

Grail Good Life

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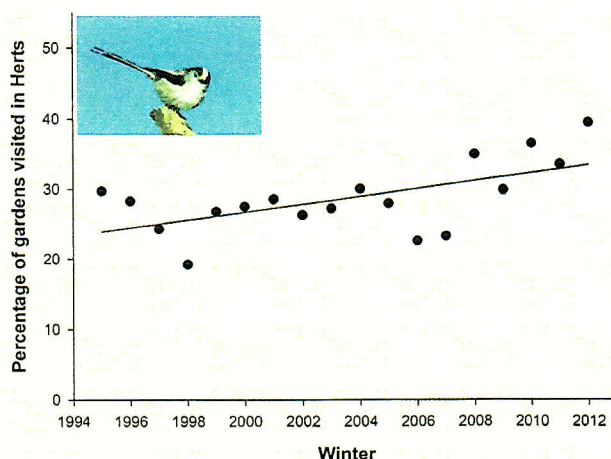
Garden Birds in Severe Winters

In recent winters Britain has experienced unusually cold weather. The most recent winter has been particularly severe. Small birds are especially vulnerable during such conditions as their size means that they chill very quickly. Also, they need to travel light to avoid predators and hence need to feed regularly. Have you wondered how some of our smaller garden birds have fared through the recent harsh winters?

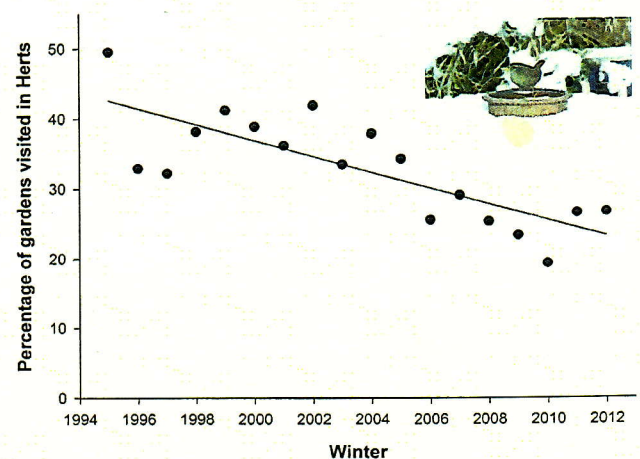
The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme monitors the changing fortunes of birds and other garden wildlife through its network of 'citizen scientists'. GBW is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world with the simple, systematic observations of participants being analyzed by BTO researchers and published in leading scientific journals. Much has been learned through this scheme. For instance, it has been possible to assess the impact of severe weather on small birds by monitoring the rates at which they visit gardens.

The Long tailed Tit and the Wren are two such small birds. Numbers of both species tend to be relatively high in gardens during winter because natural foods are scarce and the weather is cold. Over the long term, the abundance of both species has been changing, but in opposite directions. The following graphs show the percentage of gardens local to where I live, in Hertfordshire, visited by Long-tailed Tits and by Wrens during a typical week in winter (data from BTO Garden BirdWatch).

While the trend for the Long-tailed Tit is positive, ie more gardens being visited now than in the past, the trend for the Wren is negative. However, in both cases the reporting rate has been above trend during the recent, particularly severe winter. Indeed, during the especially cold month of March 2013 the reporting rate for the Long-tailed Tit was a whopping 45% higher nationally than the average for March 2010-12!



Percentage of Hertfordshire gardens visited by Long-tailed Tits. Winter is defined as November to February, with data plotted on the year in which the winter started (e.g. the winter of 2012-13 corresponds to '2012' on the x-axis). Photo by Jill Pakenham.



Percentage of Hertfordshire gardens visited by Wrens. Winter is defined as November to February, with data plotted on the year in which the winter started (e.g. the winter of 2012-13 corresponds to '2012' on the x-axis). Photo by John Harding.

Cold winter weather could affect the number of birds seen in gardens differently. Generally it causes an increase in garden bird activity, with many individuals turning to bird feeders for help. However, when conditions are so severe that large numbers are killed, abundance is reduced. So what lies behind the contrasting trends for these two species? For the Long-tailed Tit, the increase mirrors a rise in breeding numbers across all habitats. In short, there are simply more of these lovely little birds around! However, the reverse is not true for the Wren. Other results indicate that Wren populations have remained broadly level over the past 20 or so years, but with an apparent decline in gardens. The precise reason for this discrepancy remains unclear.



Following another tough winter, both species – but especially Wrens – could do with a really good breeding season to help numbers bounce back from any decline caused by the severe winter. Data collected by BTO volunteers show that both Wrens and Long-tailed Tits had dreadful breeding seasons last year amongst the monsoon-like conditions. That makes this year all the more important.



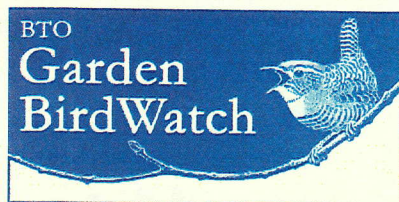
Make your garden birds count!

The author is Simon Jones, volunteer BTO Garden BirdWatch 'Ambassador' for SW Herts. The fascinating trends presented in this article have only come to light thanks to local 'citizen scientists' who take part in the year-round BTO Garden BirdWatch survey.

For a free enquiry pack, which includes a complimentary copy of the wonderful magazine for Garden BirdWatchers, 'Bird Table',

or

if you have any questions about garden birds, please get in touch with Simon:
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Useful website links:

www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw

www.bto.org/news-events/press-releases/another-one-bites-crust-struggling-birds-turn-feeders

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