

Goldcrest

Species focus

by Kate Risely



Goldcrest, by Paul Sterry/NPL

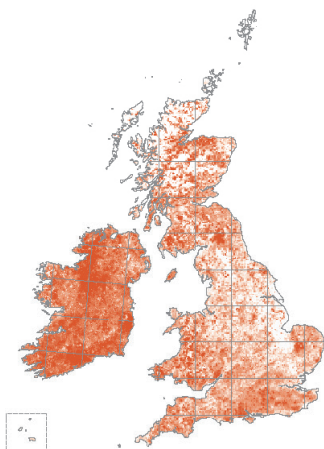
Goldcrests are insectivores and as such are rarely seen on bird feeders. They are also rendered inconspicuous by their tiny size and quiet, high-pitched voices. Wrens may be a similar size, but their powerful song means that they are much less likely to go unnoticed! Goldcrests are more visible in gardens in the winter, when harsh conditions may force them to look for sustenance from bird feeders, and they are also likely to be seen accompanying winter feeding flocks of Blue and Great Tits.

In the breeding season Goldcrests are strongly associated with conifers, though they do not require a large area, and can be found nesting in solitary Yew trees in churchyards or gardens. They may not always be visible, but the song, a soft, repetitive 'squeaky wheel', ending in a flourish, is easily recognisable. Unfortunately, as we age the first part of our hearing range to go is the highest register, and many older birdwatchers lament the fact that they can no longer hear Goldcrests.

FIRE AND GOLD

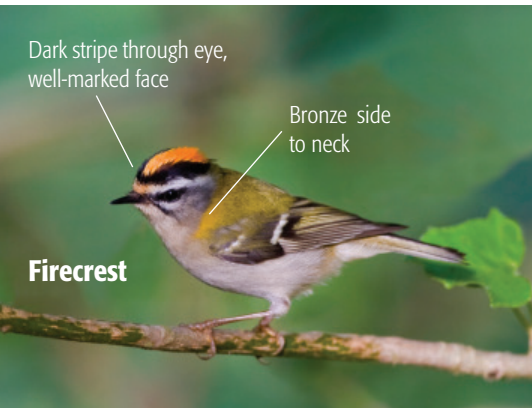
A **very similar** species is the closely-related Firecrest (see below). These are much less common, and generally only seen in south-eastern areas during the breeding season, and along the coasts during migration periods and in winter.

Firecrests have a much more strongly-marked face pattern, with a white supercilium and a black line through the eye. This is quite different from a Goldcrest's face, which is plain with an obvious round, dark eye. 'Crests' are often not easy to see, but even a glimpse of the face of a bird foraging high up in a tree top will be enough to confirm the species. If you are lucky enough to get a close view, you'll see that Firecrests have a bronze hue to the mantle, which intensifies towards the side of the neck. The song of a Firecrest has a similar timbre to Goldcrest, but repeats the same note without the cyclical rhythm.



Goldcrests are widespread across Britain and Ireland, though denser populations in forested areas can clearly be seen

Map reproduced from *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, which is a joint project between, BTO, BirdWatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.



Goldcrest, by Paul Sterry © (www.naturephotographers.co.uk); Firecrest, by Chris Knights

A GOLDEN CREST

There are times when even Goldcrests can be conspicuous, such as when two males in the breeding season engage in a territorial dispute. They then pursue each other, scolding (relatively) loudly, oblivious to human onlookers. At these times their orange-gold crests are spread open in brilliant display, giving them a completely different look. At rest, both males and females have just a narrow yellow stripe down the crown (see female at nest, right) but the under-feathers of the male are an artificial-looking neon orange, only exposed when the bird is agitated (see male with half-spread crest, left). Bird ringers can tell the sex of Goldcrests, when caught, by gently ruffling the head feathers to expose the inner part of the crest, but unless you are lucky enough to see a bird in the hand you will need to wait until you encounter an angry male!

NESTS AND EGGS

A Goldcrest's nest is a deep, thick-walled cup of moss, lichen and cobwebs, usually quite high up among the trailing tips of a horizontal branch. This makes the nest inaccessible to predators, though close attention to the movements of the adults, and the presence of a singing male, should reveal the location.

Though the normal clutch is around 6–8 eggs, they can lay up to 12, which represents one and a half times the female's bodyweight! This is a heroic effort, but a pair will often go a step further, starting on a second brood before the chicks from the first have fledged.

MOVEMENTS AND POPULATIONS

Goldcrests are very widely distributed throughout Britain and Ireland, both in winter and the breeding season, missing only from treeless landscapes in the uplands and the Fens. Numbers are swelled in autumn by arrivals from northern Europe, Scandinavia and even Russia, astounding though it is that such a fragile bird could make an autumn sea crossing. Some of these individuals move further south to over-winter in France, but many remain and contribute to the peak seen in gardens during the winter months.

Though this country provides a more hospitable winter environment than Scandinavia, Goldcrests are still severely affected by harsh conditions, and the numbers surviving to breed the following year can fluctuate dramatically. The population figures from the Breeding Bird Survey show that breeding numbers were increasing up until 2008 following a run of mild winters, but the prolonged freezing temperatures in spring 2009 caused the breeding population to fall by 56% overall, and by over 60% in Scotland. Fortunately, since then the winters have been less severe, and numbers have shown a consistent recovery. It will be interesting to see whether the 2014 breeding numbers are significantly higher, following a mild winter.

FACTBOX: Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*



Goldcrest, by John Harding; Goldcrest egg, by Paul Sterry © (www.naturephotographers.co.uk)

Population:

Breeding: 520,000 territories

Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

Diet: Insects (especially aphids, springtails and caterpillars), spiders mostly on twigs in tree crown

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 2 years

Max recorded lifespan: 4 years, 2 months and 24 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 6–8 eggs

Number of broods: 2

Incubation: 16–19 days

Young in nest: 17–18 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



www.bto.org/birdfacts