

Focus on the Goldcrest

The Goldcrest is the tiniest bird that visits our gardens, more frequently than is often realised. In fact they are the smallest birds occurring in Europe, yet capable of travelling and breeding prodigiously and maintaining their population, despite our cold weather.

The Goldcrest is a really tiny bird. Its wing is quite a bit shorter than my little finger and most adults weigh less than the six and a half grams of a new ten pence piece. For those of us who still haven't quite gone metric, you would get nearly a hundred hungry Goldcrests to the pound. Goldcrests are not doing as well now as they were in the days before decimalisation, although I'm sure this is nothing to do with their getting their change muddled up. In fact the population decline is a serious matter and the BTO has issued a 'High Alert' for this species. There are about half a million breeding territories in Britain and these probably produce a population of a couple of million birds at the start of the winter. This is swelled by a further million visitors from the Continent. Even three million Goldcrests will only weigh in at about 15 tonnes, just half a load of one big articulated lorry!

Goldcrests are serial nesters, which does not mean they nest in wheat fields! Usually when a species has successive broods the parents get the young from the first nest out of the way before starting on the next. Not so the Goldcrest. The female regularly starts to lay the second clutch of eggs before the first brood of nestlings have fledged! The male does the feeding while the female builds the new nest and gets down to repeating the whole process of breeding. The nest is very neat and is basically a spherical hammock in the outer twigs of a spruce or fir tree. The clutch is enormous for such a small bird, generally between 9 and 11 eggs and the chicks, when they hatch, are generally layered in the nest!

This incredibly productive breeding with each pair potentially fledging 20 chicks enables them to exploit the long productive days of summer to their full and is vital to maintain the population. Huge numbers of Goldcrests are lost to cold weather every year. After very cold winters there may be only a quarter of the previous autumn's population or even fewer surviving to nest. However their huge productivity allows Goldcrests to take advantage of any subsequent mild winters and their populations can build up quickly. Losses are generally recouped in just three or four years.

Such a tiny bird would seem to be no candidate for long distance migration. Our own birds wander but do not really migrate properly. However ringing has shown regular movements from countries around the North Sea and Baltic into Britain for the winter. One has even reached us from Russia and several from Poland although Norway, Sweden and Finland are their usual origins. It seems amazing that any of them survive two long journeys as well as the cold weather but some clearly do as several Goldcrests ringed here in winter have been found back home.

Chris Mead



Goldcrest photo by Tommy Holden © BTO

Goldcrest

Fascinating Facts

Girls from Boys.

Sexes can be told apart by their crowns. If there is any ruby red visible among the bright colours, you are looking at a male Goldcrest. If you can only see pale gold then the bird is a female. Outside the breeding season males do sometimes hide their tell tale glory but generally you will notice a little red if you carry on watching as they tend to flash it every now and again. There is another similar species that just might come to your garden, the much rarer Firecrest. This has a more obvious crown with a really distinct eye stripe so there should not be any difficulty if you can get a good view, although this is not always easy. Firecrests do breed here but in very small numbers.

'The King of the Birds'

.. and 'The Woodcock's Pilot' are both traditional epithets for the Goldcrest, the latter because the first migrating Goldcrests to be seen on the East coast announced the imminent arrival of the eagerly awaited Woodcocks. In the well-known 'King of the Birds' legend, the birds all agreed that whichever could fly the highest would be king, but a small bird cheated by hitching a ride hidden in the feathers of an Eagle. This cunning victory is sometimes ascribed to the Goldcrest rather than the Wren, possibly because the Goldcrest was known as the Golden-Crested Wren before the present name was officially adopted in 1883. Further support for the Goldcrest's candidacy comes from its Latin name *Regulus*, which means something like 'Kinglet', in fact Golden-Crowned Kinglet was another alternative name. However, in mediaeval Latin the word *regulus* was used for the bird we now call a Wren! 'Herring Spink' is another nickname deriving from migration, it was used by Suffolk sailors who found tired Goldcrests gathering in the rigging of their fishing boats out on the North Sea and also described this bird as the 'Tot o'er Seas'.

They Can't Exist!

Various people have worked out theoretical limits to animal sizes and shapes for them to exist under natural conditions. According to some calculations bumble-bees cannot fly but they clearly can and do! Estimates of how small a bird can be and still be able to survive freezing conditions have been made and the Goldcrest is too small by a factor of about two! In freezing conditions they undoubtedly are at the limit and have to feed constantly to keep themselves warm.