak month of June, but for the past 10 years this has stabilised at around 70%. The population is still around five million pairs, making this still one of our commonest birds, and as a noisy, busy, sociable species they are well known for nesting and sheltering in gardens, particularly taking advantage of dense shrubs and creepers.

Recently BTO has been involved in work that indicated that 74% of London House Sparrows carry avian malaria, and that this affected their survival probability. This appears to be an ongoing issue with House Sparrows, at least in southern urban areas, and we are keen to monitor any reports of dead or diseased House Sparrows in gardens.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

House Sparrow numbers appear to have stabilised, and are not currently declining. If we could provide improved urban habitats, could populations start to increase again?



74%

of London House Sparrows carry avian malaria.

Incredible GBW records

- All GBW gardens ever registered
- Gardens active since the start of the survey

438 m
Highest GBW garden: 438 m above sea level, in Nenthead in Cumbria

42,104,902
Number of filled-up bird feeders recorded

56,244
Total number of gardens ever registered

Most northerly
garden to be monitored for 25 years: Lybster in Caithness

250
Gardens that started recording at the very start of the survey and are still active today

160,597
Incidents of sick, injured or dead wildlife recorded

194,029,261
Total number of individual birds and other animals counted

18,274,086
Species with most individual records: House Sparrow

8,798,585
Total number of GBW lists submitted

25 years
Years of GBW recording, a total of 1,304 weeks

Most easterly
garden to be monitored for 25 years: Lowestoft in Suffolk

1,185
Gardens from which we have received over 1,000 weekly lists

387
Total number of species (birds, dragonflies, butterflies, bumblebees, reptiles, amphibians and mammals)

1,300
Most weekly submissions from one garden (see opposite page)

Most southwesterly
garden to be monitored for 25 years: The Lizard in Cornwall

8,002,323
Species found on most lists: Blackbird

81
Total number of GBW gardens ever registered in the Channel Islands

Garden Spotlight

Keith Jones holds the record for the most-recorded GBW garden. Keith submitted a staggering 1,300 GBW lists from the same garden over 25 years, from 1995 to 2019, and is still going strong! He has only ever missed three weeks, for well deserved holidays.

Tell us about your garden

We moved into this village near the Gwent Levels in South Wales in 1988, and the back garden was practically all grass with a few trees, leading up to a hedge with farmland beyond. Since then a lot of the farmland has been swallowed by housing so we are moving further away from the countryside. Not being a fan of lawns I set about landscaping the garden and planting it up with conifers and heathers, the remaining 'lawn' is green but is mostly weeds and moss. The hedge has been left to go wild but unfortunately has suffered losses of Elm, and the Ash trees may get hit, but I've planted other species to replace the losses. I am not a great gardener, preferring to stick plants in and then let them get on with it. The best way to describe my garden is 'scruffy but interesting'.

What do you enjoy about your garden wildlife?

I look forward to seeing what passes through, such as Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers in spring, winter thrushes, Bramblings, Blackcaps and gulls during prolonged freezing weather, and Siskins, redpolls and Reed Buntings in late winter. The expansion of GBW to include other animals was something I loved and has expanded my interests so that I now regularly trap moths in the garden, which has included some rarities for the county, and I've taken up an interest in dragonflies and damselflies. A highlight for me was a Badger a few years ago, the first live one I'd seen. Foxes and Hedgehogs are regular visitors; last year one Hedgehog was coming well into December.

The expansion of GBW to include other animals was something I loved and has expanded my interests

Tell us about a special sighting

Sitting in my conservatory I saw an unusual bird fly into the tree near to the bird feeders. Looking through my binoculars I was gobsmacked to see it was a Hawfinch, a bird I had never seen before; I had been to the Forest of Dean on many occasions hoping to see them, and here was one in my garden a few miles from the nearest wood! Deciding I had to get a photograph of it I slid off my chair onto the floor and crawled into the house to grab my camera. I slowly crawled back to see if the bird was still there. It was, so I carefully lifted the camera, switched it on and nothing! The battery was flat! Annoyed doesn't fully describe how I felt; all I could do was return to my chair and watch until it flew off.

What changes have you seen over 25 years?

The bird that has gone from my garden and that I really miss is the House Martin. When we first moved here over 30 years ago there were nests on nearly every house in the close, and in summer the sky was filled with feeding martins. I used to sit in my back garden watching the youngsters sticking their heads out of the nest waiting for another feed. My nest stopped being used a couple of years ago and last year there were only three nests that I could see in the close, a shocking decline.

Left: Keith has planted up his garden with evergreens, providing shelter for small birds.

Right: An amazing garden sighting, a Hawfinch!

COMMON CROSSBILL: PHILIP CROFT, HOUSE SPARROW: ALLAN DREWITT, FIELDFARE: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, FIRECREST: GRAHAM CLARKE/BTO, BLACKBIRD: SARAH KELMAN, HAWFINCH: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

Urban birds

The birds that we see in our towns and cities are a specialised subset that are relatively adaptable and insensitive to human disturbance. They are the species that most of us encounter daily, and provide the majority of our wildlife experiences. They are also exposed to the rapid changes that are occurring in the urban environment as a result of societal and technological changes. This combination of factors makes them valuable to study.

Here the BTO's Director of Science, **James Pearce-Higgins**, summarises some of the exciting research the BTO is doing on urban birds, and the impact we hope that work will have.

The BTO's research has looked at the effects of garden bird feeding.

Five years, ago, when examining how bird population trends vary across habitats, we found to our surprise that populations of birds in our towns and cities were faring less well than in other habitats. Not only is this a consequence of the long-term decline of classic urban birds like House Sparrows and Starlings, but we also found that other species whose populations have increased recently, such as Blackbirds and Swallows, have tended to increase at a slower rate in urban environments than elsewhere. The results of this work, which examined trends from 1995 to 2011, are summarised for each species in BirdTrends (**www.bto.org/birdtrends**). We are currently in the process of updating these trends as other much-loved inhabitants of our towns and cities are in decline, such as Greenfinches due to the spread of the disease trichomonisis.

Our work on urban birds has several strands. As regular *Bird Table* readers will know, a key focus of our work has been to understand the impact of garden bird feeding on bird populations and communities in and around our gardens. Thanks in part to your generous support, this work has shown that practices of garden bird feeding have changed radically over the last 40 years, leading to significant changes in the bird communities that visit our gardens, and even contributing to national-scale population changes. For example, analysis

We found to our surprise that populations of birds in our towns and cities were faring less well than in other habitats.

The BTO's urban and garden research

FEEDING AND COMMUNITIES (2019)

Using data from the Garden Bird Feeding Survey and records of adverts for bird seed, it was shown how the communities of birds changed as new types of bird food were introduced in gardens.

www.bto.org/naturecomms

BLACKCAP MIGRATION (2015)

Garden BirdWatch data revealed how Blackcaps were influenced by the presence of supplementary food in gardens, among other factors, in evolving a new successful migration route.

www.bto.org/feed-evolution

HOUSE SPARROW PRODUCTIVITY (2014)

This study investigates the possible reasons behind the decline in House Sparrows by using data from Garden BirdWatch, the Nest Record Scheme and the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. It revealed that there were regional differences, with House Sparrows in the east of England having lower reproductive success than in the west.

www.bto.org/sparrow-trend

GREENFINCHES AND TRICHOMONOSIS (2012)

Finch trichomonosis was shown to be behind the decline in Greenfinches, with areas with a higher recording rate of the disease coinciding with the areas where Greenfinches had most severely declined. The disease is thought to have moved to Greenfinches after being spread by pigeons.

www.bto.org/trich-spread

BRISTOL: MARTYNA BOBER, GREENFINCH & SISKIN AT FEEDER: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, HOUSE SPARROW: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

MONITORING HEDGEHOGS (2011)

Garden BirdWatch data, alongside data from other projects, was used to investigate Hedgehog populations, showing a substanial decline in Hedgehogs between 1996 and 2010.

www.bto.org/hedgehog

ARRIVAL TIME AND URBANISATION (2009)

When investigating the arrival times of birds to garden feeders, birds showed up later in urban areas than rural areas. This supports the idea that heat pollution means birds use less energy overnight and need to refuel less urgently.

www.bto.org/arrival-time

ARRIVAL TIME AND EYE SIZE (2009)

By asking volunteers which birds arrived first to their feeders on the shortest day of the year it was shown that birds with larger eyes relative to body mass arrived at feeders earlier, suggesting visual capability in low light determines when feeding begins.

www.bto.org/eye-size

SISKINS AND COAL TITS USING FEEDERS (2007)

A ten-year mist-netting project plus Garden BirdWatch data showed that certain species use bird feeders more in years when pine cone crops were lower. Both Coal Tits and Siskins showed a marked increase in gardens when Sitka Spruce produced fewer cones.

www.bto.org/sitka

As urban areas spread into farmland, birds such as Starlings and Rooks need to adapt.

of GBW data has shown that providing fats and sunflower hearts has contributed to the increasing use of gardens by Blackcaps in winter, and has led to them evolving a new migration route. Related research has shown that garden feeding not only improves over-winter survival rates, but also impacts the subsequent condition of birds which may even affect their ability to breed successfully a few months later.

GBW analyses have shown that providing fats and sunflower hearts has contributed to the increasing use of gardens by Blackcaps in winter.

However, there is much more to understand. Garden feeding can also have negative consequences for some individuals, depending upon the quality of the food put out, and particularly the hygiene associated with feeding stations. In particular, feeders can be a source of exposure to diseases such as trichomonisis. We need to understand these components better, and particularly to test the extent to which changes in our feeding practices can moderate some of these risks, which are currently threatening country-wide populations of finches and other species. Our corporate relationship with Westland, one of the leading suppliers of garden bird food, provides us with the opportunity to take forward the implications of our research with the bird feeding industry.

GARDEN MANAGEMENT

A second component to our garden work is to understand the impact that the management of our gardens has upon

HEDGEHOG: SARAH KELMAN/BTO, SISKINS: MOSS TAYLOR/BTO, STARLINGS: ALLAN DREWITT/BTO, ROOK: TOBY HOULTON/ALAMY

wildlife. Our partnership with the BBC and OU to deliver the Gardenwatch project has provided us with almost a quarter million submissions of the features in people's gardens, which we are currently using to explore what we do for wildlife in our gardens and how that varies across the country. Armed with this information, we can then start to consider the impact that different aspects of management, whether digging a pond, providing a log pile or using a compost heap, has upon the wildlife that use our gardens, and from that, understand the contribution that wildlife-friendly gardening can make to biodiversity conservation across the country.

Gardens are only one component of the urban environment. Many people do not have access to gardens, and so the wildlife they experience is dependent upon wider features of the urban landscape. Another important strand of our work is therefore to look at how bird communities vary across the urban landscape, such as with housing density and with the extent and quality of greenspace. Recent analyses of *Bird Atlas 2007–11* data have shown how the abundance of many bird species peak in low-density housing developments on the edge of our towns and cities, but then decline further with increasing densities of housing. Incorporating woodland and wetland habitats into the built environment can benefit certain species, and we are currently analysing our finer-resolution Breeding Birdy Survey data to understand in more detail how modifying the urban environment can benefit birds. Ultimately, it should be possible to devise tools and information from this work to guide the planning of new housing estates and developments, to minimise the negative impact and maximise the biodiversity benefit associated with them.

WILDLIFE AND WELLBEING

This work is not just informative for biodiversity, but also can be used to help improve the wildlife experience that we have in our towns and cities, which is increasingly shown to be important for wellbeing. Research led by the University of Exeter in collaboration with the BTO considered how bird communities varied with measures of socio-economic deprivation. Not only did we find that bird abundance and species richness tended to be lowest in areas of greatest deprivation, we also found that these communities tended to contain the greatest proportion of species which are generally perceived negatively by people. Targeted management of greenspaces in these areas to improve them for wildlife may help address this mismatch where the poorest in society have least access to the wildlife that we value. We are at the start of a growing area of work in the urban environment, that should provide the tools to know how best to manage our gardens, greenspaces and the built environment for wildlife, and to improve access to positive wildlife experiences for all sectors of society. ■

SPECIES FOCUS

Blackbird

Blackbirds have remained one of the most familiar garden birds throughout the 25 years of Garden BirdWatch, but we are still finding out new information about this everyday species. By **Robert Jaques**.

Blackbirds have been one of the most frequently-reported birds throughout the history of Garden BirdWatch. Over 97% of GBW gardens record the presence of at least one Blackbird and nearly five million pairs are thought to breed in Britain, making this one of our commonest birds. The BTO's long-term monitoring shows there was a national decline in Blackbird numbers between the 1970s until the mid-90s, possibly driven by declines in farmland populations. However, the overall numbers showed some recovery in the 1990s and 2000s, and for the last 15 years, the population has remained broadly stable. GBW records have remained steady since 2002, with nearly all gardens recording Blackbirds in the spring, dropping to around 70% of gardens in the autumn when birds make an annual movement into the wider countryside to take advantage of natural foods.

Preliminary results from last year's large-scale Gardenwatch survey, run in partnership with BBC Springwatch and the Open University, revealed that Blackbirds were observed using garden resources, such as natural foods, nesting places and water, more than any other species, showing how well they are adapted to garden habitats.

A DIVERSE DIET

Earthworms and other invertebrates make a large part of a Blackbird's diet during the summer months. Blackbirds have also

Blackbirds have been known to take newts, frogs and small fish from ponds.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SARAH KELMAN/BTO, EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, JOSIE LATUS/BTO, GRAY IMAGES/BTO

been known to prey on larger animals, including newts, small fish, frogs and their tadpoles, snakes and lizards, nestling birds and even the carrion of their own species. It has been suggested that Blackbirds are more likely to turn to these less conventional foods during periods of drought when access to ground invertebrates is limited. Young are fed soft-bodied invertebrates at first, with adult insects being introduced into the diet later in development.

Blackbirds have also been reported to rob the hard-earned food of Song Thrushes. When Song Thrushes open snail shells using their "anvils", Blackbirds will pay attention and wait for the smashing sounds to stop before swooping in to steal the extracted snail.

AN URBAN POSTER BIRD

Due to their abundance in both urban and rural settings Blackbirds have featured regularly in research looking at how urban living affects birds. We know that Blackbirds in towns and cities are likely to begin breeding earlier in the year, perhaps due to the warmer temperatures in built up areas meaning invertebrates are active for longer. The steady supply of food, both as invertebrate prey and in garden feeders, may mean town Blackbirds need to travel less, and research has confirmed that urban Blackbirds are less likely to migrate. City-living individuals have shorter wings, on average, probably due to this reduced requirement to travel large distances.

One study showed that Blackbirds seem to actively choose to nest close to street lights, possibly because this protects them from mammalian predators that don't like well-lit areas.

As well as being warmer, cities also have more artificial lights and are noisier than the countryside. Light pollution is assumed to be bad for wildlife, but one study showed that Blackbirds seem to actively choose to nest close to street lights, possibly because this protects them from mammalian predators that don't like well-lit areas. The same study found that city birds laid their eggs almost a week earlier than rural individuals, and were more likely to successfully rear chicks. Blackbirds have also been shown to respond to noise levels, with urban individuals producing a different quality of song, shifting frequencies so their song isn't lost in the increased background noise.

City living can be stressful and unhealthy; urban Blackbirds have been found to have shorter telomeres, the protective caps on the ends of chromosomes which are linked to ageing and disease when shortened. This implies that the convenience of urban living, such as warmer temperatures and reliable food, comes with a downside of consequences for their health. However, there is some evidence that urban Blackbirds have evolved to deal with these stressful environments; tests have shown that urban birds in stressful situations produce less corticosterone, the stress hormone, compared to birds from natural forest habitats. This may be a case of individual birds getting used to dynamic, noisy human environments, but there may also be a genetic component, with birds that get less stressed by urban environments being more likely to breed successfully, and producing offspring that are less susceptible to stress. ■

FACT FILE

Above: adult female
Below: juvenile
Bottom: adult male.

Blackbird

Turdus merula

POPULATION
4.9 million pairs (2009).

CONSERVATION STATUS
Green-listed bird of least conservation concern.

MIGRATION STATUS
Resident and partial migrant.

DIET
Soft-bodied invertebrates and insects, fruits and seed.

LONGEVITY
Typical lifespan: 3 years.
Maximum recorded lifespan: 15 years 2 months and 5 days.

BREEDING ECOLOGY
Clutch size: 3–4 eggs.
Number of broods: 2 to 3, 4 in exceptional years.
Incubation: 13–14 days.
Fledging period: 14–16 days.
Age at first breeding: 1 year.
Egg length: 29 mm.

HABITAT
Woodland, scrub and towns.

FIND OUT MORE
To read more visit **www.bto.org/birdfacts**

Working **together**

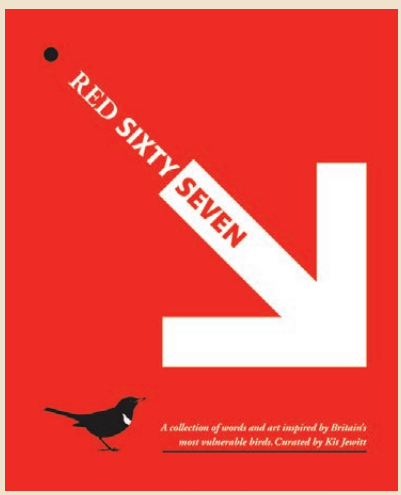
The wider work of Garden BirdWatch and the BTO towards a better understanding of birds and wildlife.

WILDLIFE ART

Red Sixty Seven

In an ideal world this book, and the official Red List of the most vulnerable birds in the UK it is based on, would not be needed. But the world is far from ideal and our bird populations are declining at an alarming rate. This collaborative project pairs together writers and artists to highlight 67 species on the UK Red List of *Birds of Conservation Concern*. It includes writers such as Ann Cleeves, Patrick Barkham, Mark Cocker and Adam Nicolson along with the artwork of Chris Packham, Carry Akroyd and a roster of renowned wildlife artists. All of the profits from the sale of this book will be donated to BTO and RSPB to further their work on Red-listed birds. Thanks to huge interest, the first print run of this book sold out. We have ordered a second print run, which is due for delivery at the end of March. Thank you for your wonderful support.

BUY THE BOOK: british-trust-for-ornithology.myshopify.com or contact BTO.



Artworks by Carry Akroyd (left) and Liza Adamczewski (right) feature in the book.

We also thank Kit Jewitt who made this book possible.

SUPPORT OUR RESEARCH

Chaffinch Appeal

Garden BirdWatchers and other survey volunteers have helped alert us to a dramatic decline in the UK Chaffinch population. In just 11 years, from 2007–2018, the Chaffinch population fell by a staggering 30%. As a result, there is a real possibility that Chaffinch will be moved onto the Red or Amber lists of *Birds of Conservation Concern* at the next review in 2021. We now need your help to understand why. Trichomonosis, a disease which decimated Greenfinch populations following its emergence in 2005, could be the cause. If this is the case then it is puzzling that the Chaffinches didn't start to decline until 2012, suggesting other factors might be contributing.

HELP OUR WORK: Further analysis of GBW data, and studying the movements of birds between different habitats may reveal what is happening to our Chaffinches. Once we know what the causes are, targeted effective conservation action can begin. To learn more about our latest Chaffinch appeal, and to find out how you can help, visit **www.bto.org/finches** or contact BTO Fundraising.

We need support to investigate the reason for Chaffinch declines.

NEW BTO SURVEY

Nesting Neighbours

For a number of years the BTO has run the online 'Nest Box Challenge' survey, collecting records of birds nesting in garden nest boxes. This year we are relaunching as 'Nesting Neighbours', an online system that will allow you to tell us about any nests you find, including open nests such as Blackbirds as well as birds nesting in boxes. The survey also provides guidance on how to safely look at nests.

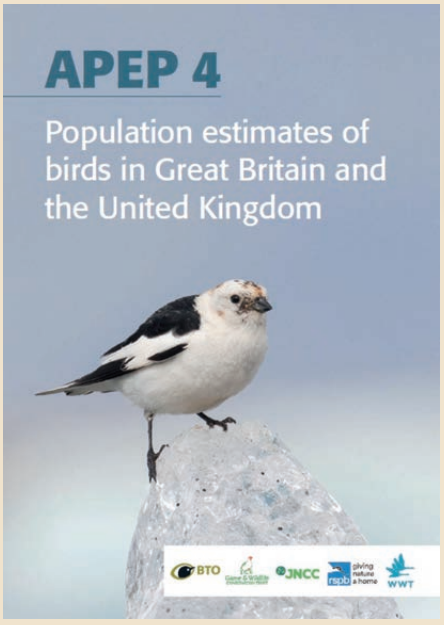
GET INVOLVED: Read more at **www.bto.org/nesting-neighbours**.

AVIAN POPULATION ESTIMATES

How many birds are there?

Overall, there are thought to be about 85 million breeding pairs of birds in the UK, with the Wren the most common, with a current estimate of 11 million pairs. Estimates of population size are a key tool, used alongside population trend information and other aspects of bird ecology to assess conservation status. BTO works with partners on the Avian Population Estimates Panel (APEP), which has recently published the fourth set of assessments, *APEP 4*.

READ MORE: Read the report online at **bit.ly/APEP4** or contact BTO.



BROADENING OUR REACH

Youth Advisory Panel

We are proud to say that the BTO now has a Youth Advisory Panel! Ten brilliant young people are joining us this year to help develop our youth engagement, with a fantastic meeting at The Nunnery starting off the project.

READ MORE: Meet the panel at **www.bto.org/yap**.

CHAFFINCH: DAVID TIPLING/BTO, ROBIN: DAVID TIPLING/BTO, YAP: FAYE VOGELY/BTO

British Wildlife Book Festival

At The Grant Arms Hotel Grantown-on-Spey

In association with BBC Wildlife Magazine

Monday 6 April to Thursday 9 April 2020

Countryfile presenter ***John Craven*** *heads a line-up of top nature writers for an entertaining programme of talks over four days hosted by author and TV producer* ***Stephen Moss****.*

From £99pp per night DB&B or 4 nights from £396pp DB&B

Appearing at the Festival:

- **John Craven**, presenter of Countryfile talking about his recent memoir Headlines and Hedgerows.

- **Kate Bradbury**, garden writer, broadcaster and author of Wildlife Gardening for Everyone and Everything.

- **Brigit Strawbridge Howard**, naturalist and author of Dancing With Bees.

- **Andy Howard**, professional wildlife photographer and author of The Secret Life of the Cairngorms.

- **Ben Macdonald**, conservationist, TV field director and author of Rebirding: Rewilding Britain and its Birds.

- **Dr Erica McAlister**, Senior Curator of Diptera at the Natural History Museum and author of The Inside Out of Flies.

- **Lucy McRobert,** wildlife storyteller and author of 365 Days Wild.

- **Stephen Moss**, naturalist, TV producer and author of The Accidental Countryside.

- **Dr Hannah Mumby**, ecologist and author of Elephants: Birth, Life and Death in the Time of the Giants.

- **Tim Stenton**, biologist, wildlife photographer and co-author of Europe's Sea Mammals.

- **Alan Stewart**, retired National Wildlife Crime Unit officer and author of Walking with Wildlife: a Year on a Scottish Estate.

In addition there are guided wildlife walks every morning. All talks and guided walks free to hotel guests.

The Grant Arms Hotel specialises in wildlife watching holidays in and around the beautiful Cairngorms National Park. Throughout the year it features natural history talks, guided wildlife walks, film shows and special celebrity-led packages. Visit the Bird Watching and Wildlife Club at The Grant Arms www.bwwc.co.uk for more information.

The refurbished GRANT ARMS HOTEL offers wonderful food, friendly staff and 50 high quality ensuite bedrooms. All bedrooms come with hairdryer, colour TV, toiletries and coffee making facilities.

What's included:

- Breakfast Menu ranging from full Scottish to Kippers or Continental
- Early Birder Breakfast if required
- Afternoon Tea & Coffee
- Fine Scottish Dining
- Special Diets accommodated
- After Dinner Coffee & Tea
- Programme of Talks, Walks and Wildlife Briefings
- Films & Quizzes
- Free WiFi
- Complimentary Daily Newspaper
- Hairdryer and Toiletries
- Free Parking
- Free use of BWWC's private Slavonian Grebe Hide
- Boot Wash, Drying Room and Laundry Room.

www.bwwc.co.uk

DOG FRIENDLY

HOW TO GET THERE

By Road: Grantown is situated just off the A9 Edinburgh-Inverness road.

By Train: The nearest station is Aviemore (14 miles) on the Edinburgh-Inverness line.

By Plane: Inverness Airport (30 miles) - Flights from most major UK airports: FLYBE from Amsterdam, Belfast City & Birmingham; LOGANAIR from Dublin, Manchester, East Midlands & Brussels; KLM from Amsterdam; EASYJET from Bristol, Gatwick & Luton; BA from Heathrow. Other destinations available from Aberdeen Airport (75 miles).

To get the most out of the area you need a car.

Fly EASYJET to INVERNESS from GATWICK, LUTON & BRISTOL for less than £100 RETURN

TO BOOK CALL 01479 872526

www.bwwc.co.uk or **email bookings@bwwc.co.uk**

BWWC LTD, 25 THE SQUARE, GRANTOWN-ON-SPEY, PH26 3HF

All programmes, talks, walks and rooms subject to availability and liable to change without notice.