

Blackcap and Rosefinch — garden stars

BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, summarises findings from Winter 2003/04 of the Garden Bird Feeding Survey.

The methods, scale and impact of supplementary feeding birds within UK gardens have escalated dramatically over the last 34 years, as shown by latest results from the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS). Recent GBFS findings chart fresh species, changes in status and also behaviour at UK birdtables — revealing much to encourage, but with some concerns.

Rich rural gardens

As ever, weekly counts of all species exploiting supplementary food and water, from October to March inclusive, were kept by householders — 122 in rural villages, hamlets and farmsteads, 143 in areas of high density housing. The sample is considered broadly representative of dwellings overall.

Species richness by site over the winter of 2003/04 varied widely from just six species at a coastal Ramsgate (Kent) garden, to 39 species in Walbottle village (Newcastle-upon-Tyne).

Interestingly, in the 2003/04 winter, rural gardens on average supported more species than those in suburbia (23.0 and 20.8 species respectively). This contrasts with recent winters, when the warmer microclimate of suburban gardens proved more attractive (see *BTO News* 242, 248). A notable feature of the 2003/04 winter was a major influx of finches and thrushes, as well as some waterfowl, tits and buntings into rural gardens during wintry cold snaps in the New Year, when natural foods were prematurely diminished.

Overall, an impressive 81 species were recorded taking food or water. Robin and Blue Tit took food at all the gardens sampled (Table 1). The 'Top Twenty' species in winter 2003/04 took food at half, or more, of sites. A comparison of the

relative frequency of feeding by these, with the initial decade of study (1970s), and more recently (1990s), proves illuminating. The majority of species show some measure of greater attendance at feeding stations — most strikingly by Goldfinch, Siskin, Long-tailed Tit, Magpie, Woodpigeon and Sparrowhawk. These reflect healthy populations, range recoveries, a greater tolerance of man (often via reduced persecution), and behaviour shifts to exploit fresh foods. On the debit side, House Sparrow and Starling show a marked decline at feeders, while the Song Thrush decline looks to have arrested at a lower level. Changes in feeding flock-sizes provide a more accurate measure of long-term changes in status at feeders (see Box p9).

Indian Summer heat and New Year chill

Three major features strongly influenced the range of species and flock-sizes at UK birdtables in winter 2003/04:

- modest yields of many wild fruits;
- a poor breeding season in 2003 for most resident tits, thrushes and certain finches;
- an eighth successive relatively mild and wet winter.

Searing heat and the driest August-October quarter since 1972, saw birdbaths in great demand. House Sparrow and Blackbird often dominated, while early Siskin and Redpoll were a bonus for some, with transient Willow Warbler, Black Redstart and Turtle Dove noted by lucky observers. The mildest November since 1994 saw late nesting Greenfinch, Collared Dove and Woodpigeon bringing families to feeders. Food caching by Coal Tit, Marsh Tit and Nuthatch was frenetic in some gardens, with first-ever Jay visits for some, reflecting a scarcity of beech mast and acorns. Chilly episodes, with some heavy snowfalls in early December and over the New Year, saw Blackbird, Starling and winter thrushes quick to plunder garden berry and soft-fruit stocks and swiftly turn to birdtable fare. Severe frosts brought the first Blackcap, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting to some feeding stations.



Goldfinches used to be just passing garden visitors. The last few years has seen them becoming frequent and regular winter feeders in gardens, especially attracted to nyjer seed. Photograph by Jill Pakenham

Table 1
GBFS Top Twenty garden birds

Species	Winter 2003/04		
	% of gdns	% of 70s gdns (*)	% of 90s gdns (†)
Robin	100	99	99
Blue Tit	100	99	100
Blackbird	99	99	99
Great Tit	99	93	97
Greenfinch	99	92	96
Chaffinch	98	92	96
Dunnock	98	95	95
Coal Tit	92	70	85
Collared Dove	88	60	86
House Sparrow	83	97	93
Starling	83	96	93
Magpie	74	29	71
Woodpigeon	70	19	53
Goldfinch	67	3	37
Song Thrush	63	88	64
Long-tailed Tit	59	11	44
Wren	54	34	51
Siskin	54	7	52
Jackdaw	52	32	45
Sparrowhawk	50	10	46

(*) Figures are the average of 10 winters from 1970/71 to 1979/80,
(†) from 1990/91 to 1999/2000.

Record-breaking high temperatures in early February brought a lull in birdtable activity and some premature successful garden nesting attempts by Blackbird, Robin and doves, with parent birds relying on provided foods to satisfy hungry young (*BTO News* 252).

A swift change to uncomfortably cold arctic air in the final fortnight, with regular night frosts, generated a marked increase in thrush and finch flocks, Blackbird, Chaffinch and Greenfinch invariably dominating. An old-fashioned mixed bag of weather in March, brought Brambling and Siskin into many gardens, as scarce crops of alder, birch and some conifer seeds were exhausted. Goldfinch continued to exploit new birdtables, flocks of 20–30 widely, though nowhere topping the 100 mark as seen in previous winters. Feeding flocks of Long-tailed Tit, similarly, were generally smaller than in recent winters.

Tree Sparrows grace gardens

The birdtable community continued to change over winter 2003/04. Among regular feeders, Greenfinch (99%), Dunnock (98%), Coal Tit (92%), Magpie (74%), Woodpigeon (70%) and Jackdaw (52% of gardens) reached all-time high levels of feeding attendance (Table 1), while Great Tit (99%), Pheasant (29%) and Herring Gull (11% of gardens) matched previous record levels. Many

observers complained of an increasing physical dominance by larger species at feeding stations, notably from ever-tamer doves (including Feral Pigeon), gamebirds (chiefly Pheasant) and corvids, and a greater need to deploy 'cages', 'baffles' and robust feeders, to limit the hoovering up of expensive food stocks.

On the positive side, Bullfinch (21%), Tree Sparrow (14%) and Grey Wagtail (13%) achieved high attendance levels at feeders, probably helped by improved seed mixes. Equally encouraging was the widespread thin scatter of Green Woodpecker, Treecreeper and Lesser Redpoll (each to 5% of gardens), attracted to windfall apples, fatty items and water. Blackcap patronized birdtables widely (31% of gardens), their highest level since the cold winter of 1995/96, with ringers catching up to a dozen different birds within individual gardens. Some observers attributed the welcome return of Bullfinch, Tree Sparrow and House Sparrow, aided by year-round supplementary feeding with sunflower hearts, hen corn or rape seed. Nonetheless, House Sparrow (83%), Starling (83%) and Mistle Thrush (14% of gardens), dipped to all-time low levels of attendance, adding to recent worries.

Jack Snipe and Hawfinch among feeding celebrities

Yet again, surprise visitors were noted coming to provided food and water. Common Rosefinch (Ipswich, Suffolk), a predicted candidate with expanding UK garden presence, brought the 34-year GBFS tally to 164 species. Elsewhere, feeding Chough (Pwllheli, Gwynedd), Red-legged Partridge (Holyhead,

Anglesey), Serin (Blean, Kent) and Hawfinch (Workington, Cumbria) caught the eye. Among waterbirds, Common Snipe (Andreas, IOM), Jack Snipe (Beccles, Suffolk) and Kingfisher (New Milton, Hants) were attracted to supplementary foods during cold weather. Waxwing (Hyde, Greater Manchester) was part of another major midwinter influx, now seemingly an annual event.

Sparrowhawk easily maintained its status as top diurnal predator, hunting at 50% of feeding stations. Red Kite were attracted to meaty scraps at Little Missenden (Bucks) and Tredegar (Gwent), 20 birds and more circling over favoured gardens. Equally encouraging, Buzzard continued to spread (3% of gardens), tempted to scraps in gardens fringing the New Forest, Welsh Marches, Chilterns and Borders.

Tawny Owl was the most frequent nocturnal predator (hunting in just 2% of feeding stations), often drawn initially to small rodents, notably Wood Mice. Sadly, several observers were forced to limit the scale, or to close ground feeding, due to



Supplementary food provided in gardens can be important for species such as Greenfinch, as they rely entirely on seed. Natural food can be in short supply towards the end of winter. Photograph by Jill Packenham

Brown Rat activity, a product of warmer and wetter winters.

The coming winter is eagerly awaited and likely to include more tales of the unexpected. 🐦

THANK YOU

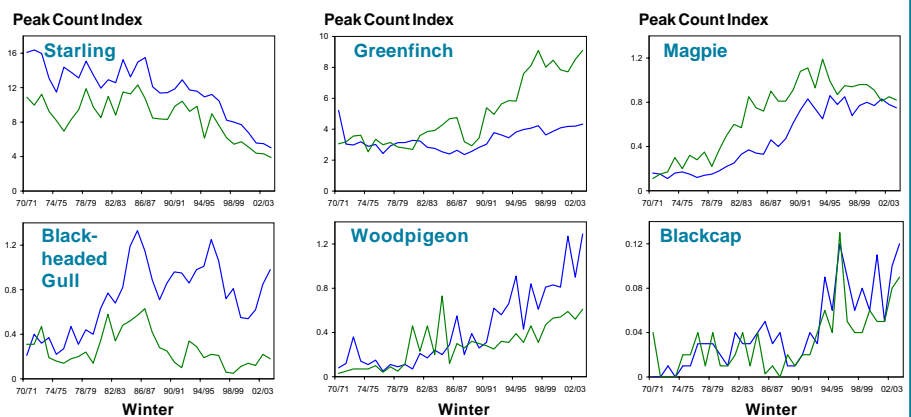
The BTO extends a large measure of thanks to the dedicated team of GBFS counters who carefully and keenly contribute each winter to this small but important Trust survey. Carol Povey, Jacky Prior and Frances Bowman kindly helped with the production and collation of forms, Mike Toms helped with the calculation of Peak Count Indices.

Mixed Fortunes at UK Birdtables: GBFS Peak Count Index 1970–2004

The BTO's GBFS plays a valuable monitoring role each winter through the Peak Count Index, an assessment of the relative number of birds feeding in the non-breeding season.

In Winter 2003/04, on the debit side, Starling flock-sizes fell to their lowest levels yet. This dip in feeding numbers, accelerated in the 1990s, and is a feature of both rural and suburban gardens. It parallels declines in breeding populations over much of NW Europe, including losses in UK farms and woods. Fewer soft-bodied invertebrate prey, affecting young bird survival, is a possible causal factor, but further studies are ongoing.

In contrast, Greenfinch has seen a marked upturn in feeding status, most strikingly in open country gardens (alongside Chaffinch), coinciding with increased year-round feeding and the introduction of better seed-mixes including sunflower hearts and nyjer. The dramatic surge in feeding numbers of Magpies, that occurred in all garden types since the late 1980s, looks to have reached a plateau, though a few sites continue to record first-time feeders, notably in more remote parts of northwestern UK. Black-headed Gull respond to cold winters, garden attendance peaking during cold



The Peak Count Index is the average maximum count per week. Scales of vertical axes vary greatly between species.

— = rural
— = suburban

snaps in the mid 1980s (along with species such as Redwing and Fieldfare). In recent years they have tended increasingly to exploit feeding stations in towns and cities, closer to reservoir roosts and municipal rubbish feeding sites. Woodpigeon, likewise, peaked at rural gardens during cold winters in the mid 1980s, but have ventured increasingly into suburban gardens in recent years, shrugging off their shyness of humans and boosted by population surges.

Use of birdtables by Blackcaps has been a welcome feature since the 1970s. Their numbers surged in the mid 1990s, being equally at home in the warmer microclimate of suburbia as in village gardens, where they are seen alongside more Chiffchaffs, the occasional Lesser Whitethroat. If warmer wetter winters are sustained, there is the potential for other insectivorous passerines to become birdtable feeders.

