

Focus on the Blackcap

The Blackcap is the warbler that is most likely to visit your garden – and it will probably be in the winter! This may seem rather strange when you realise that the vast majority of the dozen or so species of warbler found in Britain are summer migrants. But read on and you will find it is even more complicated ...

First of all that name. No Blackcaps actually leave the nest with black caps – they are all brown and only get the black if they are males after they have undergone the first autumn moult. Females gain quite a bright chestnut brown cap at this time.

Secondly, remember that just because the bird has a black cap it is not definitely a Blackcap. In some gardens the rarer tits, Marsh and Willow, come in and regularly feed at the nuts or seed. But their whole lifestyle says tit – they have chisel-shaped bills and hammer away at their food in a quite different way from the rather demur warbler. Not that two males are necessarily demur if they decide to challenge each other or that any Blackcap, male or female, who feels its personal space has been invaded will tolerate intruders.

There are two times of year when Blackcaps tend to visit gardens. The first period is during July, August and early September when young birds, from the British breeding population, are wandering around making themselves familiar with their local area, looking for places to come back and breed next year and to raid your soft-fruit! In fact the really good plants for Blackcaps at this time of year are Red Currants, elder, Bramble and Gelder Rose. These birds love fruit as the preferred food for building up fat reserves for migration to the Mediterranean. A few even cross the Sahara.

The second period is much later in the autumn, in October and November, when the 10,000-strong wintering population arrives from its breeding grounds in Central Europe – the area north of the Alps in Southern Germany and Austria. This is a lot of birds but many less than the two or three million Blackcaps in Britain and Ireland at the end of the breeding season. At first the wintering birds mainly feed on natural fruit and insects but tend to come into gardens by the end of December and stay for about three months.



The Blackcap is unusual among our warblers as many stay through the winter and are often seen in gardens.

Blackcap by Tommy Holden © BTO

They will feed on all sorts of food – even clinging to hanging peanut feeders – but they prefer fruit. Reject apples are what the two males we had last winter went for, but quite a few people like to provide sultanas or other dried fruit. Grated hard cheese and (un)frozen puff pastry are also local favourites. The new insect bar advertised by CJ Wildbird Foods should be ideal – I will have one in reserve for my Blackcaps if they return this winter. In Tring, the big yew in Beech Grove garden (the old BTO HQ) proved a big attraction when the arils (no they are not berries) turned pink and one year we had seven at the end of November.

Chris Mead

Blackcap

Fascinating Facts

Look at their legs

Lots of wintering Blackcaps have been colour-ringed in Britain. These have a metal ring on one leg and a striped ring on the other – one of the stripes is always white. A few bear more complicated combinations but those may be birds ringed in Germany for which there may be a reward. Contact your local ringer or the BTO Ringing Office if you see a colour-ringed bird regularly.

Sexy differences

The Blackcap is unusual in that the two sexes, of adult birds, are instantly recognisable. Most warblers look very much the same whatever their sex. It is rather surprising then to find that males and females are hardly different at all in size – 0.3mm on average longer wing for males according to the BWP (Birds of the Western Palearctic). On the other hand our commonest warbler – the Willow – is much smaller than the Blackcap but male wings are (on average) 5.2mm longer than their mates.

Evolution in action

The migration of the mid-European population to Britain seems to be developing rapidly. Peter Berthold, from Vogelwarte Radolfzell in Germany, has been studying the birds for a long time and has charted its spread. He has shown that the degree of migration in the individual is strongly passed on to their offspring. With captive birds that had an intermediate migration pattern, he was able to breed out this pattern, and to breeding in long distance migration, in only three or four generations.