

Focus on the Yellowhammer

Nowadays the only flashes of yellow in most gardens are the wings of the Greenfinches but, until recently, the Yellowhammer was the commoner bird in the countryside. Both these seed-eaters are in trouble on farmland, but Yellowhammers seem much more reluctant to adapt to our garden feeders.

The Yellowhammer is sometimes called the Yellow Bunting which is perfectly reasonable as being in the same genus (*Emberiza*) as the Reed Bunting, that's exactly what it is. This is one of the few British bird species whose song is well-known through being immortalised in a phrase: "a little bit of bread and NO cheeeese". However, any birds with yellow in their wings in most gardens are more likely to be Greenfinch (66% of gardens) or even Goldfinch (14%) than Yellowhammer (1% only). Indeed the yellow of the Yellowhammer is not really in the wings but generally over the breast and head of the male (not so much on the female). Both sexes have white outer tail feathers (a useful feature to look for) and the rumps of the birds are a rather distinctive chestnut colour. They are normally birds found in scrubby areas and along hedgerows in the countryside.

When I was researching my book *The State of the Nations' Birds* I put the British breeding population at 1,200,000 pairs but with a 44% decline between 1988 and 1998 (according to BTO Common Birds Census figures) apparently continuing I would expect the total British population to be around 750,000 now, at the most. Many people tell me they no longer see them out in the countryside at all and some feel that even this figure is optimistic.

There are still flocks to be seen in the winter, often where game birds are fed and now also in weedy areas of 'setaside'. Winter food can bring in birds from a wide area and ringers have been known to catch 500 (or even in one case over 1,000) at the same place in the course of a single winter. Sadly, these instances were all many years ago. Only about 3,000 are now ringed throughout the year in the whole of Britain and Ireland. Yellowhammers were often found out in the most exposed fields during blizzards, feeding where the ground was being cleared by the wind. Now that many fields are very clean of weed seeds, the birds would probably be unable to find enough food to keep them alive while searching.

The birds keep together as pairs through the breeding season and the very colourful male sings from above the nest site in the bottom of a hawthorn bush, a bramble patch or a hedge. The breeding season does not start very early. A few will have laid their first clutch by the end of April, and they carry on into August with generally two but sometimes three broods. I have never collected eggs, even in my boyhood, but the marvellously-marked eggs of buntings might have tempted me. Some look like miniature Jackson Pollocks in three dimensions. The clutches are generally quite small, most have four eggs. The female gets on with her next clutch quickly, but while she builds a new nest and lays more eggs the male will still be looking after and feeding the previous brood for a fortnight after they leave the nest. Chris Mead most of their nest predation when they have young themselves, and they only produce one brood a year. Most of their main prey species have several broods, including some before and some after the most dangerous period.

Chris Mead

Yellowhammer Fascinating Facts

Rare relative

The Cirl Bunting is a close relative of the Yellowhammer that used to be quite widespread in southern Britain. Males are very distinctive but all can be distinguished by a grey-olive rump. A hundred years ago Cirl Buntings were common south of the Thames, local in the Midlands and regular as far north as Yorkshire. There may have been as many as 10,000 breeding pairs. The collapse southwards began in about 1930. By the time of our first Breeding Atlas (1968-72) they were very patchy, recorded in just 173 10-km squares. The second BTO/SOC/IWC Breeding Atlas project (1988-91) found them in only 29! The population may have been fewer than 150 birds in 1989. Farmers have been encouraged to provide weed rich stubbles, and the RSPB has organised winter feeding (sponsored by our Garden BirdWatch sponsor CJ Wildbird Foods Ltd). The population has responded well and was estimated at 380 pairs in 1997. They are even regular in some southwestern gardens, including Tony Soper's!

Tracking the decline

At the end of the 19th century Yellowhammers bred commonly throughout mainland Britain and Ireland, in some numbers on Orkney and sporadically on the Outer Hebrides but not on Shetland. In Ireland they had begun to withdraw from the West and North by about 1940 but there were few gaps in the first Breeding Atlas. Just 20 years later, with the second Atlas, there were huge losses (over 37% of 10-km squares) with great swathes of the country missing out on these once common birds. In Scotland breeding ceased on Orkney and in the Western Isles 30 years ago and the birds have been lost from many West coast and upland 10-km squares as well as upland areas in North-west England and in Wales. The timing of the recent decline is late compared with other species but the cause is almost certainly to do with the intensification of agriculture and the use of herbicides and pesticides.

Home is where the hammer is

Ringling shows that many birds are astonishingly mobile, but not Yellowhammers. In over 90 years of bird ringling in Britain and Ireland with over 130,000 Yellowhammers ringed and over 650 reports, there are only three records abroad (two in France and the other in the Netherlands) and one found here from Norway. Within Britain only four moved further than 100 km and 86% of all birds recovered were found within 10 km of where they had been marked.