

WOODPIGEON JOINS THE GARDEN PREMIER LEAGUE

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Has the Woodpigeon become a permanent figure in your garden too? BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS) participants recorded all time high numbers last winter. BTO research ecologist, *David Glue*, describes the scene.

LAS PALOMAS TORCACES SE UNEN A LA PRIMERA DIVISION DEL JARDIN
¿Se ha convertido la paloma torcaz en presencia permanente también en su jardín?
Los participantes del conteo de aves en comederos del BTO registraron números récord el pasado invierno. El ecólogo del BTO *David Glue* describe la escena.

WOODPIGEONS WADDLE INTO MORE GARDENS

Over recent decades Woodpigeons, essentially woodland birds, have found that the UK's gardens provide all of their year-round requirements. Forced by an unusually sparse wild food larder in our forests and hedgerows in winter 2007/08, rural Woodpigeons waddled into extra gardens to join their urban cousins, figuring in the 'Top 12' species recorded by the GBFS for the first time.

Birdtable activity in general was frenetic over a memorable winter 2007/08, with these dozen commonest species supported by four-fifths of the representative sample of gardens across the UK (see Premier League table). Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit faithfully retained podium positions. High attendance of Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Coal Tit remain, but House Sparrow and Starling dipped to ever lower levels. The 251 observers who meticulously recorded weekly counts of feeding birds from October '07 to March '08 charted one of the busiest in the 38 year history of GBFS.

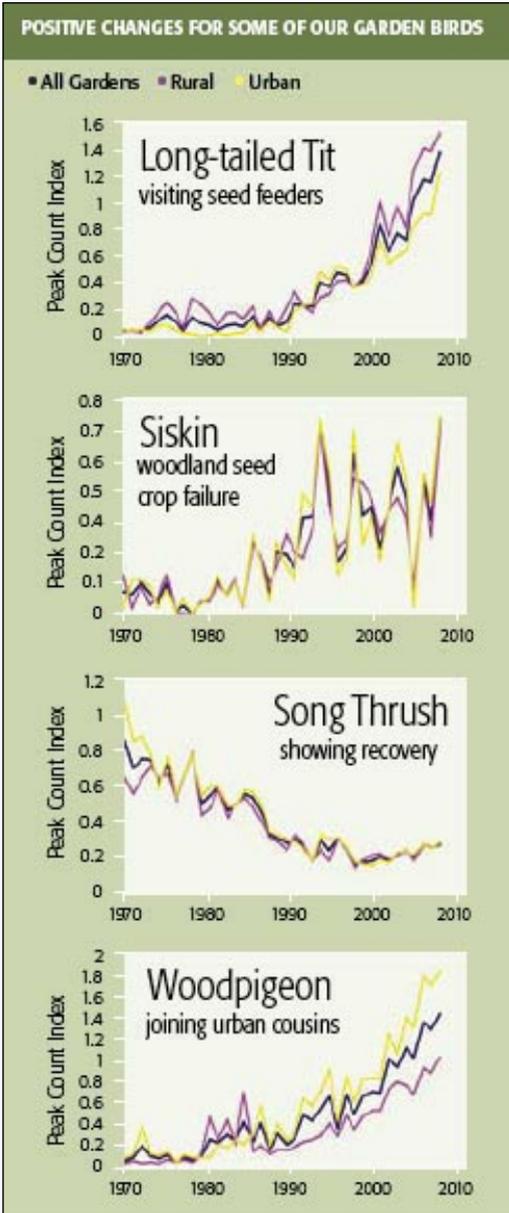
In total 90 species took food or water

provided by GBFS observers, but as ever these varied widely in character. 'Barest' garden was a suburban one in S Yorkshire, with just four species; Blackbird and Woodpigeon (two of each) being highlights. 'Richest' plot is a rural hillside garden with pools in Dyfed, managed with wildlife in mind, with 59 species including Woodcock, Buzzard, Raven, Merlin and Barn Owl.

On average, gardens in towns and cities supported 22.1 species (19.1 in 06/07) and in rural settings 23.0 species (19.8). The richer feeding communities in general last winter reflected challenging conditions for UK's birds, but an extra visual pleasure for recorders. Indeed the last 2 winters contrasted sharply in character.

A WELL-BALANCED BIRDTABLE

Diversity – with a range of colours, shapes, antics and sounds remains the aim of most GBFS observers. Many, though, report a growing dominance by larger species, notably Feral Pigeon, Woodpigeon, Pheasant, Rook and



Jackdaw. Perversely, a few complained of the aggressive nature, expense and daylong chatter from flocks of Goldfinch and Tree Sparrow. How times change!

Water tables remain high, and mid winter downpours quickly saturated sodden gardens. Several GBFS sites charted first ever feeding waterfowl, chiefly Mallard and Moorhen, but also Wigeon, Snipe, Green Sandpiper and

The Premier League...

POS	SPECIES	1970s AVERAGE	1990s AVERAGE	WINTER 2007/08
1	Robin	99	99	99
2	Blackbird	99	99	99
3	Blue Tit	99	100	98
4	Dunnock	95	95	97
5	Great Tit	93	97	97
6	Chaffinch	92	96	97
7	Greenfinch	92	96	97
8	Coal Tit	70	85	88
9	Collared Dove	60	87	87
10	Starling	96	92	85
11	House Sparrow	97	92	84
12	Wood Pigeon	19	52	80

Common Sandpiper, the last two species 'new' to the GBFS, lifting the list to 174 species.

Elsewhere, fortunate observers logged feral exotic Peacock (Bucks) and Ring-necked Parakeet (several), fleeting visits by migrant Woodcock (Durham), Whinchat and Ring Ouzel (Gwent) to refuel, surprise lingering Jack Snipe (Suffolk), Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Dyfed), Stonechat (Cornwall) and Hawfinch (Wilts). Sparrowhawk easily retained 'Top Predator' status appearing at 51% of gardens sampled, 3-4 individuals regularly hunting in some sites. Red Kite and Buzzard, alongside raven scavenged at extra gardens, reflecting range expansions.

Winter 2007/08 finished with a flourish. A dogged chilly 10-week long spell from mid February, with northerly winds dominant, in combination with exhausted seed stocks, drove Bramblings and Siskins to seed dispensers widely in sizeable flocks, but with fewer Lesser Redpoll. Many stayed until the third week of April, when winds headed back to the south. With another winter on the horizon, early indications suggest improved yields of wild berries and seed, when the UK's resident birds may be under less pressure. It is foolish, however, to predict Nature's fickle ways and cold winters will still figure occasionally despite the trends towards warmer and wetter ones.

BARE WOODS BUT BUSY BIRD TABLES: WINTER 2006/2007 EXPLAINED

- An abysmal breeding season – fewer tits, Treecreeper and some finches.
- A very dry autumn – wagtails, warblers and doves drawn to bird baths.
- Cold late autumn weather in Fennoscandia – winter thrushes and finches pushed to UK.
- Poor forest tree ‘masting’ – more tits, finches and Great Spotted Woodpecker using feeders.
- Bitterly cold arctic air in mid Nov – late Dec encouraging flocks of starlings and thrushes onto garden berry bushes and windfall apples.
- Continuing losses to diseases such as Trichomoniasis – Greenfinch and Chaffinch hardest hit.
- A drawn-out winter through to a snowy Easter – extra finches and buntings at feeders.

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