

Focus on the Chaffinch

Abundant and widespread throughout the British Isles, the attractively-coloured Chaffinch is familiar to most gardeners. They frequently visit gardens throughout the year and are easy to see, being fairly confident birds, although they generally prefer ground feeding to the bird table. *Chris Mead.*

Males are distinctive with their pink fronts (belly, breast, throat, chin and cheeks) blue-grey heads, rich chestnut backs and wings strongly barred with black and white. Judging from your letters, the more dowdy females can be confusing if seen alone, but when they accompany males the similarity in shape and behaviour is clear and this is the best way to get used to recognising them. Their delicate browns and olives are more grey in overall tone than the sandy browns of the smaller female House Sparrow and they share the males' black and white wings, clearly seen in flight. The males are rather bigger than the females but very variable, the biggest ones in Britain are 20% longer in the wing than the smallest.

At this time of year, our own 7.5 million resident pairs are joined by further millions from the East which start to arrive in late September. Probably ten million or more of them winter here, they come from Scandinavia, Finland and Germany, some via Holland and Belgium but most flying straight across the North Sea. On average these visitors are bigger and the males are more mauve than the brick-pink of our native birds but these are not completely reliable characteristics. Big winter flocks in fields are likely to be visitors but flocks in woodland might be natives or immigrants – or a mixture of both.

Chaffinches feed on all sorts of seeds but beech mast is a favourite and the supply is poorer this year than last, so they are more likely to flock into gardens this winter. They tend to choose the smaller seeds – if they are around in numbers but there are lots of large food items left, consider adjusting your seed mixture! In my own garden many of them do not use the Black Sunflower seed feeders directly but prefer to pick up the spilled seeds from the ground.

It amazes me that such a common bird raises its young each year apparently without building nests! Of course they do, but they are so well-concealed that I have personally never been able to find them, although my daughter has developed a really good technique – from the back of her pony! BTO staff

member Stephen Browne studies breeding chaffinches locally and has found only about a third as many fledged young in 1996 as in 1995. Despite this I am sure we will see more in gardens than in last winter because of the lack of beech mast.

Ringling shows that Chaffinches are long-lived for small birds, which is logical as their breeding season is rather short and many make do with a single brood, and that after possibly travelling a short distance in their first few months most are really loyal to their home areas. One bird was found squashed on the road in Reading over ten years after it had been ringed from a trap less than 200 yards away.

Chris Mead

Chaffinch

Fascinating Facts

Look at legs - 1

Around 25,000 Chaffinches are ringed each year in Britain and Ireland and many more are ringed abroad so you may well see a ringed bird in your garden. Please do not try to catch any bird you see with a ring but do always look at the legs of any bird you find dead. If it has a ring the BTO will appreciate full details, with your own name and address so that they can tell you where it was ringed. It takes 6 - 8 weeks for details of a British or Irish ringed bird to come through, longer for one ringed abroad.

Look at legs - 2

Most wild birds do not show symptoms of disease but one nasty condition that affects Chaffinch legs and feet is a fibrous growth called a papilloma, actually a viral cancer. I have found them on as many as one in 30 birds inspected although usually the infection rate is less than 1%. These tumours may regress, I have ringed birds with papillomas that were absent again on subsequent recoveries, but in serious cases death is inevitable.

Beau Chaffinch

The male Chaffinch in spring has particularly beautiful feathers on the head, but these are not freshly grown. Over winter, the concealing brown fringes wear off feathers grown the previous autumn, to reveal the pale blue-grey of the crown and the black of the forehead. These are striking badges for the birds to wear when courting and defending their territories but there is no point in being so conspicuous in the winter when they are flocking. Incidentally the scientific name *coelebs* means "bachelor". Linnaeus coined the name because most Chaffinches that remain in Scandinavia for the winter are males.

Chaffinch by Tommy Holden © BTO



Confident crumb-hunters around the table legs of summer tea gardens, ground-feeding Chaffinches in winter play the same waiting game below bird tables and feeder posts.