

THE GARDEN BIRD FEEDING SURVEY – WINTER 2018/19

INTRODUCTION

For the survey for last winter, covering the 22-week period from the beginning of October 2018 to early March 2019, we received returns from 65 gardens, the lowest response we've had since our winter surveys began in 1993/94. It was ten less than for the previous winter, and was significantly different in terms of the split between rural (57%) and urban (43%) gardens this time around. For the winter of 2017/18 the split was 65% rural and 35% urban, but the returns, in terms of the rural v urban percentage split was almost the same as the winter 2016/17. Generally speaking, the change of mix for last winter will mean that the results for species with a strong preference for rural gardens could be somewhat suppressed, whilst those species with a preference for urban gardens could be inflated. That should be remembered when reading the species comments in the main text.

The average number of species recorded in the rural and urban gardens was, at 25.9 and 19.2 respectively, on the low side, as the following table shows. Martin Lowe, from his Cranfield garden, commented that there had been “a greatly reduced number of birds in our garden this winter...the other common birds were much more infrequent with the exception of Wood Pigeons. Often these were more or less the only birds visible”. And John Pitts, from his Toddington garden, simply added “Not very exciting this winter”.

Table 1 Average number of species per garden - winters 2011/12 to 2017/18

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Rural gardens	25.6	27.2	24.3	26.1	26.3	27.1	28.5	25.9
Urban gardens	20.1	23.3	18.1	19.1	20.1	20.3	21.3	19.2

The total number of species in the gardens last winter reached 69, the same as the record level achieved in the previous winter.

Table 2 includes all species that have been recorded in our winter gardens since the winter of 2012/13. In addition, there are another 18 species which have not been recorded in our winter surveys since then, but were recorded during at least one winter between 1993/94 and 2011/12. As can be seen in the table, there were four species that were recorded in all participating gardens last winter – Blackbird, Blue Tit, Wood Pigeon (also our most frequent garden visitor last winter) and Robin.

TABLE 2 PERCENTAGE OF GARDENS EACH SPECIES WAS RECORDED IN - WINTERS 2012/13 TO 2018/19

position		%	%	%	%	%	position		%	%	%	%	%
18/19		18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15	18/19		18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15
1st=	Blackbird	100	100	100	100	100	42nd=	Grey Heron	11	16	16	15	15
1st=	Blue Tit	100	100	100	100	100	44th=	Treecreeper	9	11	6	9	10
1st=	Robin	100	100	100	100	100	45th=	Red-l Partridge	8	8	4	1	1
1st=	Wood Pigeon	100	100	100	100	99	45th=	Moorhen	8	7	6	12	10
5th	Great Tit	98	99	96	99	97	45th=	Lesser Redpoll	8	25	5	23	10
6th	Dunnock	97	97	99	100	97	45th=	Chiffchaff	8	13	22	12	10
7th	Collared Dove	92	93	92	94	91	49th=	Kestrel	6	8	10	15	7
8th=	Magpie	91	95	88	96	90	49th=	Y'hammer	6	7	8	7	12
8th=	Goldfinch	91	93	91	88	90	51st=	Brambling	5	19	4	12	1
10th=	Starling	88	84	87	85	84	51st=	Mallard	5	11	9	6	6
10th=	Chaffinch	88	92	92	96	97	53rd=	Canada Goose	3	0	0	0	0
12th=	Wren	85	99	97	96	94	53rd=	Marsh Tit	3	5	3	4	3
12th=	Long-t Tit	85	89	90	93	84	53rd=	Kingfisher	3	7	6	4	7
14th	Coal Tit	80	91	75	89	79	53rd=	Barn Owl	3	3	3	1	0
15th	House Sparrow	74	73	75	77	81	53rd=	Woodcock	3	1	0	0	0
16th	Greenfinch	72	68	68	83	85	58th=	Little Egret	2	4	4	1	1
17th	Jackdaw	62	63	66	62	56	58th=	Common Raven	2	3	1	1	3
18th	Song Thrush	58	73	68	56	56	58th=	Common Gull	2	1	1	2	1
19th	Sparrowhawk	57	71	60	74	68	58th=	Little Grebe	2	1	1	0	1
20th	Gt Sp Woodpecker	54	57	66	66	60	58th=	Greylag Goose	2	1	1	0	0
21st	C Crow	52	63	66	56	62	58th=	Gadwall	2	1	1	0	0
22nd	Pied Wagtail	42	56	51	27	32	58th=	Swallow	2	1	0	1	0
23rd	Goldcrest	37	48	43	48	25	58th=	Mute Swan	2	1	0	0	1
24th	Blackcap	35	39	43	29	38	58th=	Wigeon	2	0	1	0	0
25th	Redwing	32	57	44	24	28	58th=	Ring Ouzel	2	0	0	0	0
26th=	C Pheasant	31	43	32	35	32	58th=	Mandarin	2	0	0	0	0
26th=	Fieldfare	31	68	30	22	19	58th=	Teal	2	0	0	0	0
28th=	Green Woodpecker	25	31	42	32	37		Cormorant	0	3	0	1	0
28th=	Siskin	25	31	13	32	6		Lapwing	0	3	0	0	0
30th	Red Kite	23	20	17	10	12		Peregrine Falcon	0	1	0	1	0
31st	Stock Dove	22	20	18	20	18		Lesser Sp W'pecker	0	1	0	0	0
32nd=	Rook	18	19	25	17	24		Lesser B B Gull	0	1	0	0	1
32nd=	Mistle Thrush	18	33	26	20	13		R-ringed Parakeet	0	0	3	1	1
32nd=	Jay	18	29	22	24	38		Little Owl	0	0	1	1	1
35th=	Bullfinch	17	25	18	20	26		Herring Gull	0	0	1	0	0
35th=	Feral Pigeon	17	19	19	18	10		Water Rail	0	0	1	0	0
37th=	Grey Wagtail	15	20	18	13	13		C Snipe	0	0	1	0	0
37th=	Black-h Gull	15	13	18	10	7		House Martin	0	0	0	1	1
39th=	Tawny Owl	14	19	13	17	16		Tree Sparrow	0	0	0	1	3
39th=	Common Buzzard	14	20	10	11	12		Linnet	0	0	0	1	1
41st	Reed Bunting	12	16	9	17	16		Yellow Wagtail	0	0	0	0	1
42nd=	Nuthatch	11	17	14	17	19		Waxwing	0	0	0	0	1

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 65 gardens). If compared to the results for previous years, you will notice that the Song Thrush is no longer in the 'Top 20', being overtaken by Pheasant, Rook and Feral Pigeon.

Table 3 Frequency of occurrence winters 2013/14 to 2018/19							
Position		18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14
1st	Wood Pigeon	91	92	91	90	89	87
2nd	Blue Tit	90	91	91	91	92	89
3rd	Blackbird	89	88	91	88	91	89
4th	Robin	86	90	92	88	91	84
5th	Great Tit	76	79	75	80	81	74
6th	Dunnock	73	78	83	77	79	72
7th=	Goldfinch	62	66	62	62	61	57
7th=	Collared Dove	62	60	64	63	66	64
9th	Magpie	58	63	60	61	59	51
10th=	Chaffinch	55	65	64	68	71	69
10th=	House Sparrow	55	52	54	52	59	55
12th	Starling	52	57	58	47	55	50
13th	Coal Tit	38	50	35	52	36	24
14th	Greenfinch	37	39	33	48	44	47
15th	Long-tailed Tit	36	47	39	41	30	26
16th	Jackdaw	32	33	33	34	32	22
17th	Wren	29	40	46	39	37	22
18th	G S Woodpecker	20	24	23	29	22	20
19th	Carrion Crow	19	22	25	20	22	19
20th	Pheasant	14	13	13	15	13	13

THE WEATHER

During October the average temperature across the UK was 7.3°C, more or less the same as the average in the period 1981 to 2010. In East Anglia the average was 11.6°C, which was +0.6°C above the long-term average. It was a sunny month, and in East Anglia was 43% above the average, and it was dry, with rainfall 14% below.

That picture continued into November, with the average temperature across the UK at 5.8°C, 2°C above the average, whilst in East Anglia it was 8.3°C, which was 1.2°C above the average. It was, again, a sunny month, in East Anglia at 24% above the average, and was dry, with rainfall 18% below.

During December the average temperatures were again above the long-term average, across the UK 2.0°C above and in East Anglia 2.4°C above. In East Anglia, for once, it was a rather wet month, with rainfall 12% above.

January was slightly colder than expected, with the mean temperature in East Anglia 0.3°C below the average, but otherwise the weather patterns remained the same, with rainfall 51% below and sunshine 1% above. That continued into February, with the mean temperature across East Anglia 2.5°C above the average, rainfall 26% less than average and sunshine hours 74% above.

So, in summary for our part of the world, it was a rather mild, sunny and very dry winter. However, there were clear indications from the BTO Breeding Bird Survey for 2018 that the species that are sensitive to cold winters suffered during the very harsh spell of weather in the previous winter, in February/March 2018. Although there would have been some recovery during the summer of 2018 the populations were, for some species, still low. For instance, in the UK between summer 2017 and summer 2018, the

Goldcrest declined by 38%, Long-tailed Tit by 22% and Wren by 21% (Harris *et al* 2019). The results for all three species are well down in our own 2018/19 winter survey.

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THE MAIN RESULTS

Waterfowl to Gulls

Remarkably, there were eight species of waterfowl in our list for last winter, but of those only Mallard appeared in more than two of the gardens. Common Pheasant appeared in almost a third of gardens, virtually all in rural areas as might be expected, whilst Red-legged Partridge was in 8% of gardens, all in rural areas. On the other hand, the Grey Heron was recorded in more urban gardens (four) than rural (three).

Of the raptors, the Sparrowhawk is the most likely to visit our gardens, last winter in 57% overall, split 62% from rural sites and 50% of urban gardens. Red Kites are becoming more widespread over our gardens, but Chris Boon, in his Greenfield garden, went one better. On 31st October a Red Kite chased away a Sparrowhawk that had killed a Wood Pigeon on his lawn, and then proceeded to eat the Pigeon.

As usual, the Black-headed Gull was the most regular of the garden gulls, appearing in 15% overall, about average.

Pigeons to Crows

The Wood Pigeon was recorded in all gardens last winter and was also the most frequent of all our garden visitors. The Collared Dove was in 92% of gardens, again about average, showing a slight preference for rural sites. Similarly, the results for Stock Dove (in 22% of gardens, split evenly between rural and urban) and Feral Pigeon (in 17% of gardens, virtually all urban) were much as expected.

Our results for Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers were both well down, but that might have been partly due to the fall in returns from rural gardens. Both species have a strong preference for those sites. However, according to the BBS data (Harris *et al* 2019) Great Spotted Woodpeckers actually increased by 10% between 2017 and 2018, whilst for Green Woodpeckers there was a small, insignificant decrease. Hopefully, the results in our survey were due to a statistical quirk and nothing more serious.

The Magpie was recorded in all rural gardens, and in 79% of those in urban areas. The frequency, at 58%, was the lowest since 51% in the winter of 2013/14. In my own garden, in Woburn, they have virtually disappeared, and as I write this in May, they have only been recorded in my garden in one week of the first 12 on the current Summer form. The Jackdaw is the second-most widespread member of the crow family in our gardens, with the Carrion Crow taking up third place. Both these species have a fairly strong preference for gardens in rural areas.

Tits, Warblers to 'crests

As expected, the Blue Tit was found in all gardens, and was second in terms of frequency only to the Wood Pigeon. The Great Tit was not far behind, being recorded in all rural gardens and was only missing from one urban site. It is, however, much more frequent in rural gardens (at a level of 85%) compared to urban gardens (at 67%). Despite dropping back compared to the previous winter, the Coal Tit and Long-tailed Tit both retain their places in our 'Top 20' most frequent garden visitors. Both show a preference for rural gardens.

The Blackcap is the warbler most often found in our winter gardens, last winter in 35% of those surveyed and unusually, equally across urban and rural sites. By comparison, the Chiffchaff was recorded in just five of the gardens, all in rural sites.

The Goldcrest appeared in 37% of the gardens, the lowest level since winter 2014/15, but was found in about the same proportion of rural and urban gardens.

Wren, Starling and Thrushes



Like the previous species, the Wren also suffered in the 2017/18 winter. It was found in 85% of the gardens last winter, the lowest since 2013/14, and showed a preference for rural gardens. The Nuthatch too, shows a preference for those sites and, like other species in that category, the results may have been affected by the drop in the number of rural gardens covered, with the result (in 11% of gardens) the lowest since 2013/14.

The proportion of gardens holding the Starling, in 88% of all those covered, was higher than the recent average, although the frequency was down. Results were about the same for rural (86% of gardens, with a frequency of 54%) and urban sites (89% of gardens, but less frequent, at 49%).

As usual, the Blackbird was recorded in all the gardens, and was the third highest species in terms of frequency. The Song Thrush was recorded from 58% of gardens, the split being 76% of rural sites but in just 36% of urban gardens. The overall frequency fell too, to 10%, so was overtaken by Pheasant (14%), Feral Pigeon (12%) and Rook (11%), and dropped out of the 'Top 20' as a result. Those low numbers for Song Thrush may well have been affected by the lower returns from rural gardens.

Of the two wintering thrushes, the results were about the same, with Redwing appearing in 32% of gardens and Fieldfare in 31%. Both sets of results were well down compared to the previous winter, but that was largely as a result of the severe spell of bad weather in 2017/18 that pushed both species into many of our gardens. Returns for the Mistle Thrush were well down too, in 18% of gardens being the lowest since 2014/15. Almost all of the gardens attracting Mistles were in rural areas.

The results for the Robin were similar to that of Blackbird, appearing in all gardens and it was high in the frequency table too, coming in at fourth place.

Sparrows, Dunnock and Wagtails

Are House Sparrows trying to make a come-back? They were found in 74% of the gardens, still rather low, but the frequency, at 55%, was the highest since 2014/15. In my own Woburn garden, they have moved from being a noteworthy rarity to a fairly regular visitor, albeit in just ones and twos. Judith Knight, from her Linslade garden, commented that "two House Sparrows on 19th November – first for ages, but then nine weeks until the next!" Overall, the results show that they still prefer urban gardens. Perhaps more expected was that the Tree Sparrow failed to make it on our winter lists for the third winter in a row. Appearances of the Dunnock remained fairly static, in 97% of gardens being the same as the previous winter, but the frequency was down at 73%, the lowest since 2013/14.

And then we come to the Pied Wagtail, where the results have been up and down like a yo-yo. After three winters with low results, that is during 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16, they then had two 'good' results, before falling back again last winter. One aspect that is consistent is that have a strong preference for rural gardens.

Finches and buntings

In the winter of 2017/18, the Goldfinch overtook the Chaffinch as our most widespread garden finch, and that situation was maintained for last winter too. That is as much to do with falling results for Chaffinch as improvements for Goldfinches; just consider that in the winter of 2012/13 Chaffinches appeared in 99% of our gardens. Last winter they were in 88%. Similarly, the frequency of their appearances has dropped too, the level of 55% last winter being the lowest since our winter surveys started. Andrew Budd, from his Ampthill garden, commented that “sadly, Chaffinches have become a bit of a rarity with never more than two seen at once.”

So, what of the Goldfinch? The results for last winter were pretty much on the button compared to the last ten or so years, appearing in 91% of gardens, with a frequency of 62%. Paul Burgoine and Yvonne Cole, from their garden in Maulden, simply commented that “Goldfinches – commonest bird. 30+ during the colder periods.”

The Greenfinch appeared in more gardens last winter (in 72%) than in the previous two, but results are still well down compared to the earlier years. They were found in 73% of rural gardens, with a frequency of 37% and, almost identically, in 71% of urban gardens with a frequency of 36%. Consider that in 2008/09 they were recorded in 95% of the gardens.

The Siskin is a species where the results can vary widely from winter to winter. Last winter they were in 25% of the gardens, but apart from in three of those gardens, never for many of the weeks or in any numbers. Peter Nash, from his Sandy garden, commented that “Siskin – never many birds this winter, seen on [just] 14 days during the survey period.” Like other observers, those in his garden mainly showed during the last few weeks of the survey period, suggesting that they had spent the main winter period farther south. The Bullfinch too, had a below average set of results, whilst appearances of both Lesser Redpoll and Brambling were poor. Again, in Peter Nash’s garden, something of a hotspot in recent winters for Bramblings, most of his garden sightings were of single birds, whereas in the previous winter he’d had a maximum of 52. He also had “a very poor year compared to previous ones” for Lesser Redpoll.

Of the buntings, the Reed Bunting had a fairly average showing, appearing in 12% of gardens, whilst the results for the Yellowhammer, in just 6% of gardens, were also disappointing, except that two in Peter Nash’s garden in February were a welcome addition to his garden list.

SUMMARY

Feeding our garden birds has grown into a multi-million-pound industry. It has been estimated that our annual spend on garden bird feeding products could be as high as £300 million. A recently published report from the BTO has highlighted how widespread garden feeding of birds (it has been estimated that about half of garden owners across Britain provide food for birds) has changed the composition of bird communities in our gardens over the last 40 years (Plummer *et al* 2019). From the early days when garden feeders were dominated by Starlings and House Sparrows, their place has been taken more and more by Goldfinches and Wood Pigeons, plus a wide range of other species too. And of course, we can see that in our own gardens.

With all the pressures facing birds in the wider environment it remains crucial that we continue to monitor the changes that are taking place literally outside our kitchen windows. Once again, we are very grateful to the 65 garden surveyors who took the time to take part, and we look forward to receiving your returns for future survey periods.

Barry Nightingale

References

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