

Grail Good Life

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Garden BirdWatch

The decline of previously common British garden birds such as the House Sparrow has been well documented over recent years. But were you aware that we know of this largely through analysis of the regular observations of thousands of ordinary garden bird watchers like you and me?

Importance of 'citizen scientists'

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme monitors the changing fortunes of birds and other garden wildlife through its network of 'citizen scientists'. GBW is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world with the observations of participants being analysed by BTO researchers and published in leading scientific journals. BTO Garden BirdWatchers have charted the decline of species such as the House Sparrow and Starling as well as the meteoric rise of some birds including the dashing Goldfinch and chubby Woodpigeon. They have discovered that urban birds get up later on winter mornings than their rural counterparts and have also monitored the importance of gardens for birds during the last two severe winters. Recently they have also alerted conservationists to the impact of an emerging disease in Greenfinches.

This winter GBW results will be used to monitor the use of gardens by a range of birds. This will include two handsome thrushes which have been arriving in the UK in large numbers over the past few weeks from their breeding grounds in Iceland, Scandinavia and further east.



The Redwing is relatively small (about the size of a Song Thrush) with a plain brown back and with dark brown spots on its white underparts. The most striking difference between it and the Song Thrush is the bold face pattern, with a creamy-white stripe over the eye, along with rusty-red flanks and under-wing areas (see picture).

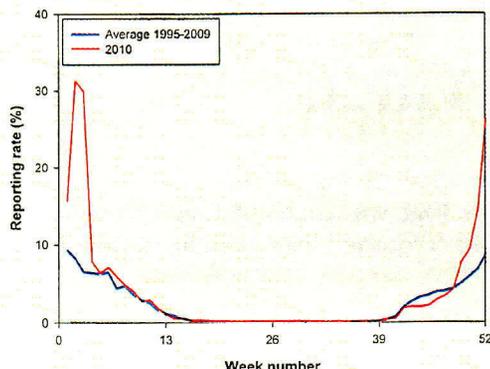
Redwing by Jeff Kew – BTO library

The Fieldfare is a large thrush, nearly as big as a Mistle Thrush, with a plain brown back, white under its wings, and grey/blue on its rump, crown and the back of its head. The breast has a yellow-ochre wash whilst the rest of the underparts are white, both with dense darker spots (see picture).



Fieldfare by Jill Pakenham – BTO library

Both of these birds form large winter flocks in the countryside, where they can be seen in open fields and woodland. However, during particularly inclement weather they will also exploit food sources in gardens. GBW data show that around one in twenty gardens report Fieldfares in a normal winter but that one in three did so during the cold, snowy spells of the last two winters. Redwing abundance showed similar trends (see chart).



BTO Garden BirdWatch reporting rate - Redwings 2010

So, if this winter proves to be as cold as the last two, keep your eyes open for these two attractive winter thrushes, feasting in fruit-bearing trees and shrubs and also on the ground where fruit, berries and windfall apples are available.

If you enjoy watching your garden birds for at least a few minutes most weeks, why not contribute your sightings to GBW? You don't need to be an expert, you don't have to provide food for birds and your garden doesn't have to be big. If you can't do a count in a particular week then that doesn't matter – you just contribute observations when you can. The scheme is self-funding and so requires a £15 per annum subscription. In return you get a free book containing lots of fascinating information, a quarterly magazine to keep you abreast with the latest garden wildlife news, access to help from BTO garden bird experts and more.

This article was submitted by Simon Jones, BTO GBW Ambassador for SW Herts. Simon is part of a national network of volunteer BTO GBW Ambassadors who are available to speak to local organisations on GBW. If you see Redwings or Fieldfares in your garden this winter, or are interested in joining GBW, please get in touch.

You can contact Simon at simon.l.jones@ntlworld.com.

Useful website links:

www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw

www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-11037830

www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/about/background/projects/sparrows

Contact people: Penelope Johnstone & Pat Edwards



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