

THE GARDEN BIRD SURVEY – SUMMER 2019

Introduction

Here are the results of our 22nd Summer Garden Bird Survey, which covered the period 10th March to 5th October 2019. We received a total of 73 returns, a healthy increase compared to 2018, with four more from rural gardens (46) and the same from urban gardens (27). The sites covered in our survey range from small town gardens to large rural gardens, including at least one with ‘a small lake’, with others bordered by a stream or river. These types of garden tend to account for the less-typical garden species in the results, such as Little Egret, Gadwall, Mute Swan, Common Tern and Greylag Goose. Four species appeared in 2019 for the first time in our summer surveys – Goshawk, Merlin, Nightingale and Wigeon.

The gardens in rural areas recorded an average of 29 species feeding or foraging, whilst the gardens in urban areas recorded, on average, 22 species. Generally, the levels have stayed fairly consistent over the last few years, as can be seen in Table 1, which shows the average number of species per garden per year since 2010, and the number of contributors.

	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Rural	29	30	29	31	30	29	31	30	29	29
Urban	22	22	21	21	20	19	21	20	21	20
Contributors	73	69	72	76	76	66	75	78	77	77

In total, for the 73 gardens, there were over 28,100 records submitted, at an average of over 385 records per garden, which is a tremendous response, so once again our thanks go to all those who took the time to do that.

The Results

A total of 83 species was recorded in our ‘summer gardens’ in 2019, and those recorded in more than one garden are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2		Summer					% OF GARDENS					
POS		2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	average	average	
										2005 to 2011	1998 to 2004	
1=	BLACKBIRD	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	99	
1=	WOOD PIGEON	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	97	
1=	BLUE TIT	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
1=	ROBIN	100	100	100	100	100	100	99	100	100	98	
5=	GREAT TIT	97	99	96	100	97	100	99	100	98	97	
5=	DUNNOCK	97	100	100	100	99	98	99	100	98	96	
7	GOLDFINCH	96	94	96	95	99	97	93	94	91	71	
8	COLLARED DOVE	95	93	96	97	96	97	100	97	98	98	
9=	MAGPIE	93	97	94	95	96	92	91	90	90	82	
9=	WREN	93	86	94	93	89	79	87	83	86	89	
11	STARLING	92	86	94	93	97	94	95	95	95	99	
12	CHAFFINCH	89	93	93	95	95	94	96	100	99	95	
13	HOUSE SPARROW	86	86	85	84	88	88	87	87	91	98	
14	GREENFINCH	84	86	76	89	89	86	91	94	95	98	
15=	COAL TIT	81	74	78	72	70	62	60	64	68	59	
15=	LONG TAILED TIT	81	86	86	80	83	65	81	79	71	60	
17	CARRION CROW	70	68	67	68	70	65	64	62	61	49	
18=	GT SP WOODPECK	68	59	60	61	63	58	65	56	57	51	
18=	JACKDAW	68	77	71	75	66	67	67	65	53	43	
20	SONG THRUSH	66	71	76	68	61	55	67	72	76	83	
21	SPARROWHAWK	55	72	67	63	71	62	68	67	69	56	
22	BLACKCAP	53	45	49	58	47	41	67	44	34	31	
23	CHIFFCHAFF	42	28	44	42	28	38	33	40	29	30	
24=	GREEN W'DPECKE	40	39	38	41	43	41	41	42	38	33	
24=	PHEASANT	40	36	31	28	28	23	32	28	35	27	
26	JAY	38	26	22	29	25	29	33	27	23	14	
27	SWIFT	33	32	35	37	41	41	47	40	18	14	
28=	GOLDCREST	30	39	40	39	29	27	31	29	24	27	
28=	TAWNY OWL	30	39	21	22	20	26	15	14	10	10	
30	STOCK DOVE	29	33	28	32	28	24	20	22	13	6	
31=	FERAL PIGEON	27	22	26	22	21	23	17	18	18	16	
31=	HOUSE MARTIN	27	30	33	33	38	33	24	26	24	15	
33=	ROOK	26	36	25	25	24	29	31	32	25	19	
33=	RED KITE	26	25	18	16	20	14	12	8	2	0	
33=	GREY HERON	26	19	18	20	17	14	9	12	13	9	
36	SWALLOW	25	22	29	30	33	30	35	35	23	24	
37	NUTHATCH	23	14	15	17	16	18	19	22	13	10	
38	PIED WAGTAIL	22	38	32	28	29	21	28	23	26	36	
39=	BULLFINCH	21	29	33	22	20	29	35	33	24	23	
39=	MALLARD	21	22	19	25	24	20	19	24	18	14	
39=	SISKIN	21	36	13	46	3	9	45	9	16	18	
42=	RED L PARTRIDGE	18	19	17	12	7	11	7	9	9	7	
42=	COMMON BUZZAR	18	16	17	13	16	15	20	4	2	0.6	
44	MISTLE THRUSH	15	17	18	16	20	14	12	18	18	24	
45	WILLOW WARBLER	14	22	22	26	21	15	21	22	21	27	
46	GARDEN WARBLE	12	3	6	7	5	5	1	6	6	5	
47=	TREECREEPER	11	10	7	7	5	8	7	6	9	8	
47=	GREY WAGTAIL	11	10	8	8	8	6	7	6	7	7	
49	KINGFISHER	10	7	7	7	3	3	4	3	4	5	
50=	COMMON W'THRO	8	9	11	14	9	11	11	14	10	9	
50=	KESTREL	8	9	11	7	11	9	13	9	13	15	
50=	REED BUNTING	8	22	10	14	12	8	23	13	6	1	
53=	MOORHEN	7	10	7	8	11	9	12	8	11	9	
53=	YELLOWHAMMER	7	12	6	7	9	15	8	12	8	7	
53=	HOBBY	7	10	7	8	7	3	5	6	4	6	
56=	LITTLE EGRET	5	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0.1	0	
56=	SPOT FLYCATCHER	5	9	1	5	5	5	7	8	7	15	
56=	LESSER REDPOLL	5	13	3	20	8	9	29	5	3	2	
59=	LSR WHITETHROA	4	0	3	7	3	5	1	1	4	4	
59=	COMMON RAVEN	4	4	1	0	4	2	3	1	0	0	
59=	MARSH TIT	4	6	1	3	1	3	5	3	6	7	
62=	CUCKOO	3	3	6	4	0	5	0	5	2	6	
62=	REED WARBLER	3	1	3	5	0	2	1	3	2	2	
62=	BARN OWL	3	6	1	1	0	0	1	5	1	0.3	
62=	MUTE SWAN	3	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0.3	0.9	

In addition the following species were recorded in one garden during the survey period:

Canada Goose	Black-headed Gull	Yellow Wagtail
Greylag Goose	Lesser Black-back Gull	Redwing
Gadwall	Common Tern	Fieldfare
Mandarin	Merlin	Nightingale
Wigeon	Rose-ringed Parakeet	Brambling
Goshawk	Sand Martin	Linnet

Goshawk, Merlin, Nightingale and Wigeon were recorded for the first time since this survey began.

During the summer of 2019 four species appeared in all of the gardens that were surveyed – Blackbird (in all gardens since 2002), Blue Tit (in all gardens since 2004), Wood Pigeon (in all gardens since 2005) and Robin (in all gardens since 2007, except in 2013 when in 99%). Coal Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Jay were among those species that appeared in the highest level of gardens since our summer survey began (in 1998) but the Chaffinch was in the lowest percentage of gardens.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the ‘Top 20’ species in our summer gardens. This is measured by calculating how many weeks in total each species was recorded (all gardens), and comparing that with the maximum possible number of weeks, in the case of 2019 this being 2,190 weeks (73 gardens x 30 weeks). For the seventh summer in a row the Wood Pigeon was the most frequent visitor to our gardens. I’ve also shown in Table 3 the percentage-points change between the average during 1998–2004, and 2019. Of the ‘Top 20’ most frequent species the biggest ‘winner’ over that period is the Goldfinch (up 42 points), followed by Jackdaw and Wood Pigeon (both up by 25 points). The biggest losers are Greenfinch (down by 28 points), Starling (down 26 points), House Sparrow (down 19 points) and Chaffinch (also down 19 points).

FREQUENCY OF THE TOP 20 SPECIES - SUMMER												
POS		2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	average	average	% points change
										2005 to 2011	1998 to 2004	1998-2004 to 2019
1	WOOD PIGEON	92	90	92	90	90	90	90	91	86	67	+25
2	BLACKBIRD	88	85	87	89	88	88	89	92	88	87	-1
3	BLUE TIT	86	82	85	86	83	84	82	86	84	82	+4
4	ROBIN	84	80	85	84	81	79	77	81	80	72	+12
5	GREAT TIT	74	70	72	73	71	71	68	72	69	64	+10
6	DUNNOCK	69	72	74	75	75	73	73	78	73	66	+3
7	GOLDFINCH	65	64	65	65	63	61	59	60	52	23	+42
8	COLLARED DOVE	62	58	63	66	69	65	71	73	75	75	-13
9	HOUSE SPARROW	60	60	59	61	61	59	60	65	69	79	-19
10	MAGPIE	58	56	57	57	55	53	46	45	42	37	+21
11	STARLING	51	50	56	57	56	56	55	60	64	77	-26
12	CHAFFINCH	43	51	59	64	63	63	65	69	67	62	-19
13	WREN	41	34	41	39	32	28	28	32	31	35	+6
14	GREENFINCH	40	45	42	51	48	51	55	57	66	68	-28
15	JACKDAW	39	37	37	38	35	33	29	27	22	14	+25
16	COAL TIT	29	28	23	28	25	20	18	20	21	18	+11
17	GT SP WOODPECK	26	23	22	24	23	19	23	25	21	17	+9
18=	LONG-TAILED TIT	24	29	24	26	20	17	19	21	15	11	+13
18=	CARRION CROW	24	22	23	23	24	21	19	20	19	15	+9
20	SONG THRUSH	17	15	21	20	18	16	19	20	23	28	-11

The Species

The following comments cover the more significant events in Summer 2019, and major changes since the summer surveys started in 1998.

Wildfowl to Little Egret

As usual, the Mallard is the highest-placed species of wildfowl, appearing in 21% of gardens, mostly in rural areas. Other wildfowl species registered as garden visitors during this survey were Mute Swan (in 3% of gardens, including four in Peter Nash's Sandy garden, a new addition to his garden list), and Greylag Goose, Gadwall, Mandarin and Wigeon (all in 1%).

The Pheasant is the highest-placed game bird, recorded in 40% of gardens (the highest since 40% in Summer 2010), with Red-legged Partridge in 18%.

Recorded across rural and urban sites, the Grey Heron was in 26% of gardens, the highest since our summer survey began. The Little Egret was recorded in 5% of the gardens, all in rural areas.

Raptors

The Sparrowhawk remains the most regular raptor in our survey, in 55% of gardens last summer, but that was the lowest level since 2002, when in 49% of gardens. The Red Kite was seen in, or over, 26% of gardens whilst the Buzzard was recorded from 18% of gardens, including Peter Nash's garden, where one individual in particular has become a regular visitor, eating earthworms, rats and moles in the paddocks. The Kestrel was reported from 8%, the Hobby from 7%, whilst the Goshawk and Merlin each from one 'garden' (the Goshawk was in the grounds of Turvey Abbey).

Rails to Cuckoo

The Moorhen was in 7% of gardens, as usual all in rural areas, and was very much a permanent resident in two of those gardens.

There were just two species of gull in the list for Summer 2019, with Black-headed Gull and Lesser Black-backed both in 1%. Common Tern was recorded in one of the gardens.

Taking top spot, once again, in all our measures is the Wood Pigeon. Appearing in all summer gardens since 2005, it has also been the most frequent garden visitor since 2013. Last summer it appeared in our rural gardens at a frequency of 94% and in our urban gardens at a frequency of 89%. The Collared Dove was in 95% of gardens, with a preference for rural gardens where the frequency was 65%, compared to urban gardens, at 56%.

The Stock Dove was recorded in 29% of gardens, with a preference for rural gardens (in 30% of those) but it still appeared in 26% of urban gardens. The Feral Pigeon was in 27% of gardens, the highest since in 28% in 2003. One in my Woburn garden was a first for me, and was in fact the first I can recall anywhere in the village. The Turtle Dove, not surprisingly, failed to show in any of the gardens during last summer.

Cuckoos were, as in the summer of 2018, recorded in two of the gardens, both in rural areas.

Owls to woodpeckers

Tawny Owls were recorded in 30% of our gardens last summer, down from the high in 2018, but that was at a record level. As expected, they showed a strong preference for rural gardens, in 39% of those, compared to just 15% of urban sites. Barn Owls were recorded in just two gardens, both in rural areas.

The Swift was noted over 33% of the gardens last summer, about the same from rural and urban sites.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker continues to do well and, in 68% of gardens, was at the highest level since our summer survey began. Rural sites are much preferred, in 87% of those in 2019, compared to 37% of urban gardens. They also retain their place in our 'Top 20' most frequent garden visitors, ahead of Song Thrush. The other woodpecker species in our list for 2019 is the Green, in 40% of gardens, again showing a strong preference for rural sites.

Crows

The Magpie is the most obvious member of the crow family in our gardens, and during last summer was found in 93% overall, that was from all but two of the rural gardens covered and all but three of the urban sites. In terms of frequency, the appearances were at the highest level since our summer survey started (at 58% in 2019 compared to just 30% in 1998).

Taking a slight step back was the result for the Jackdaw, appearing in 68% of gardens compared to 77% in the previous summer. That ended a run of three high summer results, so is perhaps reverting to the situation prior to 2016. It is still well established in the 'Top 20' of our most frequent garden visitors, and at a frequency of 39% was at a record high. In 1998 the frequency was just 6%. The Carrion Crow was found in 70% of the gardens, about average, and is just as likely to be found in urban gardens (in 66%) as those in rural areas (72%). I wrote 12 months ago that garden appearances of the Rook were increasing, but last summer they were in 'just' 26% compared to 36% in 2018, but that in itself was a record high, so in 2019 they returned to a more average level. The Jay, in 38% of gardens, set a new record, the previous high being 33% in 2013. They are more than twice as likely to be found in rural gardens.

Tits to Swallow

As usual, the Blue Tit was seen in all gardens, with the Great Tit seen in all but two of the gardens. Appearances of the Long-tailed Tit are more erratic, last summer in 81%, lower than in the previous two survey periods, but close to the previous five. The Coal Tit was in 81% of gardens last summer, a record high, with a slight preference for rural gardens.

Of the hirundines, the House Martin is the most often-seen species in or over our gardens, and last summer was recorded from 27%, but that was the lowest since 2013. By all accounts, and certainly from sightings in Woburn, they had a particularly bad year, returning very late to their nesting areas. The Swallow was reported by 25% of the garden watchers, a small improvement on 2018 but that in turn had been at a low level. Mr Corley, from his Great Barford garden, noted that it was "a very poor year for Swallows, martins, Swifts and warblers".

Warblers

Results for the Blackcap tend to be erratic, with the result for 2019 being on the high side. After a particularly poor result in the 2018 survey the Chiffchaff returned to a more expected level, in 42% of the gardens, but that compares with just 14% of gardens recording the Willow Warbler. Other members of the warbler family to show in our gardens last summer were Garden Warbler (in 12%, a record high), Common Whitethroat (in 8%), Lesser Whitethroat (in 4%) and Reed Warbler (in 3%).

Goldcrest to Starling

The Goldcrest was in 30% of gardens, the lowest level since 29% in 2015. It was more likely to be found in rural gardens, as we might expect. After a poor result for the Wren in the summer of 2018, perhaps caused by 'the Beast from the East', appearances and frequency both improved, to levels more in keeping with the summers of 2016 and 2017. The Nuthatch was recorded in 23% of gardens, the highest since our summer survey began, and appeared in rural and urban gardens, whilst the Treecreeper, in 11% of gardens (the highest since 2011), was only recorded in rural gardens. One managed to enter the bedroom of one of our lady contributors (her name withheld to protect her modesty) and was found flapping behind the curtain.

The result for the Starling (in 92% of gardens) was a good recovery from the previous summer, but the trend is still downwards. It was entirely absent from five rural gardens and one urban garden. The frequency was low, at 51% just 1% better than in 2018, but we should be aware that in 1998 the frequency was 80% and that was when the population was already decreasing. It has, however, become a much more frequent visitor to my Woburn garden and Nigel Willets, from Wilden, recorded his first garden record for five years.

Thrushes and Spotted Flycatcher

Needless to say, the Blackbird remains one of our most common garden visitors, appearing as usual in all gardens last summer, with a frequency in rural areas of 91% and in urban gardens of 82%. The Robin too, was in all gardens, and like the previous species, was more frequent in rural gardens (86%) than in urban areas (79%).

Results for the Song Thrush have been somewhat erratic over the last few summers with garden appearances for last summer the lowest since 2015. The strong preference for rural sites continues, last summer in 80% of those gardens (at a frequency of 21%) compared to only 41% of urban sites (at a frequency of just 10%). The appearances of the Mistle Thrush, another Red-list species, in our gardens have been erratic in the past, but has been on a downward trend since 2015. It was found almost entirely in rural gardens, with just one urban garden reporting it, the same situation as in Summer 2018.

After the results for Summer 2018, I wrote of “a pleasant surprise” with the result for Spotted Flycatcher (in 9% of gardens), but during last summer it reverted to type, being in only 5% of gardens, and in only one week in any of them.

Sparrows to buntings

The results for the House Sparrow have stabilized, and being found in 86% of gardens, was about average for the last eight years. Last summer they were more likely, as usual, to be found in urban gardens (in 93% of those) compared to rural gardens (in 83%). I am pleased to say that in my own garden they have moved from being a rare visitor to being much more frequent, appearing in 21 of the 30 weeks of the last summer period. The frequency across all gardens has been pretty much the same since 2013, so while there is no sign of an improvement things do not seem to be getting worse.

The Dunnock was in 97% of gardens last summer, and the frequency was slightly down compared to the previous summer (and in fact was the lowest since 2002).



Three species of wagtail appear on our list for last summer, with Pied Wagtail in 22% of gardens (typically very erratic), the Grey Wagtail in 11% (the highest since 2005), and Yellow Wagtail, recorded in just one garden.

The Goldfinch appeared in 96% of the gardens, split 98% of rural and 93% of urban gardens. It is doing rather better than the Chaffinch which, in 89% of gardens, was at the lowest level since our summer surveys began. As recently as 2012 it was found in all gardens. Andrew Budd reported that Chaffinches “have become a rarity” in his Amptill garden, Mike Jones, from Toddington, mentioned that he “had hardly any Chaffinches”, whilst Lawrence Jarrett from his Luton garden commented about “the general absence of Chaffinches”. Of even more concern is the status of the Greenfinch, which was recorded in 84% of gardens (87% of rural and 78% of urban gardens). In the first ten years of our summer surveys (1998 to 2007) they were never lower than in 96% of gardens. The British race of the Greenfinch is Red-listed and is declining at one of the fastest rates of any of our species. In previous summers the Bullfinch showed a strong preference for rural gardens, but last summer it was found in almost the same proportion of urban (in 19%) as rural sites (in 22%).

Typically, appearances of the so-called winter finches are very erratic from one year to the next. Siskins were in 21% of gardens last summer, which was a middle-of-the-road result. Of the 15 gardens that recorded them, the majority were in March, with then two gardens holding them into early April, and then my own in Woburn with records through to early June and another Woburn garden (100m away, so probably the same bird) with a record in early May. Just one garden recorded them in the late summer period.

Similarly, there were very few Lesser Redpolls, in just four gardens, and even fewer Bramblings, in just one.

Reed Buntings were in only 8% of gardens, with the most productive, in terms of records, being Peter Nash’s garden. He noted them on 51 days during the period of this survey, with males lingering into July, and then re-appearing in September. Yellowhammers were in 7% of gardens, all of which were in rural areas. There has been no consistent trend for either of these species in our summer surveys.

Summary

Our summer garden survey has now been running for 22 years. Once again, we have to thank the enthusiasm of our members for supporting our garden surveys, with many of you taking part since their inception. We look forward to receiving further records from your gardens in the winters and summers to come.

Barry Nightingale