

A BTO Garden BirdWatch factsheet

Lesser Redpoll



The delightful Lesser Redpoll is sweeping into the nation's gardens. This finch, which is much smaller than its cousins the Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, is making the most of modern garden bird foods, particularly nyjer seed.



From boom to bust

Lesser Redpolls have tiny beaks that are adept at handling fine seeds. They favour birch, although the seeds of Alder and young conifers are also taken. Birch thrives in young woodland, and the felling of trees during the Second World War presented ideal conditions for birch to flourish in the post-war period. With lots of young conifers also planted, Lesser Redpoll numbers boomed until the mid-1970s.

Thereafter, until the mid-1990s their numbers in the countryside dropped, particularly in lowland woodland in southern England. Birches that prospered post-war were gradually outmuscled by other, slower-growing trees, while agricultural intensification saw important weed seeds become scarcer. Breeding success and survival rates of Lesser Redpoll fell, and this species is now a bird of high conservation concern.

Nyjer-lissima!

It is not all bad news. In gardens, numbers of Lesser Redpolls have rocketed over recent years. In particular, nyjer seed is proving very popular. Lesser Redpolls are seen most often in gardens during late winter, although there are indications that this influx is now starting before the turn of the year.

Should I stay or should I go?



Lesser Redpolls that breed in the UK often stay here over winter although 'internal flights' are common, with birds breeding in the north travelling south or south east in pursuit of milder conditions. Lesser Redpolls can leave the country altogether during autumn, journeying south towards Belgium, France and Holland, if high numbers or scarce food resources make life here too tough.



More than meets the eye

Lesser Redpolls have a red forehead (from which the name 'red-poll' is derived). During the breeding season, a peachy-red colour extends down the throat and neck of males, and to a lesser extent in females. Both sexes have black streaking on their backs and have a small black 'goatee beard'. So far, so good – but, with redpolls, things can get a bit complicated.

There are, in fact, three different species of redpoll that may be seen in the UK – Lesser Redpoll, Common Redpoll and Arctic Redpoll – and these can be tricky to distinguish. Lesser Redpolls are by far the most frequently seen. Despite their name, Common Redpolls (also known as Mealy Redpolls) are much scarcer in the UK, with numbers arriving in autumn and winter varying considerably between years. Most Common Redpolls are encountered in the east of the UK. Arctic Redpolls are sporadic visitors and are very rare in UK gardens.

Lesser Redpolls are sociable birds, moving in flocks outside of the breeding season and not being very territorial even when nesting. Their chattering, rattling, metallic twitters and songs enliven any garden, so do listen out for them.

In Lesser Redpolls the 'base colour' of the back, flanks, wing-bars and cheeks ranges from cream to light cinnamon-brown, which gives this species a 'warm' appearance. Common Redpolls are slightly larger and have a 'colder' appearance, with their base-colour being whiter. Larger than Lesser Redpolls, Arctic Redpolls resemble frosty Common Redpolls and have dinkier beaks. The rump of an Arctic Redpoll tends to be un-streaked, unlike Lesser and Common Redpoll. There is a degree of variation in the appearance of all redpoll species and some birds remain unidentifiable even in the hand.



Population: 25,000 pairs

Conservation Status: Red-listed

Diet: very small seeds, especially birch.
Invertebrates in summer.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan – 2 years

Max recorded – 6 years

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size – 4–5 eggs

No. broods – 2

Incubation – 12 days

Young in nest – 14–15 days



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Make your garden count

The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation. Over 30,000 birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys and collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 100 at its offices in Norfolk, Stirling and Bangor, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry, conservation organisations and its supporters. The BTO is a Registered Charity No 216652 (England & Wales), No SC039193 (Scotland) and a Company Limited by Guarantee No 357284 (England & Wales). Registered Office: The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

BTO Garden BirdWatch is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. The project is funded by participants' contributions and is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the World. Participants receive the quarterly magazine *Bird Table*, have access to GBW Online and the expertise of the BTO's Garden Ecology Team. For more information, please visit www.bto.org/gbw

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