

22 Birdlife in Your Garden

British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch (GBW) observations reveal that one of our most colourful, eye-catching and unmistakable birds is about twice as likely to be spotted in Shropshire gardens as in gardens elsewhere in the British Isles. That bird is the Bullfinch. The male is spectacular, with a reddish-pink breast



Caption: A male Bullfinch on a garden seed feeder. Could this be the most exotic-looking native bird? The white rump is often seen as the bird is flying away (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library).

and cheeks, an ash-grey back, a black cap, tail and wings and a white rump and wing bars. The bill is black or very dark grey and stout. The female's plumage pattern is the same but the pink is replaced by greyish-buff and the grey of the back has a slightly brown tone. Juvenile birds are similar to the females but are less smartly patterned and lack the black cap. All are bulky, rotund and 'neckless' which, with their heavy bills, gives them a front-heavy appearance. This is believed to be the origin of the 'bull' prefix in their name, which they share with other front-heavy creatures like bulldogs and bullfrogs, as well as the eponymous bovine.

So exotic-looking is the male that it is frequently mistaken for an escaped cage bird by those who have not seen one before. Indeed, Bullfinches were once kept as pets in times past because of their beauty and sweet, quiet, melancholy song.

Like other finches, their diet is largely vegetarian. In the autumn and winter this consists of the seeds and berries of dock, nettle, bramble, hawthorn, birch and ash, the latter being a source of some conservation concern with the onset of ash dieback disease. Bullfinches are also partial to tree buds in spring, including hawthorn, blackthorn and sallow, as well as the buds of fruit trees, although they favour specific varieties of fruit (for example, Morello cherries and the Conference and Williams pears) and will spurn the buds of other types. This dietary preference has put them into conflict with commercial fruit growers and, in the past, thousands were killed each year in

orchards. Mass culling is of doubtful value, however, and a study in Herefordshire established that it had no effect on the size of the local population of Bullfinches. Adult birds will also take insects during the nesting season to provide a protein source for growing nestlings.

Bullfinches are sedentary birds and are relatively non-territorial. They frequently leave their nest area to find food and I have seen two male birds sharing a feeder during the breeding season with no aggressive behaviour. Unlike Chaffinches, they rarely flock (but are more likely to be seen in pairs or small family groups) and tend not to feed on the ground.

In addition to gardens, Bullfinches favour scrub, woodlands (especially edges), orchards, parks and hedgerows, where the female creates a nest of twigs, roots and moss, often in dense shrubs and conifers, laying the first clutch in April. There may be two or three broods in a season.

Unfortunately, Bullfinch numbers in the UK have dropped 62% in the past 35-40 years. It is not known exactly the reasons for this decline but changes in the composition of woodlands and the removal and excessively-frequent trimming of hedgerows have been implicated in depriving these birds of both food sources and nest sites. They adapt well to bird feeders, however, where their numbers have been increasing rapidly, and are particularly fond of sunflower hearts. By offering such foods and by providing trees and



Caption: A Bullfinch pair at the nest with young. Garden shrubs and trees provide valuable nesting locations for this species. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

shrubs for nest sites and shelter, you can assist in the recovery of this beautiful bird.

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The author is BTO Ambassador for the 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. New members of GBW receive a free book on joining, either *Garden Birds and Wildlife* or *Gardening for Birdwatchers*. Please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to find out more!