



THE HOBBY

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PROGRAMME MATTERS

Welcome to the July 2021 edition of The Hobby. With the first returning waders, the autumn is fast approaching, and birdsong has mostly gone quiet with young to feed but there are still birds to be found; we welcome records of breeding success for all of our scarcer breeders so that we can monitor their status. Spotted Flycatcher and Turtle Dove both remain of concern, while many other species are of interest as a result of small populations such as Pochard, Little Egret and Firecrest that are not recorded through the annual survey activities like BBS.

We have begun to finalise a winter program of talks which will remain on Zoom for the foreseeable future while concern remains about the on-going status of Covid infections and the requirements that we consider we would need to put in place to safeguard our members as part of our indoor meeting. We will continue to review the situation and listen to the thoughts of our members in this regard. Opinions and ideas on this would be welcomed by email to me or any other committee member. Once again our program is kindly sponsored by Opticron.

Planning is in place for some outdoor meetings for the winter, focussing on some local sites in particular; more information on this will be shared through the website and email as appropriate.

We hope you can still enjoy your birding in this continuing difficult period. Stay safe...

APRIL – JUNE 2021 BIRD NEWS

April 2021

White-fronted Goose - an adult at Southill on 20th as well as the lingering bird from the winter at Meadow Lane GP up to the end of the month and still present mid-May

Pink-footed Goose - one long term resident present with Greylag at Meadow Lane in the month, also seen at Priory CP, present in the area until at least 22nd May

Shelduck - ten at Grovebury SP on 25th was a high count

Garganey - male at MCP Wetlands NR from 16th to 20th, one at Meadow Lane GP on 22nd, another male at Black Cat GP on 28th

Pintail - on 24th a male was present at Stewartby Lake at first light but not after, then another was reported flying over Priory early morning and then found at Meadow Lane GP, potentially the same bird in all sightings

Turtle Dove - one around Stewartby Lake and MCP Wetlands NR and another near Little Staughton

Common Crane - two noted over Rookery North CIP on 3rd, one noted around two clay pits on 6th

Stone Curlew - one recorded on nocturnal migration over Sandy on 3rd

Whimbrel - three at Grovebury SP early morning on the 14th, four there on 24th, two at Stewartby Lake on 23rd where birds were also noted passing over on both 24th and 27th. A group of 15 flew around at Broom East CWS on 24th, two remaining there later on 24th-25th and another at Meadow Lane on 27th

Curlew - one at Meadow Lane GP on 19th

Bar-tailed Godwit - one at Broom GP on 17th, another at MCP Wetlands NR from 18th, with three there on 23rd and one remaining to 26th, one at Grovebury SP on 23rd, three there on 25th and one there on 27th, one circled Stewartby Lake a number of times without landing on 24th, birds at Broom East CWS on 25th and 28th

Ruff - one at Rookery South on 27th, four females at Grovebury SP on 27th

Sanderling - one at Grovebury SP on 5th

Dunlin - found in Rookery South CIP on 3rd and 8th, at Grovebury SP on 21st, 23rd and 27th, three at Black Cat GP on 28th, singles at Broom East CWS on 28th and 29th

Wood Sandpiper - birds at Broom East CWS on 26th and 27th, one at Black Cat GP on 30th

Spotted Redshank - two at Grovebury SP on 25th, one at Black Cat GP from 28th to 30th

Greenshank - three at Grovebury on 23rd, birds at Broom East CWS on 23rd, 26th-28th and 30th, three at Brogborough Tip Pools on 27th, four on 28th, with three remaining to 29th

Little Gull - three at Priory CP on 20th, one at Broom East CWS on 21st, at least 35 at Stewartby Lake on 23rd, eight at Rookery South Pit, two at Broom GP on same day; a big passage on 24th included a minimum of 139 through Stewartby Lake in ten groups and seven birds at Priory CP

Mediterranean Gull - two at Broom East CWS on 24th

Kittiwake - two at Stewartby Lake on 6th

Arctic Tern - at least 70 in a flock through Stewartby Lake on 23rd, 14 at Rookery North CIP, six at Priory CP and six at Broom East CWS as well as other small groups elsewhere on 28th



Black Tern - three at Stewartby Lake on 23rd, one at Black Cat GP on 28th

Great White Egret - two regularly at Stewartby Lake from 10th, increased to four on 28th at least, elsewhere on at Broom East CWS on 4th, two over Potton on 5th and two at Black Cat GP on 20th

Spoonbill - one over Broom GP on 10th

Bittern - one booming in the brick pits during the month

Marsh Harrier - a few records around the brick pits, others flew over Sandy on 17th, and Sandy Smith NR on 20th

Osprey - one over Luton on 27th, one over Stewartby Lake on 28th

Short-eared Owl - one passing near Old Warden on 24th

Hoopoe - one in Biddenham on 18th

Merlin - a selection of reports near Langford Solar Farm and wind turbines in the first half of the month

Cettis Warbler - a few double figure counts of singing birds at Stewartby Lake / MCP Wetlands NR

Wood Warbler - one noted at Coopers Hill on 21st

Siberian Chiffchaff - one singing near Broom East CWS from the start of the month until the 13th

Ring Ouzel - birds regularly reported from Pegsdon Hills with a maximum of five on 12th and 15th with birds present up to 30th, elsewhere reports included one at Everton Sand Quarry on 1st, two at Dunstable Downs on 3rd, one on Stopsley Common on 6th, two in Sewell on 12th, one at Caddington GC on 19th, Blows Downs on 14th, 20th, and 21st, three near Houghton House on 23rd, two at Kensworth Quarry on 24th, three at Hawkesbury Meadows on 30th

Nightingale - at least three around Stewartby Lake area; away from the brick pits there was one at Cardington Lock on 26th and also birds at Knotting Green

Pied Flycatcher - one at Blows Downs on 22nd

Black Redstart - a female in Renhold on 1st, others at Chelveston Airfield on 4th, near Langford on 5th, another in Flitwick between 11th and 13th, female at Pegsdon Hills on 18th and one on top of the incinerator building in Rookery North on 26th

Common Redstart - first at Stopsley Common on 6th, others noted near Grovebury SP on 11th, at Blows Downs on 11th, 13th, 16th and 21st, Potton on 12th another at Ruxox Farm, Flitwick on 13th and at Pegsdon on 19th and 20th

Whinchat - one at Pegsdon Hills on the 20th then three birds noted on 28th - at Ridgeway Wood, Pegsdon Hills and Blows Downs

Wheatear - a few birds of the larger Greenland type noted at the end of the month

Tree Pipit - one near Potton on 16th and 19th

Brambling - a few lingered near The Lodge RSPB on 16th

Hawfinch - one noted at Carthegena GC on 14th

May 2021

Quail - one near Southill on 28th

Turtle Dove - all records requested please - birds noted around Stewartby Lake and MCP Wetlands NR, Marston Thrift, near Tempsford, Dunton, Knotting Green, Waterloo Thorns

Spotted Crane – one heard on nocturnal migration over two locations in Luton early morning on the 1st, recordings were just a kilometre apart and separated by approximately 45 seconds !

Crane - two heard in flight near Blunham on 18th

Ringed Plover - 23 at Grovebury SP on 8th, seven there on 9th. Single birds noted at Broom East CWS on all dates from 3rd to 14th but also a group of 22 amassed on 8th, others at Black Cat GP between 13th and 21st, eight at Meadow Lane GP on 22nd

Curlew - noted at Brogborough Tip and over Ampthill Park on 9th

Whimbrel - two through Grovebury SP on 3rd

Turnstone - one at Grovebury SP on 22nd

Knot - one at Grovebury SP on 3rd, six there on 8th, one on 9th

Sanderling - two at Grovebury SP on 3rd, three different individuals reported on 4th, five through there on 8th, one also on 9th. One at Black Cat GP on 9th, one at Broom East CWS on 9th with another there on 15th and another at Grovebury SP on 21st

Dunlin - a total of 64 were counted moving through at Grovebury SP on 4th following an early morning initial report of 43 birds, with 17 also reported through there on 8th and ten on 21st. Also on 4th, seven were at Broom East CWS and two at Black Cat GP. Otherwise one at Black Cat GP on 8th, another there on 18th, and two at Meadow Lane GP on 22nd



Greenshank - single birds at Meadow Lane on 1st and at Broom East CWS from 1st to 7th with two there on 4th, also at Broom Quarry on 1st to 3rd. Photo by Paul Kaiser.

Spotted Redshank - one early morning at Houghton Brook Pools on 9th

Wood Sandpiper - one at Black Cat GP from 1st to 5th, three at Broom East CWS on 2nd with two there also on 3rd

Kittiwake - one at Grovebury SP on 23rd

Mediterranean Gull - one at Meadow Lane GP from 19th to 23rd

Black Tern - one at Broom GP on 10th

Arctic Tern - six through Black Cat GP on 1st and five at Brogborough Lake on 23rd

Great White Egret - three in flight together near Biggleswade on 1st

Osprey - one through Grovebury SP on 3rd, also over Broom on 7th and Black Cat GP on 8th

Marsh Harrier - one around the brick pits on 1st and 19th, a female at Tetworth Estate on 23rd and a male over Biggleswade on 31st

Hen Harrier - one over Stotfold on 3rd, another near Riseley on 29th

Alexandrine Parakeet - one in Brickhill garden on a few days mid-month was the second record of a bird in the county this year

Golden Oriole - one at Knotting Green on 19th and another at Willington on 22nd

SAVI'S WARBLER - first for the county was at Derek White Eggs GP from 5th to 12th was audible and occasionally visible from Biggleswade Common

Ring Ouzel - three at Hawkesbury Meadows on 1st, and one at Whipsnade on 9th

Fieldfare - a flock of 60 still lingered near Sandy on 1st

Whinchat - one at Streatley on 1st and another at Houghton Regis ChP on 2nd, three at Wigmore CP and two at Blows Downs on 9th

Redstart - a female near Potton on 7th, another at Wigmore CP on 9th with two at Blows Downs the same day and lastly on Brogborough Hill on 11th

Wheatear - five at Pegsdon on 15th

Spotted Flycatcher - all records requested, noted at ten sites on Birdtrack records in the month, all at sites across the central band of the county

June 2021

Barnacle Goose - 22 at Stewartby Lake on 17th were unusual away from the usual sites in the Ouse Valley east of Bedford

Pochard - a brood of seven young noted at MCP Wetlands NR indicated successful breeding

Goosander - broods reported on 9th at Turvey and Bromham may have bred locally or drifted downstream from known breeding locations higher up the river in Bucks. Five juveniles at Grovebury on 27th also considered a brood that had been raised locally probably just outside of the county

Turtle Dove - one bird has been noted occasionally in gardens including visiting bird feeders in Arlesey while a juvenile was recorded in a garden in Henlow

Black-tailed Godwit - one at Black Cat GP on 26th

Redshank - two young noted at MCP Wetlands NR indicated successful breeding

Wryneck - one reported on the 4th in Carlton

Spotted Flycatcher - all records welcomed please of this declining species - only a few reported at sites on the Greensand ridge and in the east and north of the county this month

Black Redstart - three singing males from at least two breeding pairs noted around Luton, with at least one pair successfully fledging young from first brood

Stonechat - has bred successfully in the south of the county

We thank all contributors who have submitted their records directly to the Recorder, or via Bedsbirds Email Group as well as other sources. Please note that we currently have no official appointed County Bird Recorder and that this role is being managed in the interim by Peter Nash with support from Andy Grimsey. Records are welcomed to the email address below, and any questions, requests or reports otherwise can be directed to Peter on 07753411786 or Andy on 07402429312.

Records are preferred via the online system BirdTrack,

Compiled by Andy Grimsey
recorder@bedsbirdclub.org.uk

NOTES ON THE BIRD REPORT

The report for 2020 is now being compiled with vast majority of species written up, work will now move on to collating the species records into the systematic list and concluding the write-ups of the articles; the aim is to have the report with members by the end of the year. The number of records collected in the year was over 251,000 of which over 224,000 were compiled in BirdTrack, and covered a total of 199 recorded species.

We would encourage all members who are not yet using Birdtrack to consider doing so, it not only ensures all our data is maintained and archived in the records of the BTO , but also ensures they are in one manageable format to make the County Recorders job easier !

GOLDEN ORIOLE IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Since the loss of breeding birds at RSPB Lakenheath ten years ago, Golden Oriole has proved a difficult bird to see for birders in the UK and I'm sure there are a few of us from Bedfordshire that used to go up there perhaps annually to see this species along with some of the other specialities of The Brecks.

2021 has proved to be a good year for Golden Oriole on spring migration with birds reported in a number of inland locations in the south east and fortunately there were two records in the Bedfordshire, one at Knotting Green on 19th May and another at Willington on 22nd. The Willington bird proved particularly popular, though not easy to see as it was present on and off for much of the day and was only the second twitchable record ever in the county following one that stayed for two and a half hours allowing a number of people to see it at Tempsford on 3rd June 2012.



In total there have now been 14 records in the county since 1946 all in the second half of May or first half of June of which five have been in the last ten years - 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 (2). The majority of records have been in the lower Ouse and Ivel Valleys so we have an idea where and when best to look for the next one.

Image by Sean D’Arcy

Text by Andy Grimsey

MIGRANT RETURN DATES – FOCUS ON HOUSE MARTIN

In May, Peter Smith posted on the email group about his House Martins:

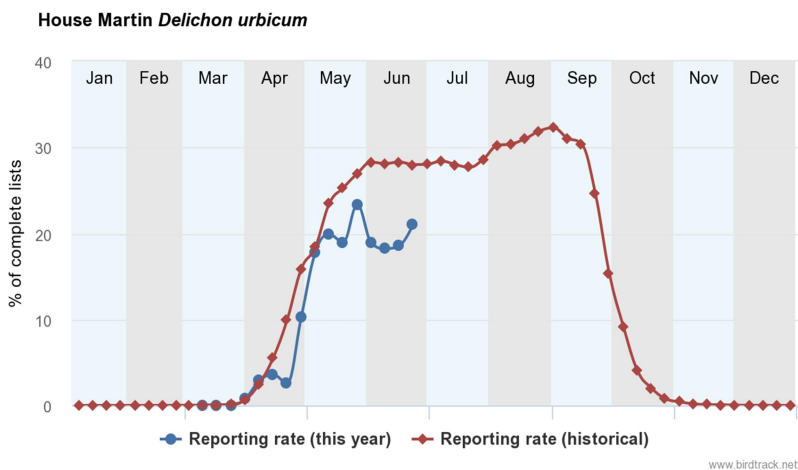
“We have 14 artificial House Martin boxes on our house in Eversholt, our first returnee House Martin was yesterday 26 days later than 7th April 2020.”

As it was unusually cold around the time that many of our migrants might first appear this is not unexpected and is reflected also in Birdtrack data for this species. Two graphs below show that Peter’s observation is in line with the national and county picture.

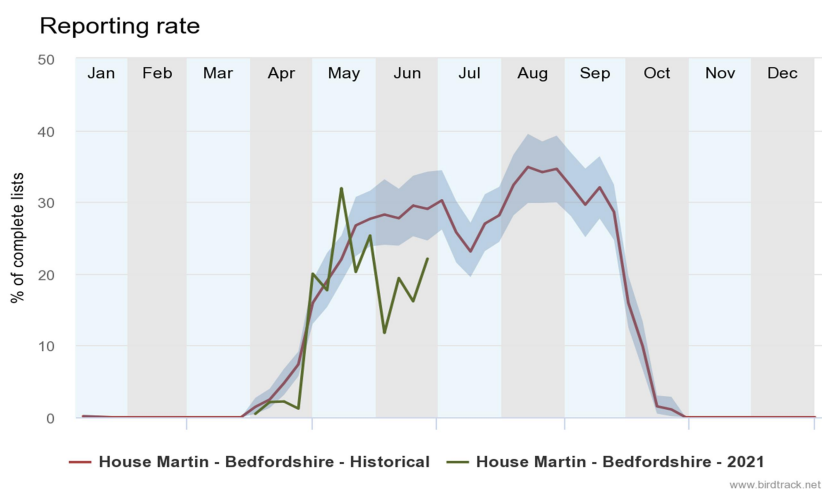
We can also see that the recording rate in Bedfordshire historically is almost identical to the national picture. This does not reflect abundance of the species and suggests there are some observers seeing a lot more House Martins locally that I am...

[These graphs are another valuable resource available to us from maintenance of records in BirdTrack.]

National reporting graph

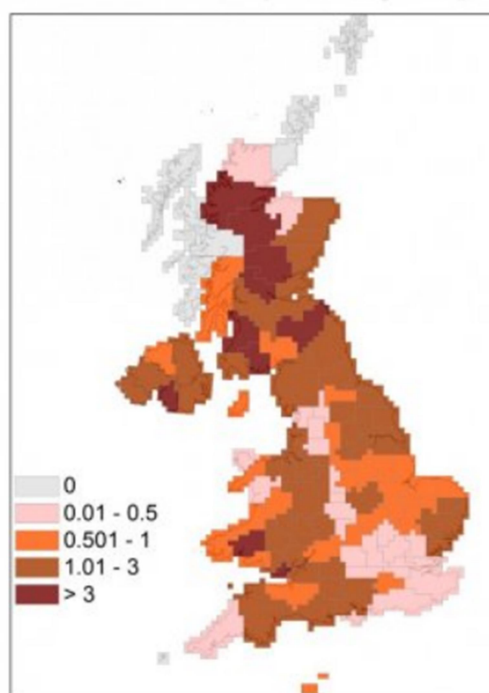


Bedfordshire reporting graph



The map is taken from the preliminary results of the recent BTO House Martin Survey and shows the general low levels of House Martin breeding pairs in the south-east including Bedfordshire. I'm sure that many of you have read much debate on this picture from all sorts of media, with comments on lack of flying insects, lack of nesting sites, indeed occasionally the deliberate destruction on nests on houses due to the "mess", all of which no doubt are restricting the numbers of this delightful bird in our county. I am sure I am not alone in wishing we had lot more, delighting us with their presence as they swoop around overhead a pub garden with swifts on a warm sunny afternoon.

Mean no. of colonies per surveyed square



NEW MEMBERS

We are pleased to welcome the following new members to the Beds Bird Club since the last edition:

Tom Barker, Bedford	Steve & Sue Lee, Marston Moretaine
Mark Bolan, Houghton Regis	Niamh Lynch, Turvey
John & Sandra Breen, Stopsley	Ian Noone, Marston Moretaine
Sophie Elliott, Clophill	Laura Pearce, Sharnbrook
Peter Fincham, Kempston	Lorraine Perry, Potton
Andrew Graham, Reading	Heather Stuckey, Biggleswade
Tom Jackson, Clifton	Barry Titmuss, Luton
Graham Lamey, Langford	Stuart Winter, Luton

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

THE GARDEN BIRD FEEDING SURVEY – WINTER 2020/21

INTRODUCTION

For the survey for last winter, covering the 22-week period from the beginning of October 2020 to the end of February 2021, we received returns from 76 gardens, an increase of four gardens from the previous winter, with the split between rural and urban sites about the same.

The average number of species recorded in the rural and urban gardens was, at 26.2 and 20.3 respectively, higher than in the previous two winters, as the following table shows:

Table 1 Average number of species per garden - winters 2014/15 to 2020/21

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Rural gardens	26.1	26.3	27.1	28.5	25.9	26.0	26.2
Urban gardens	19.1	20.1	20.3	21.3	19.2	19.6	20.3

The total number of species in the gardens last winter reached 72, a new record high for our winter garden surveys.

Table 2 includes all species that have been recorded in our winter gardens since the winter of 2014/15. As can be seen in the table, there were just three species that were recorded in all participating gardens last winter – Blackbird, Blue Tit and Robin. Remarkably, the Wood Pigeon was totally missing from one (lucky?) garden, whilst the Wren was also missing from just one garden. The Goldfinch, in 96% of gardens and Carrion Crow, in 68%, were at the highest levels since our surveys began in the winter of 1993/94. Conversely, the Coal Tit, in 67% of gardens, was at the lowest level since 64% in 2013/14, the Great Spotted Woodpecker, in 51%, was the lowest since 48% in 2011/12 whilst the Bullfinch, in just 9% of gardens, was the lowest since our winter surveys began.

TABLE 2 PERCENTAGE OF GARDENS RECORDING EACH SPECIES - WINTERS 2014/15 TO 2020/21

		20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15			20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15
1st=	Blackbird	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	45th=	Treecreeper	8	11	9	11	6	9	10
1st=	Blue Tit	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	45th=	Kestrel	8	7	6	8	10	15	7
1st=	Robin	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	45th=	Mallard	8	10	5	11	9	6	6
4th=	Wren	99	92	85	99	97	96	94	45th=	Reed Bunting	8	6	12	16	9	17	16
4th=	Wood Pigeon	99	100	100	100	100	100	99	49th=	Brambling	5	4	5	19	4	12	1
6th	Dunnock	97	99	97	97	99	100	97	49th=	Kingfisher	5	8	3	7	6	4	7
7th=	Great Tit	96	100	98	99	96	99	97	49th=	Grey Heron	5	13	11	16	16	15	15
7th=	Goldfinch	96	90	91	93	91	88	90	52nd=	Herring Gull	4	0	0	0	1	0	0
9th=	Magpie	92	93	91	95	88	96	90	52nd=	R-ringed Parakeet	4	3	0	0	3	1	1
9th=	Collared Dove	92	85	92	93	92	94	91	54th=	Red-l Partridge	3	4	8	8	4	1	1
11th	Starling	87	81	88	84	87	85	84	54th=	Common Gull	3	1	2	1	1	2	1
12th	Chaffinch	86	85	88	92	92	96	97	54th=	Yellowhammer	3	0	6	7	8	7	12
13th	Long-tailed Tit	84	90	85	89	90	93	84	54th=	Cormorant	3	3	0	3	0	1	0
14th	House Sparrow	78	78	74	73	75	77	81	54th=	Barn Owl	3	1	3	3	3	1	0
15th	Greenfinch	72	75	72	68	68	83	85	54th=	Mute Swan	3	1	2	1	0	0	1
16th	Sparrowhawk	70	65	57	71	60	74	68	60th=	Swallow	1	3	2	1	0	1	0
17th	Carrion Crow	68	60	52	63	66	56	62	60th=	Marsh Tit	1	8	3	5	3	4	3
18th	Coal Tit	67	92	80	91	75	89	79	60th=	Canada Goose	1	3	3	0	0	0	0
19th	Jackdaw	66	61	62	63	66	62	56	60th=	Greylag Goose	1	3	2	1	1	0	0
20th	Song Thrush	53	49	58	73	68	56	56	60th=	Little Grebe	1	1	2	1	1	0	1
21st	Gt Sp Woodpecker	51	63	54	57	66	66	60	60th=	Gadwall	1	1	2	1	1	0	0
22nd	Blackcap	50	29	35	39	43	29	38	60th=	Wigeon	1	1	2	0	1	0	0
23rd	Redwing	47	25	32	57	44	24	28	60th=	House Martin	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
24th	Common Pheasant	38	39	31	43	32	35	32	60th=	Willow Warbler	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
25th	Red Kite	32	26	23	20	17	10	12	60th=	Woodcock	1	0	3	1	0	0	0
26th=	Pied Wagtail	30	21	42	56	51	27	32	60th=	Common Raven	1	0	2	3	1	1	3
26th=	Goldcrest	30	38	37	48	43	48	25	60th=	Peregrine Falcon	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
28th=	Green Woodpecker	26	26	25	31	42	32	37	60th=	Water Rail	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
28th=	Fieldfare	26	10	31	68	30	22	19		Tree Sparrow	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
28th=	Siskin	26	4	25	31	13	32	6		Lesser Sp W'pecker	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
31st	Jay	25	36	18	29	22	24	38		Lesser B-b Gull	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
32nd=	Feral Pigeon	22	19	17	19	19	18	10		Little Egret	0	0	2	4	4	1	1
32nd=	Stock Dove	22	25	22	20	18	20	18		Mandarin	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
34th	Common Buzzard	21	15	14	20	10	11	12		Teal	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
35th	Rook	18	18	18	19	25	17	24		Ring Ouzel	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
36th	Tawny Owl	16	21	14	19	13	17	16		Lapwing	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
37th=	Grey Wagtail	14	24	15	20	18	13	13		Little Owl	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
37th=	Nuthatch	14	19	11	17	14	17	19		C Snipe	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
37th=	Black-headed Gull	14	13	15	13	18	10	7		Linnet	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
40th=	Mistle Thrush	13	18	18	33	26	20	13		Yellow Wagtail	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
40th=	Chiffchaff	13	14	8	13	22	12	10		Waxwing	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
42nd	Lesser Redpoll	12	7	8	25	5	23	10									
43rd=	Bullfinch	9	22	17	25	18	20	26									
43rd=	Moorhen	9	8	8	7	6	12	10									

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 that each species is recorded and comparing that to the maximum possible total (i.e., 22 weeks x 76 gardens). Topping this table for last winter is the Wood Pigeon, at the highest level since our surveys began, with Magpie, at 67%, also the highest for that species. Sadly, the Chaffinch is at the lowest level for that species, just 49%, since our surveys began, whilst the Coal Tit, at 31%, is the lowest since 24% in 2013/14.

TABLE 3 FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE WINTERS 2014/15 TO 2020/21								
		20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15
1st	Wood Pigeon	93	92	91	92	91	90	89
2nd=	Robin	90	88	86	90	92	88	91
2nd=	Blue Tit	90	92	90	91	91	91	92
2nd=	Blackbird	90	90	89	88	91	88	91
5th	Great Tit	76	80	76	79	75	80	81
6th	Dunnock	72	69	73	78	83	77	79
7th	Magpie	67	63	58	63	60	61	59
8th	Goldfinch	65	55	62	66	62	62	61
9th	Collared Dove	63	58	62	60	64	63	66
10th	House Sparrow	60	53	55	52	54	52	59
11th	Starling	50	49	52	57	58	47	55
12th	Chaffinch	49	52	55	65	64	68	71
13th	Wren	40	34	29	40	46	39	37
14th	Jackdaw	37	38	32	33	33	34	32
15th	Greenfinch	35	35	37	39	33	48	44
16th	Long-tailed Tit	34	42	36	47	39	41	30
17th	Coal Tit	31	47	38	50	35	52	36
18th	G S Woodpecker	28	27	20	24	23	29	22
19th	Carrion Crow	24	22	19	22	25	20	22
20th	Sparrowhawk	16	16	10	14	10	16	11

THE WEATHER

October 2020 began very unsettled, with Storm Alex bringing rain and strong winds to much of England and Wales. The provisional UK mean temperature was 9.4°C, which was 0.1°C below the 1981-2010 long-term average. For most of the UK it was a wet and dull month, with 142% of average rainfall and 72% of average sunshine – provisionally the fifth wettest October in a series from 1862, and also the fifth dullest since 1919.

In November, it was mostly mild in England, with southerly winds, but there were brief spells of colder, settled weather with widespread fog, especially towards the end of the month. It turned wet and windy around mid-month with gales in places. The provisional UK mean temperature was 7.7°C, which was 1.5°C above the long-term average, making it the sixth warmest November in a series from 1884.

December was wet, with rainfall 135% of average overall, but generally above average in parts, including East Anglia, seeing more than twice the normal rainfall. In December the provisional UK mean temperature was 4.3°C, which was 0.5°C above the long-term average.

The first ten days of January were generally cold, with wintry showers in places in the first week. Storm Christoph brought very wet and windy weather between the 19th and 21st, with many areas having over

100 mm of rain. The provisional UK mean temperature was 2.2°C, or 1.5°C below the long-term average, making it the coldest January since 2010.

The first five days of February were mild in the south, cold in the north, and unsettled, followed by a very cold easterly spell with heavy snowfalls in some areas. It turned much milder for the second half of the month, and wetter in most areas with frequent strong winds. The provisional UK mean temperature was 4.1°C, or 0.4°C above the long-term average, with the milder second half more than making up for the earlier cold spell. It was another rather wet month, with rainfall 116% of average overall.

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THE MAIN RESULTS

Waterfowl to Gulls

Of the six species of wildfowl that appear on our lists for last winter, the most recorded species is the Mallard, in 8% of the gardens, all as expected in rural areas. Of the gamebirds, the Common Pheasant occurred in 38% of gardens, with 25 of those in rural areas but also four in urban areas. As stated before, this species occurs in more of our gardens in winter than Pied Wagtail, Goldcrest, Jay and Green Woodpecker. David Withers from his Ampthill garden, was very pleased to tell me that he had had his first garden Pheasant in October – it has only taken him 50 years!

Typically, the Sparrowhawk is the most likely raptor to visit our gardens, last winter in 70% overall, higher than the recent average. It visits urban and rural areas about equally, and remains in our ‘Top 20’ most frequent garden visitors. As expected, the Red Kite is being recorded, hunting in the airspace above our gardens more and more, last winter over or from 32% of gardens, a record high. Similarly, the Common Buzzard hit a new level too, from 21% of gardens. Please make sure that, for both of these species, they are hunting over your garden and not just flying over, before you record them.

The Black-headed Gull was recorded in 14% of gardens, with a strong preference for urban sites. Two other species of gull are in our lists for last winter, with Common Gull in 3% of gardens and Herring Gull from 4%, all with a slight preference for urban gardens. Rory Morrissey, from Leighton Buzzard, had his first garden record of Common Gull last winter.

Pigeons to Crows

The Wood Pigeon was recorded in all but one of the gardens, and in most gardens was ever-present for all surveyed weeks. Not surprisingly therefore, it was the most frequent of our garden visitors and at 93%, at a record high. Just consider that, in 1995/96, the frequency was only 32%. After a drop in the previous winter, the Collared Dove was in 92% of gardens, back to the previous average. It shows a slight preference for urban gardens, and in fact was entirely absent from four rural gardens. It only just scraped on to my own list for my Woburn garden, with one rather sick bird appearing for just about five minutes in the whole winter period. Both the Feral Pigeon and Stock Dove were recorded in 22% of gardens, with the former more likely in urban gardens, and the latter more typically in rural sites. The Feral Pigeon almost made it into our ‘Top 20’ last winter, and was more frequent for example than Song Thrush (10%), Pied Wagtail (6%), Goldcrest (10%), Jay (8%) and Nuthatch (9%).

Recent results for the Great Spotted Woodpecker have been erratic, to say the least. After a drop to 54% of gardens in winter 2018/19, it bounced back to 63% in 2019/20, only to fall back to 51% last winter. That is the lowest level since 2011/12, when it was recorded in 48% of the gardens. The Green Woodpecker was recorded from 26% of gardens, pretty much the same now for the last three winters, but well below the

average for the four winters prior to that. Both species, as you might expect and particularly Green Woodpecker, are more likely to be found in rural gardens.

Three gardens last winter recorded Rose-ringed Parakeets, surely a species we can expect to see more of in our gardens in the near future.

The Magpie was recorded in 92% of all gardens, about average for the last six winters, and remains the most regular member of the crow family in our gardens, showing a slight preference for rural sites. The frequency level of 67% was the highest since our winter surveys began, and that increase was particularly noticeable in rural gardens. Also reaching new highs was the Carrion Crow, seen in 68% of gardens last winter, a level not achieved since the start of our winter surveys. Lawrence Jarrett, from his Luton garden, has seen a big increase over the last few winters, from a peak of just three in 2018/19 (and only two in 2019/20) to 16 last winter. For the previous winter I mentioned a slow decline in the number of gardens visited by Jackdaw. Last winter it bounced back, to a level of 66%, equalling the previous high. The frequency of their visits remained high too.

After a good result for Jay in the previous winter it fell back to 25%. Typically, the picture for Jay is erratic, and of all the regular crow family that visit our gardens this is one of two species that shows a strong preference for rural sites (in 36% of those compared to just 9% of urban sites). The other species is the Rook, which in 18% of gardens overall, remains at a very consistent level.

Tits, Warblers to ‘crests

As expected, the Blue Tit was found in all gardens, and shares equal second place with Robin and Blackbird in terms of frequency. The Great Tit was in 96% of gardens and at a frequency of 76%. It was present in all rural gardens but absent from three urban sites. There is quite a difference though, in the frequencies – in rural gardens it is at a level of 89% but in urban gardens only 58%. Judith Knight, from her Linslade garden, only noted Great Tit in her garden during two of the 22 weeks. “Why?” she asks. Similarly, Andrew Budd in his Ampthill garden noted that he “was hardly seeing Great Tits at all (none from mid-January to the end of February)”.

The result for the Long-tailed Tit is rather erratic and, in only 84% of gardens last winter, was at the lowest level since 2014/15. The frequency level was the lowest since that winter too.

The results for the Coal Tit were very disappointing and, in only 67% of gardens, was the lowest since 2013/14, when it was in 64%. Consequently, the frequency was low too, and at 31% was the lowest since 24% in 2013/14. Comparing results for the last two winters the reductions were more noticeable in urban gardens (down from 90% of gardens to 56%) but also a big drop was seen in rural gardens (down from 93% to 75%). We await the results for the next winter with interest. Another species showing a big negative trend, but not unexpected considering the picture in the county as a whole, is the Marsh Tit, recorded in just one of the gardens last winter, compared to six gardens in the 2019/20 winter. Worrying indeed. Back to some better news - with the Blackcap being recorded in half of the participating gardens last winter. That was the highest level since winter 2012/13, when it was found in 54%. Typically, it slightly favours urban gardens, where the micro climates might tend to be warmer. Tony Ploszajski, from his Renhold garden, had his first garden winter Blackcap in the 11 years of living there. The second most familiar warbler in our winter gardens is the Chiffchaff, but they tend to be recorded at either end of the winter period, and were in none of the gardens for longer than five weeks, and more typically in just one or two of the weeks. The results for the Goldcrest were low and, in only 30% of the gardens, was the lowest since in 25% in 2014/15. They showed a slight preference for rural sites, but for Andrew Budd, in his Ampthill garden, they were one of his highlights and had “more this year than previously”.

Wren, Starling and Thrushes

The Wren was reported from all but one of the gardens and that, along with the frequency, regained the levels last seen in the 2017/18 winter. After a big drop for the Starling in winter 2019/20 that too recovered - they were seen in about the same level of urban gardens as that winter, so the increase came from rural sites, in 89% of those compared to 79% the previous winter. Results for the Nuthatch saw a bit of a drop, but over the years they have been so erratic it is difficult to come to any conclusions. Of the 11 gardens that recorded them all but one was rural. It is a very similar picture for the Treecreeper, where all six gardens listing them were in rural areas.

As usual, the picture for the Blackbird holds steady, reported from all gardens with a frequency only bettered by the Wood Pigeon. The Song Thrush showed a slight improvement over the previous winter, but is still well below historical levels. It remains scarcer in urban gardens, in only 41% of those compared to 61% of rural sites, but more telling is the frequency, at only 3% in urban sites compared to 15% in rural gardens.

After a disappointing 2019/20 winter for our so-called winter thrushes, both bounced back last winter, with Redwing found in 47% of gardens and Fieldfare in 26%. Peter Nash, from his Sandy garden, made a particular note that Fieldfares though (and Bramblings too) were completely absent. But overall, both Redwing and Fieldfare were found in more gardens than the Mistle Thrush, which had its worst set of results since the winter of 2014/15.

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

Sparrows, Dunnock and Wagtails

If the House Sparrow is hopefully making a bit of a comeback, then the results for last winter might add to our optimism. They were recorded in 78% of gardens, the same as the previous winter, but at a higher level of frequency, at 60% the highest since the winter of 2012/13. As usual, they much prefer urban gardens (in 84% of those) compared to rural sites (in 73% of those).

The Dunnock was found in 97% of gardens, below average for the last few winters. It was in all rural gardens but was missing from two urban sites. In terms of frequency, it has now had three low winter results on the trot, and apart from 2013/14 when it was also at 72%, it is about eight percentage points lower than previously. For instance, in the winter of 2009/10 the frequency was 84%. Judith Knight commented, after a Dunnock in her garden in early November, that it was "the first for weeks!"

The Pied Wagtail, after a poor result in the previous winter, recovered slightly, but was still down compared to the three winters previous to that. Typically, it continues to show a strong preference for rural gardens. The Grey Wagtail moved the opposite way, from 24% of gardens in 2019/20 to 14% last winter. It also has a strong preference for rural gardens.

Finches and buntings

The Goldfinch was in 96% of gardens last winter, the highest level since our winter surveys began. During the winter of 1995/96 it was in only 37% of gardens, so this species has benefitted enormously from the widespread provision of garden feeders. Mark Burnapp enjoyed up to 21 Goldfinches in his Bedford garden during last winter.

Unfortunately, the picture for the Chaffinch looks rather gloomy. It was found in 86% of gardens last winter, so was entirely missing from 11 of the gardens, spread evenly between rural and urban areas. As recently as 2014/15 it was found in 97% of gardens. The frequency took another tumble too, and at 49% was the lowest since our winter surveys began. That was made up of 55% in rural gardens and 42% in

urban sites. Andrew Budd added that “sightings continue to be very infrequent and only ever one at a time”. The Greenfinch seems to be holding its own – just, but is much less obvious in our gardens than six winters ago, when it was in 83% of gardens. The biggest drop is in urban gardens, where it was only found in 63% of those compared to 80% in rural areas. The frequency has gone the same way too over the same time period. Lawrence Jarrett noticed a huge decrease in the number of Greenfinches in his Luton garden, down from a maximum of 19 in winter 2018/19 to just four last winter. Trevor and Elizabeth Askew, from their Luton garden, failed to record Greenfinches at all and commented “a big decline in some species, especially the finches”. And Alan Gomersall, from his Leighton Buzzard garden, made a similar comment with “a marked reduction in Chaffinches and Greenfinches”.

The Siskin is a species where the results vary widely from winter to winter, and in the county at large they were very difficult to find anywhere in the previous winter let alone in our gardens, but last winter they were more obvious, being found in 26% of gardens. In my own garden in Woburn, I had probably my best winter ever for the species, as they visited daily from the end of January onwards, peaking at 18 at the end of March. As I write this section on 10th May they are still appearing on my garden feeders, albeit now in ones and twos. The Lesser Redpoll was in 12% of gardens, the highest for three winters but, like the Siskin, over the years the results have been erratic. Our other winter finch, the Brambling, was in just 5% of gardens, about the recent average. The last ‘good winter’ for this species in our gardens was in 2017/18. The result for the Bullfinch is concerning, reported from just 9% of gardens, and of the six gardens involved they were only regular in three of them. That is by far the lowest result for this species since our winter garden surveys started.

Both of the bunting species that we might expect to see in our winter gardens had low returns, with the Reed Bunting in 8% of gardens and the Yellowhammer in 3%, but that was after a complete absence for that species in our gardens for the previous winter.

SUMMARY

We must thank all 76 garden watchers for taking the time to record the birds in their gardens, contributing just a shade fewer than 21,600 records, a fantastic result in what has been a weird winter in many ways. Those records make up a fascinating picture, both positive and negative, from what is some our most valuable habitat (and right outside our kitchen windows). Those of us fortunate enough to have access to a garden will, I’m sure, be even more grateful than usual for the interest that it provided.

Barry Nightingale

Fieldfare on Bushmead Estate, Luton by Andy Grimsey



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