

# Seasonal round-up

Spring 2005 comprised an uncomfortable mix of extreme weather events that created challenging conditions for the UK's breeding birds. Late spring frosts produced a 'go-stop-go' breeding season for many resident songbirds. Winds from the north in April slowed the arrival of many summer visitors, with various warblers, flycatchers, hirundines (Swallow and martins) and Cuckoo in short supply. The stifling heat from mid-June meant that much nesting activity faded prematurely in July.

## Firecrest and Hawfinch among April highlights

A changeable April flattered to deceive. Prolonged thundery downpours at times, leading to flooded homes and gardens in south and west Scotland, northern England and Devon, helped to reinvigorate tired lawns and warm cool soils. Cold episodes, around 7–8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, with sleet and snow briefly on hills and downs, combined with northerly winds, held back many spring migrants. However, a few pioneer Chiffchaff, Swallow and Sand Martin had been reported egg laying by the final day of the month. Homeowners were delighted to note brief visits by transient Hoopoe (Cornwall and Wiltshire), Rock Thrush (Cornwall), Firecrest (Buckinghamshire) and Hawfinch (Suffolk). Others were thrilled to chart overflying Whooper Swan (Isle of Man), Great White Egret (London), Osprey (Cambridgeshire) and Black Kite (Cornwall and Orkney).

Peregrines bred widely alongside Man, successfully so in Bristol, Nottingham, London and other cities. Crossbill and Siskin, having overwintered comfortably in UK conifer forests, fuelled by an exceptional seed crop, brought newly-fledged family parties to gardens in the Welsh Marches, Radnor, Durham and Grampian. Whereas the frosty spell of mid-February to mid-March had put many gardening and nesting operations 'on-hold', the changeable mix of weather in April initially helped many gardeners, alongside foraging parent Rook, Mistle Thrush and Starling, with hungry broods to satisfy.



Reports from around the country suggest it has been a mixed season for tits rearing families in nestboxes. Young Blue Tit by Garden BirdWatcher Andrew Hyde

## May heat spurs on tired migrants

May blew hot and cold, to the discomfort of birds and gardeners. Temperatures fractionally above average (up 0.1°C by day), ended the recent sequence of unusually warm Mays (1997–2004), the driving force behind the UK trend towards warmer springs. Genuine 'spring-like' heat on May Day, boosted garden centre sales, the emergence of garden butterflies (with brimstone, holly blue and orange tip featuring strongly), while many broods of Robin, Blackbird and Wren fledged successfully. On the debit side, episodes of high pressure and clear night skies led to damaging frosts that hit fruit blossom and spring bedding, while reports came in of chilled moribund broods of Dunnock, Song Thrush and Chaffinch. An overnight low of –6.3°C at Tulloch Bridge near Fort William was the coldest night so late in the season since 1956.

Ongoing northwesterly winds contrived to hold back and displace summer visitors and concerns intensified as Cuckoo, Willow Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher failed to return to former regular garden breeding haunts. A number of migrant species that would normally be found breeding on the Continent 'overshot' and turned up here in gardens on the wrong side of the English Channel. These included Woodchat Shrike (Dorset), Golden Oriole (London), Common Rosefinch (Durham) and Serin (Dorset and Northamptonshire). Quail were noted widely, in garden grasslands, banksides and allotments, from Gloucestershire to Argyll, part of a modest influx from the Continent.

## Smouldering June suits Swifts and flycatchers

June was one of the hottest on record (only 1992 and 2003 have been warmer in recent years), with daily temperatures some 1.6°C above average. It was, however, a month of two halves with a cool, changeable first half far from 'flaming'. Ground frosts early in the month checked egg-laying and development of young tits, thrushes and warblers. Some Garden BirdWatchers described feeders busier with tits, corvids and finches than they had been during the previous relatively quiet winter months.

Mid-month, a welcome moist southwesterly Atlantic rainbelt crossed the UK but failed to deliver sufficient rain to much of the south, where local hosepipe restrictions were in place. Stressed badger, hedgehog and fox, devoid of earthworms and other soil invertebrates, scavenged for scraps closer to buildings. Progressively drier soils posed challenging conditions for nest building and repeat brooding House Martin, thrushes, Starling and Magpie. Ponds and bird baths proved to be increasingly popular, with Starling and Blackbird very often monopolizing activities, though Little Owl and Nightingale were surprise visitors. Increasingly humid heat in the third week saw temperatures exceeding 30°C countrywide on 19<sup>th</sup> and promoted a wealth of aerial insects which boosted breeding prospects for Swift, House Martin and flycatchers. Fierce electrical storms surged up from France on 29/30<sup>th</sup>, with monsoon-like deluges producing a Glastonbury Festival mudlark, a spectacular backdrop to the Trafalgar celebrations, relief for many humans and a spur for multiple-brooded resident songbirds.

## Owls flourish as tits falter

July started in a disturbed fashion with an 'autumnal' low bringing copious rain and 50 knot winds to many areas. Blue Tit and Great Tit successfully fledged late repeat and second broods from garden nestboxes. Box occupation rates were generally high, reflecting good over-winter survival of adults, but many Garden BirdWatchers reported the loss of whole broods, a consequence of the weather and lack of food. Other species fared rather better. Small mammal populations were locally buoyant, having also benefited from the winter surplus of seeds and fruit, and this led to large broods of Tawny Owl and Barn Owl (typically 2-4 and 5-7 young fledging per nest respectively). Searing heat mid-month saw nesting activity among thrushes, Wren and others, fade sharply. Roving mixed flocks of tits, warblers and Treecreeper were modest in size, hinting at a mediocre breeding season for songbirds overall. Plentiful sunshine helped to ripen soft fruits and berries but yields were modest which might suggest potentially testing times ahead for the UK's birds this winter, with busier bird tables a real prospect. Indeed, Woodpigeon, Greenfinch, Tree Sparrow and House Sparrow were quick to bring late broods to feeding stations in late July and the start of August.

David Glue

## The Quarter's weather

**April** has a reputation for being a month in which the seasons can be switched on and off within the blink of an eye. April 2005 proved that quite conclusively. There was a great deal of temperature fluctuation throughout the month, with the beginning and end being the warmest. In between we had a real mix, from rain and snow through to frost.

**May** can best be summed up as often cool and changeable, but with well below average rainfall. The low volume of rain is likely to increase the concern of water companies over the continuing lack of rainfall over the past eight months. A hot and dry spell this summer could mean restrictions being introduced in places if the current trend continues.

**June** could best be described as a month of two halves; the first half dominated by cool and often cloudy conditions to which we have become accustomed during the spring months, and the second half finally seeing summer arrive in style, with temperatures soaring into the eighties for many of us.

Colin Harwood



Late June on the Norfolk coast by Mike Toms

## Spring 2005 (Q2)

Spring 2005 (Q2)			Spring averages (1995-2004)	
Position	Species	Reporting rate	Position	Reporting rate
1	Blackbird	0.967	1.0	0.97
2	Blue Tit	0.919	2.0	0.91
3	Greenfinch	0.831	4.8	0.79
4	Robin	0.819	5.5	0.79
5	Woodpigeon	0.809	10.2	0.68
6	Dunnock	0.796	8.0	0.76
7	Great Tit	0.772	8.1	0.76
8	Collared Dove	0.771	5.3	0.79
9	Chaffinch	0.770	8.5	0.75
10	House Sparrow	0.759	4.4	0.82
11	Starling	0.694	8.2	0.75
12	Goldfinch	0.548	16.6	0.28
13	Magpie	0.545	12.0	0.55
14	Coal Tit	0.368	14.3	0.34
15	Wren	0.328	14.8	0.33
16	Song Thrush	0.326	14.0	0.37
17	Jackdaw	0.296	16.5	0.30
18	Carrion Crow	0.289	16.9	0.29
19	G.S. Woodpecker	0.258	18.9	0.21
20	Feral Pigeon	0.134	21.1	0.13
21	Bullfinch	0.128	27.3	0.08
22	Long-tailed Tit	0.123	23.5	0.11
23	Jay	0.115	21.5	0.12
24	Nuthatch	0.106	24.7	0.10
25	Sparrowhawk	0.103	27.5	0.08
26	Rook	0.100	22.3	0.11
27	Pied Wagtail	0.079	24.1	0.10
28	Mistle Thrush	0.051	26.4	0.08
29	Tree Sparrow	0.049	30.7	0.05
30	Siskin	0.044	27.1	0.08
31	Goldcrest	0.043	32.6	0.04
32	Blackcap	0.040	30.3	0.05
33	Yellowhammer	0.033	32.6	0.04
34	Tawny Owl	0.024	35.6	0.02
35	Reed Bunting	0.014	38.9	0.01
36	Black H. Gull	0.014	35.9	0.02
37	Marsh Tit	0.014	37.5	0.02
38	Treecreeper	0.012	37.3	0.01
39	Marsh/Willow Tit	0.011	33.3	0.04
40	Brambling	0.005	38.1	0.01
41	Willow Tit	0.005	40.0	0.01
42	Redwing	0.002	41.2	<0.01
43	Fieldfare	0.001	40.5	<0.01

This table shows the rankings for our 'core' species for Q2 2005 (Apr-Jun). The reporting rate shows the occurrence of each species across all the GBW gardens for which we received completed forms. If you multiply the reporting rate by 100 you get the % of gardens with the species for this quarter (e.g. Wren would be 32.8%). Blue columns show a long-term average for all spring quarters (1995-2004). Willow Tit & Marsh Tit have been recorded separately online since December 2002 but are grouped together on the paper forms. A technical problem with the data load at the time of going to press means that this table is based only on web submissions.