

# Focus on the Brambling

The Brambling is a fascinating finch present in Britain in varying numbers during the winter. This species is associated in many peoples' minds with beechmast, but flocks of Brambling also occur on arable land and, increasingly, in gardens. *Chris Mead.*

A male Brambling in good plumage is one of the most handsome birds that you are likely to see in your garden. The black head and orange shoulders are the most obvious features when at rest but the white rump, shown by all ages and both sexes, is the characteristic which gives away the presence of the birds within a flying flock. One concealed feature, which you have to be lucky to see, is a stunning lemon-yellow wash under the wing, particularly prominent on the old males. For many people, the Brambling is most likely to be seen as the odd individual within a flock of its close relative, the Chaffinch.

The Dutch names of the two species are brilliant. The Chaffinch is a vink – a very good name just like the harsh chinking call of the bird in flight. The Brambling is a keep – just right for the nasal call they characteristically utter. With this information you will amaze your birdwatching friends by being able to pick out the presence of Bramblings flying over.

Every year some Bramblings reach us from their breeding grounds in Fenno-Scandia, from where there are about 100 ringing recoveries, and a few come from even further to the East. One from Russia was found in Kent during 1975 but the furthest was a Norfolk bird, ringed in 1967, found in the region of Komi in Russia, 3325 kms to the east! The British population in a good year may exceed a million birds and they can be very concentrated – 150,000 birds were recorded using a Merseyside roost in one winter – but the total population of the country in a poor winter may be much lower.

Good numbers in Britain and Ireland are often associated with the occurrence of good crops of beechmast at the same time as poor crops on the Continent. The Beech woods of Central Europe are where these birds winter in massive concentrations. Where there is a good mast crop, the amount of food available runs into tens of tons per hectare. Roosts of many millions are often recorded, 92 million birds have been estimated in one flock! The local radio stations actually put out reassuring broadcasts to the local people to allay panic as the sky was darkened by the flocks moving from their roosting site to the woods.

In gardens where Bramblings are regular visitors, ground-feeding can build up the numbers. They like to be able to survey the area from a tree or bush and can be very flighty – even when they come to feed regularly. My garden flock reached a maximum of 71 birds at the food last spring, feeding on my standard mix of two parts premium seed mix to one of peanut granules. A handful of them tried, rather clumsily, to use the hanging black sunflower seed feeders but most spent their time feeding on the ground.

Cock birds in the autumn have their shiny black heads concealed by fawn feather edges. These wear off rather suddenly in the late winter and so, by the spring, males look very fine. The birds stay with us until late March or early April and you may be lucky enough to find a flock of males in song at this time of the year. The song is not pretty, but is quite a spectacle when almost 500 Brambling are sitting singing in a clump of Beeches in the spring sunshine.

*Chris Mead*



Bramblings by Tommy Holden © BTO

## Brambling Fascinating Facts

### Scourge of the sunflowers

About 20 years ago some Dutch farmers started to grow sunflowers for their seed. One year the harvest was delayed and an early influx of Brambling caused havoc, treating them like a crop of beechmast!

### Road deaths

In the year when the Merseyside roost contained over 150,000 birds there were also massive road deaths of Brambling. The birds were feeding on beechmast under roadside trees, but salt applied to the icy roads debilitated some of the birds, which were then unable to dodge the traffic. Probably 2000 birds perished at this one site.

### A future breeding bird?

The first proved breeding record was in Sutherland in 1920. A nest in the Brecks, about forty years ago, had all the right parasites, but was not accepted as proof of breeding. In the last 15 years there have been about a dozen breeding records, and twice as many possibles, scattered around Scotland and the Eastern half of England. Because they fluctuate a great deal it may be a little premature for us even to hope for this lovely species as a regular member of the British and Irish avifauna.