

VARIETY AT WINTER BIRD TABLES

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BT0 Research Biologist, *David Glue*, looks back at the findings from winter 2002/03 of the Garden Bird Feeding Survey.

VARIEDAD EN LOS COMEDEROS DE INVIERNO

El biólogo del BTO David Glue examina los resultados del invierno de 2002/03 del Cuento en Comederos de Aves de Jardín (Garden Bird Feeding Survey).

The BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS) was conceived in the late 1960s, to assess the range of birds capitalizing on supplementary foods in gardens and to examine their food preferences. Since the winter of 1970/71, observers have been charting the weekly peak counts of feeding birds countrywide. Today, the survey also provides a check on changes in status of garden species. Bird food and feeders have changed markedly and currently, up to 60,000 tonnes of peanuts and wild bird seed are provided annually in the UK, a bird care facility worth £150–180 millions.

GARDEN FEEDING STATIONS RICH AND POOR

Weekly counts of all species attracted to foods from October 2002 to March 2003 inclusive were kept by 264 householders throughout the UK — 120 in rural villages and homesteads, 144 in town and city dwellings. Top rural and suburban gardens each attracted 35 species, belonging to Mrs M E Bateman of Beccles, Suffolk and K Russell of Walbottle Village, Newcastle-upon-Tyne respectively.

Perhaps surprisingly, in winter 2002/03, gardens in suburbia supported fractionally more

feeding species than their rural counterparts (21.2 and 19.7 respectively). This has been a feature of other recent winters (see *BTO News* 200, 242). This may reflect the attractive nature of bird tables within the warmer microclimate of built-up areas, coupled with mild winters and an increasingly impoverished avifauna in the open UK farmed countryside.

Overall, 78 species were recorded taking food and water. Robin was the only species to patronize all gardens (Table 1). The top 12 species, and their relative frequency, closely matched that of the previous winter 2001/02 (*BTO News* 242). More revealing is a comparison with the same dozen species averaged across winters in the initial decade of study in the 1970s. Far greater use of bird tables is now made by Collared Dove and Magpie (the latter overtaking Song Thrush). Other changes worthy of note are increases of the forest-dwelling Coal Tit and finches, and decline in the proportion of feeding stations supporting House Sparrow and Starling (Table 1).

AUTUMN GALES AND MARCH WARMTH HAVE AN EFFECT

Three key factors strongly affected flock-sizes

TABLE 1. GBFS Top Twelve garden feeding species Winter 2002/03.

Rank	Species	% of gardens	% of gardens in 1970s (*)
1	Robin	100.0	99
2	Blue Tit	99.6	99
3	Blackbird	99.2	99
4	Great Tit	98.1	93
= 5	Chaffinch	97.0	92
= 5	Greenfinch	97.0	92
7	Dunnock	96.2	95
8	Collared Dove	91.7	60
9	Coal Tit	87.9	70
10	House Sparrow	86.7	97
11	Starling	85.6	96
12	Magpie	72.7	29

* Figures are the average of 10 winters from 1970/71 to 1979/80.

and the range of species at UK birdtables in winter 2002/03:-

- widespread, prolific yields of certain major wild fruits, including beech mast, hazel nuts, acorns, haws, some conifers and some domestic soft fruits — in sharp contrast to the previous winter.

- a relatively productive breeding season in 2002 for many resident tits, thrushes and several finches — in contrast with recent years.

- yet another largely snow-free winter, lacking long-term penetrating frosts, and with unseasonal warmth in the New Year and March.

Various striking weather episodes influenced feeding patterns over the winter. Dry, Indian summer heat in September (in contrast to a chilly 2001) dominating until mid October, led to late broods of doves, Dunnock, Greenfinch and House Sparrow, enlivening birdtables. The coolest October since 1993, brought an early return of tits and finches to feeders. Violent storms around 27 October (locally the most severe since 1987), as well as damaging housing fabric, depressed feeding activity, and led to disorientated waterfowl, thrushes, warblers and cage-birds turning up in gardens.

A very wet and mild November (warmest widely since 1994), saw many gulls, corvids and thrushes able to obtain food from damp pasture and berry-rich hedges. Food-caching by Coal Tit, Marsh Tit, Nuthatch and Magpie remained low key, with seed-specialists in fewer numbers than the previous winter (see Box).

Drier cold snaps with severe night frosts and snow flurries in December, from 9–11th and 18–19th, brought the first Goldcrest, Blackcap and Yellowhammer to favoured feeders. Spring-like heat over Christmas week, though, saw many birdtable offerings largely left ignored. Lashing rain at times, leading to saturated lawns, brought first-time feeding Moorhen, Mallard, Grey Wagtail and even Kingfisher in some gardens.

In the New Year, cold snaps with snow, including a numbing easterly blast from the Continent on 12th and bitter arctic northerly winds from 29th, encouraged winter thrushes, Woodpigeon and Blackcap to switch from hedgerow ivy and haws to birdtable fare in January.

The winter’s coldest, and most destructive cold spell, from 13–19 February, with widespread, sub-zero temperatures during the day, saw a marked increase in flock sizes of tits and finches, the appearance in many areas of Long-tailed Tit, Siskin, Brambling, Redpoll and Tree Sparrow, as natural stocks of alder and birch seed and beech mast became depleted. Redwing and Fieldfare progressively capitalized on stocks of windfall apples, where provided. Mild southerly winds in late February, heralding a glorious, sunny, settled March (warmest since 1997), saw winter thrushes quick to leave and Robin, Woodpigeon and Collared Dove bringing premature first-brood families to feeding stations. A progressively dry March (driest widely since 1973), saw Brambling, Reed Bunting and Siskin drawn to bird baths, with pairs of the latter lingering to later bring juveniles to garden bird feeders in Liss Forest (Hants) and Ringshall (Herts).

GREY WAGTAILS AND BULLFINCHES AT NEW SITES

The birdtable community continued to change over the winter of 2002/03. Among regular feeders, Collared Dove (92%), Great Spotted Woodpecker (52%) and Pheasant (29% of sites) reached all-time high levels of attendance. Equally encouraging were the high incidence of feeding Goldcrest (13%), Grey Wagtail (11%), Tree Sparrow (9%) and Yellowhammer (7% of sites), despite the abundant natural food larder and absence of prolonged spells of cold

weather, each adding extra sparkle and colour. These increases, endorsed by findings of the year-round BTO Garden BirdWatch, are considered the product of a greater tolerance of man, improved quality food-mixes, increasing populations, or combination of these factors. A current challenge is to attract to feeding stations scarce solo feeders, such as Mistle Thrush, Marsh Tit and Willow Tit, and similarly shy, social feeders, such as Linnet, Redpoll, Hawfinch and Corn Bunting, on a regular basis.

Further positive news arrived over the winter. Green Woodpecker, often drawn initially to ant colonies exposed by saturated lawns, turned widely to fat and fine grains (5% of sites). Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a Red Listed species, delighted home-owners by appearing at peanut baskets as far afield as New Milton (Hants) and Grange-over-Sands (Cumbria). Also encouraging was the presence of three essentially insectivorous species, Wren (51%), Blackcap (25%) and Chiffchaff (4% of sites), sustained by fatty products, peanuts and softbill mixes during the cold weather. Meanwhile, the growing ability of Pheasant to exploit feeding stations within towns and cities, and Raven to rural dwellings, reflects bolder behaviour and reduced keeping.

Against the backcloth of a wild fruit glut, Goldfinch (66% of sites) failed to sustain its sharp upturn shown during the 1990s, with maximum flock-sizes of only 20–45. Nonetheless, birds drawn into gardens by the seeds of teasel, lavender and evening primrose, turned for the first-time to feeders (often holding nyger seed) in many parts of the country. Equally encouraging, Redpolls were drawn to seed feeders for the first time in a number of gardens.

While depleted populations of House Sparrow (87%) and Black-headed Gull (16%) showed no change, Reed Bunting (6% of sites) dipped below all-time GBFS low levels.

BUZZARD AND WATER RAIL AMONG SURPRISE FEEDERS

As ever, unexpected visitors turned to provided food and water. An exotic escapee,

Grey Singing Finch (Dorking, Surrey), brought the 33-year GBFS tally to 163 species. Elsewhere, visiting Water Rail (Isles of Scilly), Black Redstart (Dunsford, Devon) and Woodcock (Argyll), quickened the pulse of observers. Waxwings (Norwich, Norfolk) were part of a New Year influx some 2,000 strong, initially to east coast counties, switching from crab apple and *Cotoneaster* berries to seed-mixes.

Sparrowhawk (hunting at 47% of feeding stations) easily retained top predator spot. Some watchers noted between four and five different birds visiting (based upon plumage characters), taking prey ranging in size from Goldcrest and Siskin to Jay and Pheasant. Far fewer feeding stations supported Kestrel (3%) or Tawny Owl (1% of sites) — their hunting methods not being as effective within the garden environment. The ongoing expansion of reintroduced Red Kites was reflected by birds being attracted to meaty scraps, or dead day-old chicks, at Amersham (Bucks), Tredegar (Gwent) and Rhayader (Powys). Similarly, the resurgent Buzzard population was reflected by birds drawn to kitchen scraps at gardens on Anglesey, fringing the Chilterns, Exmoor, Stafford and Cheviots.

Garden feeding visitors recorded outside of the GBFS in Winter 2002/03 included Little Egret (Ringwood, Hants), Lesser Whitethroat (West Sussex) and a spring highlight, Sardinian Warbler to a fat basket at Beeton Stump (Norfolk), a food source regularly used on the Continent.

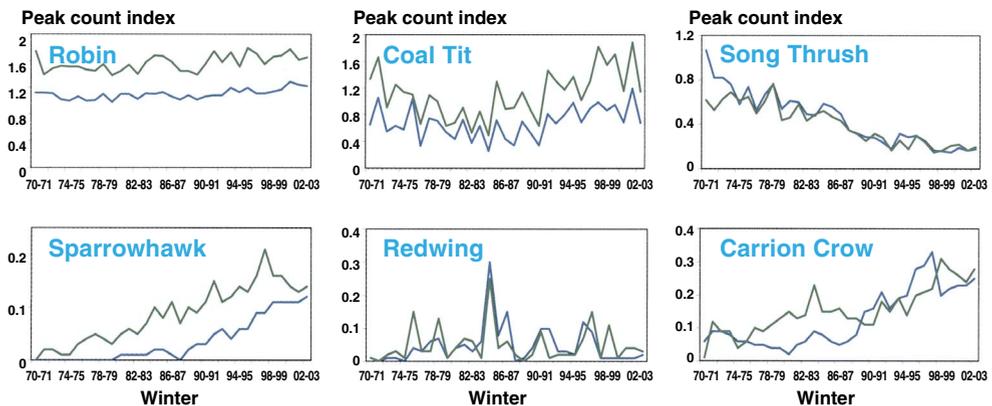
One ponders quite what species will be detected over the coming winter.

THANK YOU

The BTO extends its thanks to the dedicated team of garden bird surveyors who have carefully counted and observed the behaviour of their feeding birds for one-third of a century. Jacky Prior, Carol Povey and Frances Bowman kindly helped with the preparation of forms and Mike Toms assisted with the generation of Peak Count Indices.

FLUCTUATING FORTUNES AT BIRDTABLES — GBFS PEAK COUNT INDEX 1970–2003

The GBFS provides the BTO with a very useful yardstick of garden bird numbers in winter via the Peak Count Index. Few birds, like Robin, have relatively constant attendance at birdtables. Even here, some relinquish territories, generally in cold winter snaps, as in 1978/79, the mid 1980s and 1996/97 to feed amicably in groups, at which time vulnerable species such as Redwing (also Pied Wagtail, Blackcap and Fieldfare), tend to also achieve peak numbers. Many more, like Coal Tit (also Great Tit, Nuthatch and certain fine-billed finches), show erratic ‘boom and bust’ attendance patterns at feeders in winter. Bumper beech mast yields, as in autumn 1976, 1985, 1991, 2000 and 2002, resulted in far fewer seed-eaters resorting to feeders. The UK Song Thrush population, in long-term decline, looks to have stabilised at a low level, as reflected by numbers feeding within winter gardens. In contrast, the increase of the UK Sparrowhawk population, having bounced back from pesticide induced breeding performance losses following the 1950s, has slowe, in part, perhaps, reflecting fewer small bird prey at large. Intriguingly, those Sparrowhawks venturing into GBFS rural gardens and, more recently, in towns and cities to hunt and kill, have also raided less frequently. Carrion Crow typifies the increasingly successful corvid family, commensal with man, ever bolder birds venturing into suburbia to feed and breed, perhaps to be followed by Raven in coming years.



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

— = rural
— = suburban