



GBFS News 2009

A newsletter for participants of the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey

This year marks the launch of the first ever Garden Bird Feeding Survey Newsletter in which we report on the results of your hard work and keen observations over the last winter. Your efforts will help to keep the survey at the forefront of garden habitat research and provide definitive data on the behaviour and preferences of birds at garden feeding stations. Thank you for all your support and may we wish you much happy birdwatching to come.

Goldfinches galore and much more...

Goldfinch proved to be the key species of last winter, with a 5% increase in the number of plots feeding these seed specialists. The increasing occurrence of these birds at garden feeders is a trend supported by results from Garden BirdWatch which have charted a remarkable change in foraging behaviour over time. Evidence points to these more typically farmland birds adapting their feeding preferences to take advantage of the new, high-quality seeds being provided in gardens, such as Nyger and sunflower hearts.

It has also been suggested that changes in farming practice and land use may be depleting natural food sources or reducing 'leftovers' that have always previously been available for the taking. Birds are quickly having to learn new feeding techniques and try novel offerings in order to compensate for this shift. Your £7.00-a-throw bag of luxury wild bird seed will do very nicely, thank you! It is not all good news of

course, as these delightful 'new' visitors to our feeders are often forced there in response to growing pressures. Small and delicately framed birds such as Coal Tit, Goldcrest and Long-tailed Tit arrived at many feeders in force during the severe cold weather, relying heavily on these emergency supplies as their energetic demands increased. The percentage of plots feeding these birds increased greatly from last year, with jumps of 6%, 7% and 8% respectively. Only further monitoring will reveal any knock-on population effects later this year.

Goldfinch and Long-tailed Tit by Jill Pakenham



Changing Fortunes: GBFS 1970 - 2008

The Garden Bird Feeding Survey is the longest running bird monitoring scheme of its kind and has charted the changing fortunes of our birds through good times and bad. Here we examine some of the major fluctuations recorded by the survey over its nearly 40 years of service.

The good – Some welcome, some not so welcome, birds such as Collared Dove, Woodpigeon and Siskin have done well thanks to the foods we provide. Blackcap, perhaps responding to changing temperatures and provisioned foods, overwinters in gardens previously only visited in summer. Sparrowhawk, having recovered from persecution and pesticide use, takes advantage of convenient garden hunting grounds. Despite this, research has shown no effect on songbirds at the population level as a result of increased predation. A natural removal of other otherwise compromised or vulnerable individuals may occur instead.



Blackcap by Mark R Taylor

The not-so-bad – Some bird table favourites remain relatively stable, including Blue Tit, Robin and Dunnock. The latter two species are multi-brooded, perhaps accounting for high juvenile recruitment into the adult population. Wet summers can wash out early nests, making one-attempt-only a risky, high investment breeding strategy for Blue Tit. The pay-off comes in good years when large broods fledge successfully.

The bad – Since the early 90's we've witnessed the infamous decrease in our breeding House Sparrow population, in part due to a growing scarcity of suitable nesting sites in the urban habitats. Without surveys such as GBFS, this downward trend would not have been so readily apparent. Whilst Song Thrush numbers appear to have steadied, Starling and Yellowhammer are among others still in decline.



Nuthatch by Mark R Taylor

The downright interesting – Species with specialist diets show marked peaks and troughs in garden feeder use, reflecting their relationship with natural food supplies. For example Nuthatch, Coal Tit and Jay can be hit hard in years of acorn or conifer seed crop failure and turn to gardens as emergency larders. Migrant winter specialists from the Continent, such as Redwing, Fieldfare and Brambling, are similarly affected, with influxes arriving in years of poor berry production in their native lands. Flocks strip the fruits of ornamental trees, turning to provided soft fruits and windfall apples when stocks run low.

Garden Spotlight – bare and rich

Linda Maddock joined GBFS in 1999. Her 'bird-bare' garden on the Isles of Scilly throws up unusual species from Firecrest to Rose-coloured Starling.

"Our garden on the island of St. Mary's is quite small and very windswept, with views over the sea to the west (next stop America). The climate is mild, although this year we had frost and snow for the first time in a long while. Since digging the pond in 1998 it was iced over for the first time in February. The most striking feature of the garden is the paucity of regular species, with a marked lack of the woodland species commonly seen in our old Cornish garden. Altogether some 60 species have been seen in or from the garden, many occurring on only one occasion, with only about 12 each week. The weekly number of species taking food averages only eight or nine, and the feeding stations are dominated by up to 50 Starlings and House Sparrows. Song Thrushes are exceptionally tame, often coming into the house, but we see Robins only in winter. Water Rails are regular visitors to the garden, and one December morning in 2005, two House Sparrows landed nearby one splashing about at the edge of the pond. The Water Rail snatched one, plunged it under the water, held it there until it stopped struggling, and then carried it away into the bushes to eat. "



Water Rail by John Harding

Nicholas Watts of 'Vine House Farm' feeds both at his home near Spalding and at his 'bird-rich' farm, where the production of bird seed attracts flocks of hungry visitors.

"I have been recording the breeding birds on my farm since 1982 and so am very aware of the decline in farmland species. In particular the scarcity of House Sparrows has become noticeable. I suspect the large and heavily trafficked roads nearby may play a part in deterring bird movement, perhaps preventing recolonisation. Having been feeding for many years, the local Woodpigeons and Collared Doves have learnt about the free restaurant at the farm. They have big appetites and seem to do well without supplementary food, so I minimize their takings by using cage guards on my feeding stations. The holes allow Blackbirds, thrushes and Starlings in for mealworms and soaked raisins, but exclude greedy doves."



Winter feeders at Vine House Farm by Nicholas Watts

Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

Winter 2008/2009

TOP TWELVE SPECIES

Species	Plots Feeding	%	Species	Plots Feeding	%	Species	Plots Feeding	%
Robin	247	99	Great Tit	241	97	Collared Dove	212	86
Blue Tit	247	99	Dunnock	237	96	Woodpigeon	208	84
Blackbird	245	99	Coal Tit	233	94	Goldfinch	207	84
Chaffinch	242	98	Greenfinch	231	93	Starling	200	81

ADDITIONAL SPECIES

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Long-tailed Tit	199	80	Tree Sparrow	28	11
House Sparrow	196	79	Herring Gull	27	11
Magpie	174	70	Grey Wagtail	25	10
Jackdaw	168	68	Stock Dove	22	9
Song Thrush	153	62	Marsh/Willow Tit	19	8
Great Spotted Woodpecker	141	57	Lesser Redpoll	19	8
Sparrowhawk	127	51	Treecreeper	17	7
Siskin	121	49	Mallard	13	5
Wren	118	48	Yellowhammer	13	5
Carrion Crow	90	36	Marsh Tit	10	4
Pied Wagtail	88	36	Green Woodpecker	9	4
Nuthatch	87	35	Moorhen	8	3
Pheasant	77	31	Common Gull	8	3
Blackcap	63	25	Lesser Black-backed Gull	8	3
Bullfinch	55	22	Tawny Owl	7	3
Jay	53	21	Grey Heron	6	2
Rook	53	21	Red Kite	6	2
Black-headed Gull	49	20	Buzzard	5	2
Goldcrest	48	19	Chiffchaff	5	2
Brambling	48	19	Kestrel	4	2
Feral Pigeon	43	17	Willow Warbler	4	2
Fieldfare	42	17	Raven	4	2
Mistle Thrush	35	14	Red-legged Partridge	3	1
Redwing	32	13	Hen Harrier	2	<1
Reed Bunting	29	12	Barn Owl	2	<1

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Mute Swan	1	<1	Rock Dove	1	<1
Canada Goose	1	<1	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	1	<1
Goosander	1	<1	Skylark	1	<1
Wigeon	1	<1	Meadow Pipit	1	<1
Teal	1	<1	Stonechat	1	<1
Goshawk	1	<1	Garden Warbler	1	<1
Merlin	1	<1	Waxwing	1	<1
Peregrine	1	<1	Willow Tit	1	<1
Grey Partridge	1	<1	Crossbill	1	<1
Water Rail	1	<1	Corn Bunting	1	<1
Coot	1	<1	Ring-necked Parakeet	1	<1
Woodcock	1	<1	California Quail	1	<1
Green Sandpiper	1	<1	Indian Peafowl	1	<1
Great Black-backed Gull	1	<1	Little Grebe	1	<1

Number of garden feeding stations: 248
Number of species taking food/water: 89
Species in **bold** are new to GBFS

Did you know...?

Dominant Great Tits are able to choose the best feeders and foraging times due to their elevated social status. Research has shown that such adults can push juvenile and subordinate birds to more risky feeders (i.e. those more prone to attack from predators, such as those near low cover) and so secure the safest sites for themselves. Studies have also found that dominant birds carry less body fat than subordinate birds. Whilst this may seem counter-intuitive, a lighter bird may be better able to quickly outmanoeuvre swooping raptors. 'Top' birds can also afford to dispense with carrying extra emergency weight if they are guaranteed a meal on demand.



Great Tit at feeder by John Harding

Extracts: Winter 08/09



Stapleford, Cambridge: Peanuts ignored but Rook and Jackdaw haul large blocks of fat up on to the bird table, tugging at string using beaks and feet.

Stamford, Lincs: Brambling took seed in mid October – surprisingly early. House Sparrow love flaked maize and corn. Pied Wagtail and Long-tailed Tit prefer fat and breadcrumbs.



Hythe, Kent: Blackbird (max 3), Greenfinch (2) and a single Dunnock far fewer than in previous winters. Larger birds, including Jackdaw (max 12), Herring Gull (6) and Woodpigeon (5), tending to dominate these days.

West End, Hants: Robin takes sunflower hearts from feeder by fluttering at the side of the pole.



Ramsgate, Kent: On Christmas Day our first ever Ring-necked Parakeet was attracted to the peanut feeder – a welcome present.

Gedling, Nottingham: Highlight has been two pairs of Bullfinches feeding regularly at sunflower heart dispenser. Could they be following in the footsteps of local Goldfinches?



Abertawe, West Glamorgan: Lovely to see large flock of Long-tailed Tit (max 20) at birdtable, coming to fat blocks, though they are irregular visitors and invariably the last event of the day.

Dornie, Ross-shire: Unusual in October to see Coal Tit (max 7) outnumbering Great Tit and Blue Tit (max 5 of each). Extra Siskin (max 6) at seed feeders by mid December, Chaffinch topping 60 birds.



Norwich, Norfolk: Wonderful views of Long-tailed Tit (max 14), Blue Tit (2) and single Goldcrest feeding on suet treats. Magpie (max 14) have taken a liking to the windfall apples presented.

Newtownards, Co. Down: Single Greenfinch only feeding: formerly our most abundant visitor.

Cryant, Neath, West Glamorgan: Two Robins now hand tame and coming regularly for mealworms – a real privilege.



Brentwood, Essex: Small flock of Goldfinch (max 10) now regularly attend garden feeders.

High Wycombe, Bucks: Red Kite took trout heads from roof of bird table. Magpie pair protected portions of cooked chicken before scoffing them.

Strathaven, Lanarkshire: Pair of Great Spotted Woodpecker now feeding at nut basket – male first while female waits her turn.



Nun Monkton, Yorks: Song Thrush taking ground seed provided – first case to supplementary foods in 26 years of garden bird recording.

Disley, Lancs: Treecreeper scavenging for sunflower seed fragments under hanging feeder while Blackbird clings to fat dispenser – both forms of behaviour 'new' here.

Harpenden, Herts: Complete absence of House Sparrow, Starling and Song Thrush at feeding site in first quarter a measure for concern.

Thorganby, North Yorks: Placed a poultry type 'garden guard' over ground feeders to limit dominant Woodpigeon and Collared Dove activity. It works a treat, enabling smaller Robin, Dunnock and tits to have a fair share.

Llangollen, Clwyd: Long-tailed Tit come regularly at dusk to feed on nuts and fat. Both Nuthatch and Coal Tit have been caching sunflower seeds taken from feeders.

Marford, Wrexham: Jays drinking at bird bath, taking seeds from beneath bird table along with acorns and burying them in the turf of the lawn.

Llanwrda, Dyfed: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker regular visitor to peanuts – a real bonus.

Ravenhead, Nottingham: Cock Sparrowhawk sat on water lily in pond and bathed for several minutes, smaller birds strangely taking little notice.

Little Thirkleby, North Yorks: Chiffchaff came to drink at bird bath in early October.

St Margarets Hope, Orkney: First-winter Hen Harrier hunting over garden feeding station. We also witness raids by Kestrel and Peregrine.

Benenden, Kent: Lesser Redpoll taking Nyger seed a first for this garden. Strikingly attractive Californian Quail fed for a few days – presumably an aviary escape.

Ingatstone, Essex: Garden looking like an aviary at times during the New Year mini freeze. Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldfinch, Grey Wagtail and Siskin, among others, all taking food provided.

Melbourn, Cambs: Number of Goldfinches feeding dictated by seed ports available and seating capacity. The more provided, the more arrive.

Nunthorpe, Cleveland: Number of Starling feeding almost equalled by the Woodpigeon flock – sign of the times.

Old Malton, North Yorks: Single Moorhen appeared at feeding site, a 'first' for the garden. No doubt driven away from the ice-bound stream one quarter of a mile away.

New Mills, Derbys: Mistle Thrush took mealworms for the first time and now mounting guard over feeder, chasing Blackbirds away.

Seaton, Cumbria: Pair of Red Squirrels feeding on sunflower seeds a lovely surprise. Birds have to share space at the table, including 'first-ever' Nuthatch and Jay.

Rook by John Harding, Ring-necked Parakeet by Christine M Matthews, Bullfinch by Jill Pakenham, Coal Tit by John Harding, Goldcrest by Rob Robinson, Red Kite by Jill Pakenham, Song Thrush by John Harding, Starling by John Harding, Jay by Jill Pakenham, Chiffchaff by www.grayimages.co.uk, Lesser Redpoll by Jill Pakenham, Grey Wagtail by Colin Varndell, Moorhen by Neil Calbrade and Nuthatch by Tommy Holden.



WINTER 09/10: ANOTHER COLD ONE?

This year we are happy to welcome to the survey 32 new participants from across Scotland, Northern Ireland, Lincolnshire, Herefordshire, Bedfordshire, Yorkshire and the Isle of Man. Records from these areas will help to 'fill in the gaps' and ensure representative coverage throughout Britain.



Coverage of GBFS sites winter 08/09. Red = urban/suburban. Blue = rural.

IN MEMORIAM

Members we are sad to have lost over the 08/09 winter include John Woodland of Dunsford, Exeter (BTO Regional Representative for Devon), Norman Evans of New Milton, Hampshire and David Snow of Wingrave, Buckinghamshire.



Long-tailed Tits by Dick Jeeves

The GBFS Team:

Amy Lewis: Garden BirdWatch Development Officer

David Glue: BTO Research Ecologist

Fran Bowman: Data Assistant

Mike Toms: Head of Garden Ecology

Jacky Prior, Heather Pymar and Donna Hobbs:

Garden BirdWatch Team

BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey:

GBFS has been monitoring the numbers and variety of garden birds coming to supplementary foods in winter since 1970. It is the longest running annual survey of its kind in Europe and allows direct comparison of garden types and locations over time.

Contact us:

BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey
The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU

tel: 01842 750050

email: info@bto.org

website: www.bto.org



Great Spotted
Woodpecker by
Jill Pakenham

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