

Focus on the Greenfinch

By far and away the most widely distributed and common finch in Britain is the Chaffinch with over five million territories. The second most common finch is the Greenfinch with 530,000 territories and this is one of the real garden bird specialists.

Chris Mead.

The Greenfinch is one of the species that has made the very sensible change from being a farmland bird to one which has whole-heartedly embraced the human habits of park and garden. In my young days, 40 years ago, Greenfinches were birds that were found in scrubland and hedgerow in the summer, but in the winter they were found in farmland flocks. Greenfinches started coming to some gardens in Britain at the turn of the century. This behaviour then spread both throughout the country and on to the continent.

They take seed, they like peanuts (even in hanging feeders), but heaven for a Greenfinch seems to be sunflower seed. In Tring in 1963, there had been no sightings of Greenfinch coming to food in my garden, but they were down and feeding within two hours of putting out the first sunflower seed. These big striped seeds took the birds several seconds to open. Now the highly nutritive and smaller black sunflowers can be hulled in a trice (or even faster!). Many may think me fanatical, as in my Norfolk garden I fed the birds about 1.2 tonnes of black sunflower seeds last year, most of them eaten by Greenfinches. The local birds continue to visit throughout the whole year.

This is one of the birds that year round feeding seems to suit best. My birds are apparently breeding a good fortnight, or even three weeks earlier than traditionally and they bring their young to the feeders very early in May. Ringing shows that further newly fledged birds continue to arrive right through May, June, July and well into August. There were even some rather juvenile birds in September! Possibly, there are some birds rearing three broods and using the black sunflower seeds as a guaranteed food supply for their seed-eating chicks.

Stopping feeding in the spring is very bad for this species. April is the time of peak ringing recoveries from birds found dead. This suggests that they are really under pressure at that time of the year when the winter food stores have been depleted and very few seeds from spring flowering are available. Hanging feeders are fine, and they are better than ground feeding during the spring and summer when the grass is growing.

I am one of the world's worst nest finders but I have come across a few Greenfinch nests. They have often been in Cupressus bushes and when the chicks are well grown, they have been rimmed with a ring of faeces. The females may often start the second nest before the chicks from the first have fledged. Indeed, there are records of the hen actually starting laying before her previous brood has left the nest. In these circumstances the male ends up doing a lot of work!

Breeding areas are easy to find when the males are singing their drawn-out and wheezing song. Greenfinches often breed quite close together and there may be half a dozen nests in a small area of scrub. What many people do not realise is that often these belong to bigamist males and that the birds may have to search for food up to several kilometres from their nest sites.

Chris Mead



Greenfinch - Tommy Holden © BTO

One of our most abundant finches, the Greenfinch, has become a common garden feeding bird and is particularly fond of sunflower seeds.

Greenfinch

Fascinating Facts

Sex and the single Greenfinch

Basically sexing Greenfinches on the feeder is quite easy. The males have much more yellow in the wing and tail than the female. From May to August or even September, juveniles have stripy body plumage. Age from autumn onwards is rather more difficult, but birds with sandy-coloured tips to the small feathers visible on the upper part of the wing are youngsters.

The oldest bird

Amazing though it may seem, with well over a million Greenfinches ringed and almost 25,000 recoveries reported, the oldest recorded bird was one that lost a wing in an accident two years after ringing. Well protected and fed, it lasted for more than eleven years in captivity, far longer than wild birds.

Moderate movers

Many Greenfinches move around during the winter over an area which may extend for 50 or 100 kms. There are, however, regular movements of some birds from the home counties down to the southwest peninsula. Ringing recoveries show that some birds traverse the Irish Sea and a few move to the continent.