

GOLDFINCH JOINS THE CHART-TOPPERS

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Is the red-faced finch a fixture at your bird feeder too? BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey observers reported new levels of sightings last winter, as *David Glue* reports.

EL JILGUERO ALCANZA LA CABEZA DE LA LISTA

¿También en su comedero abunda ese pájaro de cara roja? Los observadores del conteo de aves en comederos del BTO registraron un alto número de avistamientos el pasado invierno, como informa *David Glue*.

The diminutive Goldfinch, once a rarity at garden bird tables, has leapt into the Top 12 of species visiting birdfeeders watched by contributors to the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey.

While Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Coal Tit populations – benefiting greatly from afforestation and maturing gardens – have all turned to extra birdtables compared to the 1970s (see Table 1), it is the meteoric rise in Goldfinch in gardens that catches the eye. Formerly a scarce feeder, it now comes to exploit seeds of teasel, nyger and sunflower hearts and has leap-frogged Magpie in the GBFS league for the first winter.

Ever-reliable Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit retained 'Top Trio' status for winter 2006/07, but House Sparrow and Starling slipped to their lowest-ever attendance levels. Only time will tell if this is a true reflection of overall population losses or the exceptionally mild weather conditions allowing them to feed elsewhere.

The 257 GBFS contributors who completed weekly counts between October and March experienced one of the quietest periods in the history of the scheme, though a very respectable total of 87 species took food or water provided.

Numbers ranged from a meagre six species in coastal Ramsgate (Kent) to 57 species in

Llwynygroes, Tregaron (Dyfed), the latter including Water Rail, Snipe and Skylark to food, plus foraging Merlin and Goshawk.

On average, 19.1 species were attracted to gardens in towns and cities (22.5 in 05/06) and 19.8 species to gardens in rural settings (21.3 in 05/06).

COLD SNAPS AND QUAGMIRES

Six key factors helped to shape last winter's feeding community:

- A late, condensed, below-par 2006 breeding season, contributing fewer first-year tits, thrushes and finches.
- The warmest autumn (September–November), largely frost-free in many regions.
- The mildest winter (December–February) on record in many parts of UK, the result of prevailing southwesterly winds.
- An abundance of hedgerow fruits and berries, and forest conifer seeds and mast.
- The lack of sustained cold spells, lengthy snow lay, penetrating frosts or glazed ice, triggering unseasonable midwinter breeding attempts by Tawny Owl, Robin, thrushes and doves alongside feeding stations.
- Disease-related losses, chiefly Trichomoniasis among finches (see next page).

TABLE 1. GBFS Top Twelve Species in gardens where supplementary food is provided.

| Rank | Species | Winter 2006/07 % gardens | 1970s(*) % gardens |
|------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Robin | 100 | 99 |
| 2 | Blackbird | 99 | 99 |
| 3 | Blue Tit | 98 | 99 |
| 4 | Great Tit | 97 | 93 |
| 5 | Dunnock | 97 | 95 |
| 6 | Chaffinch | 95 | 92 |
| 7 | Greenfinch | 95 | 92 |
| 8 | Collared Dove | 90 | 60 |
| 9 | Coal Tit | 84 | 70 |
| 10 | House Sparrow | 82 | 97 |
| 11 | Goldfinch | 81 | 3 |
| 12 | Starling | 79 | 96 |

* 1970s decade = average percentage of gardens occupied winters 1970/71 to 1979/80..

In the recent winter, just a handful of birdtable ‘regulars’, such as Jackdaw, Dunnock and Goldfinch, matched or exceeded earlier attendance levels. The great majority, notably winter thrushes and treeseed specialists such as Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Woodpigeon, Coal Tit, Siskin and Brambling, were in short supply.

Brief cold snaps (before Christmas and mid January) and the new millennium’s heaviest accumulations of snow (early February), drew in extra essentially insectivorous Wrens, Blackcaps and Goldcrests to suet, fine seeds and mealworms.

GREENFINCHES SUCCUMB

Disease-related instances of sickly, moribund or dead birds in GBFS gardens were considered higher in winter 2006/07 than in any previous year, seemingly triggered by the hot humid weather of July 2006. From early October, GBFS participants attributed 87 cases to Trichomoniasis, determined by visual observations or

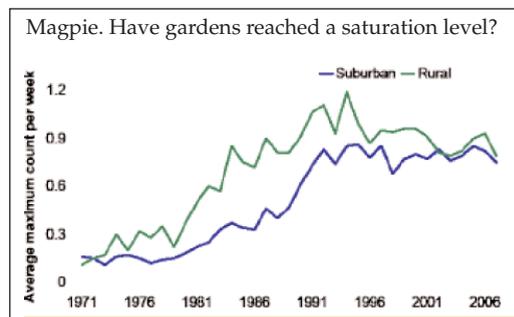
postmortems undertaken by the Garden Bird Health Initiative (GBHI).

Birds appeared, variously, lethargic, fluffedup, gaping with swollen throats, stiff-winged or with a weak flight. Greenfinch dominated (57 cases), followed by Chaffinch, Goldfinch, House Sparrow and Collared Dove (in descending order), plus single instances of Woodpigeon and Sparrowhawk. The impact on local populations varied, from locally acute, single instances to no discernible effect.

Fewer cases were reported following early sharp frosts in November, while some sick birds in the New Year were shown to suffer from Salmonella poisoning and the sub-lethal Papillomas virus (produces warts on soft parts) affected Chaffinch, Brambling and House Sparrow.

RAPTORS BRING EXCITEMENT

Countering the generally quieter garden scene, scarce raptors and scavengers were drawn to



more feeding stations than in previous years. Red Kite, Buzzard and Raven were observed from Bodmin Moor, the New Forest and Chiltern Hills to the Scottish Borders.

Sparrowhawk remained easily the most frequently observed diurnal raptor, prey taken ranging in size from Coal Tit and Siskin to Magpie and Red-legged Partridge. Individual Sparrowhawks were watched regularly spooking feeding flocks and returning to collect stunned window-strike victims, others roadrunning to collect songbirds beneath bushes.

Elsewhere, lucky observers recorded garden hunting Goshawk (Angus, Dyfed), Hen Harrier (Essex), Merlin (Cornwall, Hants, Powys), Barn Owl (Suffolk) and Little Owl (Dyfed), individuals often hunting at feeding stations at dusk or dawn for a late or early meal.

GARDEN WATER WONDERLAND

After two dry winters, regular downpours ensured aquifers and reservoirs were replenished, but many gardens were reduced to quagmire no-go areas at times. However, some suitably stocked and sited small GBFS gardens logged first-time feeding Mallard and Moorhen, with a welcome short-term return of Reed Bunting for a few.

The large hillside garden at Llwynygroes, near Tregaron (Dyfed), mentioned earlier, drew Greylag Goose and Wigeon to grain, both new species for the GBFS, bringing the 37-year tally to 172 species.

Elsewhere, delighted observers charted faithful visiting Water Rail (Dyfed, Cornwall), Coot (Suffolk) and Lesser Black-backed Gull (Avon), plus fleeting visits for supplementary foods by Mandarin (Hants) and Kingfisher (Gwent).

THANK YOU

Thanks to all dedicated GBFS counters, plus Margaret Askew, Frances Bowman, Carol Povey and Jacky Prior for help with the production and collation of recording forms, and to Mike Toms for help with production of the average maximum counts per week .