



THE HOBBY

Website: www.bedsbirdclub.org.uk

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the July 2017 production of The Hobby. Following a relatively quiet birding spring, autumn is now upon us with the first returning waders reported from mid-June. Summer records of breeding birds however are vital to our understanding of the health of populations of common as well as scarcer birds, so please share any records that you have collected
Good birding to all...

Andy Grimsey

PROGRAMME MATTERS

Iolo Williams talk – Tuesday 26th September

Tickets for our 25th birthday event have sold well but we still have some left. So far we have been publicising the event only within the Bird Club and BNHS in order that as many members as possible can have the opportunity to attend this special event in commemoration of the Birds Club's 25th Anniversary.

From the end of July, we will look to sell the remaining tickets through appropriate channels in order to ensure a full house on the night and so we would ask that should you wish to obtain tickets that you do so as soon as possible.

As a reminder, admission is by ticket only, price £5.00 for paid-up Bird Club/BNHS members, £8.00 for non-members. To apply for tickets please send your cheque, payable to BNHS to: Don Green, Red Cow Farm Cottage, Bidwell, Dunstable, LU5 6JP, together with a postage stamp and your address. Envelope supplied. If applying for other members please give their names. If you have any questions about the event please call Don Green on 01582 867258 or contact any other member of the Committee.

We would also ask please for any members who wish to help on the night to please let us know as we will need a few extra people to help with the set out of chairs etc. for the event and guide people in or supervise the entrance. Please let us know of any help you can provide.

Many thanks.

MAY – JUNE 2017 BIRD NEWS

Contributors: please phone Steve Blain on 07979 606300 or email recorder@bedsbirdclub.org.uk with any news or records. Records are preferred via the online system BirdTrack, using the Excel file found on the Bird Club Website, singly using the online form (<http://tinyurl.com/2v6oweh>), or on paper.

May 2017

White-fronted Goose - One was still around at Broom GP until around mid-month
Garganey - A drake was at Broom GP on 1st
Goosander - Breeding was again confirmed near Harrold during the month (RD)
Cattle Egret – Bedfordshire’s first was seen flying over Coronation CIP on 24th (AG, SCB).
Osprey - One flew over Stewartby Lake on 7th
Avocet - Two were at Broom GP on 1st, and one was at Stewartby Lake on 16th
Grey Plover - One was at Meadow Lane GP on 6th
Sanderling - One was on the Pillinge, MVCP on 13th
Ruff - Two were at Meadow Lane GP on 5th
Bar-tailed Godwit - One found in foggy conditions on the paddocks at Blows Downs on 2nd was an unusual find (MH)
Whimbrel - One was at Brogborough Tip pools on 7th
Spotted Redshank - Two were at Derek Whites Eggs pit on 5th
Greenshank - Two were at Meadow Lane GP on 4th, one at Broom GP on 8th
Wood Sandpiper - Three were at Broom GP on 4th, and another was at Meadow Lane GP on 18th.
Little Gull - One was at Priory CP and another at Stewartby Lake on 1st
Little Tern - One was at Grovebury SP on 13th (JL)
Black Tern - One was at Derek Whites Eggs pit and three at Priory CP on 1st. One was at Grovebury SP on 2nd. Six were at Priory CP on 5th
Arctic Tern - Two were at Rookery North CIP and one at Priory CP on 1st, two at Priory CP on 8th, two at Southill Lake on 9th, three at Stewartby Lake on 10th
Stock Dove - 300 at Copt Hall on 2nd was a huge Beds count (JT)
Wood Warbler - One sang on Coopers Hill on 1st (PW)
Ring Ouzel - One was at Coopers Hill on 1st, two at Barton Hills and two at Blows Downs on 6th with the last of the spring at Blows Downs on 9th
Whinchat - Two were at Meadow Lane GP and one at Brogborough Tip on 1st
Tree Pipit – one sang on territory for most of May and June in the south of the county
Blue-headed Wagtail - A male was at Meadow Lane GP on 5th
Grey-headed Wagtail - A male was at Meadow Lane GP on 8th (JB)

June 2017

Common Quail - One was found on Thurleigh Airfield on 11th
Eurasian Bittern - Booming birds were at three locations.
Marsh Harrier - One pair attempted to breed but again was not successful.
Sanderling - One was at Broom GP on 8th

Turtle Dove - Numbers continue to decline, but up to three purring birds were around MVCP and several birds were still in the Tempsford airfield area too.
Please send ALL records of this beautiful bird in to BirdTrack.

Bearded Tit - Breeding was confirmed at three sites.



Spotted Flycatcher - A preliminary survey by Richard Bashford through the email group seemed to indicate a steep decline in this species compared to the first survey operated in the same way in 2002. Please submit ALL records via BirdTrack.

Common Stonechat - Stonechats bred in Beds for the first time in decades with a pair in the south of the county.

Observers:

RD - Richard Dowsett; AG - Andy Grimsey; MH - Martin Hickman; SCB - Steve Blain;
JL - John Lynch; JT - John Temple; PW - Paul Wright; JB - John Bowler;

We thank all contributors who have submitted their records directly to the Recorder, or via Bedsbirds Email Group as well as other sources.

Compiled by Steve Blain
recorder@bedsbirdclub.org.uk

YOUR VIEWS COUNT! – CBC DRAFT LOCAL PLAN

The Draft Local Plan for Central Bedfordshire Council was due to go out to public consultation on 4 July 2017. You can give your feedback through the formal route, as the process for the consultation is determined by government regulations.

The consultation system is being set up so that within two weeks CBC can capture comments on the overall Draft Local plan, as well as more detailed feedback. The Council will then consider all of the comments received and publish the next version of the Local Plan for comment in spring 2018. We want public feedback on these options and, whilst we need to plan for growth, we are asking for views on how we deliver it.

The public consultation will be open from 4 July and run to 29 August 2017. During the consultation period we will be holding a number of drop-in-sessions for the public, and you are welcome to come along to ask any questions.

These will be held from 2pm – 8pm on:

11 July, Marston Sports Pavilion

20 July, Biggleswade Town Council Office

26 July, Arlesey Village Hall

7 August, Sandy Village Hall

9 August, Caddington Sports and Social Club.

You can read more detail about the individual growth locations, the full Draft Local Plan document and the supporting evidence and studies at www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/localplan or by visiting local libraries or the Council offices (Chicksands and Dunstable) where copies are available to view from 4 July. You can also sign up for email alerts and updates about the Local Plan on our website.

I was very pleased to see the responses from local residents in Biggleswade with regard to the following:

- Local Character; natural open space. 51% in favour of protection.
- Environment; open space and wildlife habitat. 69% in favour of protection.

You could consider making the following comments:

The proposed expansion will include new infrastructure, housing, retail and industrial development and it is vital that the natural environment and the wildlife (biodiversity) that depends on it, is protected, enhanced and properly managed.

Whilst people value Biggleswade Common and the Green Wheel, to exercise and walk their dogs, this is not in itself wildlife habitat. True wildlife habitats put the needs of biodiversity and the ecosystem first; public access must come second.

This means that the Local Authority must find sufficient funds to protect and manage this natural resource, including the County Wildlife Sites that the local authority owns. In order to do this, CBC will have to be innovative and find new ways of funding the annual management of wildlife habitats.

As I say at the beginning, your views matter, so please find the time to attend a local meeting.

Graham Goodall

MAKING OUR BIRD DATA MORE VALUABLE.

Bird watching is a brilliant hobby, and a key part of it involves recording the species we see and submitting our records. The collection of ornithological data can play a very important role in protecting the biodiversity of our county. It allows us to identify the most important sites for birds and may help to protect sites from damaging development.

In addition, the data can be used to secure long-term benefits; for example, minerals sites that have come to the end of extraction, as at Gypsy Lane East, where we are in the process of developing a 20 year management plan with Tarmac.

The key element records need to contain is breeding codes, because this adds important information and confirms the status of breeding species and allows us to prove how valuable some of the county's sites are in supporting a range of birds, including scarce and rare species. Therefore, it is vital that all bird records are entered on to BirdTrack, the BTO website.

BTO breeding Codes.

Possible:

- H: species seen in suitable nesting habitat.
- S: singing male in suitable breeding habitat.

Probable:

- P: pair in suitable nesting habitat.
- T: permanent territory (defended over at least 1 week).
- D: courtship and display.
- N: visiting probable nest site.
- A: agitated behaviour.
- I: brood patch of incubating bird (seen on bird in the hand).
- B: nest building or excavating a nest hole.

Confirmed:

- DD: distraction display or injury feigning.
- UN: used nest or eggshells found from current season.
- FL: recently fledged young or downy young.
- ON: adults entering or leaving nest site in circumstances indicating occupied nest.
- FF: adult carrying faecal sac or food for young.
- NE: nest containing eggs.
- NY: nest with young seen or heard.

Graham Goodall.
Honorary Research Officer.

THE GARDEN BIRD FEEDING SURVEY – WINTER 2016/2017

Sponsored by G&M Growers

INTRODUCTION

This survey was kindly sponsored by G&M Growers, suppliers of bird food from their farm shop at Upper Caldecote.

For the survey for last winter, covering the 22-week period from the beginning of October 2016 to early March 2017, we received returns from 77 gardens in Bedfordshire.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, the average number of species recorded in the surveyed gardens was the highest, for both rural and urban gardens, since the winter of 2012/13.

Table 1 Average number of species per garden - winters 2009/10 to 2016/17

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Rural gardens	26.5	26.8	25.6	27.2	24.3	26.1	26.3	27.1
Urban gardens	20.6	21.4	20.1	23.3	18.1	19.1	20.1	20.3

It might be stating the obvious, but many of the species show a strong preference for either rural or urban gardens. Those appearing in more rural sites during last winter include Song Thrush (in 84% of rural gardens compared to 44% of urban gardens), Pied Wagtail (67% compared to 28%), Carrion Crow (78% compared to 50%), Jackdaw (82% compared to 44%), Mistle Thrush (38% compared to 9%), Great Spotted Woodpecker (91% compared to 31%), Pheasant (49% compared to 9%), Green Woodpecker (60% compared to 16%) and Grey Wagtail (29% of rural gardens compared to 3% of urban gardens). Those species showing a preference for urban gardens include House Sparrow (84% of urban gardens compared to 69% of rural gardens), Black-headed Gull (20% compared to 11%), Blackcap (53% compared to 36%) and Feral Pigeon (38% of urban gardens compared to 7% of rural gardens).

The total number of species in the gardens last winter reached 67, equalling the record high set in 2010/11.

Table 2 includes all species that have been recorded in our winter gardens in the latest survey with previous survey history going back to 2008/09. As can be seen in Table 2, there were four species that were recorded in all participating gardens last winter – Blackbird, Blue Tit, Robin (also our most frequent garden visitor last winter) and Wood Pigeon. In addition the Dunnock was reported from all urban gardens.

TABLE 2 PERCENTAGE THAT EACH SPECIES WAS RECORDED IN - WINTERS 2008/09 TO 2016/17

position		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
16/17		16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13	11/12	10/11	09/10	08/09
1st=	Blackbird	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
1st=	Blue Tit	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
1st=	Robin	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	99	100
1st=	Wood Pigeon	100	100	99	99	99	99	100	99	100
5th	Duncock	99	100	97	99	99	100	99	99	97
6th	Wren	97	96	94	81	90	93	89	91	97
7th	Great Tit	96	99	97	100	99	99	100	98	100
8th=	Chaffinch	92	96	97	94	99	95	96	97	99
8th=	Collared Dove	92	94	91	93	92	92	92	93	95
10th	Goldfinch	91	88	90	91	88	89	88	84	86
11th	Long-t Tit	90	93	84	84	92	88	90	82	86
12th	Magpie	88	96	90	88	92	92	89	92	93
13th	Starling	87	85	84	84	91	88	92	92	92
14th=	Coal Tit	75	89	79	64	74	69	84	68	83
14th=	House Sparrow	75	77	81	79	85	84	82	81	84
16th=	Greenfinch	68	83	85	83	83	91	88	91	95
16th=	Song Thrush	68	56	56	46	65	64	68	78	80
18th=	Gt Sp Woodpecker	66	66	60	53	66	48	59	56	53
18th=	Jackdaw	66	62	56	51	51	47	42	50	49
18th=	C Crow	66	56	62	51	55	53	56	54	58
21st	Sparrowhawk	60	74	68	69	65	64	71	66	62
22nd	Pied Wagtail	51	27	32	23	47	39	73	57	51
23rd	Redwing	44	24	28	30	43	53	48	61	43
24th=	Blackcap	43	29	38	26	53	29	29	31	34
24th=	Goldcrest	43	48	25	27	40	29	29	17	44
26th	Green Woodpecker	42	32	37	26	34	39	35	44	36
27th	C Pheasant	32	35	32	32	33	33	38	39	43
28th	Fieldfare	30	22	19	16	71	41	32	49	50
29th	Mistle Thrush	26	20	13	20	24	20	19	24	24
30th	Rook	25	17	24	15	15	21	21	22	20
31st=	Jay	22	24	38	17	44	24	29	22	38
31st=	Chiffchaff	22	12	10	9	12	9	5	1	5
33rd	Feral Pigeon	19	18	10	15	19	9	15	12	10
34th=	Stock Dove	18	20	18	16	19	16	9	9	5
34th=	Black H Gull	18	10	7	9	19	12	13	20	15
34th=	Bullfinch	18	20	26	16	23	25	21	20	23
34th=	Grey Wagtail	18	13	13	11	12	11	16	6	8
38th	Red Kite	17	10	12	6	9	5	4	4	1
39th	Grey Heron	16	15	15	10	14	12	16	21	19
40th	Nuthatch	14	17	19	11	21	12	15	7	14
41st=	Siskin	13	32	6	14	37	16	19	12	31
41st=	Tawny Owl	13	17	16	12	13	19	11	12	13
43rd=	Common Buzzard	10	11	12	10	7	7	4	2	5
43rd=	Kestrel	10	15	7	6	9	11	8	10	13
45th=	Reed Bunting	9	17	16	11	26	18	18	18	12
45th=	Mallard	9	6	6	6	3	6	10	4	8
47th	Y'hammer	8	7	12	6	15	8	8	13	14
48th=	Moorhen	6	12	10	6	10	11	13	10	9
48th=	Treecreeper	6	9	10	2	6	7	13	3	9
48th=	Kingfisher	6	4	7	4	1	1	3	2	3
51st	Lesser Redpoll	5	23	10	9	24	13	11	8	5
52nd=	Brambling	4	12	1	9	21	4	19	8	20
52nd=	Little Egret	4	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
52nd=	Red-l Partridge	4	1	1	2	2	4	4	1	2
55th=	Marsh Tit	3	4	3	1	7	4	7	7	9
55th=	R-ringed Parakeet	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
55th=	Barn Owl	3	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
58th=	Common Gull	1	2	1	1	3	0	1	3	1
58th=	Common Raven	1	1	3	0	2	1	0	0	0
58th=	Little Owl	1	1	1	0	1	2	0	1	1
58th=	Little Grebe	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
58th=	Greylag Goose	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
58th=	Herring Gull	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
58th=	Water Rail	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
58th=	C Snipe	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
58th=	Gadwall	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
58th=	Wigeon	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The following species have been recorded in previous surveys since the beginning of the survey 24 years ago but were not recorded in any gardens during the 2016/17 survey period.

House Martin	Meadow Pipit	Sky Lark
Cormorant	Common Redpoll	Stonechat
Swallow	Common Crossbill	Goshawk
Peregrine Falcon	Egyptian Goose	Willow Tit
Tree Sparrow	Lesser Sp W'pecker	Coot
Linnet	Merlin	Grey Partridge
Waxwing	Common Redstart	Long-eared Owl
Mute Swan	Bittern	Canada Goose
Lesser B B Gull	Corn Bunting	Peafowl
Yellow Wagtail	Lapwing	Firecrest
Black Redstart	Mandarin Duck	Willow Warbler
Woodcock		

Species that were recorded in the highest proportion of the gardens since our winter survey started in 1993/94 included Jackdaw, Carrion Crow and Grey Wagtail. At the other end of the spectrum those species in the lowest percentage of gardens were Chaffinch, Greenfinch and House Sparrow.

Table 3 shows the 'Top 20' species that were the most frequent in our gardens. The frequency is calculated by taking the total number of weeks each species is recorded in and comparing that to the maximum possible total (i.e. 22 weeks x 77 gardens). Of the Top 20 species, the Goldfinch equalled the previous high reached in the 2015/16 winter, whilst the Chaffinch and Greenfinch were at their lowest level. The Song Thrush climbed back into the 'Top 20' with a frequency increasing from 14% for the previous two winters to 18%, whilst the Sparrowhawk was pushed out, with a frequency of just 10%, the lowest since the winter of 2009/10.

TABLE 3		FREQUENCY OF OCCURENCE WINTERS 2008/09 TO 2016/17								
Position		16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13	11/12	10/11	09/10	08/09
1st	Robin	92	88	91	84	91	86	89	93	92
2nd=	Blue Tit	91	91	92	89	91	91	94	94	91
2nd=	Wood Pigeon	91	90	89	87	91	87	90	91	86
2nd=	Blackbird	91	88	91	89	94	91	93	97	95
5th	Duncock	83	77	79	72	77	77	81	84	82
6th	Great Tit	75	80	81	74	77	77	82	78	76
7th=	Chaffinch	64	68	71	69	77	71	75	77	77
7th=	Collared Dove	64	63	66	64	68	69	68	76	76
9th	Goldfinch	62	62	61	57	59	54	56	58	55
10th	Magpie	60	61	59	51	53	51	53	59	57
11th	Starling	58	47	55	50	61	56	60	67	69
12th	House Sparrow	54	52	59	55	63	61	61	60	59
13th	Wren	46	39	37	22	32	37	31	34	40
14th	Long-tailed Tit	39	41	30	26	35	37	39	30	35
15th	Coal Tit	35	52	36	24	32	28	42	33	44
16th=	Jackdaw	33	34	32	22	24	22	21	25	21
16th=	Greenfinch	33	48	44	47	49	51	52	54	66
18th	Carrion Crow	25	20	22	19	20	23	23	24	26
19th	G S Woodpecker	23	29	22	20	27	21	25	24	27
20th	Song Thrush	18	14	14	10	13	17	15	22	24

THE WEATHER

Across the UK, the winter of 2016/17 was again rather mild. Mean temperatures in October were near or slightly above the average, whilst in November mean temperatures were close to or just below the long-term average. During December average temperatures for the UK were 2.0°C above the long-term level, making it the 8th warmest December since 1910.

Temperatures in January were slightly above average, and February was again generally mild, with the average for the UK 1.6°C above the long-term mean, making it the 9th warmest February since 1910 (source: adapted with permission, from Crown copyright data supplied by the Met Office).

THE MAIN RESULTS

Waterfowl, Game Birds, Herons, Raptors, Waders and Gulls

The Mallard appeared in seven of the gardens last winter, whilst Gadwall, Wigeon and Greylag Goose appeared in a garden, complete with lake, in Sandy. The Pheasant appeared in about a third of the gardens, mostly in rural areas, whilst the Red-legged Partridge appeared in three gardens, all in rural sites, as expected.

The Grey Heron appeared in 12 gardens last winter, which was about average, but more unexpected was that Little Egrets appeared in three of the gardens.

According to the BTO Breeding Bird Survey data, Sparrowhawks are declining in the East of England, and that is reflected in the results from our garden bird surveys. Last winter they appeared in just 60% of the gardens (64% in rural areas, and 53% of urban gardens), the lowest since 2002/03, when in 53%. It also dropped out of the 'Top 20' most frequent garden visitor, with a score of just 10%, the lowest since the same in 2009/10. The Kestrel occurred in 10% of the gardens, about the recent average, and all in rural gardens. Moving up fast, however, are Red Kites, last winter in 17% of the gardens, the highest level yet, with Buzzards in 10%, about the recent average.

Although not a new addition to the survey, a Common Snipe was certainly new to Marion Hession's Great Barford garden. As she describes "it was sitting hunkered down in the middle of the lawn before flying off over houses towards farmland".

The Black-headed Gull was found in 14 of the gardens (nine of them urban) and the Common Gull and Herring Gull in one each.

Pigeons, Owls, Kingfisher, Woodpeckers and Crows

Typically the Wood Pigeon was recorded in all the gardens last winter, and was also the equal-second most frequent of all our garden visitors. They were found almost as often in urban gardens (a frequency of 88%) as rural gardens (93%). Collared Doves were reported from 92% of the gardens, about the recent average, and with a frequency of 64%. That is about the same level since 2010/11 but is well below the average of the years prior to that.

The Stock Dove appeared in 18% of the gardens, average for the last six winters, with the majority of those gardens in rural areas. On the up though, is the Feral Pigeon, in 19% of gardens last winter, the highest since the same level in 2012/13.

Three owl species appear in the results for last winter, the Tawny in 13% of gardens, the Little Owl in 1% and Barn Owl in 3%, including in my own garden in Woburn, a garden tick. In a better showing than normal, Kingfishers visited five gardens, all in rural areas.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker was recorded in 66% of gardens last winter, equalling the previous high set in 2015/16 and 2012/13. Green Woodpeckers appeared in 42% of gardens, the highest since in 44% in the 2009/10 winter. Both species show a strong preference for rural sites, the Green Woodpecker particularly so. One in John Kirkham's Silsoe garden was a garden first for him. For the fifth consecutive winter the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker failed to appear in any of the winter gardens surveyed.

The Rose-ringed Parakeet appeared in two of the gardens, in Sheila Brookes' Toddington garden on just one day, but was a daily visitor to Mark Burnapp's Bedford garden from the middle of January onwards.

The Magpie appeared in 88% of the gardens overall, the lowest since 2013/14, but was in 98% of rural sites but 'only' 75% of urban gardens. The Jackdaw continues to increase in our gardens, reflecting the situation across the county at large, being reported from 66% of gardens. Consider that for the first three winters of this survey (1993/94 to 1995/96) the average was just 24% of gardens. It does however still show a strong preference for rural areas. Not to be left behind, the Carrion Crow also appeared in more winter gardens than before, also in 66%, which again shows a huge increase since the first three winters of our survey (when in 34%). The Rook also showed at record levels, in 25% of gardens, another high. Results for the Jay, though, remain erratic, appearing in 22% of gardens last winter, which is on the low side, but perhaps that reflects the fluctuating numbers that cross the North Sea each autumn to spend the winter in the UK.

Goldcrest, Tits and Warblers

After the strong showing in our winter gardens in the previous winter, results for the Goldcrest dropped back slightly, but still appeared in 43% of gardens. It is just as likely to be found in urban gardens, presumably where it benefits from the warmer micro-climate, as rural sites.

The Blue Tit remains one of our most familiar garden species, found in all surveyed gardens for the last ten winters. The frequency of appearances over that period has also been remarkably consistent too. The Great Tit was missing from three gardens and, in 96% of gardens overall, was at the lowest level since the same in the 2004/05 winter. As a result the frequency also dropped. The Long-tailed Tit also dropped back slightly but, found in 90% of gardens, was still at a high level. It shows a slight preference for rural gardens, in 93% of those, compared to 84% in urban areas. Results for the Coal Tit have been extremely erratic, in the last eight winters seeing drops of up to 15 percentage points and gains of up to 16 points from one winter to the next. The best we can say is that, after appearing in 75% of gardens last winter, that is just about average for the last nine winters. It is another species that shows a strong preference for rural gardens, found in 84% of those during last winter, compared to 63% of urban gardens. The Marsh Tit just about hangs on in this survey, appearing in one urban and one rural garden last winter.



With another mild winter Blackcaps again showed well, in 53% of urban gardens and 36% of rural sites. Overall though, they didn't linger in many of the gardens, staying for eight or more weeks in only six of them. The results for the Chiffchaff were also strong, and in 22% of gardens was the highest level since our survey began. However, closer examination shows that the vast majority of occurrences (78%) were during the first five weeks of the survey period, so were arguably delayed departures rather than wintering birds.

Wren, Starling and Thrushes

The Wren appeared in 97% of gardens, the highest level since the same in winter 2008/09. The frequency, at 46%, was the highest since a level of 49% in the winter of 2004/05.

The result for the Starling (in 87% of gardens) was the highest since the 91% in the winter of 2012/13. The frequency, at 58%, was the highest since 61% in that same winter. Remarkably perhaps the percentage of gardens in which it was found and the frequency is exactly the same for rural and urban gardens. Overall, however, it remained completely absent from ten (or 13%) of the gardens throughout the 22-week period.

The Song Thrush appeared in 68% of gardens, the highest since the same level in the 2010/11 winter, but still well below the peak (during our survey) of 87% in the winter of 2003/04.

Although they were recorded in 84% of rural gardens, where most of the recovery came from, the biggest gap is still in urban areas, where only 44% of the gardens attracted them, and in only one of those for more than six of the weeks. The Blackbird has been recorded in all gardens covered by our survey for the last 11 winters, and last winter it was the second-equal most frequent visitor (although at a level of 91% is well below that of the 97% in 2009/10).

In the most recent review, in 2015, of the status of birds in the UK the Mistle Thrush was moved to the Red list. Supporting that was the sober news that the East of England population, according to the Breeding Bird Survey results, fell by 57% between 1995 and 2014. It was something of a surprise that the species was found in 26% of our gardens last winter, the highest since the same level in 2004/05.

Both the 'winter thrushes', Redwing and the Fieldfare, showed strongly in our gardens last winter. The Redwing was found in 44% of gardens, the highest since 2011/12, and the Fieldfare in 30%, the best since 2012/13.

The Robin was, once again, reported from all gardens last winter and, with a level of 92%, was our most frequent garden visitor.

Dunnock, Sparrows and Wagtails

The Dunnock was recorded from all but one of the gardens in the survey last winter, with the highest frequency since 2009/10.

The results for the House Sparrow were again disappointing, appearing in only 75% of gardens, the lowest since our winter survey began in 1993. Consider that in the first three winters of our survey they appeared in an average of 99% of gardens. The frequency level, at 54%, was slightly up compared to the 2015/16 winter, but as recently as 2004/05 the level was 80%. The biggest gap is still in rural gardens, with a frequency of just 49% compared to that in urban gardens of 60%. They were completely absent during the 22-week period in 14 rural gardens (including my own in Woburn, although they are always in gardens just 70m from where I live), and five urban gardens. The Tree Sparrow was not recorded at all in the survey for last winter.

The results for the Pied Wagtail in this survey are somewhat baffling, swinging from 73% of gardens in 2010/11, to 23% in 2013/14 and then 51% during last winter. What is clear is that they prefer rural gardens, in 67% of those during last winter, compared to 28% of urban gardens. What is more positive is the upward trend of the Grey Wagtail, last winter found in 18% of gardens, the highest level yet.

Finches

The most widespread finch in our gardens remains the Chaffinch, last winter occurring in 92% of the gardens, but that was the lowest level yet, as was the frequency level, at 64%. Perhaps it is

starting to go the same way as the Greenfinch which is calamitous to say the least. That species was found in just 68% of gardens last winter (it was in 99% as recently as 2006/07), the lowest level yet, and the frequency too was, at just 33%, the lowest ever. It was double that level in 2008/09. Only ten of the gardens attracted Greenfinches for 20 or more of the weeks, one of those being Lawrence Jarrett's Luton garden, where he noted them in twice as many weeks as in the previous winter. On the other hand Mike Jones from Toddington described his situation as being part of "a huge decline, with just three sightings of a bird that used to be seen in numbers up to eight or so at a time most weeks of the year".

On the plus side the Goldfinch, no doubt benefitting from the food that garden owners provide (money well spent at G&M Growers of course), was found in 91% of gardens, equalling the same record high set in 2013/14.

During the previous winter Siskins were found in 32% of our gardens, and yet last winter they were only in just 13%, but that erratic pattern is fairly typical for this species. I found them quite hard to find anywhere in the county last winter and were virtually absent from my winter garden. Similarly the Lesser Redpoll was scarce, showing in just 5% of gardens, the lowest level since 2008/09. Jan Kirkman's Pavenham garden was something of an exception, where he had Redpolls every day from the middle of December through to early March, with occasionally up to 20 at a time. Bramblings were also hard to find, in just 4% of our gardens, but again past results from our survey show just how erratic the winter population of this species can be. Nick Hammond summed up the situation quite well when he commented "what a weird winter! No Bramblings, no Redpolls, no Redwings, no Fieldfares!"

Reed Buntings also had a lean winter, found in just 9% of gardens, well down on the recent average of 17% of gardens. Relatively speaking, Yellowhammers had a more typical winter, found in 8% of gardens, just slightly below the average for the previous eight years.

SUMMARY

The returns from the 77 gardens included over 22,000 records, so our thanks go to all the members (and a few non-members) who took part. We look forward to receiving your feedback for future winters. Finally we thank G&M Growers who so kindly sponsored this winters survey.

Barry Nightingale

GALLERY

Lots of young birds about at the moment; Bearded Tits have been found, and proved to breed, in the county at a variety of reedbed sites in the last few years



ILLUSTRATIONS BY:

Sean D'Arcy: Spotted Flycatcher; Coal Tit
Steve Blain: Bearded Tit



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