

## FIELD CRAFT

# Making the most of winter birding

**Short days, inclement weather and seasonal commitments – winter can see birding take a back seat. However, the UK is internationally important for wildfowl and waders during this period, as well as hosting millions of thrushes, finches and other passerines. From a monitoring perspective, it is vital to maintain our efforts throughout the winter! Motivation to birdwatch during winter can come in many forms and there are plenty of opportunities to hone your skills or learn new ones, as Nick Moran explains.**

### WINTER-SPECIFIC BIRDWATCHING

Plenty of birdwatching experiences are unique to this season. Looking for wintering waders can be rewarding, whether at estuaries or managed wetlands known to host species including Knot, Dunlin, Redshank, or in transient habitats such as flooded fields, where you might discover Golden Plover, Lapwing, Snipe and perhaps a group of Ruff.

Visiting a raptor roost (see Field Craft, *BTO News* 325) is often memorable and

provides the chance to observe species usually found in low densities and therefore seldom encountered by most of us. Harrier roosts, for example, are a great way to build familiarity with the variety of plumages these birds show. The winter distribution of Marsh Harrier increased fivefold between 1981–84 and 2007–11, and it is now the easiest harrier species to see at roosts in most of the southern half of Britain. Further north, Hen Harrier still dominates, though in smaller numbers. Merlin and Short-eared Owl can often be found in areas holding roosting harriers, and most reedbed roosts also offer the chance of seeing a Bittern.

Birdwatching at the local sewage works might not sound particularly enticing! However, the relative abundance of insects makes them a favourite of



▲ An estimated 96,000 Redshank are found on Britain's coasts and estuaries each winter.

wintering Chiffchaff and Grey Wagtail. There's also the chance of discovering a Firecrest or Yellow-browed Warbler, particularly in more southerly locations. If that is impractical or doesn't appeal, sifting through flocks of geese or diving ducks can help increase awareness of the plumage variation in these groups, and may reveal something unusual.

### ADDING STRUCTURE

Whilst the idea of a survey might sound daunting to the uninitiated, gathering records in a structured way is a useful discipline, not only for the valuable data generated but also at a personal level for improving observational and counting skills. Winter is a good time to start a new type of structured data collection, such as logging complete lists in BirdTrack or taking on a site to count for the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Regular BirdTrack complete lists can reveal patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, at my local patch of the BTO's Nunnery Lakes reserve, December sees the reporting rate for Bullfinch reach its annual peak (encountered on 57% of visits, compared to 29% in January–October). This

### BIRDTRACK COMPLETE LISTS PER DAY, 2003–19



The average number of BirdTrack complete lists per day during 2003–19. December sees the lowest submission rate of the year, whilst the spring months outstrip January and February, despite New Year's resolutions and the motivation to start a new year-list.

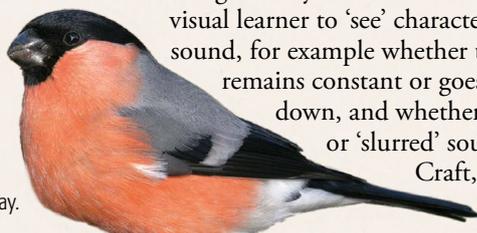


▲ Short-eared Owls can be very nomadic in winter, with some years far better for them than others.

## Winter is a good time to start a new type of structured data collection, such as logging complete lists in BirdTrack or taking on a site for WeBS

matches the pattern across Britain and Ireland, though the December peak is much lower (19% of complete lists), presumably because the species is not found in all habitats where BirdTrack lists are being recorded. WeBS counts provide vital information about the waterfowl and waders for which the UK is so important in winter. Sites come in all shapes and sizes, so participants do not necessarily need to be able to identify distant sandpipers or *Aythya* ducks! The 'WeBS vacant sites tool' highlights

► The plumage of a male Bullfinch can look especially fine on a clear winter's day.



nearby sites that are not currently being counted: [www.bto.org/webs-vacant-sites](http://www.bto.org/webs-vacant-sites)

### LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Winter is the perfect time to brush up on the calls of resident species. With fewer leaves on the trees it is easier to locate the source of sounds, and the absence of summer visitors reduces the pool of species. Only a minority of resident species sing throughout the winter, and committing the early-singing species such as Wren, Robin and Song Thrush to memory in winter can be a great help in the burgeoning soundscape of spring. One method to learn to recognise a particular call is to describe the sound to yourself or someone else – perhaps likening it to a familiar sound – then mentally associate it with a word or phrase. Whilst visualising calls through spectrograms might seem overly technical, it is a great way for the less musical or more visual learner to 'see' characteristics of the sound, for example whether the pitch

remains constant or goes up and/or down, and whether it is a 'clean' or 'slurred' sound (see Field Craft, *BTO News* 322). ■

## Winter birding: the basics

### ► Put the welfare of birds and other wildlife first

Shorter days limit feeding opportunities for many species, whilst lower temperatures increase the need for food. Take extra care to avoid disturbing feeding or roosting birds.

### ► Start early!

With eight or fewer hours of daylight, birding time is at a premium so be on site at first light, or plan to stay until dusk. Dawn and dusk also offer the best chance of seeing raptors, and birds departing from or coming to roost.

### ► Stay with the flock

If you encounter a group of birds, such as tits and crests in a woodland or Starlings, Lapwings and winter thrushes in open country, don't hurry past – spend time observing them. Many species are more likely to be found in flocks in the winter, so the first flock you find might be the only one you see that day.

### ► Get the angle right

Low winter sun can seriously compromise viewing, and nobody likes cold wind in their face whilst using binoculars or a 'scope. If there are various options for viewing an area, choose the one that will offer the best lighting conditions and most shelter.

### ► Be prepared

Take enough clothing, food and (hot!) drink to keep you comfortable. If you use BirdTrack on a smartphone, a great piece of winter birding kit is a pair of touchscreen gloves, allowing you to log your sightings in the field without getting frostbite!

► Check [www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net) to ensure you have the latest updates of our BirdTrack app.

