

Birdlife in your Garden

Members of the finch family are frequent visitors to our gardens and feeding stations. Chaffinches, Greenfinches, Bullfinches and Goldfinches quite commonly make use of seed offered in hanging feeders, on bird tables or on the ground. In recent years, these species have been joined by another member of this group, the Lesser Redpoll.

These are small finches, about the size of a Blue Tit, with warm brown plumage, streaked in black on the back, and with a small black “bib”. The bill, while typically finch-shaped, is small and sharp-pointed, the wings show buff bars and the tail is dark and forked. Most notably, the “forehead” of both sexes shows a patch of red, which gives the bird its name (from “poll”, meaning “head” in early English, a usage also found in “poll tax” and “pollard”). During the breeding season, a pinkish hue extends over the throat and neck of the male but this is much less apparent in the hen bird.

Redpolls are resident in Shropshire. They primarily breed in the south and south-west of the county (including the Strettons area) but are more generally widespread in winter. The seeds of birch, alder, willow, larch and spruce, as well as small weed seeds, make up their diet, but they may also take small invertebrates during the breeding season to provide protein to their growing chicks. Most feeding is done among the branches of trees, in remarkable acrobatic displays in which they are upside-down most of the time! Redpolls demonstrate extraordinary coordination of beak and feet which permits them to hold down and pull towards themselves tasty food items. They may also occasionally feed on the ground. In gardens, their small delicate bills permit them to extract the fine seeds from nyger seed feeders.

Their numbers exploded during the Second World War, when woodlands were cut for the war effort and birches became abundant in the cut areas, and after the War, with the expansion of conifer plantations. With the regeneration of deciduous woodland, during which birches were crowded out by other trees, and the intensification of agriculture,



Lesser Redpoll Chris Knight's Birdlife Garden

which deprived them of grass and other weed seeds, the species entered a decline, and numbers throughout the UK are now only a tenth of what they were in the 1970s. For this reason, the Lesser Redpoll is “red-listed” as a species of conservation concern.

They mainly visit gardens in late winter and early spring. Arrival dates have been getting earlier and the numbers showing up at seed feeders have increased fifteen-fold in the last five years, which is welcome news for this threatened species. They are gregarious and may flock with Siskins and Goldfinches, so check out those winter finch flocks carefully and add Lesser Redpoll to your garden bird list.

John Arnfield

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