

Focus on the Blackcap



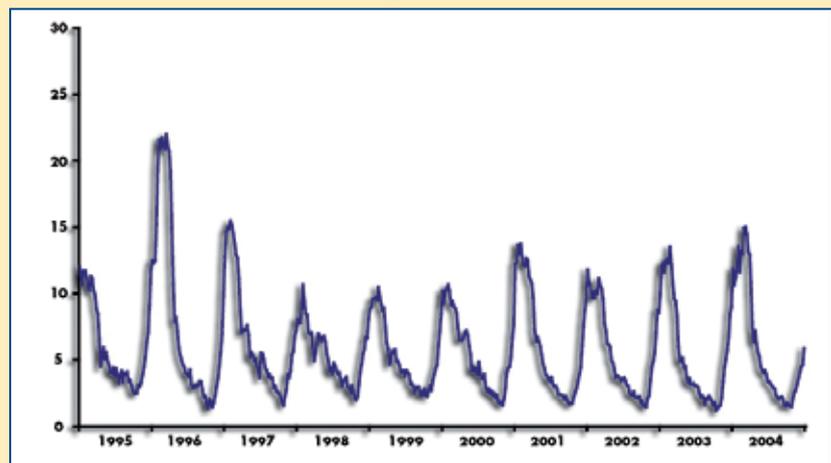
From top: a male Blackcap at the nest – bramble thickets are favoured nest-sites (Photograph by Kevin Carlson). In autumn both adult females and juveniles have a brown cap (Photograph by Tommy Holden). A young male Blackcap undergoing the body feather moult that will give him a black cap (Photograph by Dawn Balmer).

The reporting rate graphs, generated from BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch results, reveal interesting patterns in the use that bird species make of gardens. Perhaps one of the most interesting patterns to be seen is that for Blackcap. This common and widespread warbler shows a pronounced winter peak in its use of gardens, something that might seem a little odd for a species that has traditionally been regarded as a summer visitor to Britain and Ireland. We know, from studies involving bird ringing, that Blackcaps forming our summer breeding population arrive in Britain and Ireland from early April (females arrive a week or so later than the males), to breed in scrubby woodland habitats, and depart again from late August. Recoveries of ringed Blackcaps suggest that most of our breeding population winters in southern Iberia and northwest Africa, so why does the Garden BirdWatch reporting rate graph (see below) show an increase in use of gardens from late December with a distinct peak in use in January? Where are these wintering birds coming from?

Small numbers of Blackcaps have been recorded wintering in Britain for many years, though there is good evidence that the size of the wintering population has increased significantly over recent decades. For example, while an average of just 22 records were noted per winter between 1945 and 1954, some 380 were reported per winter between 1970 and 1977, and in winter 2004/05 some 2,936 were reported from Garden BirdWatch gardens alone. Amazingly, these wintering birds are not simply individuals from our breeding population that have chosen to remain here (although some may remain). Instead, most are from the central European breeding population – birds that have migrated here in the autumn. That the numbers of Blackcaps wintering here has increased suggests that there has been a change in the migratory behaviour of part of the central European breeding population (see box on opposite page). Wintering birds, arriving during September and October, feed on natural foods in woodland and scrub before moving into gardens from late December. Many Garden BirdWatchers report regular use of garden feeding stations by overwintering Blackcaps and it may be that this provision of food is one of the factors that has enabled the Blackcap to winter so successfully in Britain.

Although warbler species are primarily insectivorous in their diet, the Blackcap is somewhat more catholic in its choice of food, feeding in the winter on fat, bread, fruit and even meat on occasion. Detailed work carried out by bird ringers has shown that Blackcaps feeding on such foods are able to maintain, or even increase, their body weight. One aspect of Blackcap behaviour often reported by Garden BirdWatchers is the aggressive nature of these birds at garden feeding stations. Blackcaps will regularly chase other species away from suitable food sources. Interestingly, the ability of this species to take a wide range of different foodstuffs might be one reason why it is one of the earliest summer visitors to arrive. As with a number of other summer migrants, arrival dates have tended to become progressively earlier since the mid-1970s, a pattern that may reflect climate change.

BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch reporting rate for Blackcap (1995-2004)

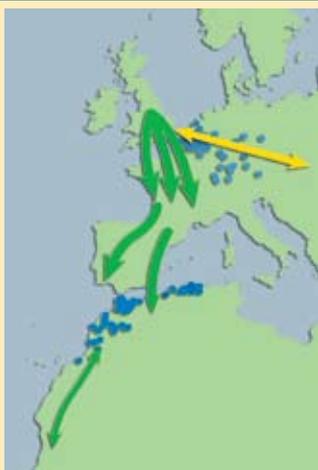


The Blackcap is not a bird that you would expect to find nesting in a garden since this is a species that prefers mature deciduous woodland with a well-developed shrub layer, a habitat which it shares with the closely related Garden Warbler. However, nesting Blackcaps have been recorded in overgrown hedgerows and in scrub within urban parks and larger gardens. The nest is usually built quite low down (typically less than six feet above the ground) in bramble or other thick cover, and egg laying peaks in May. From three to six (normally four or five) eggs are laid and, once the clutch is completed, these will be incubated for 13–14 days. The chicks are fed by both parents and will remain in the nest for another two weeks before fledging. Although Blackcaps usually only rear one brood during the breeding season, some pairs in the south of Britain may manage two.

Because the Blackcap prefers dense cover, it is a species that is more often heard than seen during the breeding season. To the untrained ear, its rich, melodic song can be difficult to distinguish from that of the Garden Warbler. Eric Simms, author of an excellent book on warblers, described the song of the male Blackcap as being 'a pure rich warble with clean, musical intervals' that was 'less rapid, less even and less uniform than the outpourings of the Garden Warbler'. Nevertheless, for a sure identification it is always worth seeing the songster. While the Garden Warbler is a rather plain-looking bird, the Blackcap is instantly recognisable by the presence of a cap. This cap is black in adult males (hence the name) but is a rufous-brown in adult females and a dull rufous-brown in young birds of either sex. Young birds undergo a partial moult in the autumn when they replace their body feathers and acquire the adult cap colour. This means that individuals seen at garden feeding stations in winter can be sexed on the colour of their cap, with young males often showing a few brown feathers mixed in with the predominantly black cap.

Although found breeding across most of Britain and Ireland, the distribution within Scotland and Ireland is more patchy than that in England or Wales. Having said this, results from the two **BTO Breeding Atlases** show that the species has spread northwards within Scotland and expanded its breeding range within Ireland. This range expansion could be linked to global climate change and/or a change in wintering behaviour, with increasing numbers of birds remaining north of the Sahara in recent decades. Since this information on range expansion comes from the 1968–72 and 1988–91 Atlases, it will be very interesting to see what the results of the next Atlas (due to start in winter 2007/08) will show.

Blackcaps from the British and Irish breeding populations migrate south to southwest in the autumn (green arrows), a direction that takes them down through France and Spain and across into North Africa. The general heading of individuals from the western part of the central European breeding population is also southwest but there is a large amount of variation in this heading such that some individuals would normally reach our shores (yellow arrows). Historically, those that did reach our shores were likely to have found conditions unsuitable. However, over recent decades, conditions may have become increasingly favourable, with milder winters and more people providing suitable food at garden feeding stations, helping these winter visitors to survive. The birds that have wintered here have been shown to arrive back on their central European breeding grounds some two weeks before those individuals wintering around the Mediterranean Basin, something that might offer them a competitive advantage and to raise more youngsters than the other birds. This may go some way to explaining how the tendency to winter in Britain has spread so rapidly through this particular component of the central European breeding population.



Map taken from 'Time to Fly'

Facts & Figures

www.bto.org/birdfacts

Common name: Blackcap

Scientific name: *Sylvia atricapilla*

Family: Sylvia warblers

UK population:

Breeding: 932,000 pairs

Wintering: unknown

Migratory status:

Summer migrant and winter visitor

Conservation status: Favourable

Breeding:

Clutch size: 4–5 eggs

Incubates: 13–14 days

Young in nest: 11–12 days

Number of broods: 1–2

Breeding season: April–July

GBW Reporting Rates:

January–March: 11%

April–June: 6%

July–September: 3%

October–December 4%

Distribution: Found across Britain and Ireland, though distribution more patchy in Scotland and Ireland. The map shows 10–km squares containing Garden BirdWatch gardens where Blackcap has been recorded (green) and only gardens where Blackcap has yet to be recorded (grey).

