

Robins Counting on Christmas Cheer

This year Robins and other garden birds could be in trouble over the festive period. While we overdo it on mince pies and turkey, our garden birds may well be struggling to find food. A poor autumn for seeds, and with berries disappearing fast, many birds will be looking to us to make up the shortfall.

This autumn has been particularly poor for acorns and beech mast, which has meant that birds like Woodpigeon, Coal Tit and Chaffinch have lost one of their major winter food sources. As a consequence some of these birds have started to feed on berries much earlier than normal, with others visiting garden feeding stations in greater numbers to take seed and other foods.

Berries represent an important resource for many of our familiar garden birds, including the unofficial emblem of Christmas – the Robin, and this year there is going to be plenty of competition for limited supplies. This means that any help homeowners can give to small birds could make a real difference.

“The poor seed crop this year has seen berries being depleted much earlier than normal. What this means for our garden birds is that a food source which would normally last them through the winter months has now pretty much been exhausted,” says Mike Toms, the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch organiser.

It is clear that Robins and other garden birds are going to need extra food from garden owners to help them make it through this critical period but it is important that we put the right type of food out too.

“Some foods are unsuitable for birds with things such as bacon-rind and desiccated coconut actually being harmful. Don’t put out the turkey carcass and leave it there to be picked on as it will soon go off and become a health hazard to birds. There are great energy-rich seed mixes available at supermarkets and garden centres, get these and give your garden birds a fighting chance this winter” Mike adds.

Robins are going to need our help this winter, so put out food and go that extra step and join the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch survey. The records you provide will ensure that we know how the populations of our familiar garden birds are faring, which is especially important during the winter months.

It has been running since 1995 and has highlighted changes in the use of the nation’s gardens by different bird species. Some 16,500 participants currently take part in Garden BirdWatch and send in simple weekly records of the bird species using their gardens. These records show that 95% of Garden BirdWatchers record Robins using their gardens each week. To receive a free information pack, phone on 01842 750050 or write to GBW, Room 50, British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU.

The BTO is the UK’s leading bird research organisation. Over thirty thousand birdwatchers contribute to the BTO’s surveys. They collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 80 at its HQ in Norfolk, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO’s investigations are funded by government, industry and conservation organisations.

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Notes for Editors

- 1) The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. Currently, some 16,500 people take part in the project across the British Isles. The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch is funded by participants' contributions and supported by CJ WildBird Foods Ltd and is the largest year round survey of garden birds anywhere in the world. For more information see www.bto.org/gbw
- 2) CJ WildBird Foods is Europe's leading supplier of bird food and bird feeding products. CJ WildBird Foods has been responsible for a number of significant developments within the bird food and feeding industry, including the introduction of black sunflower seeds to the UK as a major new bird food and the development of specialist seed mixes for use in tubular feeders. The company has also been supporting research into the changing fortunes of garden bird populations, most notably through the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch.
- 3) Robin Facts. Almost six million pairs of Robins breed in the UK. Most will only live for about two years but the oldest recorded reached the ripe old age of eight years four months. During the winter some of the Robins in our parks and gardens will actually have come to us from Scandinavia to spend the winter.
- 4) Beautiful images of Robins are available for use alongside this article from images@bto.org
- 5) The BTO has an ISDN line available for radio interviews.

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