

Birdlife in your Garden

Little is more distressing to the garden birdwatcher than to hear a loud 'clunk' on a window and to find a motionless bird lying outside on the ground, victim of a window strike. I received a call from a reader a few weeks ago asking what she could do about this problem and decided that the information might be more widely useful – hence this article. This is not an insignificant issue as the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) estimated a few years ago that 100 million collisions with windows occur each year, of which a third are fatal. Even birds that appear to be only stunned, and fly away after a period of recuperation, may succumb later due to internal bleeding or brain damage.



A Garden Warbler victim of a window strike. Learn how to avoid this distressing occurrence in the accompanying text. (Photo: David Wragg, BTO Library)

Birds have excellent eyesight so why does this happen? There are three main reasons why garden birds fly into our windows:

- They see reflections of the sky and landscape in the window and mistake this for the real thing.
- They see a bright window on an opposite wall of the house and attempt to fly through what appears to a clear space.
- They see house plants near to windows and attempt to perch on or feed from them.

It is thought that these collisions are most likely to occur when the bird is panicked (e.g. when avoiding a Sparrowhawk) or when it is an inexperienced juvenile.

To assess whether the first two problems occur in your garden, go out to your feeder, bird-bath or other locations where birds congregate and view your windows from the exact position the birds would be in. Can you see reflected landscape and sky images or apparent 'tunnels' through the house? If so, this may explain why birds are colliding with your windows.

There are a range of solutions to this problem, some easily applied and others more intrusive. Here are the simple ones.

How far from your window is your bird feeder or bird-bath? This should be either closer than 5 m (better yet,

less than 1 m) or farther away than 10 m. This is because the fatality rate of bird strikes increases with distance away from the window, as birds gain more speed the further they fly before the collision. Eventually, however, the distance is great enough that they easily have time to avoid a collision. Hence the danger zone is between 5 and 10 m. Consider relocating feeders and bird-baths if you have a window strike problem.

One way to both break up reflections and decrease the 'tunnel effect' is to place visible objects in the window space. These can be stickers on the glass, decorative items hanging inside, or window blinds (especially if you leave them partially closed). Whatever you use, however, needs to be placed densely across the window space, with about 10-20 cm of clear space separating the visual obstructions or birds may attempt to fly between them. This approach may spoil your view through the window, of course. This can be avoided by using ultraviolet-reflecting film that clings to the window and which is visible to birds but not to humans. Also available are pens with ultraviolet reflecting ink that can be used to draw vertical lines on a window that the birds can see but you can't. These items are available through bird food suppliers and similar outlets.

Try to avoid placing houseplants near windows where they may look like attractive habitat and, if possible, decrease or eliminate the brightness of windows on a far wall by closing doors, blinds or curtains.



During the breeding season, inexperienced juvenile birds, like this young Blue Tit, are particularly susceptible to collisions with windows. (Photo: Jill Pakenham, BTO Library)

Finally, what should you do if you find a bird that has been involved in a window collision? If there is a noticeable injury, you should take it to a vet or wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. (In the Stretton area, call Cuan Wildlife Rescue in Much Wenlock on 01952 728 070.) If it is unconscious or conscious but stunned, place it in a box (e.g. a shoebox) lined with rags or soft paper, using gloves to pick it up. Place it away from predators and in a warm location, covered so the bird is in the dark: do not attempt to feed it and minimise handling. Every 15 minutes, take it outside and remove the cover. If the bird flies away, great! If not,

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cover it again and repeat the process. After a couple of hours, however, a motionless bird can probably be taken as dead and a conscious one should be given professional help.

There are other approaches to minimizing window strikes but I do not have the space to cover these here and they tend to be more intrusive and inconvenient than those mentioned above. If you are interested, contact me (see below) and I will send you a list.

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The author is BTO Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding.

If you are interested in joining GBW, please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to give it a go!