

Number 3

Sept 2011

Record diversity in GBFS gardens

After 41 winters, the GBFS continues to produce fascinating new results. More birds than ever are tucking into the bird foods that we provide, highlighting the growing importance of gardens within our wider living landscape.

Last winter arrived in two distinct halves, with exceptional freezing conditions during November and December ushering a tremendous number of birds into gardens, followed by much milder conditions in the New Year. It was a bumper period for avid birdwatchers, with more species than ever recorded through the GBFS, the total reaching 96 – up by four on the previous record set in 2007–08.

It was a great time to see the delicate Brambling and the fantastical Waxwing – the former using 44% of GBFS sites, almost double that of the preceding winter. Over the Christmas period, the mean peak counts per garden of Blackbird and Jay were up by over a third compared with the previous five winters, Starling by 19%, Long-tailed Tit 18% and Blue Tit 14%. Rural gardens were graced with their highest ever counts of Tree Sparrow and their second highest counts of Redwing. In total, 89 species were recorded feeding or drinking at rural GBFS plots last winter, a record number. In suburban gardens, a total of 65 species were logged, only four short of the record number set in 1997–98. Yellowhammers were at their most numerous



JOHN HARDING

The delicate Brambling used 44% of GBFS sites, almost double that of the preceding winter.

for over a decade in suburban GBFS gardens, benefitting from food supplements and warmer microclimatic conditions. The kings of suburbia, however, were Woodpigeons, with their numbers 43% higher in suburban than in rural gardens, and their presence across both garden types up by an amazing 10% on the preceding GBFS winter.

Familiar GBFS sites figured among the richest and poorest feeding stations. The barest, Ramsgate (Kent), manned by Mr S. M. Harper, supported just four species with highlights including Robin and Collared Dove (two of each). The richest, Tregaron (Dyfed), a Welsh hillside garden with shallow pools given over to wildlife overseen by Mrs B. Adie and Miss K. Adie, attracted an impressive 56 species including Goosander, Wigeon, Green Sandpiper, although just four Greenfinch maximum.

However many birds you saw in your garden last winter, we are really grateful for your support and we hope that you enjoy this *GBFS News*.

Variety is the spice of GBFS life

The 'first-ever' bird table Little Gull, a rush of Goldfinches and a healthy dash of Waxwings, combined with a prolonged December 'deep freeze', provided the ingredients for an enthralling 41st winter of the GBFS. BTO Research Ecologist David Glue finds out more.

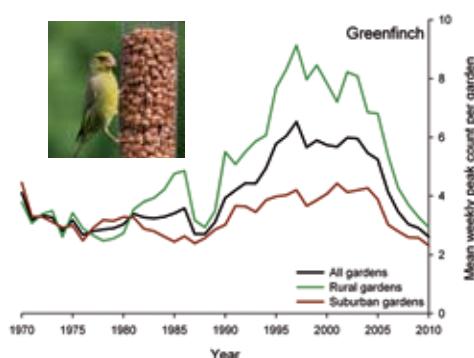
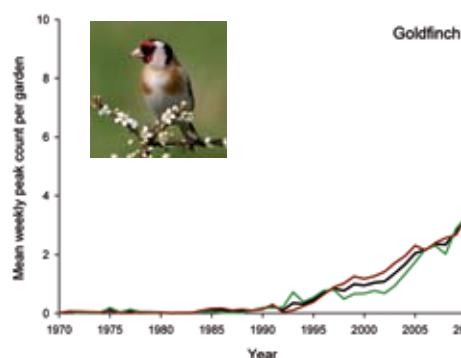
Gold is the new green

For the first time in the history of the GBFS, during an average week last winter, more Goldfinches were seen taking food or water in gardens than Greenfinches. For the former, it was a record-breaking period with their average weekly peak count per garden up by almost a fifth on last year, which itself had been an all-time high. The worrying decline of Greenfinches, a species which has been impacted heavily by the disease trichomonosis, however, continued with GBFS counts reaching an all-time low, down by 10% on the winter of 2009–10. Interestingly, both Goldfinches and Greenfinches visited a similar percentage of GBFS sites last winter (p.6–7) compared with the preceding one, so the changes in their GBFS counts suggests that flock sizes of the former are booming while those of the latter are eroding.

Tales of the unexpected

The stormy autumn of 2010 and severe weather episodes across last winter led to many surprise visitors to GBFS sites. In October and November transient Whitethroat (Cornwall), Willow Warbler (Isle of Man), Black Redstart (Norfolk), Chiffchaff (several sites) were drawn to drink at bird baths. Certain scarce species or those with isolated ranges delighted a few: Crested Tit (Inverness-shire), Lesser-spotted Woodpecker (Dyfed, Yorkshire) coming for peanuts, Rock Dove (Lanark, Orkney), Water Rail (Dyfed, Cornwall), Rock Pipit (Ross-shire) for seeds. Waxwing appeared widely following the largest influx to the UK since the winter of 1965–66, but this glamorous species was only recorded at a few GBFS sites (taking stored apples, sunflower seeds and water) owing to a preference for other 'naturally occurring' alternatives in gardens.

Sub-zero temperatures by day during a snowy December provided the most testing of conditions and many garden highlights. An immature Little Gull among 10 Black-headed Gulls feeding on maize at a Stamford (Lincolnshire) bird table was a new species in the GBFS, bringing the 41-year tally to 177 species. Observers logged stressed wetland species spilling over into gardens, including Mandarin (Hampshire) for grain, Jack Snipe (Yorkshire) and Woodcock (Angus, Dyfed) coming for grated cheese, peanut chips and mealworms. Similarly, spill-over from snow-clad



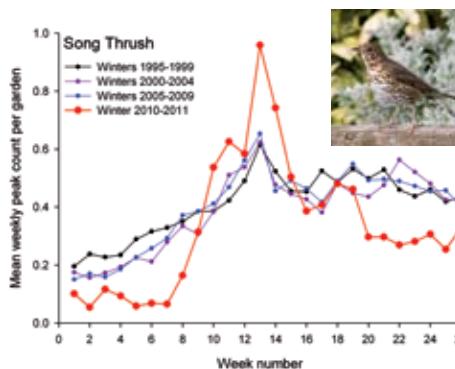
farmland was apparent, with visitors including Grey Partridge (Buckinghamshire) and Corn Bunting (Lincolnshire) for seeds.

Sparrowhawk retained its status as the 'top' diurnal predator, with Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Collared Dove among its most frequently taken prey species. Red Kites visited five GBFS sites last winter, up by two on the preceding winter, feeding on meat scraps, while Hen Harrier (Orkney, Isle of Man) swept in from local roosts. Goshawk (Inverness-shire) made impressive serial passes before leaving a bundle of Blackbird feathers, and even Peregrine Falcons (West Sussex, Gwent) joined the fray. A record high of 96 species were logged in GBFS gardens last winter, demonstrating how important our gardens can be for birds during this barren time of year.

Christmas crackers

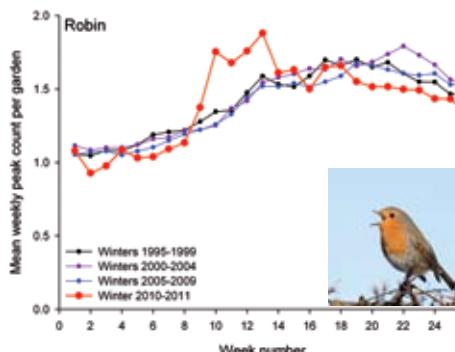
Last December was the coldest in the last 100 years and the coldest of any month for almost a quarter of a century. As frost penetrated deep into the ground, our Christmas festivities were enlivened by huge numbers of hungry garden visitors. Compared with an average Christmas (Christmas defined here as weeks 13 and 14 of the GBFS) during the latter part of the last decade, GBFS counts of many species were unusually high last winter. There were almost twice as many Redwing, a near 90% increase in numbers of Grey Wagtail and Reed Bunting, and more than a 50% rise in counts of Fieldfare and Treecreeper. Song Thrush numbers also boomed. During the past 20 years, GBFS counts of this elegant species have peaked consistently around week 13. The same was true last winter but the size of the spike was around 50% larger than normal. Despite this, however, numbers of Song Thrushes in GBFS gardens were well below average during the early and latter part of last winter, with counts over the whole GBFS period down by 22% on the preceding winter.

Robins of both sexes defend their individual territories throughout winter, resulting in their average weekly GBFS count per garden rarely creeping much above one. Despite this, however, their numbers do fluctuate seasonally, with individuals becoming much



JOHN HARDING

more tolerant during late January and early February. This might be explained by stocks of natural food running low as winter progresses, causing more Robins from the wider countryside to venture into gardens and by incumbent Robins becoming more focused on feeding than on territorial defence. Amidst the chill last December, however, Robins showed their affable side unusually early, with numbers peaking, aptly, in the week leading up to Christmas. As ever in the 41 year history of GBFS, Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit visited more gardens than any other species, although the latter were also joined by Chaffinch. However, last winter the 'reliant Robin' took pole position, being the only ubiquitous GBFS species. Its fortunes contrast starkly with another familiar visitor, the House Sparrow, whose drop in reporting rate left it outside of the top 12 ranked species for the first time in the history of the GBFS (p.6-7).



JOHN HARDING

Feeding birds: the big issues

Feeding birds is now so popular and is such a large global industry that, from time to time, it throws up some big questions. Tim Harrison takes a look at three important issues.

Food supplementation can provide pronounced benefits for birds at different times of year. During cold, temperate winters feeding has been shown to increase the survival rates of numerous species, and has even been associated with enhanced breeding success during the following spring. There are, however, some important questions relating to the provision of food for wild birds.

1. Red in beak and claw

The resurgence of Sparrowhawks during recent decades has caused concern amongst householders that feeding might make garden birds more vulnerable to a lightning aerial attack. While common sense dictates that feeding might create a 'honey-pot' for this most divisive of garden guests, there is a lack of evidence to support this supposition. In particular, studies of close relatives of the Sparrowhawk (*e.g.* Cooper's Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk) in North America show no evidence that predation risk is heightened by feeding.

On two counts, perhaps this is an issue of perception. First, birds can perceive risk without, in an immediate sense, the predator being seen or heard. Watch a Blackbird before it returns to

its nest, for example – it will first look to see if anything suspicious is around. No danger might be afoot but it has developed, or it emerged from its egg with, a sense of risk. It knows that checking for a malevolent presence is a good idea. In Great Tits, research has shown that older, dominant birds will often feed on the safest feeders, again driven by a perceived sense of risk. To this end, a regular, reliable source of food in gardens might actually reduce an individual's risk of predation, enabling it to feed at less risky times and/or in safer places.

The second issue of perception is that of our own. For many people it can be distressing to see a smaller bird plucked violently from the air. Overlay this with a potential sense of guilt for having apparently lured the bird towards its visceral end and emotions can run high. It is helpful to remember, therefore, that Sparrowhawks are not a major cause for the decline of songbird numbers nationally (BTO research), and that their success in recent decades (55% of GBFS gardens were visited last winter), represents a recovery, rather than an increase in their numbers.

Sparrowhawks are undoubtedly impressive and many GBFS-ers might enjoy seeing them operate. The balance can be tipped in the favour of smaller birds by moving feeders frequently, since Sparrowhawks often follow regular flight paths, and by spreading out feeders to encourage greater group vigilance amongst potential prey. Feeders hung next to dense cover (*e.g.* evergreen vegetation) can also help smaller birds to beat a hasty retreat.

2. Bird feeding goes the distance

Research is emerging that food supplementation in gardens can influence the geographical range over which some species are found. Internationally, the northward expansion of the Northern Cardinal and American Goldfinch in North America has been linked with bird



feeding in gardens. In Finland, an increased tendency for some birds to overwinter in situ rather than migrate south also appears to be influenced by food provided by householders. Although climate is more important than food supplementation in determining the wintering distributions of birds at temperate latitudes, it is clear that feeding could be helping some birds to shift locations.

Interesting patterns are also emerging closer to home. In Issue 2 of *GBFS News* the probable influence of bird feeding in supporting burgeoning



JOHN GODFREY

numbers of Blackcaps over winter was discussed. Nuthatch is another species that appears to be spreading its wings. Increasing numbers of this attractive, almost triangular-shaped bird are being seen in Scotland, seemingly influenced by a warming climate and aided by garden feeders. Interestingly, for every northward hop made by this species, gardens seem to be an early port of call. Tying this story together neatly are new records from the GBFS. Last winter, for example, Brian Neath near Dornie, Ross-shire had the first confirmed record of Nuthatch in the district of Skye and Lochalsh. We can't all have world-firsts but I'm sure we can all celebrate Brian's new tick!

3. Keeping it clean

Unfortunate as it is, the threat of disease is something that garden birdwatchers need to be aware of when feeding wild birds. *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, for example, may spread through bird faeces, tending to be most prevalent from December to April and March to May, respectively. More recently, reports of avian

pox virus, which can cause large growths to develop around the face of birds, have increased in number. Great Tits appear to be particularly susceptible, with sightings of affected birds being most frequent in late summer and autumn. A range of vectors, including bird to bird contact and biting insects, are likely candidates for disease transmission but contaminated surfaces in gardens might also be important.

The disease trichomonosis has gained a particularly high profile in recent years. BTO surveys show the remarkable effect that this disease has had on numbers of Greenfinch, with GBFS counts for this species falling by more than half in the past seven winters. Trichomonosis is caused by the *Trichomonas* parasite, which is found in the saliva of affected birds, and there is concern that garden feeding stations and bird baths could be a platform on which it might find new hosts.

So, what is the risk and how can it be managed? Disease of garden birds is a relatively new field of research and so answers are currently emerging. It is important to be aware of the potential risks of disease transmission when feeding. To this end, the BTO recommends cleaning and disinfecting feeders, bird tables and bird baths regularly; rinsing these with water and allowing them to air dry; moving feeders around the garden to reduce the build-up of faecal matter; and ensuring that food stays fresh by not providing too much. Bird food companies can make an important contribution; the new Gardman/BTO 'FeedSafe' feeders, for example, incorporate silver ions as an antimicrobial agent.



JOHN HARDING

Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

Winter 2010/2011

Top Twelve Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Robin	279	100	Coal Tit	260	93.2
Blackbird	278	99.6	Greenfinch	256	91.8
Blue Tit	276	98.9	Goldfinch	244	87.5
Chaffinch	276	98.9	Collared Dove	238	85.3
Great Tit	275	98.6	Woodpigeon	237	84.9
Dunnock	274	98.2	Starling	219	78.5

Additional Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
House Sparrow	217	77.8	Fieldfare	48	17.2
Long-tailed Tit	209	74.9	Reed Bunting	47	16.8
Magpie	200	71.7	Feral Pigeon	43	15.4
Great Spotted Woodpecker	170	60.9	Lesser Redpoll	43	15.4
Song Thrush	165	59.1	Tree Sparrow	43	15.4
Sparrowhawk	153	54.8	Yellowhammer	38	13.6
Jackdaw	151	54.1	Herring Gull	37	13.3
Siskin	146	52.3	Goldcrest	33	11.8
Wren	125	44.8	Stock Dove	29	10.4
Brambling	122	43.7	Grey Wagtail	26	9.3
Pied Wagtail	119	42.7	Marsh-Willow Tit	24	8.6
Carriion Crow	114	40.9	Mallard	19	6.8
Nuthatch	100	35.8	Moorhen	18	6.5
Pheasant	100	35.8	Common Gull	14	5.0
Blackcap	83	29.7	Treecreeper	14	5.0
Bullfinch	82	29.4	Heron	10	3.6
Rook	71	25.4	Lesser Black-backed Gull	10	3.6
Redwing	65	23.3	Buzzard	9	3.2
Black-headed Gull	58	20.8	Red-legged Partridge	9	3.2
Mistle Thrush	55	19.7	Kestrel	8	2.9
Jay	52	18.6	Chiffchaff	5	1.8

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Green Woodpecker	5	1.8	Common Sandpiper	1	0.4
Hooded Crow	5	1.8	Corn Bunting	1	0.4
Linnet	5	1.8	Crested Tit	1	0.4
Red Kite	5	1.8	Goosander	1	0.4
Tawny Owl	5	1.8	Goshawk	1	0.4
Meadow Pipit	4	1.4	Green Sandpiper	1	0.4
Snipe	4	1.4	Greylag Goose	1	0.4
Waxwing	4	1.4	Jack Snipe	1	0.4
Barn Owl	2	0.7	Little Grebe	1	0.4
Hen Harrier	2	0.7	Little Gull (New to GBFS)	1	0.4
Lesser-spotted Woodpecker	2	0.7	Little Owl	1	0.4
Merlin	2	0.7	Mandarin Duck	1	0.4
Peregrine Falcon	2	0.7	Mealy Redpoll	1	0.4
Raven	2	0.7	Mute Swan	1	0.4
Ringed-necked Parakeet	2	0.7	Grey Partridge	1	0.4
Rock Dove	2	0.7	Rock Pipit	1	0.4
Skylark	2	0.7	Swallow	1	0.4
Water Rail	2	0.7	Teal	1	0.4
Woodcock	2	0.7	Whitethroat	1	0.4
Black Redstart	1	0.4	Wigeon	1	0.4
Canada Goose	1	0.4	Willow Warbler	1	0.4

Number of sites recording: 279

Seventh heaven: what made last winter so special?

1. Productive breeding season in 2010 swells populations of Blue Tit, Great Tit, Dunnock and Chaffinch among others.
2. Prolific crops of berries and fruits, if somewhat patchy and unpalatable (a legacy of driest first-half January–June in 80 years during 2010), fuelled extra winter thrushes.
3. Limited cereal, tree seed and berry yields on the Continent encourage sporadic migrants including Waxwing.
4. Heavy early October rains flood UK gardens attracting transient waterfowl, Kingfisher, Pied Wagtail and Grey Wagtail.
5. Heaviest arctic snows and sharpest night frosts since 1965 in the last week of November – a prelude to a destructive Siberian December.
6. Dominant milder Atlantic south-westerlies induce a slow thaw during January. A mild, sunless February prompts early nesting activity involving Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Robin and thrushes.
7. A warm mixed bag ‘many-weather’ March, with rainfall shortage ongoing (driest since 1990). Bird baths busy with some Brambling and Waxwing lingering in gardens.



A healthy obsession

Feeding and watching birds is good for you, as Tim Harrison discovers

You've been caught at it again – gazing half vacantly, half inquisitively out of the window when you know that there are jobs to be done. True, none of the shirts that are piled ominously high in the corner are raising a sleeve to volunteer to iron themselves, and the vacuum cleaner will not snuffle its long proboscis around the seats of your car all by itself. "Just one more minute" you say to yourself, "I'll just wait to see if anything interesting turns up." It's hopeless. You may be self-confessed, you may be oblivious, you might even be in denial – but you are an addict. Much as you might try to wrench yourself away, you know it and anyone else who lives with you knows it – your gaze will, soon enough, be beckoned back by the fluttering of busy wings.

The force elicited by these visual magnets, which flit too and from your feeders with verve, is by no means inconsiderable and has been a topic of much recent comment and research. Our affinity for birds is pronounced, driven, for example, by their visual and vocal beauty, their trials and tribulations

which can be allegorical to our own and by the reassurance that they offer us that the natural world is functioning as it should. One of the main reasons that we feed birds is an empathetic, impulsive wish to help them – to improve their prospects of survival, particularly through harsh days of winter. Interestingly, research has also shown that 'atonement' for the negative environmental impacts of people on the planet can sometimes be a motivation as well.

While it is attractive to contend that feeding garden birds is driven only by altruistic benevolence, the evidence does not stack up. The principal reason why people feed birds is, quite simply, because it brings them an enormous amount of pleasure. Our world is urbanising rapidly and, in the blur of modern life, people are becoming increasingly isolated from nature. For this reason, above all others, feeding garden birds has become a hugely significant cultural, as well as biological, phenomenon. Within our dynamic and complicated surrounds, bird feeding is the most frequent interaction that the majority of people have with wildlife, and represents an ecological super-highway back to our ancestral roots. Indeed, in developed nations, feeding garden birds is arguably now the most important activity through which a broader interest in, and appreciation of, nature may be engendered.

As sentient creatures, humans tend to gravitate towards those things that give them pleasure and away from those things that do not. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the incredibly popular pastime of feeding and watching garden birds is likely to do us the world of good. Simply having access to a garden can reduce one's sensitivity to stress, and diminish levels of anxiety or depression. A 'green view' from a window can increase



JOHN HARDING

Feeding and watching birds is a routine that feels like home



Caught at it again – when you know that there are jobs to be done

cognitive functioning in children and can also help to improve one's own powers of attention. Regarding the latter, there is a certain irony, however, that most avid garden birdwatchers are likely to plough this residual capacity straight back into even more birdwatching! For some people, the benefits of feeding and watching birds reach right to their core. People can be lifted through experiencing the interconnectedness of human and natural life, and spiritual fulfilment is sometimes cited as a motivation to feed wild birds.

Green spaces in urban areas have known community benefits – increasing social interaction between neighbours, improving how a neighbourhood perceives itself and perhaps also reducing levels of crime. Fascinatingly, however, the value of green space to human wellbeing is not fixed – some areas are better than others. In Sheffield researchers have found that the psychological benefits of urban green space increases concurrently with plant biodiversity. In short, biological richness can make us feel better. Beyond the thrill experienced when an unusual garden bird crops up on our patch, perhaps it is a good feeling provided by ecological diversity that propels our endeavours to attract more and more birds

into our gardens.

For many people – including many GBFS participants – feeding birds forms an important part of their daily routine and enhances quality of life. An important word here is ‘routine’. As words go, it is a fickle customer. In some contexts, it implies almost offensive tedium, while in others it generates a fuzzy, welcoming feeling. Applied to the pile of ironing or the crumb-ridden car, routine is a word that sits heavy with the mundane trappings of life. Applied to fish and chips every Friday night and feeding the birds each morning, the same word glows like warm feet in a pair of slippers. Feeding and watching birds is a routine that feels like home – not just because it happens where you live but because it comforts and grounds us. It enables us to look outwards beyond ourselves and the human world, and to connect with the environment in which we have evolved – a deep sense of home, akin to looking at the stars.

So, don't fight the force. If you are unable to extricate yourself from your favourite birdwatching chair, plugged like a golf ball in a bunker, just stay there. Feeding and watching birds is good for you – and sharing your healthy obsession with the BTO is great news for all concerned.



JILL PAKENHAM

One of the main reasons that we feed birds is an empathetic, impulsive wish to help them

Extracts: Winter 2010/11

Looe, Cornwall



(Oct) Whitethroat paused to drink at bird bath – late migrant.

Seaton, Cumbria



(Nov) Red Squirrel returned after an absence of eight weeks, having stripped nearby cob-nuts: now turns to seed at bird table.

Fortrose, Ross-shire



Robin and Wren joined by Rock Pipit, eating pulverised peanuts and grated cheese bits.

Ramsgate, Kent

(Dec) Robin finally enticed by raisins, bring tally for quarter to a meagre four species: Collared Dove, Woodpigeon and Feral Pigeon in all.

Photographs supplied by: John Harding; Christine M Matthews; John Bowes; Ron Marshall; Neil Calbrade; Al Downie

Tring, Hertfordshire

(Oct) Cock Sparrowhawk revived after colliding with patio window while juvenile Woodpigeon died from broken neck – lady luck.

Llangollen, Clwyd

(Dec) Six Robins feeding fairly amicably together daily in snow-clad site.

New Mills, Derbyshire



(Dec) Goldcrest showed great initiative in cold weather, taking sunflower hearts, fallen scraps and peanut fragments from bird table. Also visited hanging baskets.

St Mary's, Isles of Scilly

(Nov) Herring Gull took dead Robin presented on bird table – recycling energy.

Holbrook, Suffolk

(Dec) Waxwing (max 3) taking berries move to scraps, providing a delightful garden ‘first’.

Caversham, Berkshire



(Jan) Ring-necked Parakeet (group of 3) dropped in on sunflower heart dispenser for a lovely surprise visit.

Iaverfordwest, Pembrokeshire

(Dec) Snipe probing among leaves and eating seeds in snows of Christmas Day – a delight.



(Dec) Lesser-spotted Woodpecker star appearance at peanut cage.

Belstone, Devon

(Oct) Grey Wagtail paused to drink in bird bath for the 'first time'. Greenfinch sadly absent for the entire quarter.

Mkt. Drayton, Shropshire



(Jan) Treecreeper taking peanut fragments spilt onto the ground.

Dornie, Ross-shire

(Oct) Nuthatch fed on peanuts: first confirmed record for Skye and Lochalsh District. Yellowhammer (max 4) and Siskin (max 1) add extra valuable Winter Atlas records.

Strathaven, Lanarkshire

(Jan) Lesser Redpoll (max 2) 'first time' to nyjer alongside other birds, including Brambling (max 6) and Siskin (max 7)

Gedling, Nottinghamshire

(Dec) Hectic frenzied feeding activity in freezing snows: watching bird feeders is better than TV!

Fremington, Devon

(Dec) Female Blackcap dominates activity at the seed dispenser, excluding all species bar Nuthatch and Starling.

Cley, Norfolk



(Nov) Black Redstart a pleasant surprise visitor, pausing for a few days, taking water provided in bird bath.

Looking ahead: Winter 2011-12

With the record for the total number of species recorded during a GBFS winter now standing just shy of a century, will 2011-12 see this milestone surpassed? Your observations are demonstrating that gardens, and the foods provided therein, are increasingly important for a wide variety of birds. Is this because of a greater diversity of bird food products and feeders? Does this reflect a deterioration of foraging conditions in the wider countryside? It is only with your help that the BTO can examine these important questions. Please help us to maintain the important role of the GBFS as we all wrap up warm for the winter ahead.

GBFS sites where data were submitted in 2010-11



BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



JOHN HARDING

Contact us:

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GBFS has been monitoring the numbers and variety of garden birds coming to supplementary foods in winter since 1970. It is the longest running annual survey of its kind in the world and allows direct comparison of garden types and locations over time.

The GBFS Team

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Fran Bowman: Data Assistant

Mike Toms: Head of Garden Ecology

Jacky Prior, Heather Pymar and Donna Hobbs: Garden BirdWatch Team

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