

A BTO Garden BirdWatch factsheet

Wintering Blackcaps



While many birdwatchers think of the Blackcap as a summer visitor, for Garden BirdWatchers the species is more commonly encountered in winter. In fact, numbers using gardens during winter are rising rapidly, both reflecting and fuelling a profound change in the migratory habits of this bird. Elegant, feisty and with a liking for town and city life, the Blackcap is a visitor not to be missed.

Bird feeding goes the distance

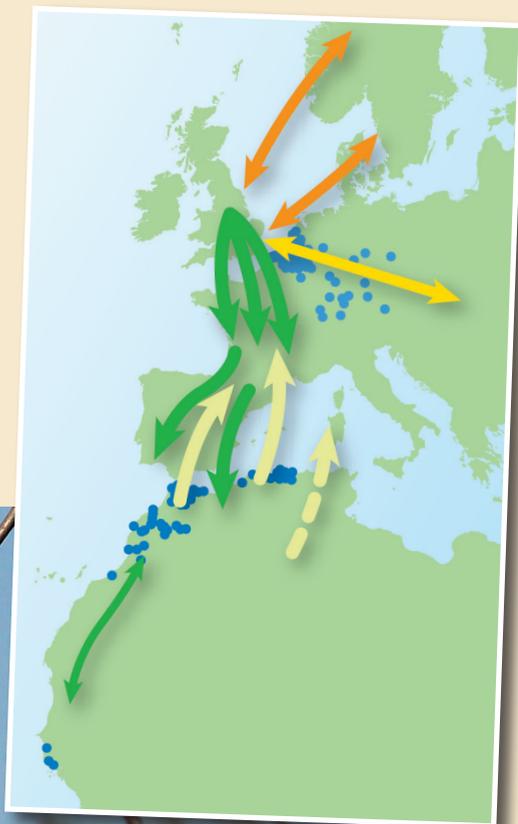
A growing number of Blackcaps that breed in central Europe are coming to our shores to spend the winter instead of travelling to the Mediterranean, where they normally go. In Britain, food provided in gardens, coupled with our warming winter climate, is helping Blackcaps to survive.

The reward for enduring harsher winter conditions here than in the Mediterranean is that our Blackcaps have a shorter journey back to central Europe in the spring, meaning that they can stake early claim for the best territories. Central European-breeding Blackcaps that winter with us have been found to lay more eggs and fledge more chicks than those that winter further south.

The map (right) shows how the Blackcaps breeding in Britain migrate south in the autumn (green arrows) to winter in North Africa, returning again in spring (pale arrows). Some birds breeding to the north-east of us pass through on migration (orange arrows), while some central European breeders (yellow) arrive in Britain for the winter.

Go West

Gardens in the west of Britain are particularly favoured by Blackcaps during winter, owing to the milder conditions in these areas. Mildest of all is south-west England, where Blackcap visitations exceed those of any other region. Despite the south-western bias to their wintering range, householders just about anywhere can look out for Blackcaps.





In addition to garden bird foods, Blackcaps will eat lots of berries (e.g. Ivy, Holly, Elder) during autumn and winter. They certainly have a 'sweet tooth', with windfall apples and pears, and nectar (e.g. from winter-flowering *Mahonia*) also explored.

Range change

Blackcaps' love of milder conditions and garden feeders brings them right into our towns and cities during winter. In urban and suburban areas temperatures are often a few degrees warmer than they are in rural habitats, while higher housing densities mean that food supplement availability is also increased.

It's not just Blackcaps whose geographical range appears to be influenced by food provided in gardens. In North America, the northward expansion of American Goldfinches and Northern Cardinals seems to have been helped by 'backyard' feeding. Meanwhile in Finland, a growing tendency for some birds to overwinter *in situ* rather than migrate south has also been linked with garden feeding. Closer to home, climate change and garden feeders are thought to be helping Nuthatches spread north into Scotland.

Bossy boots

Blackcaps have a reputation for being bolshie at garden feeders, seeing off other birds that dare to come to feed. Even Robins – which often tend to be 'top dogs' amongst the smaller garden birds at feeders – can be put in their place. One possible explanation is that garden bird food is so important to the survival of Blackcaps over winter that they defend these resources with verve.

Blackcaps are quite chunky birds, about the size of Chaffinches, with fine, dark beaks. Both sexes are mostly soft-grey in colour and, in winter, are best distinguished by the colour of their cap.

Adult males (below, left) display the black cap that gives the species its common name, while females (below, right) have a chestnut-brown cap. During late summer you might see juveniles, which also sport a chestnut-brown cap, making them difficult to distinguish from adult females.





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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