

## BLACK REDSTARTS BRIGHTEN WINTER BIRDTABLES

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For 35 years, the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey has been monitoring garden birds in winter. BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, looks at the findings of winter 2004/05.

### LOS COLIROJOS TIZONOS DAN COLORIDO A LOS COMEDEROS DE INVIERNO

Durante 35 años, el conteo de aves de jardín en comederos ha monitoreado las aves de jardín en invierno. El biólogo investigador del BTO *David Glue* revisa los resultados del invierno 2004-05.

The UK garden bird care market continues to expand. It is currently considered to be worth some £150–180 million per annum, with in excess of 18 million home-owners providing supplementary food of some type. The BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS), which started in winter 1970/71, has provided long-term data for this increasingly important habitat.

### BARE UK BIRDTABLES COUNTRYWIDE

In winter 2004/05, observers recorded all species coming to take food or water provided, on a weekly basis from October to March inclusive. The gardens sampled totalled 241, with 113 in rural villages, hamlets and farmsteads and 128 of city houses, suburban semis and maisonettes. Collectively these are considered to be broadly representative of UK dwellings by type across all regions. Garden species richness was comparatively low for this winter, on average just 16.7 species in suburban and 19.8 species in rural sites, compared to the previous winter 2003/04 (20.8 and 23.0 species for suburban and rural respectively). This is generally 2–3 species fewer than has been

recorded in recent winters (see *BTO News* 242, 248, 254) and is largely a consequence of prolific fruiting yields in UK hedges and woods and a mild winter.

As ever, species richness varied widely between gardens, extreme examples featuring familiar long-term core counters. A coastal garden in Ramsgate (Kent) attracted a meagre four species (House Sparrow and Collared Dove being the highlights). The richest suburban garden in Walbottle Village (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) attracted 34 species (including Grey Wagtail and Yellowhammer). This total of 34 species was matched by the top rural garden in Mold (Flint), a mobile miniwaterfall feature attracting Chiffchaff, Meadow Pipit and Linnet to drink.

In total, a modest 76 species were charted taking food or water. Robin was the only species to feature at every feeding station (Table 1). The 'Top Twelve' species, by composition and relative frequency, were very similar to that of winter 2003/04 (*BTO News* 254). Compared to winters averaged across the 1990s, though, Collared Dove, Coal Tit and Magpie showed increased attendance, while House Sparrow and Starling continued to slip back, probably as a result of population declines (Table 1).

TABLE 1. GBFS Top Twelve 1994–2004 garden feeding species.

Rank	Species	Winter 2004/05 and average for 1990s	
		% of gdns 2004/05	% of gdns 1990s*
1	Robin	100	99
2	Blue Tit	99	100
3	Blackbird	99	99
4	Great Tit	98	97
5	Greenfinch	97	96
6	Dunnock	97	95
7	Chaffinch	95	96
8	Collared Dove	91	86
9	Coal Tit	88	85
10	House Sparrow	86	93
11	Starling	81	93
12	Magpie	75	71

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

### CHILLY WINTER EPISODES LEAD TO BUSIER FEEDERS

Four major features moulded the spectrum of species feeding and flock sizes of birds at UK birdtables in winter 2004/05:

- an autumn legacy of unharvested arable crops in open country: chiefly oilseed rape and spring-sown barley, following a protracted wet summer.
- widespread high yields of many woodland and hedgerow fruits, notably beech mast (best crop since 2000), acorns, cob nuts, hips and haws.
- prolific conifer seed yields, notably spruce, pine and larch, the largest for a decade.
- another largely mild winter, lacking any prolonged spells of lying snow and ground-penetrating frosts.

Several noteworthy weather events affected feeding patterns of birds over the winter. Initially, a balmy warm start to October, adding to an Indian Summer in September, saw Collared Doves, Stock Doves, Greenfinches and Tree Sparrows bringing families to feeders. A chilly, stiff easterly continental wind during 9–11 October swept a large movement of winter thrushes (chiefly Redwing) and Goldcrest to UK, eventually some turning to feeding stations. Food hoarding by Coal Tit, Marsh Tit, Magpie and a few other species remained low key. Persistent mild westerly winds during much of

the mid winter (November–January) depressed numbers of tits, thrushes, Starlings and finches at feeders. A bitter blast of arctic air during 19–23 November enticed the first Blackheaded Gull, Blackcap, Pied Wagtail and Reed Bunting to favoured sites. This same weather pattern also prompted a major influx of Waxwings, exceeding that of recent winters and that of 1985/86. New Year monsoon-like downpours, which saturated gardens, and caused serious flooding in Snowdonia, Cumbria and West Highland, brought Mallard, Moorhen, Grey Wagtail, and other less usual birds to feeding stations. Violent storms in mid January, hurricane force in western parts (rivalling conditions in 1987 in some areas), damaged housing fabric, flattened fencing and feeders, and depressed bird feeding activity.

Spring-like heat early in February limited further feeding by tits, thrushes (notably Blackbirds), corvids and finches. Premature nesting saw Collared Dove, Woodpigeon and Robin bringing young to feeders (*BTO News* 258). From 10 February, cold arctic air from Greenland, then North Russia, brought an uncomfortable four-week late winter snowy spell. Livelier birdtables supported winter thrushes, Long-tailed Tits, Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings but Brambling, Redpoll and Siskin remained in short supply. Spring proper arrived around 16–18 March, with southerly winds sweeping warm tropical air to UK. Many feeders were vacated, residents paired and eggs laid, though parent Robin and Greenfinch, among others, relied on suitable extra food rations.

### GOLDCREST AND LONG-TAILED TIT ADD SPARKLE TO EXTRA FEEDERS

The status of birdtable visitors, and aspects of their behaviour, continued to change in winter 2004/05. Among the regulars, opportunistic Long-tailed Tit (69% of sites), Carrion Crow (38%), Pheasant (32%) and Goldfinch (72%) equalled or exceeded alltime high levels of attendance at GBFS feeders, contrary to the general downward trend in feeding rates. Encouragingly, adaptable Great Spotted Woodpecker (50%), Jackdaw (51%) and Woodpigeon (69%) now feed at half or more

## FLUCTUATING FORTUNES AT UK BIRDTABLES: GBFS PEAK COUNT INDEX 1970–2005

GBFS continues to provide the BTO with a valuable indicator of the changing status of garden birds in the non-breeding season.

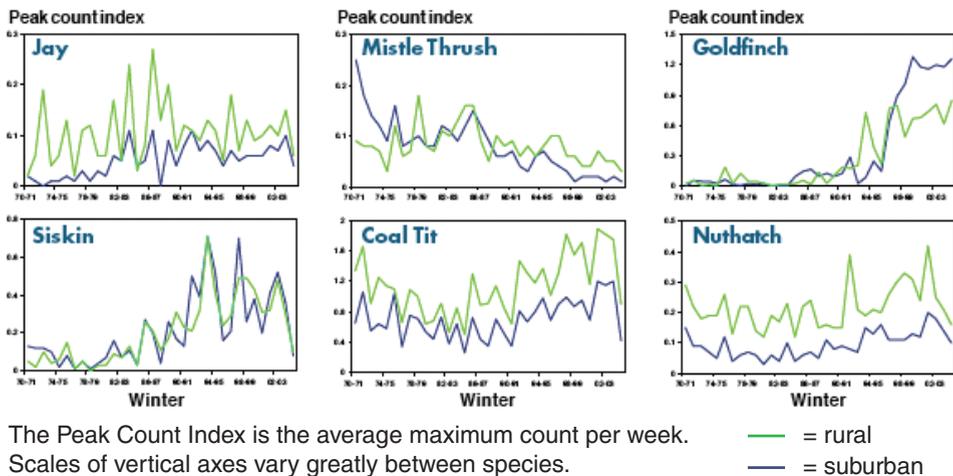
Jay numbers at feeders fluctuate erratically by winter, inversely related to the volume of the acorn crop. Birds from parks and cemeteries, especially in suburbia, have turned increasingly to birdtable fare: a modest corvid success story compared to other corvids — Rook, Carrion Crow, Magpie, Jackdaw, and even Raven in places.

Mistle Thrush, like its cousin the Song Thrush, has been on the slide in gardens long-term; today it is absent from most feeding stations in towns and cities.

Coal Tit and Nuthatch (like Great Tit), display marked peaks and troughs in winter attendance levels at seed feeders and nut baskets, dictated by the volume of beech mast (and other woodland tree fruits) available in the countryside. Low levels of feeder visits in winter 2004/05 were similar to the patterns in previous winters with beechnut bonanzas, notably 1976, 1985, 1991 and 2000.

Siskin numbers, similarly, dipped sharply in winter 2004/05, reflecting the largest conifer seed yield in a decade, following a marked upturn in this fine-billed finch's fortunes since the 1990s.

Goldfinch, in contrast, sustained its recent meteoric rise in UK garden feeder-use, flocks 20–30 strong reported widely in winter 2004/05 though none exceeded the 100 mark.



garden feeding stations, while Tree Sparrow (10%), Goldcrest (13%) and Bullfinch (20%) now feed at onetenth or more. In Kyle, Ross-shire, Waxwings drank at a bird bath 'puddle', part of the recordbreaking influx (see above).

Sparrowhawk (53% of sites) comfortably maintained its status as chief diurnal garden avian predator and was observed taking prey ranging in size from Blue Tit to Pheasant and Herring Gull (the latter two being lame and emaciated individuals respectively). Observers noted Sparrowhawks, variously, hunting 'in

tandem', ground-running through bushes to snatch songbirds, and repeatedly claiming Collared Doves that had been dashed and dazed against windows and walls. Kestrel (just 4% of sites), with its perch-and-pounce hunting strategy, is less well suited to operate effectively within the garden environment. Buzzards (2% of sites) scavenged for food at a scatter of gardens, from the fringes of Dartmoor and Welsh Marches, to New Forest and Borders. Red Kites visited gardens in the Chilterns, Thames Valley and Mid Wales. Elsewhere, lucky observers

observed hunting Hen Harrier (Castletown, Isle of Man), Peregrine snatching Feral Pigeon (Canterbury, Kent) and Merlin (Holyhead, Anglesey).

Winter 2004/05 brought further cases of the unexpected at UK birdtables. The transient Quail attracted to grain at Runcton, Chichester (Sussex) in late October (sadly later found dead on a nearby road), brought the 35-year GBFS tally to 165 species. Elsewhere, Black Redstarts (Tredegar, South Wales; Budleigh Salterton, Devon) helped to liven lacklustre winter birdtables.

Some GBFS observers complained, variously, of feeding stations 'dominated' or 'plagued' by a

spectrum of birds, hoovering up costly materials. These range from 'problem' Woodpigeon, Feral Pigeon and Pheasant (many sites), local Herring Gull, Black-headed Gull, Rook and Mallard, even Red-legged Partridge (Rhostyllen, Wrexham), Goldfinch (Hillsborough, Co Down) and Tree Sparrow (Gresford, Clwyd) — but one man's perceived 'problem species' surely provides another with 'treasured pleasure'. Achieving a comfortably diverse and attractive feeding community close to hand via a range of feeders and foods, for bird conservation and human satisfaction is a laudable aim. GBFS will continue to chart the changing picture in winter 2005/06, that beckons.

### THANK YOU

The BTO extends a huge measure of thanks to the dedicated team of GBFS counters, a small key core extending back to formative years of this survey: one that has yielded much useful data for the Trust. Thanks also go to Jacky Prior, Carol Povey, Margaret Askew and Frances Bowman who helped to distribute and collate forms, and to Mike Toms for help in calculation of Peak Count Indices.