

Focus on the Siskin

Siskin is the success story of the last 25 years from Britain's many bird gardeners. The Siskin is a small, attractive greenish finch weighing in at less than half that of their bigger, conical-billed cousin, the Greenfinch. Males have a distinctive black crown but the females are stripy. Both sexes have a pale yellow flash in the wing.

When the BTO started to record garden birds 25 years ago through the Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS), only seven per cent of these gardens reported any Siskins at all. The GBFS survey is based on very detailed recordings in about 200 gardens. Last year an amazing 59% of GBFS sites had at least one record of Siskins. (See page 2 for the results of the last three years of the Garden bird Enquiry.) So what has happened?

First it is certain that there are more Siskins about now than there used to be. One only has to look at the change between our first Atlas of breeding birds, covering 1968-1972, and the new atlas for 1988-1991. Siskins now breed over large areas of the countryside where they were a rare visitor 25 years ago. And the reason is not hard to discover – Siskins have thin pointed bills which enable them to feed on the seeds from open pine cones. Lots of pine plantations have been planted and come to maturity over the last three decades – lots of food for Siskins.

Even the few Siskins which used to occur in the south-east of England never used to come into gardens. That is unless the garden had Birch or Alder trees in them – sources of natural food. Yet now they flock to peanuts all over the country. The first thing that has changed is our habits in feeding birds – 30 years ago most peanuts were hung up in their shells and not presented to the birds shelled and in wire or plastic mesh. So it is not surprising that the Siskins did not feed on them!

However about 30 years ago, in the Weybridge area of Surrey, some feeders of garden birds started reporting Siskins coming to red plastic-mesh nut bags. They were in areas where Siskins already visited gardens for natural food – birch seed. Two theories exist for why this started. The first is that a filled red plastic nut bag looks like a huge alder cone – the other is that the birds were simply inquisitive and were coming down to see what the tits were feeding on.

Siskins are seasonal birds in gardens in the south-east of England and their attendance varies from year to year. 1995 could be the best-ever year, even exceeding 1994. They usually begin to visit gardens in January and peak in early April – nearly all are gone by the last week of the month. This is explained partly by the birds using up the natural foods and partly by their need to put on fat for migration. Recoveries of birds fitted with BTO rings show that most of them go to Scotland or to Scandinavia to breed. There are over a thousand observations of ringed birds that have travelled more than 100 km in Britain and Ireland. A further 150 observations have been made of ringed birds travelling to Scandinavia and the Baltic as well over 300 in central and southern Europe. There are even four examples of birds travelling to North Africa to overwinter in different areas in successive winters.

Chris Mead



Male Siskins (top) show a black cap, while females and immatures (bottom) are duller in appearance. Siskins have a thin pointed bill which enables them to feed on the seeds in pine cones. Siskins are much smaller than their stockier cousin the Greenfinch.

Siskins Tommy Holden © BTO

Siskin

Fascinating Facts

Head down feeding

The majority of birds feeding on hanging food spend most of their time the right way up. Siskins are not bothered one way or the other and often head down.

Weather differences

If you live near conifer plantations watch out for lots of Siskins when the weather is wet. Rain closes the cones on the conifers and the birds have to find alternative sources of food.

Post prandial gatherings

If you have a good number of Siskins coming to feed watch out for birds, which have eaten their fill and are loafing around in the tree whilst their 'high energy' meal digests.

Close observation has shown that five or six minutes of feeding may be followed by half an hour of inactivity.