

Focus on the Goldfinch

It used to be quite unusual to see these exotic and charming birds in any garden. Now, better quality bird foods attract them even to small suburban plots, especially in spring when there is very little natural food for specialist seed eaters in the countryside.

The tinkling, ringing call notes of an appropriately-named “charm” of Goldfinches keeping in contact with each other while feeding used to fill the air around patches of seeding thistles in the autumn or teasels in the winter. However this characteristic and easily-recognised sound can be heard more and more in gardens now that seeding weeds are few and far between on farmland and smaller, oil-rich, black sunflower seeds are available to attract these specialist seed eaters.

Goldfinches were recorded in only 4% of gardens 25 years ago. Even now only six or seven per cent of the thousands of gardens surveyed for Garden BirdWatch record Goldfinches in December but as many as 27% of gardens surveyed in the first week of May have them, as discussed on page one. In some gardens they have learnt to feed on peanuts but most still prefer to take smaller seeds. Black sunflower is a firm favourite once they have discovered your garden but many people have had real success attracting them with the tiny niger seeds. I keep a store of these in case birds come in to feed on daisy or dandelion plants seeding in the lawn, although I must say it is a little frustrating to be asked to write a focus on the Goldfinch because this is one species I have so far been unable to attract to food in my large rural garden!

This could be because there are plentiful seeding weeds in the surrounding countryside, much of which is managed in a bird-friendly manner. Where farms are heavily sprayed with herbicides or suburban development has eliminated ‘waste ground’ the birds have to resort to gardens. Several Garden BirdWatchers have been able to retain them for several weeks by scattering niger and black sunflower seeds about — reporting up to 200 Goldfinches feeding in flocks on suburban lawns which must be a real joy!

Successfully feeding these birds in gardens may well gradually alter their pattern of migration. Probably less than a quarter of Britain’s Goldfinches stay at home for the winter at the moment. The chances of resident birds nesting successfully should be better than those of migrant birds. They will already be in place to bag the best nest sites as soon as the weather is suitable and they do not have to make a long, risky and energy-

consuming journey. In Canada and the USA, feeding seeds such as niger to finches has caused some of the species concerned to start wintering much further north than they did before. Many of these birds are able to survive cold weather and short days if their food supply is good enough, but if garden feeding suddenly stops they could be in trouble. The distance to the next available source of food could well be too great for them to fly before they starve. **Chris Mead**

Goldfinch

Fascinating Facts

Red in the face

These lovely birds all look superficially identical but in fact their very complex plumage includes features which tell the sexes apart, and young birds from old. Before the autumn moult youngsters have no red on their heads but as soon as this appears, subtle differences between the sexes can be seen. The red on the head of the males extends beyond the back of the eye and the nasal bristles are blacker. Harder to see are the lesser coverts — small feathers on the leading edge of the wing. These are blacker in the males and tipped grey-brown in the females. First year birds have some duller wing feathers.

Worth their weight in gold?

No, not quite, but the Goldfinch was a favourite cage bird when selling wild birds was legal and captive-bred birds are still popular. Goldfinches seem to get quite used to living in a cage and their cheerful tinkling calls, understated warbling song and bright plumage made them irresistible objects of desire. Victorians even trained them to do tricks for visitors! The favourite way of catching them was in double compartment traps. One compartment had a call bird (a Goldfinch one had caught earlier) and the other a lid which closed as soon as the wild bird trod on the perch inside the trap. These are called ‘chardonneret’ traps after the French name for the bird.

Better late than never

The Goldfinch is a seriously late breeder. Eggs are laid from mid-May right into August and some pairs may be able to raise three broods in the year. The nest itself is very neat and cosy and is often placed in the outermost twigs of trees when they are in full leaf and normally at quite a height. Frequently they are found in fruit trees but this is probably because one looks hard at one’s fruit trees to see how the fruit is doing! I have even found them in ornamental cherries in town centres within feet of major roads. These birds can keep a low profile, despite their bright colouring and it is pretty infuriating, when the leaves fall off the trees, to find empty nests in the garden when you had no idea the birds had been around!



Goldfinch photograph by Tommy Holden © BTO