



THE HOBBY

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the March edition of The Hobby.

After a short burst of spring at the end of February, it has been a week or more of wet and windy weather but spring is here as the first Wheatear has appeared and the Summer Garden Bird Feeding Survey is underway. In this bulletin, Barry gives details of the results of last year's survey and Graham has put together a short piece introducing this year's BTO survey looking at English Farm Woodlands. Good birding to all...

Andy Grimsey

PROGRAMME MATTERS

Tuesday March 26th will be our last indoor meeting of the season and we will have two speakers on the night; Dr Rob Lambert and Lucy McRobert ask 'What have Ospreys ever done for us? Meeting at 8pm at Maulden Village Hall until 10pm with a break for refreshments.

We trust you have enjoyed the program and are pleased to let you know that we already have some quality speakers being set up for the 2019-2020 season starting on September 24th.

We thank you for your attendance this year and extend our invitation to all members who have not regularly come to these events to do so next year; many of our speakers comment positively on the size of the audience and the experience of presenting to one of the best clubs in England!

As spring migration gets going our program includes a selection of outdoor meetings starting with a field trip to Breckland on 24th March visiting initially Cavenham Heath and RSPB Lakenheath. More local meetings are the almost annual pilgrimages to Pegsdon Hills on 14th April (with Ring Ouzel one of the key species to look for), Broom GP complex on 28th April (hoping for some passage and breeding waders and other wetland species) and Priory CP for our Dawn Chorus meeting on 5th May.

Further afield, a new location for us on 12th May will be RSPB Dearne Valley in South Yorkshire.

All details are in our program and on the website at bedsbirdclub.org.uk

Contact can also be made to Kevin Sharpe for making arrangements on 07827 440394

JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2019 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.

January 2019

Whooper Swan - Seven were found in fields north of Southill on 19th and stayed in to March.

Barnacle Goose - 90 were an unusual sight at Grovebury SP on 15th. It is likely these came from one of the large feral flocks on the near Continent rather than elsewhere in Beds, as several other flocks were seen coming in off the sea around East Anglia in the few days before these were found.

Smew - A red-head briefly visited at Priory CP on 14th.

Lady Amherst's Pheasant - One was reported on social media as being present in the county but without any further details.

Great Northern Diver - The two juveniles were present at Stewartby Lake throughout the month

Great White Egret - One was at Derek Whites Eggs pit on 6th, with another around Priory CP and Willington GP from 10th in to February. One was also at Stewartby Lake on 11th, with two over Chimney Corner North Lake on 19th.

Slavonian Grebe - The Brogborough Tip bird remained until 1st.

Hen Harrier - A ringtail was at Rookery North pit on 18th.

Merlin - A male was seen near Cardington twice around 26th.

Mediterranean Gull - An adult was at Stewartby Lake on 11th (along with a possible hybrid Med x Black-headed Gull). A first-winter was at Houghton Brook Pools on 15th.

Yellow-legged Gull - A first-winter was at MVCP on 1st, and an adult at Stewartby Lake on 11th.

Short-eared Owl - Three were at Southill on 20th.

Common Chiffchaff - A bird which appeared to be a 'Siberian' Chiffchaff (ssp tristis) was located at Bedford SW on 12th-19th but it was calling like a collybita!

Waxwing - Three were around Sutton and Potton on 9th-10th. Another was well watched in Sandy from 10th-17th and two were in Flitwick on 19th-31st.

Common Stonechat - Small numbers were at scattered locations in the county.

Tree Sparrow - Up to six were around Sunderland Hall Farm, Biggleswade on 9th.

Brambling - Very few were recorded in the county during January, with several records from around Sandy and Barton Hill Farm.

Common Crossbill - Up to four were around the Lodge RSPB throughout Jan and Feb.

Corn Bunting - Up to 400 were at Stotfold during the month, at least 2% of the total UK population! 29 were also recorded at Houghton Regis ChP, an increasingly scarce bird in the south of the county.



White-headed Duck - A ringed female was found at Roxton Lakes on 5th (RIB) and caused quite a stir!

February 2019

Pink-footed Goose - Two were seen near Staploe on 3rd.

Pintail - A drake was at Brogborough Lake on 12th.

Eurasian Bittern - One was seen standing on ice in Coronation CIP on 3rd

Great White Egret - One was again at Derek Whites Eggs pit on 17th, and also seen occasionally in the Priory CP and Willington area during the month.

Grey Heron - An unusual leucistic bird was seen in Luton on 16th.

Glossy Ibis - One flew over Dunstable SW on 25th (NF) and was also reported at Houghton Brook Pools two hours later.

Merlin - One flew over Brogborough tip on 3rd.

Eurasian Curlew - Five flew over Meppershall on 22nd, and another at Grovebury SP on 24th.

Caspian Gull - Three (an adult and two first-winters) were at Grovebury SP on 25th (LGRE)

Short-eared Owl - One was at Cardington on 23rd with two present on 26th.

Great Grey Shrike - One was at Keysoe Row West on 16th. (SM)

Common Chiffchaff - A Siberian Chiffchaff was at Stotfold Mill NR from 11th (MI)

Waxwing - The Flitwick pair were still present on 2nd. Another two were at Bedford Hospital on 4th, and a further pair were at the Lodge on 22nd.



Dipper - One was reported along the Ivel at Biggleswade Common on 16th but unfortunately could not be relocated in subsequent searches.

Blackbird - A very pale Blackbird was in Cople suffering the 'brown' plumage mutation making it look startlingly golden.

Tree Sparrow - Two were near Upper Caldecote on 11th.

Common Redpoll - At least one was at Sandy Heath on 12th (DOM)

Corn Bunting - 45 were at Meadow Lane on 11th.

Eagle Owl - One was spotted at night near Bolnhurst giving the observers a bit of a shock!

Observers:

Norman Finan – NF; Richard Bashford – RIB; Mike Illet – MI; Lee Evans – LGRE;
Darren Oakley-Martin - DOM

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

A BRIEF REPORT OF THE 2019 BIRD CLUB AGM

The AGM was held at Maulden Village Hall on Tuesday 26th February, and was attended by 75 members.

Peter Holden MBE, Hon. President, chaired the meeting.

The elected officers for 2019 are:

Hon. President (2017-19):	Peter Holden MBE
Hon. Secretary:	Sheila Alliez
Hon. Research Officer:	Graham Goodall
Hon. Assistant Treasurer:	Sonnie Wing
Hon. Bulletin Editor:	Andy Grimsey
Hon. Meetings Secretary:	Stuart Elsom

County Bird Recorder:	Steve Blain
BNHS Membership Secretary:	Mary Sheridan

The elected committee members for 2019 are:

Phil Cannings
Roger Hicks
Peter Nash
Kevin Sharpe

The nominated Chairman for 2019-21 is Richard Bashford (to be confirmed at the BNHS AGM in March).

The Club membership at the end of December was 285. The Assistant Treasurer's summary of the accounts stated that the decrease in expenditure of c.£6590 (to £1479.21) was down to the extraordinary expenditure of 2017 (the cost of the 25th anniversary celebrity lecture and colour plates in both parts of the *Journal*), the lack of invoices for *The Hobby*, and delayed invoices for the 2017 Bird Report. He again asked members to consider switching to electronic delivery of *The Hobby*, which would cut costs. Income was £1485.48. Thanks were due to the Peter Smith Charitable Trust for Nature which allowed the inclusion of colour plates in the *Journal* for a second year. The Christmas raffle raised £185. Members using the services of advertisers in *The Hobby* and the *Journal* were urged to tell advertisers that they saw their advert in a Bird Club publication. The Research Officer's report will be published in *The Hobby* and also the Bird Report 2018.

After the completion of business, Paul Laurie gave an illustrated talk on birding Blakeney Point.

Sheila Alliez, Hon. Secretary

NEW MEMBERS

We would like to welcome the following new members to the Beds Bird Club:

Andrew Hodge, Houghton Regis
Anthea Saunders, Langford

We hope you will enjoy many years of membership with us.

Mary Sheridan, Membership Secretary

BTO: ENGLISH FARM WOODLAND BIRD SURVEY 2019

If you would like to take part in this survey, please look at the BTO website. www.bto.org

Since 1988, over 22,000 farm woods have been planted in England. The woods are mostly small, between 1 and 5 hectares in size, which will make survey coverage quite quick and straightforward. These farm woods were planted in a wide variety of settings, ranging from complete isolation through to alongside existing established woodland. This provides a very interesting natural experiment to assess how well birds have colonised these new woodlands on farmland. A new survey for 2019 plans to provide data on how birds have colonised woods planted in farmland.

Methods

Four morning visits are required walking a route around the perimeter and through the farm woodland, to within 50m of every part of the woodland. For convenience in the field, survey data will be collected on the survey map using standard BTO species and activity codes to accurately plot all individuals and help avoid double counting. The methods are designed to estimate species' abundances, overall abundance and species richness. Field data should then be collated on summary sheets designed for ease of subsequent inputting. The sites are small, so it should be possible to cover a number of woodland plots in a morning. Some basic, but essential, habitat recording will be required for each farm wood, to record the features including tree species, woodland structure (reference diagrams provided), boundary type and mammals.

Timing of visits

Four morning visits between 15th March 2019 and 15th July 2019, each conducted at least two weeks apart. Each survey visit will be conducted between 05:00am and 11:00am. Most plots are small and it should take around 20 to 30 minutes to survey, depending on size.

What to Record

Record all birds seen or heard using standard BTO species and activity codes. All live mammals observed along your route are to be recorded separately on a different form. All registrations of birds (number and species) seen and heard in the woodland, including birds flying in or out of it, or in flight if associated with the woodland (e.g. hirundines foraging over it, but not gulls or woodpigeons that happen to fly over) should be mapped. We are also interested in woodland composition. For each visit, record the woodland habitat features using the form and list provided. Tree type key and stand-type scheme are provided to aid identification of trees and woodland structure. If a woodland patch crosses the border with another square that you have not selected, please consider also surveying the portion of that same woodland contained in the adjacent square, as otherwise nobody else will cover it. After the survey is finished, please complete a summary count form to record totals of each species per visit, as well as an estimate of the total number of territories for each woodland plot.

Please see the Resources page for details of field methods, recording forms and other useful survey information.

All bird, mammal and habitat data, plus copies of your survey maps, should be sent to BTO as soon as possible before 15 August 2019.

Graham Goodall, Hon. Research Officer.

THE GARDEN BIRD SURVEY – SUMMER 2018

Introduction

Here are the results of our 21st Summer Garden Bird Survey, which covered the period 11th March to 6th October 2018. We received a total of 69 returns, slightly down on the last couple of years, with two less from rural gardens (42) and one less from urban gardens (27). The sites covered in our survey range from small town gardens to large rural gardens, including at least one with ‘a small lake’, with others bordered by a stream or river. These types of garden tend to account for the less-typical garden species in the results, such as Little Egret, Gadwall, Mute Swan, Cormorant and Greylag Goose. Four species appeared in 2018 for the first time in our summer surveys – Coot, Canada Goose, Lapwing and Peafowl.

The summer will be remembered as one of the hottest and driest for many years. Whilst there is no evidence in this survey as to any likely long-term effects, there is no doubt that water provided in our gardens would have attracted more bird species than usual. Mary Sheridan, in her Leighton Buzzard garden, was pleased to see flocks of young tits, and Blackcaps, Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers taking advantage of her bird baths.

The gardens in rural sites recorded an average of 30 species feeding or foraging, whilst the gardens in urban areas recorded, on average, 22 species, the highest ever for those sites. Generally, the levels have stayed fairly consistent over the last few years, as can be seen in Table 1, which shows the average number of species per garden per year since 2009, and the number of contributors.

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009
Rural	30	29	31	30	29	31	30	29	29	29
Urban	22	21	21	20	19	21	20	21	20	21
Contributors	69	72	76	76	66	75	78	77	77	78

In total, for the 69 gardens, there were just over 26,000 records submitted, at an average of over 375 records per garden, so once again our thanks go to all those who took the time to do that.

The Results

A record total of 86 species was recorded in our ‘summer gardens’ in 2018, and these, with all the other species that have been recorded since our summer survey began in 1998, are shown in Table 2 on the following page..

During the summer of 2018 five species appeared in all of the gardens that were surveyed – Blackbird (in all gardens since 2002), Blue Tit (in all gardens since 2004), Wood Pigeon (in all gardens since 2005), Robin (in all gardens since 2007, except in 2013 when in 99%) and Dunnock. In addition, the Great Tit appeared in all urban gardens.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the ‘Top 20’ species in our summer gardens. This is measured by calculating how many weeks in total each species was recorded (all gardens), and comparing that with the maximum possible number of weeks, in the case of 2018 this being 2,070 weeks (69 gardens x 30 weeks). For the sixth summer in a row the Wood Pigeon was the most frequent visitor to our gardens. I’ve also shown in Table 3 the percentage-points change between the average during 1998–2004, and 2018. Of the ‘Top 20’ most frequent species the biggest ‘winner’ over that period is the Goldfinch (up 41 points), followed by the Wood Pigeon and Jackdaw (both up by 23 points). The biggest losers are Starling (down 27 points), Greenfinch (down 23 points) and House Sparrow (down 19 points).

POS	TABLE 2	% OF GARDENS										POS	TABLE 2	% OF GARDENS									
		2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	average 2005 to 2011	average 1998 to 2004	2018			2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	average 2005 to 2011	average 1998 to 2004		
1=	BLACKBIRD	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	99	44=	MISTLE THRUSH	17	18	16	20	14	12	18	18	24	
1=	WOOD PIGEON	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	97	46	COMMON BUZZARD	16	17	13	16	15	20	4	2	0.6	
1=	BLUE TIT	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	47	NUTHATCH	14	15	17	16	18	19	22	13	10	
1=	ROBIN	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	98	48	LESSER REDPOLL	13	3	20	8	9	29	5	3	2	
1=	DUNNOCK	100	100	100	99	98	99	100	98	96	96	49	YELLOWHAMMER	12	6	7	9	15	8	12	8	7	
6	GREAT TIT	99	96	100	97	100	99	100	98	97	97	50=	TREECREEPER	10	7	7	5	8	7	6	9	8	
7	MAGPIE	97	94	95	96	92	91	90	90	82	82	50=	HOBBY	10	7	8	7	3	5	6	4	6	
8	GOLDFINCH	94	96	95	99	97	93	94	91	71	71	50=	GREY WAGTAIL	10	8	8	8	6	7	6	7	7	
9=	CHAFFINCH	93	93	95	95	94	96	100	99	95	95	50=	MOORHEN	10	7	8	11	9	12	8	11	9	
9=	COLLARED DOVE	93	96	97	96	97	100	97	98	98	98	54=	COMMON W'THROA	9	11	14	9	11	11	14	10	9	
11=	STARLING	86	94	93	97	94	95	95	95	99	99	54=	KESTREL	9	11	7	11	9	13	9	13	15	
11=	WREN	86	94	93	89	79	87	83	86	89	89	54=	SPOT FLYCATCHER	9	1	5	5	5	7	8	7	15	
11=	LONG TAILED TIT	86	86	80	83	65	81	79	71	60	60	57	KINGFISHER	7	7	7	3	3	4	3	4	5	
11=	HOUSE SPARROW	86	85	84	88	88	87	87	91	98	98	58=	MARSH TIT	6	1	3	1	3	5	3	6	7	
11=	GREENFINCH	86	76	89	89	86	91	94	95	98	98	58=	BARN OWL	6	1	1	0	0	1	5	1	0.3	
16	JACKDAW	77	71	75	66	67	67	65	53	43	43	60=	LITTLE EGRET	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0.1	0	
17	COAL TIT	74	78	72	70	62	60	64	68	59	59	60=	GREYLAG GOOSE	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.7	
18	SPARROWHAWK	72	67	63	71	62	68	67	69	56	56	60=	COMMON RAVEN	4	1	0	4	2	3	1	0	0	
19	SONG THRUSH	71	76	68	61	55	67	72	76	83	83	60=	FIELDFARE	4	3	1	7	3	9	4	1	1	
20	CARRION CROW	68	67	68	70	65	64	62	61	49	49	60=	BLACK H GULL	4	3	3	4	3	7	1	1	2	
21	GT SP WOODPECKER	59	60	61	63	58	65	56	57	51	51	60=	REDWING	4	6	7	5	2	12	3	5	4	
22	BLACKCAP	45	49	58	47	41	67	44	34	31	31	66=	GARDEN WARBLER	3	6	7	5	5	1	6	6	5	
23=	GREEN W'DPECKER	39	38	41	43	41	41	42	38	33	33	66=	CUCKOO	3	6	4	0	5	0	5	2	6	
23=	GOLDCREST	39	40	39	29	27	31	29	24	27	27	66=	LINNET	3	7	4	4	0	5	3	5	15	
23=	TAWNY OWL	39	21	22	20	26	15	14	10	10	10	69=	REED WARBLER	1	3	5	0	2	1	3	2	2	
26	PIED WAGTAIL	38	32	28	29	21	28	23	26	36	36	69=	SAND MARTIN	1	1	3	3	3	3	0.7	0.7	0.7	
27=	PHEASANT	36	31	28	28	23	32	28	35	27	27	69=	GADWALL	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
27=	ROOK	36	25	25	24	29	31	32	25	19	19	69=	MUTE SWAN	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0.3	0.9	
27=	SISKIN	36	13	46	3	9	45	9	16	18	18	69=	CORMORANT	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	
30	STOCK DOVE	33	28	32	28	24	20	22	13	6	6	69=	SKYLARK	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.6	2	
31	SWIFT	32	35	37	41	41	47	40	18	14	14	69=	LITTLE OWL	1	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	4	
32	HOUSE MARTIN	30	33	33	38	33	24	26	24	15	15	69=	MANDARIN	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.1	0.1	
33	BULLFINCH	29	33	22	20	29	35	33	24	23	23	69=	GREY PARTRIDGE	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.7	0.6	
34	CHIFFCHIAFF	28	44	42	28	38	33	40	29	30	30	69=	HERRING GULL	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.3	0	
35	JAY	26	22	29	25	29	33	27	23	14	14	69=	TURTLE DOVE	1	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	4	
36	RED KITE	25	18	16	20	14	12	8	2	0	0	69=	COMMON TERN	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.3	0.9	
37=	SWALLOW	22	29	30	33	30	35	35	23	24	24	69=	CANADA GOOSE	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0.1	0.9	
37=	MALLARD	22	19	25	24	20	19	24	18	14	14	69=	COOT	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.1	
37=	FERAL PIGEON	22	26	22	21	23	17	18	18	16	16	69=	LAPWING	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
37=	WILLOW WARBLER	22	22	26	21	15	21	22	21	27	27	69=	PEAFOWL	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
37=	REED BUNTING	22	10	14	12	8	23	13	6	1	1	69=	ISR BLACK-B GULL	1	3	0	3	2	3	0	0.3	1	
42=	GREY HERON	19	18	20	17	14	9	12	13	9	9	69=	YELLOW WAGTAIL	1	3	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	
42=	RED L PARTRIDGE	19	17	12	7	11	7	9	9	7	7	np	SEDGE WARBLER	0	1	4	3	0	0	3	0.9	1	
44=	BRAMBLING	17	1	8	1	2	11	3	8	5	5	np	LSR WHITETHROAT	0	3	7	3	5	1	1	4	4	

FREQUENCY OF THE TOP 20 SPECIES

POS	TABLE 3	% OF GARDENS										% points change 1998-2004 to 2018
		2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	average 2005 to 2011	average 1998 to 2004		
1	WOOD PIGEON	90	92	90	90	90	90	91	86	67	23	
2	BLACKBIRD	85	87	89	88	88	89	92	88	87	-2	
3	BLUE TIT	82	85	86	83	84	82	86	84	82	0	
4	ROBIN	80	85	84	81	79	77	81	80	72	8	
5	DUNNOCK	72	74	75	75	73	73	78	73	66	6	
6	GREAT TIT	70	72	73	71	71	68	72	69	64	6	
7	GOLDFINCH	64	65	65	63	61	59	60	52	23	41	
8	HOUSE SPARROW	60	59	61	61	59	60	65	69	79	-19	
9	COLLARED DOVE	58	63	66	69	65	71	73	75	75	-17	
10	MAGPIE	56	57	57	55	53	46	45	42	37	19	
11	CHAFFINCH	51	59	64	63	63	65	69	67	62	-11	
12	STARLING	50	56	57	56	56	55	60	64	77	-27	
13	GREENFINCH	45	42	51	48	51	55	57	66	68	-23	
14	JACKDAW	37	37	38	35	33	29	27	22	14	23	
15	WREN	34	41	39	32	28	28	32	31	35	-1	
16	LONG-TAILED TIT	29	24	26	20	17	19	21	15	11	18	
17	COAL TIT	28	23	28	25	20	18	20	21	18	10	
18	GT SP WOODPECKER	23	22	24	23	19	23	25	21	17	6	
19	CARRION CROW	22	23	23	24	21	19	20	19	15	7	
20	SONG THRUSH	15	21	20	18	16	19	20	23	28	-13	

The Species

The following comments cover the more significant events in Summer 2018, and major changes since the summer surveys started in 1998.

Wildfowl to Little Egret

As usual, the Mallard is the highest-placed species of wildfowl, appearing in 22% of gardens, mostly in rural areas. In Lawrence Jarrett's Luton garden a female Mallard appeared with 13 tiny ducklings in April and stayed for 90 minutes before wandering off into the nearby gardens. Where they nested is still a puzzle.

Other wildfowl species registered as garden visitors during this survey were Greylag Goose (in 4%), and Gadwall, Mute Swan, Mandarin and Canada Goose (all in 1%).

The Pheasant is the highest-placed game bird, recorded in 36% of gardens (the highest since 40% in Summer 2010), followed by Red-legged Partridge in 19%, the highest since our summer surveys started, and Grey Partridge in 1%, the first in our summer surveys since 2015.

Recorded across rural and urban sites, the Grey Heron was in 19% of gardens, about average for the last three summers. One, with part of its left leg missing, first appeared in December 2015 in Lawrence Jarrett's garden. It then re-appeared in his garden in August 2018, so despite being disabled, it has survived for two and a half years, perhaps by taking advantage on goldfish in garden ponds. The Little Egret was recorded in 4% of the gardens, and in Andy Skinner's and Bex Cartwright's garden in Sandy two were seen catching Toads in a small area of lake. Needless to say, that was a new species for their garden (the egret, not the toad).

Raptors

As previously, the Sparrowhawk remains the most regular raptor in our survey, in 72% of gardens last summer, the highest since 74% in 2011. They can be seen almost anywhere, appearing in 81% of rural sites and 60% of urban gardens. Coming up fast is the Red Kite, seen hunting over 25% of gardens last summer. It first appeared in our summer lists in 2005. The Common Buzzard was in or over 16% of gardens, about average for the previous five summers. Please ensure that if you 'tick the box' on the survey form for these two species, that they are actively hunting your garden space and not merely flying over. The Kestrel, in 9% and the Hobby, in 10% – the latter the highest level since our summer surveys began, also make their usual appearances in our list.

Rails to Cuckoo

The Moorhen was in 10% of gardens, all in rural areas, whilst the Coot appears in our summer list for the first time, recorded during nine weeks in one rural garden. Another newcomer to this survey was the Lapwing, again in just one garden, and not surprisingly was the only wader to feature.

There are three species of gull in the list for Summer 2018, with Black-headed Gull in 4%, and Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls in just 1%. Common Tern fished along the river bordering the margins of one of the gardens. It was not the first time it has featured, being in our lists every year from 1999 to 2006.

Taking top spot in all our measures is the Wood Pigeon. Appearing in all summer gardens since 2005, it has also been the most frequent garden visitor since 2013. There is little difference between the frequency in rural sites and urban gardens. By comparison the Collared Dove, in 93% of gardens, was at the lowest level since our summer surveys started in 1998, being found in fewer rural gardens than before. The frequency, at 58%, is the same for both rural and urban areas, but overall that frequency was also the lowest since our summer surveys began.

The Stock Dove was recorded in the highest level of gardens since our summer surveys started (in 33%) and appeared in both rural and urban gardens, although it prefers the former. The Feral Pigeon was in 22% of gardens, about average for the previous four summers and, as expected, much prefers urban gardens. The Turtle Dove was recorded in just one garden, close to one of the few known breeding sites in the county, and was the first in our summer surveys since 2015. The highest percentage of gardens in which it has appeared since our summer surveys started in 1998 was in that first year (in 8%) and again in 2000. I doubt that it will ever reach that height again.

Cuckoos were recorded in two of the gardens, both in rural areas.

Owls to woodpeckers

Tawny Owls were recorded in 39% of our gardens last summer, all but one of those in rural areas. Such is the concern that they are in decline has led to the BTO to initiate a survey in 2019 to record this species. It is thought that any reduction in numbers might be in built-up areas.

Barn Owls were recorded in four gardens, all in rural areas, whilst the Little Owl was reported in just one garden (mine in Woburn).

Another species in decline is the Swift, recorded in (or more accurately over) about a third of the gardens last summer. That is the lowest since 25% in 2011. Garden watching is not the most relevant way to monitor Kingfishers but they must have given a thrill to the five garden owners in which they appeared last summer.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is doing ok and last summer appeared in 59% of gardens, about average since our surveys began, although rural gardens are much preferred, recorded in over 80% of those in 2018. They also retain their place in our 'Top 20' most frequent garden visitors. The other woodpecker species in our list for 2018 is the Green, and in 39% of gardens was about average for the last few years.

Crows

The Magpie is the most obvious member of this tribe in our gardens, both in rural and urban sites, and during last summer was found in 97%, the highest level since our summer surveys began.

The Jackdaw was recorded in 77% of the gardens, also the highest ever level. In the first summer of this survey, in 1998, it was found in just 28%. It is also well established in the 'Top 20' of our most frequent garden visitors, and shows a preference for rural sites. The Carrion Crow was found in 68% of the gardens, about average, and again is in the 'Top 20' of our most frequent visitors. Garden appearances of the Rook are increasing, being in 36% of gardens last summer, the highest level since our summer surveys started. The Jay was in 26% of gardens, about average, but with a strong preference for rural sites.

Tits to House Martin

As usual, the Blue Tit was seen in all gardens, but at a slightly lower frequency, followed by the Great Tit, seen in all but one of the gardens. The Long-tailed Tit also showed well, in 86% of gardens, the same as the previous summer, whilst appearances of the Coal Tit are somewhat erratic, last summer in 74% of gardens. Both of these last two species show a strong preference for rural areas. Somewhat surprisingly the declining Marsh Tit appeared in four rural gardens, but was only regular in one.

Of the hirundines, the House Martin is the most often seen species in or over our gardens, and last summer was recorded in 30%, but that was rather on the low side. The Swallow was reported by 22% of the garden surveyors, and that was the lowest since the same level in 2010.

Warblers

The Blackcap remains the most familiar warbler in our summer gardens, although the results are erratic from year to year, appearing in 45% of our gardens last summer, which is rather on the low side. After two strong summers the Chiffchaff appeared in only 28% of the gardens with, as usual, a strong preference for rural sites. The Willow Warbler appeared in 22% of the gardens, about the average level for the last few summers. However, in no garden did it appear in more than three weeks, indicating that our garden birds are merely passing through. One in Terry Osborn's Clifton garden in August was a garden first. Other members of the warbler family to show in our gardens last summer were Common Whitethroat (in 9%), Garden Warbler (in 3%) and Reed Warbler (in 1%). There were no garden records for Sedge Warbler or Lesser Whitethroat in last summer's survey.

Goldcrest to Starling

The Goldcrest performed well (in 39% of gardens), with the results for the last three summers the highest since our survey began. It doesn't seem to have suffered as a result of the very cold spell at the end of the 2017/18 winter. On the other hand, the result for the Wren (albeit in 86% of gardens) was the lowest since 2014, so that might suggest that they did suffer. The Nuthatch was recorded in 14% of gardens, the lowest since 2010, but conversely the Treecreeper was in 10% of gardens, the highest since 2011.

The result for the Starling (in 86% of gardens) was the lowest since our summer survey began. It was entirely absent from nine rural gardens and one urban garden. That is reflected, to some extent, in the frequency results too, at 49% for rural gardens and 53% for urban sites. Overall, it had the lowest frequency score since our summer surveys started – in 1998 it had a frequency of 80% and that was when the population was already decreasing.

Thrushes and Spotted Flycatcher

Needless to say, the Blackbird remains one of our most common garden visitors, appearing as usual in all gardens last summer, with the frequency in rural and urban gardens virtually the same. The Robin too, was in all gardens, and like the previous species, at the same frequency level across all types of garden.

Results for the Song Thrush have been somewhat erratic over the last few summers with garden appearances for last summer still on the high side compared to the average of the previous five summers. The strong preference for rural sites continues, last summer in 83% of those gardens (at a frequency of 20%) compared to 52% of urban sites (at a frequency of just 6%). The appearances of the Mistle Thrush, another Red-list species, in our gardens have been erratic in the past, but they seem to have stabilized, being in 17% of gardens last summer. It was found almost entirely in rural gardens, with just one urban garden reporting it.

One pleasant surprise, on the surface at least, was that Spotted Flycatchers appeared in 9% of the gardens, the highest level since the same result in 2010, but well down from the peak of 20% in 1999. Closer inspection, however, shows that of the six gardens that attracted them, only one recorded it during two weeks of the survey period (the other five were in just one of the weeks), and all records were during August and September – in other words the sightings involved only passage birds. One in Terry Osborn's garden was a garden first.

Sparrows to buntings

In the summer of 2016 the House Sparrow appeared in just 84% of gardens, the lowest since our summer surveys began. Since then we have seen a very slight improvement, with the result for last summer being 86%. They were entirely absent during the 30-week period in eight rural and two urban gardens, the frequency in urban gardens being 67% but in rural areas only 56%. They regularly nest and roost in gardens just 50m away from Nick Hammond's Sandy garden, but rarely visit his, but in

May they appeared in some numbers coinciding with the emergence of Banded Demoiselles, were only sporadic from August onwards and then disappeared again. For the second summer in a row the Tree Sparrow failed to make the list.

The Dunnock was in all gardens last summer, but the frequency was slightly down (the lowest since 2010), but was probably not significantly so.

Three species of wagtail appear on our list for last summer, with Pied Wagtail in 38% of gardens (the highest since 2001), the Grey Wagtail in 10% (the highest since 2005), and the Yellow Wagtail, recorded during five weeks in a garden in Cockayne Hatley.

Results for the Goldfinch were down, appearing in 94% of the gardens, just slightly more than the Chaffinch, in 93%. Contrary to our worst fears, the Greenfinch was in 86% of gardens, up from the low of 76% in the previous summer, but still well down compared to earlier years. It was in 93% of rural gardens but in only 74% of urban sites. Similarly, the Bullfinch shows a strong preference for rural gardens, in 38% of those sites, compared to just over 1% of urban gardens. Two pairs that visited Angela Mason's Wootton garden in June were considered a real treat, and one in Peter Nash's Sandy garden in April was a garden first.

After the large number of gardens holding Siskins at the end of the 2017/18 winter (see *The Hobby* #158) a fair number stayed over into the start of last summer (or at least the early spring). A total of 23 gardens recorded the species in that early spring period with the last of those long-stayers moving on after the week commencing 8th April. [Incidentally, as I write this in mid-January, I've not had a single Siskin in my garden all winter, and I suspect that not many other gardens have had them either]. In a similar fashion, there were good numbers of gardens holding Lesser Redpolls and Bramblings at the end of the 2017/18 winter, and some of these stayed over too, with 13% of gardens recording Lesser Redpolls and 17% with Bramblings. In Peter Nash's garden Bramblings were regularly in double figures, including 14 on 13th April, and were present up to 22nd April, whilst Lesser Redpolls peaked at ten on 31st March.

Reed Buntings were in 22% of gardens, mainly in the first few weeks, but re-appeared in Peter Nash's garden in September, whilst Yellowhammers were in 12% of gardens. There has been no consistent trend for either of these species in our summer surveys.

Summary

Our summer garden survey has now been running for 21 years and has given us a great insight into perhaps our most under-estimated habitats. Once again, we have to thank the enthusiasm of our members for supporting our garden feeding projects, with many of you taking part since their inception. As usual, with the results from Summer 2018, we can see both expected and surprising trends. In my own Woburn garden House Sparrows and Starlings had both become rather rare visitors, but during last summer they started to turn up more regularly, for Starling in 21 of the 30 weeks and House Sparrow in 13 weeks. Andrew Budd also mentioned that it had been 'a good year for House Sparrows and Starlings' in his Ampthill garden. So, however well we think we know our gardens, changes are occurring.

Barry Nightingale

IMAGES BY:

Andy Grimsey: Waxwing
Steve Blain: White-headed Duck

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