



THE HOBBY

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PROGRAMME MATTERS

Welcome to the July 2023 edition of The Hobby. In this edition, along with Bird News from the first three months of the year is a note about the development of the Clophill Lakes Nature Reserve and a write-up of the results from the Winter Garden Bird Feeding Survey.

Our next outdoor meeting is to RSPB Frampton Marsh reserve on Sunday 10th September; this fabulous reserve is always packed with waders and this year hosted breeding Black-winged Stilts, so is sure to present an opportunity for views of a large variety of species. A new program of Indoor and Outdoor Meetings is being put together for the winter 2023/24 and will be published on the “Events Programme” tab on our website when complete.

We hope you will enjoy your birding through the coming season.

We would also invite any members who would like to get involved with our Committee to contact one of the committee members for more information. We also welcome any support to our activities including contributions to The Hobby and the production of our annual Bird Report. Thank you !

APRIL – JUNE 2023 BIRD NEWS

April 2023

Whooper Swan - three at Harrold CP on 1st

Garganey - drakes at Fenlake Meadows and Broom East CWS on 6th; one at Meadow Lane GP on 10th

Red-crested Pochard - one at Roxton GP on 8th

Common Scoter - one at Quest CIP on 16th

Crane - two over Biggleswade on 19th, another single bird noted on 25th

Black-necked Grebe - one at Brogborough Tip Pools from 26th to 29th

Avocet - one at MCP Wetlands NR on 29th



Grey Plover - one at Wixams on 23rd
(photo by Steve Blain)

Whimbrel - one at Grovebury SP on 21st, another at MCP Wetlands NR on 28th

Curlew - 12 passed through Rookery North CIP on 22nd, three pairs noted at Thurleigh Airfield

Bar-tailed Godwit - seven at Broom East CWS and ten over Stewartby Lake on 18th; a large passage on 19th when 54 were noted through Broom South Quarry, 30 through Stewartby Lake and 13 through Fenlake Meadows; another 32 passed NE through Broom East CWS on 21st with a single at Broom Quarry South the next day

Black-tailed Godwit - single at Black Cat GP on 8th, three at Stewartby Lake on 19th and another at Grovebury SP on 22nd

Ruff - six at Broom East CWS on 6th, a single there on 24th and one at Wixams on 26th

Dunlin - ten at Wixams on 1st and 2nd, one at Grovebury SP on 16th

Snipe - skull of one found below Peregrine perch in Luton

Wood Sandpiper - two at Wixams on 22nd, one remaining the next day

Greenshank - one on nocmig recorded over Luton on 21st, five at Grovebury SP on 22nd

Kittiwake - an adult at Stewartby Lake on 1st

Little Gull - five at Grovebury SP on 8th, three at Coronation CIP on 19th, four at Stewartby Lake on both 19th and 21st

Mediterranean Gull - at Stewartby Lake and Broom East CWS on 1st, two at Broom East CWS on 17th

Great Black-backed Gull - one at Fenlake Meadows on 21st

Arctic Tern - two at Grovebury SP on 15th, four at Harrold CP on 18th, another at Priory CP also on 18th, two at Chimney Corner North on 19th and one at Stewartby Lake on 22nd

Osprey - birds at Broom East CWS on 5th and 8th, another over Blows Down on 12th

Marsh Harrier - birds noted away from the brick pits included one at Tetworth on 12th, near Bedford WTW on 20th and at Willington on 30th

Hen Harrier - a male near Broom East CWS on 21st

Merlin - a female around Broom East CWS and Broom Quarry on 6th and 7th

Firecrest - noted at The Lodge on 2nd and 3rd, another at Kings Wood Ampthill on 30th

Ring Ouzel - at the two most regular sites, the largest count at Pegsdon Hills was four on 22nd and from Blows Downs, three on 11th; elsewhere birds were noted at Barton Hills, Brogborough Hill, Rookery CIP, Shortstown and Wigmore CP Luton

Redstart - best count was four at Blows Down on 13th where birds were noted daily from 7th to 15th



32 Bar-tailed Godwits passing over Stewartby Lake on 19th April (photo by Martin Green)

May 2023

- Garganey** - two at Broom on 7th, a pair at Priory CP on both 21st and 28th
Red-crested Pochard - a male at Black Cat GP on three dates in the month
Goosander - three at Turvey Bridge on 1st
Quail - birds noted from nocmig recordings over Sandy on both 10th and 22nd
Turtle Dove - pairs noted at Marston Moretaine, Knotting Green and Waterloo Thorns
Avocet - one recorded on nocmig over Meppershall on 24th
Grey Plover - one at Grovebury SP on 29th
Ringed Plover - seven at Wixams on 7th, with 14 there on 31st noted as being northern "tundrae"
Whimbrel - two flew over Priory CP on 2nd
Ruff - two at Wixams on 4th, three at Broom East CWS on 21st
Sanderling - one at Broom East CWS on 29th, one at Wixams on 31st
Dunlin - nine through Coronation CIP on 3rd, a small flock on nocmig over Sandy on 10th, singles at both Broom East CWS and Wixams on 31st
Wood Sandpiper - two at Broom East CWS and one at Wixams, both on 4th
Greenshank - three at Wixams on 4th and 5th, one at Black Cat GP on 4th and 27th, one at Houghton Brook Pools on 29th, another at Henlow on 31st
Black Tern - two at Coronation CIP on 3rd, two at Harrold Odell CP on 4th, seven there on 27th. One at Black Cat GP on 29th and three at Priory CP on 30th
Glossy Ibis - one at Harrowden on 16th
Black-crowned Night Heron - one recorded on nocmig over Biggleswade on 10th
Great White Egret - one at Willington GP on 4th, another at Radwell GP on 14th
Osprey - one over Woburn on 7th
Marsh Harrier - other than birds around the brick pits, singles were reported at Broom Quarry on 7th, Meadow Lane GP on 14th, Broom East CWS on 23rd, 25th, 26th and 29th
Hoopoe - one in Maulden on 2nd and 3rd
Golden Oriole - at MCP Wetlands NR and Deepdale Potton on 26th
Woodlark - one singing intermittently at The Lodge from 4th to 16th
Wood Warbler - one at Deepdale Potton on 23rd
Firecrest - singles at Upper Caldecotte on 3rd, Coopers Hill from 18th to 23rd and Lowes Wood on 21st
Crossbill - one at The Lodge on 23rd

June 2023

Pintail - a male at MCP Wetlands NR from 19th staying into July

Nightjar - one heard churring near Stotfold on 11th

Caspian Tern - one reported from Coronation CIP on 18th

Quail - one near Tetworth on 2nd

Bittern - movements of birds noted around the brick pits suggested probable breeding

Purple Heron - one found at Rookery North CIP on 17th relocated to Coronation CIP where it was present until 24th at least. Seen again in Rookery North CIP on 26th

Ring-necked Parakeet - a noticeable increase in sightings from end of May and through June in the Old Bedford Road area of Luton including a maximum count of 23 on evening of 24th

Red-backed Shrike - one in Quest CIP on 17th considered to be an adult female

Golden Oriole - one at The Lodge RSPB on 1st

Crossbill - noted at Potton on 2nd, The Lodge RSPB on 9th and Rushmere NNR on 25th



Purple Heron in Coronation CIP
(photo by Steve Blain)

We thank all contributors who have submitted their records directly to the Recorder, or via Bedsbirds Email Group as well as other sources. Our recorder, Peter Nash welcomes all records by email to recorder@bedsbirdclub.org.uk or preferably via the online system BirdTrack. Of course anything of real interest we would welcome a phone call or whatsapp so news can be shared with others in case they may want to see a specific bird

Compiled by Andy Grimsey

CLOPHILL LAKES NATURE RESERVE

Just to the south of Clophill lies the 118ha site of a former Fuller's earth works. Quarrying took place in the latter part of the 20th century and ceased in about 2000. The restoration of the site resulted in a variety of habitats – two large lakes, smaller ponds, grassland and young woodland, much of which has been recognized as a County Wildlife Site.

In 2017, planning permission was granted to the then owners of the site, L&Q Estates, for a development of 50 houses on the edge of Clophill, with the remainder of the site to be handed over to a suitable organisation to develop as a nature reserve. The Greensand Trust, a local independent environmental charity, was chosen to own and manage the reserve. The land was finally transferred to the Trust in February 2022, and since then they have been working hard to meet the planning conditions necessary to establish and open the site, and carry out survey work to begin to build up a picture of the site's wildlife.

In the early years of quarrying and restoration, the site was much more open than it is today and partly visible to birders from the adjacent footpath. Local birder Pete Soper, who some of you will remember, also had a permit to access the site. In the early 2000s there are records of passage waders such as Dunlin, Redshank, Greenshank and Grey Plover and, more recently, there have been occasional winter records of Tundra Bean, White-fronted and Pink-footed Geese being observed amongst the resident Greylag and Canada Geese.

Although the site has grown up considerably in the last 20 years it still has much interest, and potential, for birds. Sand Martin nest in banks on one of the islands and a pair of Oystercatchers tried to breed this year, however sadly Crows took the eggs. A Grasshopper Warbler was heard reeling in the spring – and cuckoos have been regularly heard and seen this year. The large areas of ex-arable land which are now developing as rough grassland have good populations of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. Other species recorded so far include Water Rail, Hobby, Common Sandpiper, Snipe and Kingfisher.

The variety of habitats present, from very dry lichen heath to open water, reeds and wet woodland mean that there is a wide range of species present. Mare's-tail, an uncommon aquatic plant, is present in the lakes and a Green-winged Orchid was spotted for the first time this year. The site is of county importance for dragonflies and damselflies – baseline surveys recorded 19 species on site. Also, 22 butterfly species have been recorded in the last couple of years including, last year, Dingy Skipper. Otter spraint is regularly found and a mother and well grown cub were seen earlier this year. As well as wildlife interest the reserve also includes the Cainhoe Castle Schedule Monument – the earthworks of a Norman motte and bailey castle and later medieval manor.

The main establishment works required to bring the site into a state of readiness for opening to the public as a nature reserve will be taking place over the next few months, beginning in earnest once the bird breeding season is over. It is anticipated that the site will be opened to the public in the spring of 2024.

The Greensand Trust is continuing to raise funds for a range of conservation and access projects, including bird hides, boardwalks, dipping platforms, Sand Martin nest bank and remote wildlife cameras, and has a funding appeal running to support this:

[Clophill Lakes Appeal | The Greensand Trust](#)

An even more ambitious project is the potential creation of an Osprey nesting platform – further investigation is required as to whether the two large lakes contain sufficient fish stocks to support a nesting pair, and whether this would be sustainable into the future. And in the longer-term, Clophill Lakes is well positioned to link to other wetland sites in the Flit Valley. With the Trust's Sandy Smith Nature Reserve just over half a kilometre away, the opportunity to contribute to true nature recovery at a landscape scale will be a real possibility.

THE GARDEN BIRD FEEDING SURVEY – WINTER 2022/23

INTRODUCTION

For the survey for last winter, covering the 22-week period from the beginning of October 2022 to the end of February 2023, we received returns from 66 gardens, an increase of one from the previous winter. The proportion of urban gardens was rather high (in fact was the highest, at 45%, in recent times, compared to just 35% in 2017/18), so the results were inflated for those species more typically found in urban sites, such as Feral Pigeon and House Sparrow, and conversely deflated for those that prefer rural sites, such as Jay and Green Woodpecker.

The average number of species recorded in the rural and urban gardens was 26.5 and 19.8 respectively, as the following table shows:

Table 1 Average number of species per garden - winters 2016/17 to 2022/23

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Rural gardens	27.1	28.5	25.9	26	26.2	26.4	26.5
Urban gardens	20.3	21.3	19.2	19.6	20.3	19	19.8

The total number of species in the surveyed gardens last winter was 75, a new record high for our winter surveys, and which included our first Yellow-browed Warbler.

Table 2 includes all species that have been recorded in our winter gardens since the winter of 2015/16. As can be seen in the table, there were just three species that were recorded in all participating gardens last winter – Blackbird, Robin and Woodpigeon, with Blue Tit, Dunnock, Wren and Great Tit found in all rural gardens.

PERCENTAGE OF GARDENS RECORDING EACH SPECIES										position		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
position		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			22/23	21/22	20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16
1st=	Blackbird	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	38th	Grey Wagtail	15	8	14	24	15	20	18	13
1st=	Robin	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	39th=	Grey Heron	14	14	5	13	11	16	16	15
1st=	Woodpigeon	100	100	99	100	100	100	100	100	39th=	Mistle Thrush	14	12	13	18	18	33	26	20
4th	Blue Tit	98	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	41st	Tawny Owl	12	26	16	21	14	19	13	17
5th=	Dunnock	97	100	97	99	97	97	99	100	42nd	Buzzard	11	17	21	15	14	20	10	11
5th=	Great Tit	97	98	96	100	98	99	96	99	43rd=	Kestrel	9	17	8	7	6	8	10	15
7th	Wren	94	94	99	92	85	99	97	96	43rd=	Moorhen	9	9	9	8	8	7	6	12
8th	Magpie	92	97	92	93	91	95	88	96	45th=	Treecreeper	8	8	8	11	9	11	6	9
9th	Goldfinch	91	92	96	90	91	93	91	88	45th=	Ring-n Parakeet	8	3	4	3	0	0	3	1
10th	Collared Dove	89	88	92	85	92	93	92	94	47th=	Lesser Redpoll	6	8	12	7	8	25	5	23
11th	Starling	88	85	87	81	88	84	87	85	47th=	Kingfisher	6	6	5	8	3	7	6	4
12th	Chaffinch	86	78	86	85	88	92	92	96	49th=	Brambling	5	15	5	4	5	19	4	12
13th	House Sparrow	83	78	78	78	74	73	75	77	49th=	Bullfinch	5	12	9	22	17	25	18	20
14th	Long-tailed Tit	77	77	84	90	85	89	90	93	49th=	Mallard	5	11	8	10	5	11	9	6
15th	Coal Tit	74	62	67	92	80	91	75	89	49th=	Raven	5	3	1	0	2	3	1	1
16th=	Greenfinch	65	66	72	75	72	68	68	83	49th=	Common Gull	5	0	3	1	2	1	1	2
16th=	Jackdaw	65	66	66	61	62	63	66	62	54th=	Reed Bunting	3	5	8	6	12	16	9	17
18th	Sparrowhawk	62	62	70	65	57	71	60	74	54th=	Herring Gull	3	5	4	0	0	0	1	0
19th	Blackcap	59	57	50	29	35	39	43	29	54th=	Cormorant	3	2	3	3	0	3	0	1
20th	Carrion Crow	56	60	68	60	52	63	66	56	54th=	Lesser B-b Gull	3	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
21st	Song Thrush	52	37	53	49	58	73	68	56	58th=	Red-l Partridge	2	5	3	4	8	8	4	1
22nd	Gt Sp Woodpecker	50	52	51	63	54	57	66	66	58th=	Gadwall	2	3	1	1	2	1	1	0
23rd=	Pied Wagtail	45	35	30	21	42	56	51	27	58th=	Barn Owl	2	2	3	1	3	3	3	1
23rd=	Redwing	45	26	47	25	32	57	44	24	58th=	Mute Swan	2	2	3	1	2	1	0	0
25th=	Red Kite	36	42	32	26	23	20	17	10	58th=	Marsh Tit	2	2	1	8	3	5	3	4
25th=	Feral Pigeon	36	25	22	19	17	19	19	18	58th=	Little Grebe	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	0
27th=	Pheasant	27	34	38	39	31	43	32	35	58th=	Greylag Goose	2	2	1	3	2	1	1	0
27th=	Goldcrest	27	31	30	38	37	48	43	48	58th=	Canada Goose	2	0	1	3	3	0	0	0
29th	Fieldfare	24	9	26	10	31	68	30	22	58th=	Swallow	2	0	1	3	2	1	0	1
30th=	Jay	21	48	25	36	18	29	22	24	58th=	Wigeon	2	0	1	1	2	0	1	0
30th=	Black-headed Gull	21	12	14	13	15	13	18	10	58th=	House Martin	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
32nd=	Green Woodpecker	20	25	26	26	25	31	42	32	58th=	Willow Warbler	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
32nd=	Nuthatch	20	20	14	19	11	17	14	17	58th=	Woodcock	2	0	1	0	3	1	0	0
32nd=	Rook	20	15	18	18	18	19	25	17	58th=	Teal	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
35th=	Chiffchaff	17	17	13	14	8	13	22	12	58th=	Snipe	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
35th=	Stock Dove	17	23	22	25	22	20	18	20	58th=	Linnnet	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
35th=	Siskin	17	22	26	4	25	31	13	32	58th=	Meadow Pipit	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
										58th=	Yellow-b Warbler	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Several species reached new highs since our winter surveys started in 1993/94, with Blackcap in 59%, Feral Pigeon in 36% and Ring-necked Parakeet in 8% of gardens. Some species dropped to record lows though, with Greenfinch in 65% and Bullfinch in just 5%.

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 66 gardens). Topping this table, typically, for last winter was the Woodpigeon, at 93% whilst Feral Pigeon, at 24%, was at the highest level since our surveys began. On the other hand, the Chaffinch and Greenfinch were at their lowest levels of frequency since we started, with Blue Tit at the lowest since 2002/03 and Blackbird at the lowest since 2006/07.

Table 3		Frequency of occurrence							
Position		22/23	21/22	20/21	19/20	18/19	17/18	16/17	15/16
1st	Woodpigeon	93	96	93	92	91	92	91	90
2nd	Robin	91	92	90	88	86	90	92	88
3rd	Blue Tit	88	92	90	92	90	91	91	91
4th	Blackbird	86	91	90	90	89	88	91	88
5th=	Dunnock	76	79	72	69	73	78	83	77
5th=	Great Tit	76	74	76	80	76	79	75	80
7th=	Goldfinch	63	67	65	55	62	66	62	62
7th=	Collared Dove	63	56	63	58	62	60	64	63
9th	Magpie	60	64	67	63	58	63	60	61
10th	House Sparrow	56	53	60	53	55	52	54	52
11th	Starling	54	57	50	49	52	57	58	47
12th	Chaffinch	45	47	49	52	55	65	64	68
13th	Jackdaw	39	41	37	38	32	33	33	34
14th	Coal Tit	36	28	31	47	38	50	35	52
15th	Wren	35	37	40	34	29	40	46	39
16th	Long-tailed Tit	33	32	34	42	36	47	39	41
17th	Greenfinch	32	36	35	35	37	39	33	48
18th=	Carrion Crow	24	25	24	22	19	22	25	20
18th=	Feral Pigeon	24	17	15	14	12	11	10	11
20th	G S Woodpecker	22	23	28	27	20	24	23	29

The Weather

In England most of October was warmer than average, but rather unsettled at times. The mean temperatures for the month were 2.0°C above the long-term average, and 2022 was England’s equal fourth warmest October in a series from 1884. It was a sunnier month than average, particularly in central and eastern areas.

November was the third warmest on record for the UK, with an average temperature of 8.2°C, due to a south-westerly flow of Tropical Maritime air. While the dominant conditions led to often mild conditions, it also led to a lot of wet weather. Sunshine in the month was relatively close to average for most areas.

The first two weeks of December were the coldest start to a meteorological winter since 2010, with high pressure and a cool northerly airflow resulting in a prolonged spell of low temperatures with snow and icy conditions at times. In particular, during the week starting 11th, Bedfordshire had snow and very cold temperatures, and that had a noticeable effect on the species in our gardens. This cold snap ended with a dramatic change to much milder conditions bringing widespread thaw conditions. December overall will go down as a cool month for the UK with the average temperature at 2.9°C, which was 1.3°C below than the 1991-2020 average. The cool weather was principally brought on by an Arctic Maritime airmass, with

daytime temperatures struggling to rise above freezing for many in what was one of the most significant spells of low winter temperatures since the exceptional December of 2010.

In January temperatures were marginally warmer than average, with a period of mild weather at the start of the month followed by a cold spell. Later in the month, temperatures returned nearer to average. The month's weather largely flipped from westerlies with milder air and rain to influxes of northerly air with cold and dry weather.

Rainfall was in short supply in February, with high pressure dominating much of the month. England had its eighth driest February in a series which goes back to 1836, and its driest since 1993. Areas to the south and east, including Bedfordshire, were particularly dry. These conditions were accompanied by mild temperatures, with the UK having its joint fifth mildest February on record in a series which goes back to 1884.

The information about the weather was adapted, with permission, from Crown copyright data supplied by the Met Office, and we are grateful to them (© Crown copyright, published by the Met Office).

THE MAIN RESULTS

Gamebirds, Waterfowl, Doves and Pigeons

The Pheasant was recorded in 27% of the gardens last winter with all, apart from one of those, in rural areas. That was the lowest level since 1998/99. The Red-legged Partridge was found in just one rural garden.

There are seven species of waterfowl on the list for last winter, all in rural gardens, with the most frequent being Mallard, in 5% of gardens.

It is of no surprise to see that the Woodpigeon tops all the lists for last winter, being found in all gardens. Compare that to the first three winters of our survey (1993/94 to 1995/96) when they occurred in only 72% of gardens – some increase!

The Collared Dove was in 89% of gardens, and with an improved level of frequency, but it was still entirely absent from three rural and four urban gardens.

The Feral Pigeon was recorded in 36% of the gardens, with a strong preference for urban sites, in 53% of those, compared to 22% of rural gardens. As recently as the 2018/19 winter they were found in just 17% of the gardens overall. Andrew Budd, in his Ampthill garden is now getting up to 15 at any one time. The trend for the Stock Dove is going in the opposite direction and, in only 17% of gardens last winter, was at the lowest level since 2013/14. They, of course, show a strong preference for rural areas.

Rails, Waders, Gulls, Herons, Raptors and Owls

Moorhens were recorded in 9% of gardens, the average level, and were all in rural areas, as might be expected.

Far less expected, and as a direct result of the harsh cold snap in December, was the occurrence of two wader species. A Woodcock was in the garden of Bex Cartwright and Andy Skinner in Sandy in mid December and another was in Martin Lowe's Cranfield garden in the same week. As he describes he "looked out of the window and 2m away on the snow-free path was a Woodcock. It stayed for at least 30 minutes". At the same time a Snipe was in Betty Cooke's Clifton garden. As Betty rather modestly describes, it "was a surprise garden visitor seen from the kitchen probing through the snow on the lawn, by the pond on December 13th." I'm very envious.

Of the four gull species that occurred in our gardens last winter, typically the Black-headed Gull was the most widely reported, in 21% of gardens, and that was the highest level this century.

The Grey Heron was in 14% of gardens, the same as the previous winter. They were mostly in rural gardens, but in none of them were they regular.

As usual, the Sparrowhawk was the most often reported raptor in our gardens, being seen in 62%, the same as the previous winter. Slightly more were in rural areas but they were still recorded in over half of the urban gardens. The Red Kite was in, or more typically over, 36% of gardens, the Buzzard from 11% and the Kestrel from 9%.

The Tawny Owl was reported from only 12% of gardens, a big drop from the previous winter, and was in fact at the lowest level since the winter of 2013/14. The decrease, compared to the previous winter, came from rural gardens, although they are largely absent from our urban sites anyway. The Barn Owl was recorded in just one garden but the Little Owl was entirely absent from those gardens surveyed.

Kingfisher, Woodpeckers, Parakeet and Crows

The Kingfisher was recorded in four rural gardens, but in only one of those for more than one week. The Great Spotted Woodpecker was in 50% of the gardens, split between 70% of rural sites and 26% of urban areas. Overall, that continues a slow and downward trend, and it was the lowest level since the winter of 2011/12. The results for the Green Woodpecker were even more marked and, in only 20% of the gardens, that was the lowest level since 1995/96. Compared to the previous winter result, the drop was both in rural sites (down from 29% to 25% of gardens) and urban gardens (from 15% to 13%). By comparison, the Ring-necked Parakeet showed in more gardens than before, including one in Woburn, a garden first for me. It stayed for just half a day.

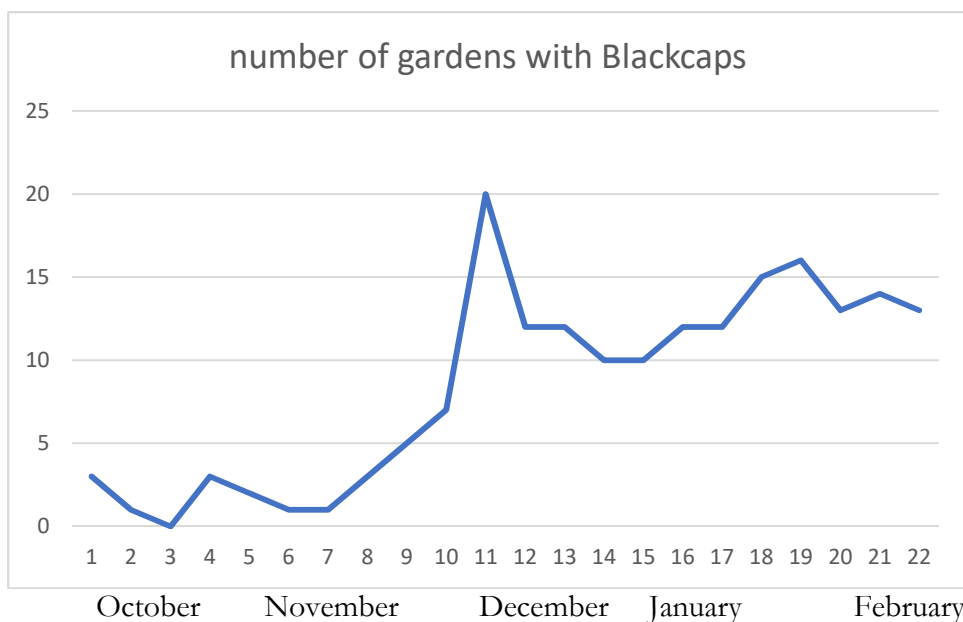
The Magpie was recorded in 92% of gardens, a drop from the previous winter, but more in keeping with the longer-term trend. It was in 94% of rural sites and 90% of urban areas, so pretty much the same, although it is more frequent in rural gardens, at 65% compared to 54% of urban gardens. The Jackdaw was in 65% of gardens, about average, but confirmed its preference for rural sites, in 81% of those compared to only 47% of urban gardens. They remain absent from my own garden in Woburn, despite that they fly over almost every day. Appearances for the Carrion Crow fell back again, leaving them at the lowest level since 2018/19. The results for the Jay are totally unpredictable, being up and down like a yo-yo. Last winter they were in just 21% of gardens, compared to 48% the previous year, and were almost entirely in rural sites, although they were absent from a lot of those too. Moving in a more positive direction was the Rook, in 20% of gardens compared to 15% in the previous winter. They appear almost equally in rural and urban sites.

Tits, Warblers, 'Crests, Wren, Nuthatch and Treecreeper

The Blue Tit was seen in all but one of the gardens. Their frequency fell to 88%, the lowest since the same level in 2002/03, but are still in third place in Table 3. The Great Tit was seen in all the rural sites but was missing from two of the urban gardens. In terms of frequency, the results have been fairly stable, but are more often recorded in rural gardens, at a rate of 86% compared to 64% in urban sites. Long-tailed Tits were in 77% of gardens, the same as the previous winter but that itself was the lowest since 2007/08. They show a very strong preference for rural gardens, in 97% of those, compared to just 53% of urban gardens.

After two poor winters for the Coal Tit, results improved and they were found in 74% of the gardens. Like the previous species, they prefer rural areas, being found in 81% of those compared to 67% of urban gardens. The Marsh Tit just about hangs on in this survey, being recorded in only one garden for the second winter running, reflecting the rather delicate status of this species across the county.

On a much more positive note, the Blackcap was found, for the second winter in a row, in the highest level of winter gardens since our survey began. The peak number of gardens in any one week (20) was the same as in the previous winter but occurred much earlier, in week 11 of the survey period compared to week 16 in the previous winter. Week 11 of last winter (mid December) was when an icy, cold blast hit the county and that had a significant effect on the number of Blackcaps, and other species, that were being seen, as the following graph shows. Overall, they were recorded in 59% of the gardens, of which 52% were rural gardens and 67% were urban sites.



Three other warbler species were recorded in our survey areas during last winter. Pride of place goes to the Yellow-browed Warbler, found in Dunstable by Mark Newman in early October, the first record of this species in our garden surveys. The Chiffchaff was in 17% of the gardens, the same as in the previous winter. Most of the records (61%) were in the first four weeks of the survey period, so presumably were late migrants rather than wintering individuals. Of the rest, three were in January and three were in February. The single record of Willow Warbler was in late October.

The Goldcrest was in 27% of gardens, the lowest level since 2013/14, and showing a slight preference for rural sites, in 31% of those, compared to 23% of urban areas. A species likely to be found across all garden areas is the Wren, and it was in 94% of gardens, the same as the previous winter, and was in all rural gardens and 87% of urban sites. The Nuthatch was in 20% of gardens, again the same as the previous winter and was exclusively in rural gardens. One for Rolf Taggart was a first for his garden in Liddington. The Treecreeper repeated its performance of the previous winter, found in 8% of gardens, but that included one garden in an urban setting.

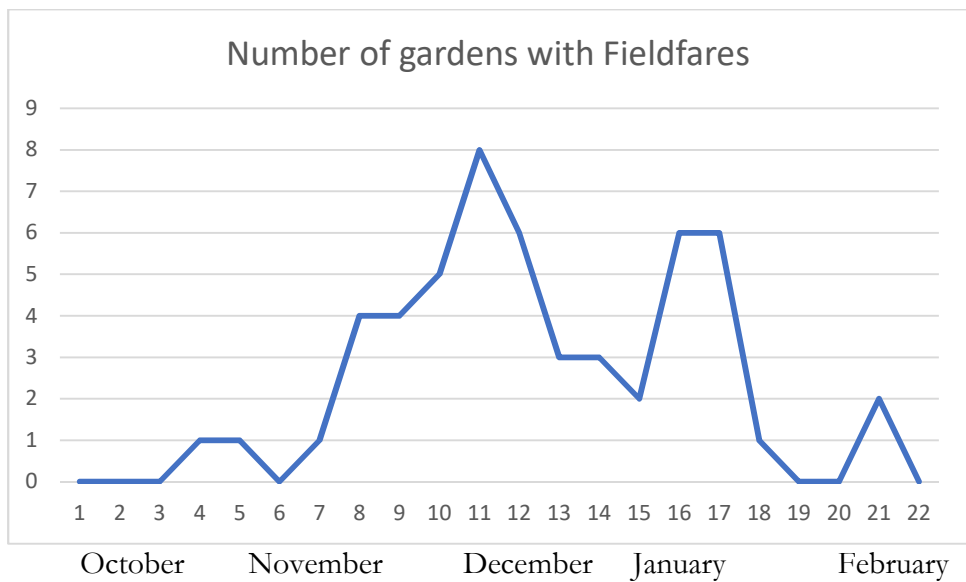
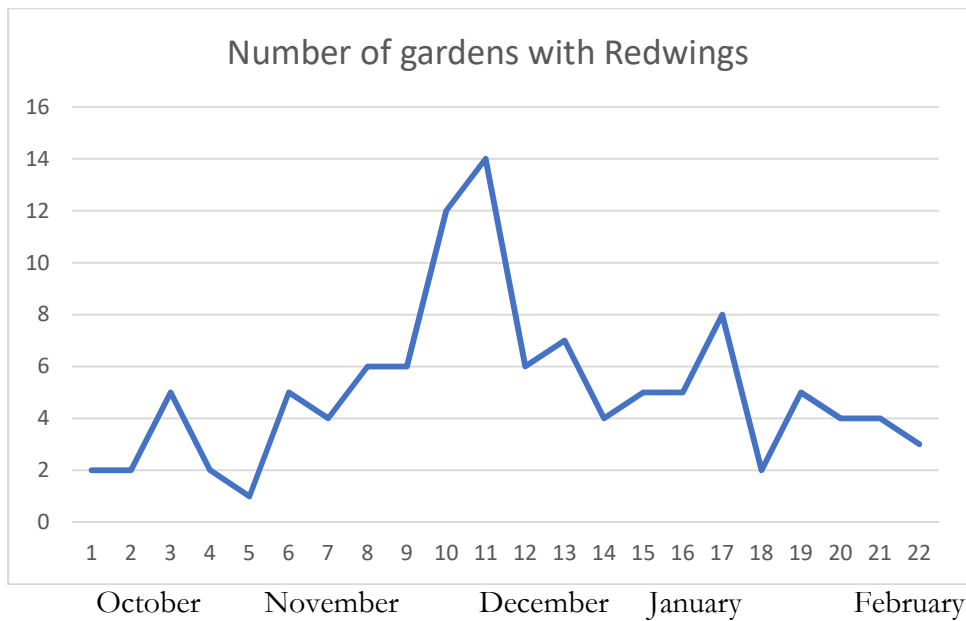
Starling to Thrushes

As I mentioned in the previous winter article, since the winter of 2013/14 the results for the Starling have held up fairly well, averaging around 85% of gardens in that period. Last winter they were in 88% of the gardens, much lower than in the early years of this survey of course, but at least they seem to have plateaued out. They were found in practically the same proportion of rural and urban gardens, although they are more frequent in urban sites (63%) compared to rural (53%).

As usual, both the Robin and the Blackbird were found in all gardens. Whilst the frequency for the former held up well, that of the Blackbird dropped to the lowest level since 2006/07. After a very poor result for the Song Thrush in the previous winter, that species bounced back somewhat, but was still much lower than historically. Whilst it was found in 75% of rural sites, only 23% of urban gardens

recorded it, and furthermore in only one of those for more than three weeks of the survey period. That repeated the same picture that we saw in the previous winter and it does highlight that the Song Thrush is struggling in urban settings. Overall, across all gardens, the frequency was just 9%, so you were more likely to come across Blackcap, Nuthatch and Feral Pigeon than Song Thrush in your garden.

After low figures for both Redwing and Fieldfare in the previous winter, which was mild throughout, both showed in more gardens this winter. As can be seen in the following graphs the peaks for both occurred during the cold spells in mid December and again in mid January. The Redwing showed in almost as many urban as rural gardens, but the Fieldfare was almost entirely restricted to rural sites.



Of recent concern have been the results for the red-listed Mistle Thrush. Last winter they were in 14% of gardens, so about the same as the two winters prior to that, but bear in mind that as recently as 2017/18 they were in 33% of gardens. Last winter they were in one urban garden for one of the weeks, but all other sightings were in rural areas.

Sparrows, Dunnock, Wagtails, Finches and Buntings

The House Sparrow was recorded in 83% of gardens, the highest since 2012/13. They have a preference for urban gardens, so the greater proportion of those areas covered last winter may have inflated that statistic. The frequency was up compared to the previous winter too.

The Dunnock was seen in all rural gardens but was missing from two gardens in urban areas, with the frequency down compared to the previous winter.

Once again, I repeat my previous comments about the Pied Wagtail, in that the results for each winter are somewhat up and down. However, for last winter they were in the highest level of gardens since 2017/18. They are much more likely to be found in rural gardens (in 58% of those) compared to urban area (in just 30% of those). After a disappointing result for Grey Wagtail in the previous winter, last winter they bounced back to a level more in keeping with the previous few years. The increase came in urban sites, found in four of those gardens where they were absent in the winter of 2021/22.

The Goldfinch continues to hold its own in terms of how many gardens it is found in each winter but the frequency last winter was down compared to the previous two winters. They are one of the most frequent visitors to my garden in Woburn, with the ever-present flock reaching 69 on 17th February.

After the poor results for the Chaffinch in the winter of 2021/22, the number of gardens in which they were found increased last winter and was back to the level seen between 2018/19 and 2020/21. That is still low, of course, compared to the historic numbers. The frequency, however, fell to the lowest level (45%) since our winter surveys began – in the winter of 1999/2000 the frequency was 79%. The main problem is in our urban gardens where the frequency last winter was just 37%, compared to 56% in rural sites. Andrew Budd at Amptill recorded just one in the whole survey period, and that was during the very cold snap in December, and compares to previously getting up to 20 at any one time.

Sharing that decline is the Greenfinch, which was only found in 65% of gardens last winter, the lowest since our winter surveys began. As recently as 2015/16 it was in 83% of gardens. Again, the biggest fall is in urban gardens, in only 50% of those last winter, although in a third of those gardens it was recorded in virtually every week. And what has happened to the Bullfinch? Last winter it was found just 5% of the gardens, the lowest level since our winter surveys began. As recently as 2017/18 it was found in 25% of the gardens.

Of the winter finches, the Siskin was found in 17% of gardens, the Lesser Redpoll in just 6% and the Brambling in only 5%. Nick Hammond, from his Sandy Garden, commented on the complete absence of Bramblings and Lesser Redpolls in his patch (as well as no Fieldfares or Redwings). Peter Nash, also from Sandy and who regularly gets Bramblings in the winter, had none either, and only one Lesser Redpoll, and Siskins on just one occasion, albeit a nice flock of 38 in October.

In the past there have normally been two species of bunting on our winter list, but for the second winter only one, with Yellowhammer again being totally absent. The Reed Bunting was only recorded in two of the gardens.

SUMMARY

We thank all 66 garden watchers for submitting over 18,000 records on their survey forms. If we combined all the gardens in the UK together it would constitute an area the size of Wales, so it continues to be important that we monitor what is a valuable and sizeable habitat. I look forward to receiving your completed returns for future garden surveys.

Barry Nightingale

NEW MEMBERS

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

Paul Bonito-Brook, Kempston

Richard Coppins, Radwell

Andrew Gush, Luton

Alia and Nadeem Khan, Luton

Alistair Kitching and Venetia Manning, Biggleswade

Caroline Leinster, Eaton Bray

Philip Martin, Meppershall

Rodney Pattison, Stotfold

Nika Underwood, Stagsden

Mark Sleet, Husborne Crawley

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

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