

Focus on the Bullfinch

Often spotted as pairs feeding together in the hedgerows, Bullfinches prefer a quiet life of 'happy families' to the mixed flocks of our more typical finches. Their numbers have declined greatly in recent years. Some are now turning up at garden feeders, perhaps reflecting their problems in the countryside.

The male Bullfinch is one of the brightest of British birds. Even the pillarbox red of a Robin's breast is put in the shade by the deep dusky rose of a breeding male, especially as it contrasts with the deep black on head and wings and the bright white rump. This sounds as if the birds stick out like sore thumbs but, like many other brightly-coloured birds, they are surprisingly self effacing and the females and young birds are a dull brown. In fact the birds are often first detected by the soft whistles a pair use to keep in touch, rather than by sight. If you keep still they will eventually appear, working their way together down the hedge.

Being both attractive and gentle, these birds are surely loved by everyone? Unfortunately not! Typical finches need protein and oil-rich seeds to survive the winter but the Bullfinch can also digest the buds of trees and bushes as they appear in early spring. It has a longer gut, specially adapted for this herbivorous diet and this can give them a survival advantage over other birds. For instance March and April are months of high mortality for Greenfinches, as measured by ringing recoveries, but the number of Bullfinch recoveries go down at this time of the year as they wax fat on their specialist diet. The bad news is that this brings them into conflict with fruit growers — both commercially and in gardens.

From the sixteenth century until very recently Bullfinches were caught and destroyed by the thousand in orchard counties like Worcestershire and Kent. All kinds of other strategies were tried. Varieties that the Bullfinches preferred were grown in the middle of the commercial varieties to try and distract them. Ash trees were grown near orchards as Bullfinches prefer ash keys when they can find them. Some growers encouraged docks and other weeds for the birds to eat rather than their precious fruit buds.

In fact Bullfinches can eke out a living on all sorts of food and serious damage to fruit buds nearly always happens when other foods are in short supply. Ash keys often have a two year cycle, one good then one bad. Bad years for ash keys were bad news for fruit growers with hungry Bullfinches stripping their trees systematically. The fruit buds eaten by other birds such as tits are generally those infested with an insect grub of some sort. These birds actually do the grower some good by destroying pests rather than potential fruit but Bullfinches in winter are genuine plant-eaters, like the Skylarks that infuriate farmers by grazing seedlings from winter fields. They can often be seen on all sorts of weeds and their strong bills can deal with quite hard foods, even the seeds of dried and shrivelled blackberries, but they really prefer softer seed heads, groundsel and sow-thistle for instance, especially for feeding nestlings. In the breeding season they develop extraordinary pouches in their lower jaws for carrying seeds back to the nest, unlike other finches which carry them in their gullets.

During winter 1999 they were seen in only five percent of our gardens, compared to about eight percent the year before but in general they are using feeders more than ever before. Black sunflower seeds will be taken once these shy birds get used to the feeders and sunflower hearts are very much relished.

This may reflect whatever problems in the countryside have caused their serious decline, which has led to the Bullfinch featuring on the 'Red List' of birds of conservation concern and to the withdrawal of trapping licences in most fruit-growing areas.

Chris Mead



Bullfinch photograph by Tommy Holden © BTO

Bullfinch

Fascinating Facts

Pinker than pink

Every few years birdwatchers report pinker, bigger and even more gorgeous Bullfinches flying into our east coast from Europe. These distinctive Northern Bullfinches are normally only seen in cages on this side of the North Sea. One recent invasion involved many hundreds of birds and the bright and beautiful individuals were seen inland as far as the Midlands and the Home Counties.

Bullfinch in a pet shop

In the nineteenth century vast numbers of wild songbirds were caught and caged. The favourites were Linnets and Goldfinches but Bullfinches were also popular. In 1850, Mayhew estimated that 70,000 each of Linnet and Goldfinch and 30,000 Bullfinches were caught around the City of London each year. Others were imported from Germany where 'piping Bullfinches' were taught in their first autumn to sing tunes! Another popular 'trick' was to feed caged Bullfinches exclusively on hemp seeds which turns their plumage a deep black. Now caged Bullfinches have to be fitted with special closed rings while they are still tiny chicks, to prove they were bred in captivity.

Going quietly

Bullfinches in Britain have been declining for many years, by 62% in fact between 1972 and 1996. At first sight they are not an obvious species to be affected by the intensification of farming. However their hedgerow habitat has suffered from flailing and neglect as well as destruction. Even where hedges remain, their plants are stunted by spray drift or cut at the wrong time of year, destroying the fruits.