

GBFSnews

The newsletter for participants in the
BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



Number 7

August 2015

Garden feeding stations quiet for yet another year

After relatively few birds were seen in winter 2013–14, we were all hoping for a surge in numbers last winter but, with mild temperatures and an abundance of natural foods, our garden feeding stations were empty once again.

While it was disappointing for us as Garden BirdWatchers, it was good news for Britain's birds as winter 2014–15 was another mild, albeit unsettled, winter. With few frosts, there were plenty of invertebrates around for the insectivores and a number of you commented on seeing bumblebees and butterflies well into the winter months. There was also another good crop of berries and tree mast, so for the second winter in a row GBFS participants saved money on bird food. In fact, many of you commented on the fact that even the berries in your gardens remained untouched well into December.

In terms of the food that was available, many of you took in peanuts and fat products that were not being touched, and it seemed that some of you gave up on nyger seed as Goldfinches and Siskins went straight to sunflower hearts. However, interestingly, there were quite a few comments about Tree



RON MARSHALL

Sparrows taking nyger seed. With their numbers increasing at garden feeding stations over the last decade, could nyger be attracting them, or are they just taking advantage of it being there? We focus more on Tree Sparrows on page 8.

It was not just our resident birds that seemed scarce in our gardens. Migrant numbers were low and not just at our feeders. The mean weekly peak counts of Fieldfare and Redwing dropped again, with the former almost non-existent in suburban areas. Brambling, Lesser Redpoll and Siskin were sorely lacking at feeding stations as well, and many of you commented on their absence.

Despite the second quiet winter in a row, you persevered with your records and we are very grateful for them. Empty garden feeding stations tell us just as much as when they are teeming. A total of 81 species was recorded this year, with observations coming in from 274 gardens and providing very valuable information, so thank you for taking part and I hope that you enjoy reading this year's *GBFS News*. **Clare Simm**

Review of winter 2014–15

Last winter was the second in a row to see a bounty of natural food in the wider countryside and relatively mild temperatures. The weather was relatively quiet compared to the exceptionally stormy weather seen in winter 2013–14 though there were some localised storms. It was therefore not surprising that GBFS participants saw few birds feeding in their gardens, especially as winter migrants appeared in low numbers again.

Typical start to autumn

With the UK experiencing its third warmest autumn since records began in 1910, it's not unexpected that garden bird feeding stations started off somewhat empty. Even species seen all year round, such as Blue Tit (Figure 1), were not present in as high numbers as usual. While October was a very warm month (with a maximum of 23.6°C recorded in Kent), it was also dominated by low pressure. Wet and windy weather was widespread; we caught the end of Hurricane Gonzalo and the country



JOHN HARDING



Figure 1: Mean peak count per garden of Blue Tit

experienced 125% of the average rainfall for the month. Most of the bad weather was localised, meaning that birds could still take advantage of the natural food available. In areas where the weather was adverse, many participants commented that birds could



JILL PAKENHAM

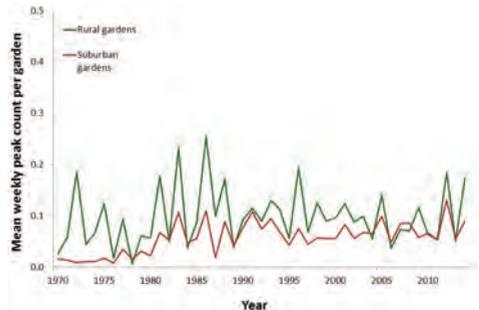


Figure 2: Mean peak count per garden of Jay

not use hanging feeders because the winds were too strong. The weather did seem to affect insectivorous species such as Wren and Goldcrest, both seen in much higher numbers at the beginning of this GBFS season than compared to the five-year average.

While it was another good year for berries and most tree seeds, acorns were scarce. This affected some seed-eating species including Jay and Nuthatch with the mean count of Jay, in particular, much higher in rural areas than last year (Figure 2). Great Spotted Woodpecker, however, was seen in lower numbers than last year.

Continued unsettled weather

As November came around, many areas saw localised flooding because of the continuing low pressure. However the mild weather also stayed and it was the fifth-warmest November since records began in 1910.

JOHN GODFREE

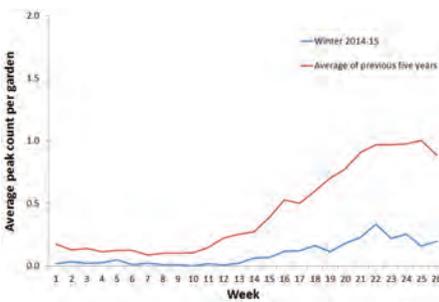


Figure 3: Mean peak count per garden of Siskin

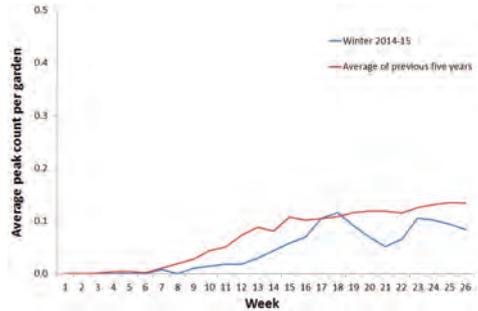


Figure 4: Mean peak count per garden of Reed Bunting

Some species, such as Song Thrush, did start to move into gardens for supplementary food but nothing unusual occurred. Even as the weather settled towards the end of the month, there were few air frosts, and most species continued to stay away from garden feeding stations.

The arrival of December saw more wet weather in the north and west of the country, but things were more settled in the south and east. Redwing and Siskin (Figure 3) finally started appearing, and staying, at garden feeding stations though still in numbers well below the five-year average. Mid-month, temperatures started to cool down, with southern and central Scotland receiving snow; by the end of the month most of the country had experienced proper frosts. This potentially was the driver behind the rise in numbers of Black-headed Gull, Bullfinch and Fieldfare, though other species, including House Sparrow and Coal Tit, followed their usual seasonal pattern and started to move away from garden feeding stations.

Mild winter

Despite a cold start, overall January was fairly mild, with a maximum temperature of 16.5°C (Devon). Temperatures did start to drop again towards the end of the month, with snow and widespread frosts across the country. With food starting to run out in the wider countryside, the cold weather brought

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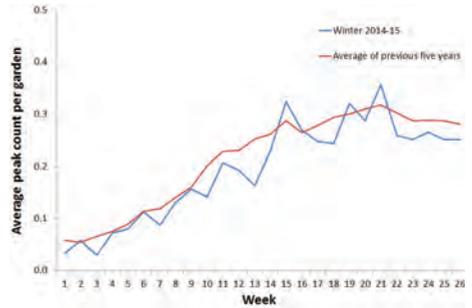


Figure 5: Mean peak count per garden of Bullfinch

more birds to garden feeders, and the average numbers of Brambling and Reed Bunting (Figure 4) both went up. Long-tailed Tits also peaked in late January and were finally

seen in numbers similar to the five-year average, having been quite low so far in the season. The long-term data show that the Long-tailed Tit mean count was higher in rural areas than the previous winter, whereas in suburban areas it decreased, suggesting that temperature may have contributed to their increased use of supplementary foods.

The first half of February remained cold, with average temperatures for the time of year and settled weather for most of the country. Both Blackbird and Robin reached their peak mean count for the season in the first week of February, with Robin exceeding the previous five-year mean count in gardens. The second half of February was a different story, bringing strong winds and rain for much of the country, and more snow for Scotland. Bullfinch numbers were at their highest in the middle of the month (Figure 5), but other small peaks had occurred previously in the season, coinciding either with stormy weather or drops in temperature, suggesting that they were struggling to get enough seeds and insects.

AMY LEWIS



Unusual visitors

It was another good year for surprise visitors taking away some of the disappointment of low numbers of our more common birds. Four gardens near the coast were visited by Great Black-backed Gulls, the Hen Harrier was back in Orkney, one lucky garden in Northumberland received a Ring Ouzel in early November, a Sheffield resident saw a pair of Mandarins and a Stonechat turned up in Chichester. However, the star garden bird had to be a Corn Bunting in Somerset.

Early spring

With average temperatures and another bout of settled weather, spring looked set to start at the beginning of March and the early breeders, such as Blackbird, started to nest. The numbers seen in gardens reflected this, with a steady decrease towards the end of the

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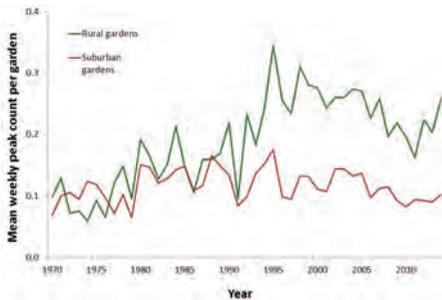


Figure 6: Mean peak count per garden of Wren

recording period. Sadly the weather turned again, with some very strong winds in south and central England disrupting those initial breeding attempts. Most numbers were not affected by this, following the pattern of the previous five years, but some, such as Great Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker, showed small increases. Sadly, with the recording period over, we don't know what might have happened into April.

Wrens bounce back

This was the sunniest winter in the UK since records started in 1929, especially in the east of the country. While it was fairly mild throughout the season, there were some species that were seen in higher mean numbers at our garden feeding stations than in recent years. One of these was Wren, which had the highest mean weekly count per garden in rural areas since 2007 and

in suburban areas since 2008 (Figure 6). The Wren population does suffer during extremely cold winters, but thanks to a few milder ones the BTO/JNCC/RSPB BBS results show that they are recovering, with a population increase of 34% observed in 2013–14 across the country.



JOHN HARDING

Opposites

Usually we would expect species numbers to increase or decrease in both suburban and rural gardens, though not necessarily at the same rate. However sometimes species break this mould and this year was no different. Black-headed Gull, Long-tailed Tit (Figure 7) and Treecreeper all increased in rural areas, but decreased in suburban ones, and Jackdaw and Reed Bunting did the opposite. Whether this is a one-off reflecting the weather conditions and availability of food remains to be seen.

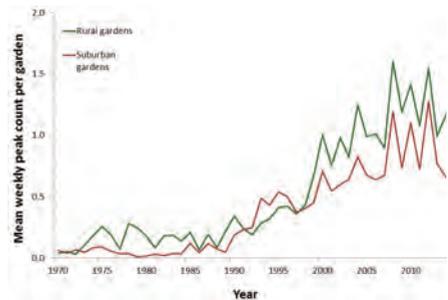


Figure 7: Mean peak count per garden of Long-tailed Tit

Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

Winter 2014 - 2015

Top Twelve Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Robin	274	100.0	Woodpigeon	239	87.2
Blue Tit	273	99.6	Greenfinch	232	84.7
Blackbird	272	99.3	Coal Tit	231	84.3
Dunnock	270	98.5	Goldfinch	230	83.9
Great Tit	266	97.1	Collared Dove	229	83.6
Chaffinch	257	93.8	House Sparrow	226	82.5

Additional Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Magpie	216	78.8	Lesser Redpoll	34	12.4
Starling	213	77.7	Mistle Thrush	33	12.0
Long-tailed Tit	190	69.3	Reed Bunting	33	12.0
Great Spotted Woodpecker	163	59.5	Stock Dove	32	11.7
Jackdaw	157	57.3	Goldcrest	26	9.5
Sparrowhawk	143	52.2	Yellowhammer	21	7.7
Wren	132	48.2	Marsh/Willow Tit	20	7.3
Carrion Crow	112	40.9	Grey Wagtail	18	6.6
Song Thrush	101	36.9	Brambling	17	6.2
Pheasant	96	35.0	Mallard	14	5.1
Nuthatch	83	30.3	Redwing	13	4.7
Jay	81	29.6	Moorhen	12	4.4
Blackcap	74	27.0	Fieldfare	11	4.0
Pied Wagtail	70	25.5	Red-legged Partridge	10	3.6
Bullfinch	68	24.8	Lesser Black-backed Gull	9	3.3
Rook	67	24.5	Common Gull	8	2.9
Siskin	61	22.3	Green Woodpecker	8	2.9
Feral Pigeon	55	20.1	Marsh Tit	8	2.9
Tree Sparrow	45	16.4	Hooded Crow	6	2.2
Herring Gull	40	14.6	Heron	6	2.2
Black-headed Gull	37	13.5	Kestrel	5	1.8

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Treecreeper	5	1.8	Racing Pigeon	1	0.4
Buzzard	5	1.8	Barn Owl	1	0.4
Ring-necked Parakeet	5	1.8	Canada Goose	1	0.4
Chiffchaff	4	1.5	Corn Bunting	1	0.4
Great Black-backed Gull	4	1.5	Mute Swan	1	0.4
Red Kite	4	1.5	Coot	1	0.4
Tawny Owl	3	1.1	Willow Tit	1	0.4
Swallow	2	0.7	Curlew	1	0.4
Linnet	1	0.4	Hen Harrier	1	0.4
Willow Warbler	1	0.4	Ring Ouzel	1	0.4
Stonechat	1	0.4	Rock Pipit	1	0.4
Partridge	1	0.4	Mandarin Duck	1	0.4
Water Rail	1	0.4	Rock Dove	1	0.4
Number of sites recording: 274					

Focus on sites

Last winter we had an average of 20 species visiting each garden site, and 15 sites with 28 or more species recorded. Only two of those sites were suburban, unlike winter 2013–14 when five of them were. The site with the least number of species was Steve Harper's suburban garden in Kent with only five species – Dunnock, Collared Dove, Woodpigeon, Herring Gull and Feral Pigeon. Steve has been taking part since winter 1989–1990 and while he only saw seven species that winter they were very different and included two species of tit, House Sparrow, Starling and Song Thrush. This shows the value of long-term participation of GBFS members, even when species numbers are low.



JILL PAKENHAM

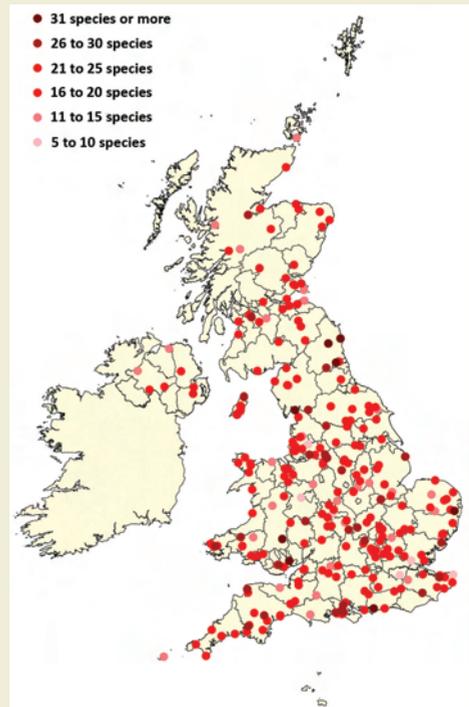


Figure 8: Number of species seen in each garden

Species focus: Tree Sparrow and House Sparrow

The fortunes of our two garden sparrow species could not be more different. GBFS results show that the average number of House Sparrows visiting our garden feeding stations has decreased in both rural and suburban since the early 1980s. Tree Sparrow numbers, on the other hand, have increased in rural gardens since the late 1980s and in suburban gardens since 2009. You would be forgiven for thinking that there would therefore be more Tree Sparrows than House Sparrows, but the latest population estimate for Tree Sparrow is 180 thousand pairs, while that for House Sparrow is 5.1 million pairs.

G B F S trends for both species reflect what is occurring in the wider countryside. The House Sparrow population has declined by over two-thirds since the late 1970s, though there have been increases in parts of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The reduction has been reflected in GBFS numbers with a mean weekly peak count of 16.3 individuals per garden in the 1970s, dropping to just 6.1 individuals last decade (Figure 9). There are many theories as to why House Sparrows have declined. In rural areas it is thought that agricultural intensification and an associated reduction in first-year survival rates have been important drivers. In urban areas things are more complicated and while a reduction in nesting opportunities and chick food resources are thought to be important, other factors may also be at work.

While other BTO surveys also show that the Tree Sparrow population has been increasing since the 1990s, in reality they are still recovering from a dramatic population crash that occurred in the early 1980s and estimated numbers are now nowhere near the 900,000 pairs seen in the 1960s. Their breeding range (Figure 10) has also reduced dramatically, with losses from much of southern Britain. The reasons behind their reduced numbers are similar to those affecting rural House Sparrows.

Winter 2014–15 brought good numbers of sparrows to our feeders, however, showing that there might be some hope for recovery. Tree

Sparrows were seen in their highest average numbers since 2010 in rural areas and, in the last two winters, they have been seen in their highest average numbers ever in suburban sites. Whether GBFS results reflect the increasing importance of supplementary feeding remains to be seen but the importance of seeds outside of the breeding season suggests that this could be a factor.

House Sparrows also had a good 2014–15 winter, having been seen in their highest average numbers in suburban areas since 2009. Rural House Sparrow sightings also increased,

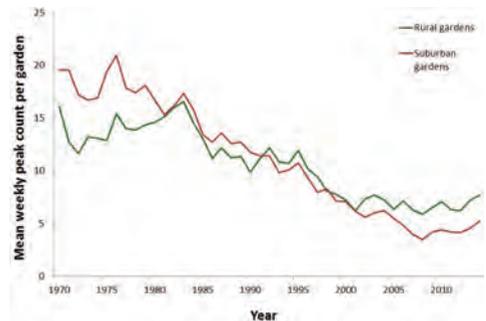


Figure 9: Mean peak count per garden of House Sparrow

and were at their highest since 2005. House Sparrow numbers have been more stable in rural areas since the early 2000s, whereas suburban numbers continued to fall until later that decade.

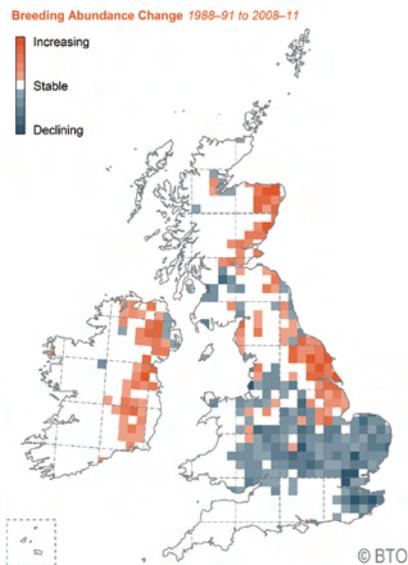


Figure 10: Tree Sparrow breeding abundance change

Map reproduced from *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, a joint project between BTO, Birdwatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologist's Club

The overall upturn in counts could reflect the slight increase in the House Sparrow breeding population in 2014, as revealed by the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey.

Winter 2014-15 in depth

The boost in Tree and House Sparrow numbers has probably been, in part, due to greater overwinter survival thanks to recent mild winters but, as GBFS results show, garden bird feeding stations could be extremely important. For example, in winter 2014–15 Tree Sparrow numbers peaked at the end of December, several weeks earlier than in the average of the previous five years (Figure 11). During that week, numbers were almost 40% higher than the five-year average. That week saw the first proper frosts of the year over large parts of Britain, meaning that birds took on more food resources to counter fat reserves lost overnight during the low temperatures. House Sparrows, on the other hand, peaked at their usual time of year in mid-December (Figure 12). An average of seven were seen per garden, 13% higher than that the average of the previous five years. In fact, both species

were seen in numbers well above the five-year average throughout the winter, though House Sparrow counts did drop in March.

Despite using garden feeders in higher numbers than in recent years, Tree Sparrows did



Figure 11: Mean peak count per garden of Tree Sparrow

follow the seasonal pattern. They are a flocking species, especially in the winter, and are seen fairly regularly in GBFS gardens, but reports are localised and overall counts in the UK remain low. Only 45 sites recorded Tree Sparrow, compared to 226 recording House Sparrow in winter 2014–15, but of those sites that did record Tree Sparrow, the average peak count per garden was 6.2, and one lucky garden in Cumbria recorded approximately 70 at one time.

House Sparrows use garden feeding stations slightly differently to Tree Sparrows, and in winter 2014–15 they followed the general pattern seen over the last five years. Like Tree Sparrow, they can be seen in large flocks in the winter and two sites, one in Cumbria and one in Essex, recorded flocks of around 100 or more over the winter.

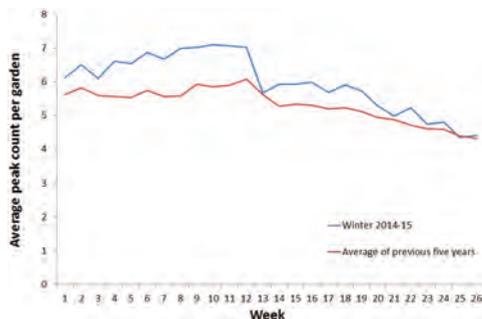


Figure 12: Mean peak per garden of House Sparrow

Extracts Winter 2014-15



(Oct) Northampton:
Remarkable week
– young House
Sparrow, Goldfinch
(2), Blackbird (2) and
Chaffinch (4) all seen
at once.

**(Dec) Worthing,
W Sussex:**
Water Rail made
its appearance -
not been seen for
nearly a year.



(Mar) Chesterfield, Derbyshire:
Notable absentees this winter
include Greenfinch, Great
Spotted Woodpecker, Bullfinch
and Siskin.



(Jan) Lincoln: The first time we've
seen any Jackdaws (3), even though
we have three fat ball holders!

**(Nov) Alcester,
Warwickshire:**
Woodpigeon trying to 'mug'
House Sparrows as they leave
cage with suet pellets.



**(Feb) St. Austell,
Cornwall:**
A Starling was
eating from the fat
block! I haven't
seen one in the
garden for over
seven years.

(Jan) Folkestone, Kent:
Pied Wagtail arrived as soon
as snow arrived.



**(Dec) Castletown, Isle of
Man:** Very surprised to see
Grey Heron under feeder take
a male Blackbird and fly off
with it.



(Mar) Hatton, Aberdeenshire: Goldfinches (16) vying for
feeder space and Yellowhammers brightened up the garden.

**(Dec) Yelverton,
Devon:** A surprise new
visitor – an immature
Herring Gull pecking at
apple slices.



(Feb) Lyndhurst, Hampshire:
Wonderful to see five Great
Spotted Woodpeckers at once.

(Feb) Longniddry, East Lothian:
Blue Tit (1), then House Sparrows (11) eating peanuts which is very unusual – they have never been popular.



(Oct) Llanerchymedd, Gwynedd:
Mixed corn suspended over the pond for the Moorhens has attracted Jays – attempting skilful balancing acts on the string!



(Feb) Nottingham:
Resident Robin aggressive to Dunnock pair and third Robin, but second Robin tolerated.

(Jan) Llantarnam, Cwmbran:
Cold snap has brought in first Bullfinches and Siskins of the season!



(Nov) Pontypridd, Mid Glamorgan:
Dunnock feeding on nyger seed feeder – quite unusual.

(Dec) Ballynahinch, County Down: Female Blackbird fluttering frantically in attempt to take sunflower hearts from hanging feeder.

(Feb) Barnt Green, Birmingham: Snow showers brought in nine Bullfinches – what a sight!



(Mar) Runcton, Chichester:
Amazed to see female Reed Bunting on sunflower hearts.



(Jan) Stamford, Lincolnshire:
A garden record of 10 Reed Buntings in this cold week.

(Feb) Catfield, Great Yarmouth: Wonderful watching large group of Long-tailed Tits (6) on suet feeder.

(Nov) Malton, North Yorks:
Nuthatch caching black sunflower seeds in bark of cypresses – looked hard work!



(Feb) Strathaven, Lanarkshire:
First Feral Pigeons ever seen in our garden or immediate surroundings – where have they come from?

(Feb) Beauly, Inverness-Shire:
Rooks have taken to burying the meat scraps left out for the Red Kites in the flowerbeds!

(Jan) Newcastle upon Tyne: Grey Wagtail – always a pleasure to see this uncommon visitor, the first time for a pair.



Looking ahead: Winter 2015–16

Despite last winter being mild enough for some species to start breeding early, anecdotal evidence suggests that many initial nesting attempts failed because of the adverse weather conditions. While multi-brooded species have had the opportunity to overcome this, the weather this summer has been changeable so breeding attempts for some species may have been challenging. Initial reports suggest this could be another good year for berries, but having already had two bumper years for tree mast in a row, seed-eating birds could be in for a tough time. It looks like it might be another interesting winter so we look forward to seeing how your garden feeding stations are used.

GBFS sites from which data were submitted in 2014–15



BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



JILL PAKENHAM

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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 the world and allows direct comparison of garden types and locations over time.

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