

## BRAMBLING AND SISKIN — EARLY AT WINTER BIRDTABLES

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Winter 2005/06 will linger long in the memory of garden birdwatchers: one of the most exciting in the 36-year-long history of the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey, as BTO Research Biologist *David Glue* explains.

### PINZON REAL Y LUGANO LLEGAN PRONTO A LOS COMEDEROS

El invierno de 2005/06 permanecerá por mucho tiempo en la memoria de los observadores de aves de jardín: fue uno de los años más emocionantes en los 36 años de historia del Cuento de Aves en Comederos del BTO, como explica el investigador del BTO *David Glue*.

Winter 2005/06, the coldest in a decade, combined with a bare wild fruit larder, led to frenetic activity at UK birdtables. Many garden feeding stations buzzed with Goldfinch and Siskin, others were dominated by Rook, Pheasant and Woodpigeon, a few graced by unexpected visitors, including Hawfinch, Ring-necked Parakeet and Red Kite. All were intriguing features of a hectic winter for the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS), in sharp contrast to the previous Winter 2004/05 which was often quiet and birdless, characterized by a glut of wild fruits and lengthy frost-free spells.

### BUSIER UK BIRDTABLES

GBFS observers count all species coming to take food and water within their defined garden feeding stations, from October to March. The 258 gardens sampled were broadly representative of dwellings across the UK countryside, both by

type and regional spread. The range of species recorded taking food during the 2005/06 winter was relatively high; on average 22.5 species in suburban and 21.3 species in rural settings. Comparative figures for 2004/05 were 19.8 and 16.7 species respectively.

Yet again, species richness varied widely between gardens. The 'barest' birdwise, a wild windswept site covered by Miss L Campbell, of Orkney, attracted just nine species, with Robin, Blue Tit and Great Tit notable among the absentees and Starling and House Sparrow dominant. The 'richest' garden, counted by Mrs J Rayner and Miss K Adie, near Tregaron, Ceredigion, given over largely to wildlife, recorded a remarkable 52 species, including Mute Swan and Corn Bunting to grain, and scavenging Red Kite and foraging Goshawk within the feeding station.

Overall, an impressive 83 species were noted taking food or water during the winter. Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit remained the top three,

each absent from just three sites (Table 1). The top twelve list was similar to the previous winter. Compared with winters averaged across the 1990s, Collared Dove, Magpie and Coal Tit showed a marked increase, but House Sparrow and Starling showed little changes (Table 1).

**SUCCESSIVE COLD WINTER SPELLS  
LIVEN UK GARDEN FEEDERS**

A string of striking weather episodes dictated the feeding patterns of garden birds over the winter. Initially, balmy, warm, settled conditions in much of October, extending into November (warmest first half since 1998), drew a few late broods of Dunnock, Stock Dove, Greenfinch and Tree Sparrow to enliven birdtables. Bird baths were well used, House Sparrow and Starling often dominating, though Red-legged Partridge, Hawfinch and Lesser Redpoll were recorded.

Although November was the sunniest on record, severe night frosts, and blizzards in Central Scotland and SW England on 25/26th brought an early taste of winter. These conditions led to earliest-ever reports of Brambling and Siskin to garden feeders. Jays, Magpies, Nuthatches and tits were observed food-caching, Coal Tit widely outnumbering Great Tit and Blue Tit at feeders. In the coldest second half of November since 1993, winter thrushes passed through berryless gardens, with Redwings notably in short supply, a feature of recent winters.

In stressful, cold midwinter weather, some birds displayed fresh skills: Stock Doves, Woodpigeons and Pheasants were observed flying at hanging feeders to access spilt contents; Chiffchaffs, Goldcrests and Treecreepers extracted fat and peanut fragments from containers; while Jackdaw and Jay as well as Rook and Carrion Crow, used beak and toes to lift and access food items suspended beneath birdtables.

Snow and destructive frosts on Boxing Day, from a brief blast of Siberian air, brought the first Blackcap, Goldcrest and Reed Bunting to some feeders. With acorns and beech mast in short supply, Jays, Mistle Thrushes and Woodpigeons visited extra garden feeding sites.

It was the coldest January since 2001, and driest since 1997. Southeastern parts of the UK received only one-third of expected rainfall,

TABLE 1. GBFS Top Twelve Garden Birds.

Rank (2005/06)	Species	% of gdns 2005/06	% of gdns 1990s(*)
1 =	Robin	99	99
1 =	Blackbird	99	99
1 =	Blue Tit	99	100
4	Great Tit	98	97
5	Chaffinch	97	96
6	Greenfinch	97	96
7	Dunnock	96	95
8	Collared Dove	90	86
9	Coal Tit	89	85
10	House Sparrow	87	93
11	Starling	84	93
12	Magpie	81	71

(\*) Figures are the average of 10 winters from 1990/91 to 1999/2000.

resulting in rock-hard frozen lawns and pasture. Starlings, thrushes and corvids turned increasingly to birdtable fare. Windfall apples, though sparse, were in great demand, Fieldfare and Mistle Thrush protecting prized items. Elsewhere, Mallard, Moorhen and Pheasant, and locally Green Woodpecker and Water Rail, plundered stocks.

Initially in February, stubborn anticyclones brought hoar frost, fog and sleet, with monthly temperatures 0.3°C below average. Finch flocks swelled in size, with Brambling delighting many. A timely Atlantic airflow during 11-17th lifted temperatures widely to 10°C, but nesting activity was limited compared to recent springs, though juvenile Robin, Blackbird and Song Thrush appeared at feeders.

A cold, snowy Arctic airstream returned from 26 February, spilling over into what turned out to be the coldest March since 1996, with daily temperatures 1.4°C below average. Birdtables provided a vital life-line, with extra Brambling, Bullfinch, Siskin and Lesser Redpoll gracing many feeding stations. In the final week, moist southwesterly winds lifted temperatures to a spring-like 21.8°C at Scampton (Lincs).

**BULLFINCH AND NUTHATCH ADD  
COLOUR TO FEEDERS**

In challenging conditions, a dozen species equalled or broke record attendance levels for

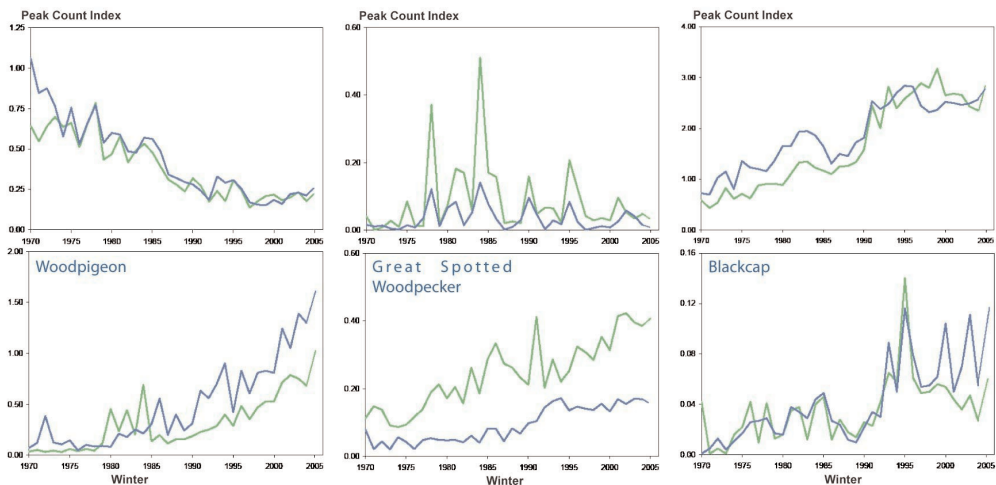
the 36-year-old GBFS. The increasingly adaptable Goldfinch (74%), Wren (58%), Great Spotted Woodpecker (54%), Nuthatch (38%), Bullfinch (26%) and Lesser Redpoll (6% of sites) were positively welcomed, whilst Magpie (81%), Woodpigeon (80%), Carrion Crow (40%), Pheasant (36%) and Herring Gull (12% of sites) received mixed emotions. Sparrowhawk came to chase and kill ever more widely (59% of feeding stations), prey taken ranging in size from Firecrest and Grey Wagtail to Red-legged Partridge and Magpie. Collared Dove, though, was the most frequent victim, prompting observers to re-name this raptor ‘Dovehawk’,

House Sparrow now figuring so low on its hit list.

More Kestrels were drawn to exploit garden bird feeding flocks than in recent winters (5% of sites), mostly in the harsh weather, as rodent populations dipped. Kestrel deployed low-level ‘hawking’ as well as conventional hovering, perch and pounce techniques. Fortunate observers also noted Merlin, (Tredegar, Gwent), and Hen Harrier, (Douglas and Andreas, I of Man), chasing and killing within gardens. Similarly, scavenging Buzzards were seen from Dartmoor (Devon) to Inverness (Inverness-shire), and Red Kite scavenged within gardens

### CHANGING FORTUNES AT UK GARDEN BIRDTABLES — GBFS PEAK COUNT INDEX 1970–2006

In winter 2005/06, GBFS Peak Count Indices helped to identify some interesting emerging and established trends. The number of Song Thrushes feeding in gardens seems now to have stabilised at a much lower figure than in the 1970s. 2005/06 was another quiet winter for Fieldfare. Peak figures for this species correspond with the cold winters of 1978/79, the mid 1980s and 1995/96. Collared Dove populations undertook a meteoric rise until the early 1990s. Garden feeding flock-sizes appear to have plateaued, perhaps having reached population saturation in all but a few places. Woodpigeon provides another modern-day success story, though flocks are viewed with mixed feelings by rural gardeners, and those with farming interests. Ever bolder, birds now increasingly exploit feeding stations in town and city gardens and parks. Since the mid 1980s, Great Spotted Woodpeckers have moved into rural gardens for birdtable fare, and then into suburban gardens from the early 1990s. Blackcap, intriguingly of Continental origin, have appeared at UK garden feeders since the 1970s, and have increased since the mid 1990s.



The Peak Count Index is the average maximum count per week. Scales of vertical axes vary greatly between species.

— = rural  
— = suburban

in the Thames Valley, Chilterns and mid Wales. Tawny Owl (just 1% of sites) remained top nocturnal predator, with Barn Owl also hunting alongside feeders at Beccles (Suffolk).

Blackcap returned in strength (29% of sites), feeding stations frequently hosting 2–4 birds. Ringing studies in some gardens indicated a turnover of a dozen birds or more. Success of the Blackcap is due, in part no doubt, to strong territorial defence of feeders against strong aggressive combatants, including Robin and Greenfinch, and a catholic diet. Observed preferred foods included apple, banana, cake, pastry, cheese, raisins, sunflower seed and porridge oats.

Even Siskins achieved almost pest levels in a garden in Canterbury, Kent. A flock 350 strong descended, 146 feeding at one sitting. One person's visual pleasure can be muted by an expensive pain in the pocket.

### SURPRISE FEEDERS

As ever, unexpected surprise exotic species turned to food provided. At Inverkip

(Renfrewshire), Avril Jones's garden feeding station is adjacent to a bay in the Firth of Clyde, where a Whooper Swan was tempted to brown bread during the December cold snap. Meanwhile, Miss K Adie, at Tregaron (Ceredigion), noted Goosanders taking grain. These two brought the GBFS tally to 170 species overall.

Elsewhere, the pulse of keeneyed observers was quickened, variously, by the arrival of Turtle Dove among a dozen Collared Dove, (March, Cambs), a Ring Ouzel that drank from a water container (Catfield, Norfolk), visiting Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Llanwrda, Carmarthenshire), Raven (New Milton, Hants) and regular Crested Tit (Boat of Garten, Invernesshire). Garden birds never fail to surprise: witness the Water Rail watched by Dr L Maddocks, (St Mary's Isles of Scilly), that dashed to grab a House Sparrow by the neck, plunging the hapless victim beneath the water of her garden pond, before seeking cover of bushes, presumably to consume its victim.

One wonders quite whether the oncoming winter 2006/07 can match the levels of excitement recorded recently.

### THANK YOU

The Trust's GBFS, though a small-scale project, requires careful consistent counting and recording during the least clement period of the year. BTO extends a large measure of thanks to the dedicated team of observers countrywide, some with especially highly prized sets of weekly counts extending back to the origins of the Scheme in 1970. Thanks also to Margaret Askew, Jacky Prior, Carol Povey and Fran Bowman for helping with the generation and circulation of recording forms, and to Mike Toms and Dan Chamberlain for the construction of the Peak Count Indices.