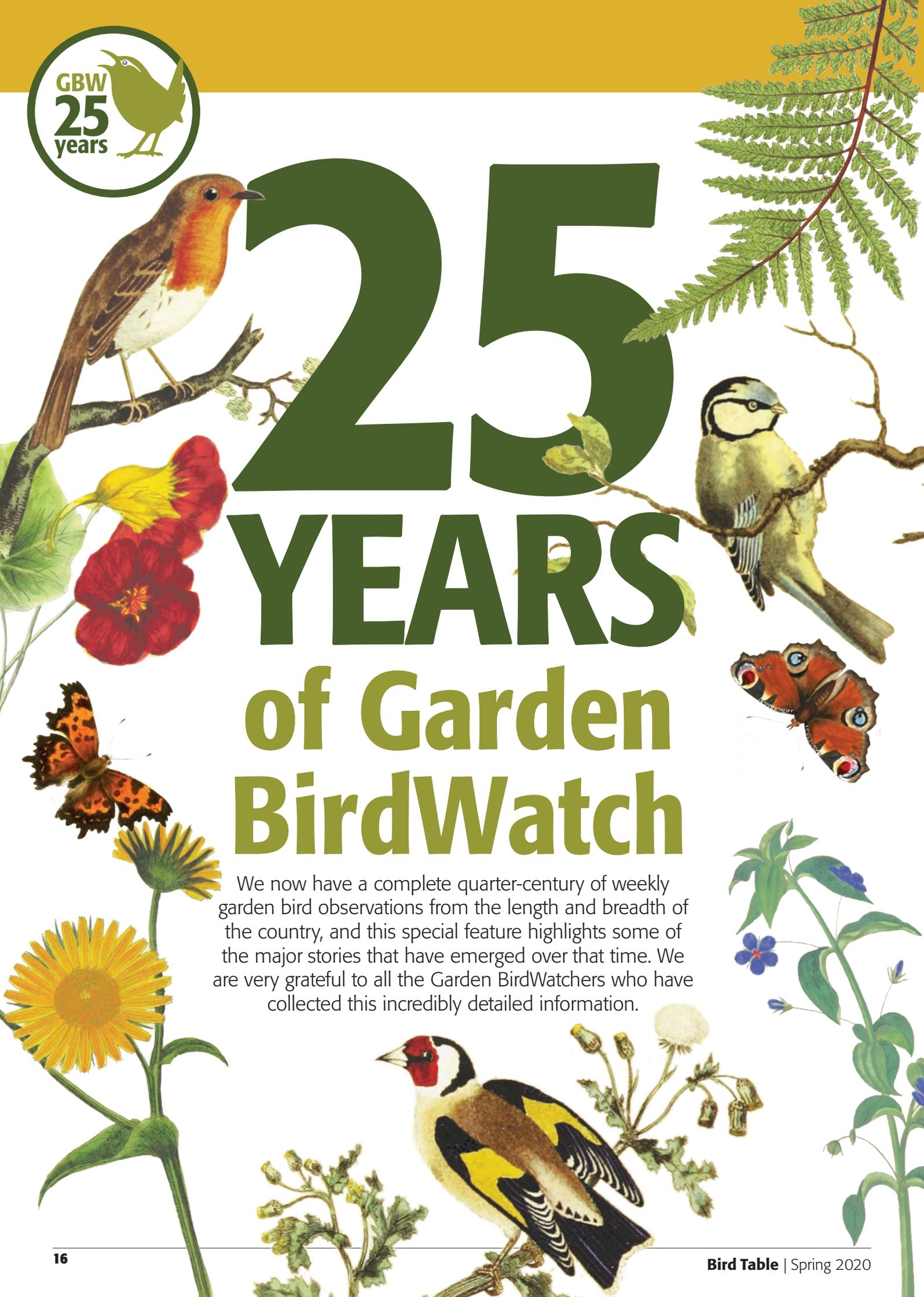




25 YEARS of Garden BirdWatch

We now have a complete quarter-century of weekly garden bird observations from the length and breadth of the country, and this special feature highlights some of the major stories that have emerged over that time. We are very grateful to all the Garden BirdWatchers who have collected this incredibly detailed information.

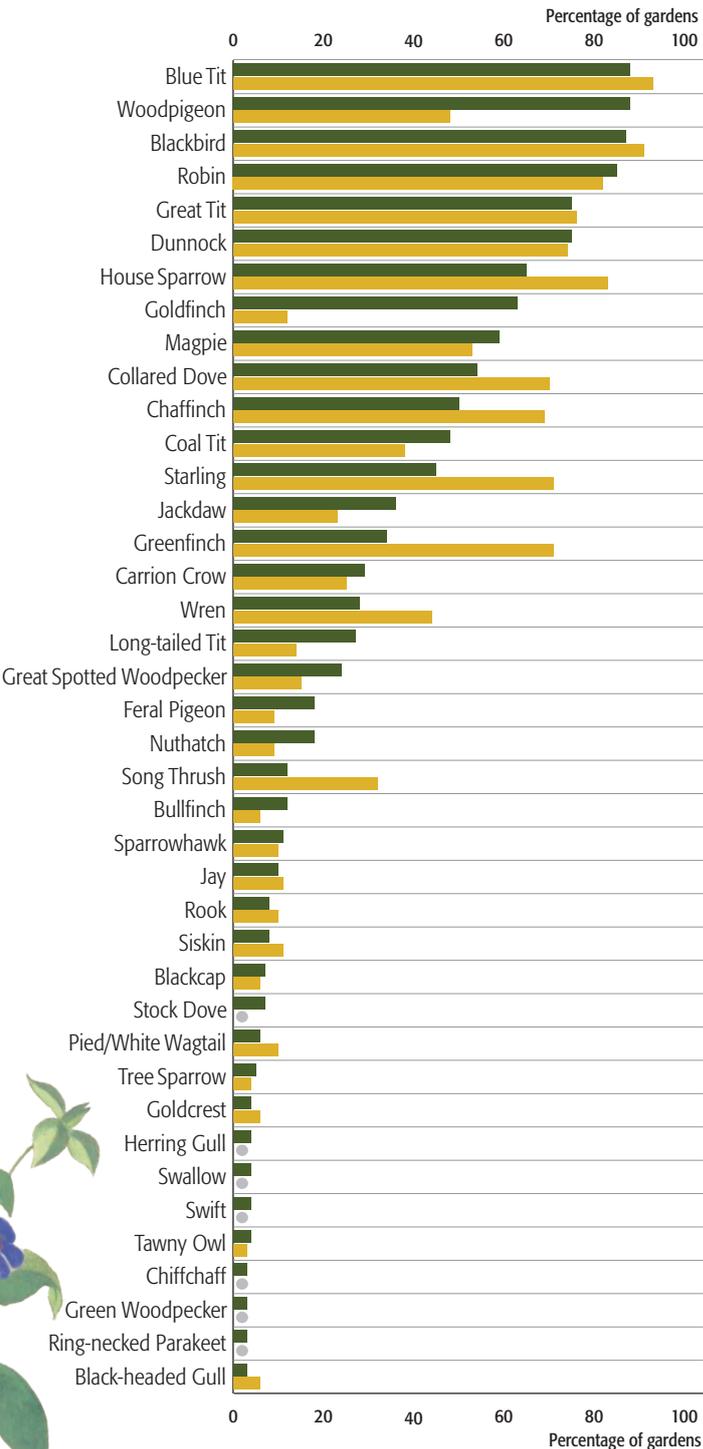


Changes between 1995 and 2019

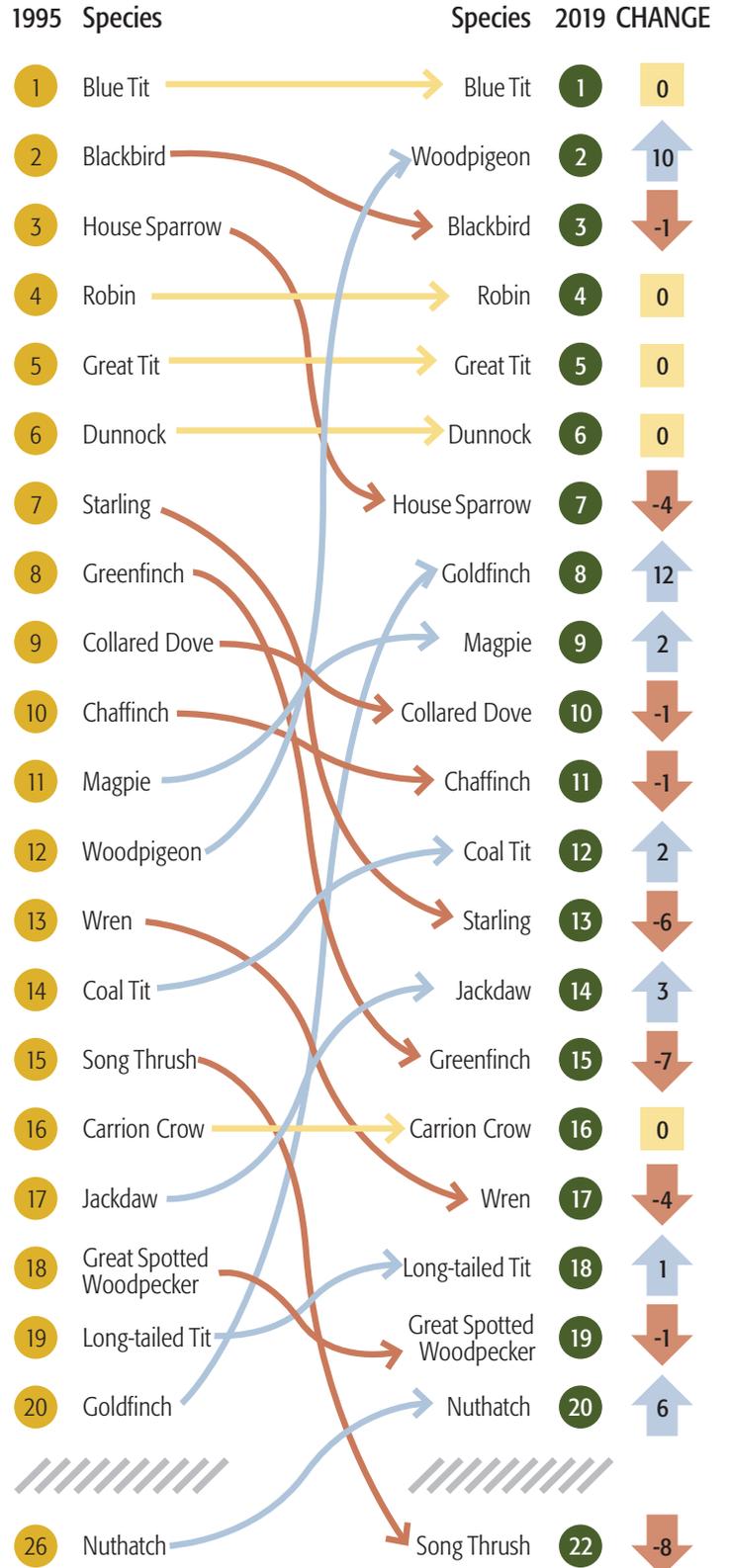
The bar chart shows the percentage of gardens that recorded each bird species for 2019 (dark green) compared to 1995 (yellow), illustrating changes such as the increase in the reporting rate of Woodpigeon and Goldfinch, and the decline of Starling and Greenfinch.

GBW REPORTING RATES

■ 2019 ■ 1995 (● Not recorded in 1995)



Species ranked from most common to least common in 1995 and 2019. The arrows show how their position has changed.



↑ Nuthatch Ranking change: +6

British breeding population:
250,000 territories.

Once primarily woodland birds of southern areas, Nuthatches have increased rapidly across the UK since the 1970s, accompanied by an expanding range into northern England and southern Scotland, where previously they were not found. They often make use of peanut feeders in gardens, and are more common in gardens near established woodland or large trees. They are seen in more gardens in October and November, with

It may be that climate change and milder winters are helping with their expansion into more northerly areas.

particularly large peaks in years with poorer natural food supplies, when birds are driven to use the food provided in gardens. In the early years of Garden BirdWatch they were only seen in around 15% of gardens even at peak times, but now they are regularly seen in over 20% of gardens, and are now in the top 20 species recorded in GBW.

Population research has shown that Nuthatches are affected by very cold winter weather, and it may be that climate change and milder winters are helping with their expansion into more northerly areas. There is also some evidence that their populations are linked to over-winter food supplies, so it's possible that garden food supplies have helped fuel their population increase.



WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Nationally their numbers are continuing to increase, with their highest population ever recorded in 2018. Though the numbers in gardens fluctuate depending on natural food supplies, we can expect to see more in gardens, particularly in the north of the UK.

↓ Chaffinch Ranking change: -1

British breeding population:
5,050,000 territories.

Although they are one of our commonest and most widespread birds, with over five million breeding territories, we have seen a worrying decline in Chaffinch numbers over the past eight years. Previously their populations had been

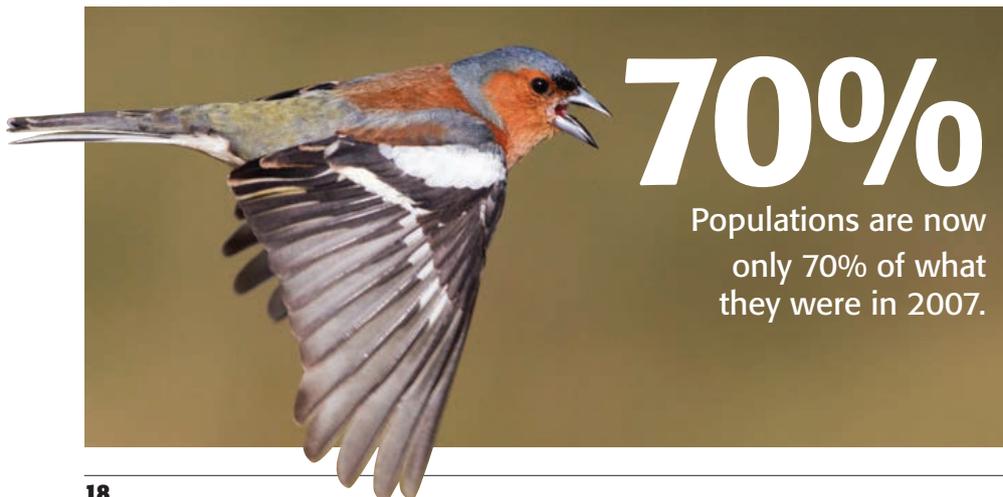
increasing, reaching a peak in 2007, and at first they appeared to have escaped severe impact from the finch trichomonosis outbreak that affected the Greenfinch population from 2006, although it was clear at the time that Chaffinches were also susceptible to the disease. However, since 2012 their numbers, both nationally and in gardens,

have been falling, and overall are now only 70% of what they were in 2007.

We don't know if trichomonosis is causing the Chaffinch decline, but through our work with the Garden Wildlife Health project we know that over 1,000 Chaffinches per year are reported as dead or affected by disease in gardens, and we hope to use our Garden BirdWatch network to keep a close eye on this situation.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Over the past eight years Chaffinches have gone from being seen in around 80% of GBW gardens, during their peak months of February and March, to only around 60%. If this decline continues, it may not be long until they are seen in under half of gardens in any given week. However, it should be remembered that they are still one of Britain's commonest birds, and we are not likely to lose Chaffinches from the countryside completely.





↓ Greenfinch Ranking change: -7

British breeding population:
785,000 pairs.

Twenty-five years ago sociable Greenfinches were in the ascendent, with numbers rapidly increasing nationally and in gardens, perhaps due to the rising popularity of sunflower hearts and other seed-based bird foods. They were in the top 10 of most commonly recorded birds in gardens, and national populations would go on to increase until 2006. However, they were then decimated by the emerging disease finch trichomonosis,

40%

of gardens now report Greenfinches, compared with 80% in 2006.

and nationally numbers are now only a quarter of what they were in 2006. Due to the losses caused by disease, Garden BirdWatch reporting rates have decreased from around 80% of gardens in their peak of March and April to only around 40% of gardens now.

BTO research, together with our partners in the Garden Wildlife Health project, confirmed that it was the trichomonosis outbreak that drove the population declines, and this project is of continuing importance for wildlife disease surveillance. BTO and partners are working to highlight the importance of hygiene in garden bird care to try to reduce the impact of disease.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Greenfinch populations have been declining steadily for over a decade. While these birds are still seen in many gardens, we don't yet know at what level the population will stabilise.



↑ Goldfinch Ranking change: +12

British breeding population:
1,650,000 pairs.

In the 1980s Goldfinches were in decline, and we were concerned about agricultural intensification affecting their ability to find food in farmland. However, from 1990 they saw a reversal in their fortunes,



and their numbers have been increasing dramatically ever since. There are now two and a half times as many Goldfinches in the UK as there were 25 years ago, and they have moved from the 20th most common species in GBW to the eighth.

It's assumed that this is mainly due to these birds exploiting garden food supplies, initially niger seed and later sunflower hearts, though there may be other factors at play. BTO research has investigated the changes in garden bird feeding practices over the past 40 years, and shown that the diversification of foods has led to an increase in the numbers of different bird species taking advantage of bird feeders. Interestingly, the ecology of Goldfinches may have made them particularly well suited to shifting to a novel food source; in natural habitats they feed on ephemeral food supplies, seeds of annual plants and flowers that always pop up in different places. Flocks of Goldfinches are known to be particularly good at roaming areas looking for new

It's assumed that this is mainly due to these birds exploiting garden food supplies, initially niger seed and later sunflower hearts.

feeding opportunities, and communicating to the rest of their flock when they see something interesting, behaviours which could have speeded up their move to using seed feeders in gardens.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Nationally Goldfinches are still increasing, and they are now seen in over 70% of GBW gardens in their peak month of April. They are now seen in the same proportion of gardens as House Sparrows, and so our prediction is that they will soon replace them as the seventh most common species recorded in GBW.



↓ Song Thrush Ranking change: -8

British breeding population:
1,300,000 territories.

In February 1996 Song Thrushes were recorded in over half of GBW gardens; their habit of breaking snails on ‘anvils’ was well known, and no doubt endeared them to many gardeners for pest control services. In 2020 they were only recorded in under 15% of gardens in January, their peak month, and in September 2019 only 3% of GBW gardens held this species. Song Thrushes have shown the biggest drop down the GBW rankings in 25 years, going from the 15th most commonly-recorded species to dropping out of the top 20 altogether.

Song Thrushes have shown the biggest drop down the GBW rankings in 25 years.

Despite their loss from gardens, they are still a common bird in the wider countryside, and their characteristic song of repeated phrases is often heard in farmland and woodland areas. While their populations experienced declines in the 1960s and 70s, BTO monitoring data show that across all habitats their populations have remained stable over the past 25 years, or even slightly increased, so their disappearance from our gardens is a mystery. Presumably gardens have become less favourable habitats since the 1990s, and it has been speculated that these birds have been affected by the use of slug pellets to control slugs and snails, though this has not been investigated.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

We don't know why Song Thrushes have declined in gardens so much, but at current rates they could disappear from gardens altogether at certain times of year within a decade.



■ Blackcap Non-mover

British breeding population:
1,650,000 territories.

Numbers of wintering birds are unknown, but suggestions include over 10,000 individuals.



Since the start of Garden BirdWatch we have learned much about the fascinating story of wintering garden Blackcaps. It was once thought that the birds seen in gardens in winter were a small proportion of our breeding birds that hadn't migrated to the Mediterranean as normal, but we now know that some Blackcaps that breed in central Europe migrate to the UK for the winter, and these are the birds we see. They are most common in gardens in southern and western England, and Wales, and GBW

It's amazing to know that filling up our garden feeders has caused a species to evolve a new migration strategy!

reports peak in February and March. This is when they make the most use of garden food supplies, such as fats and sunflower hearts, and BTO research has shown that it is these garden foods, in conjunction with warmer winters, that have driven the increase in the wintering population. It's amazing to know that filling up our garden feeders has caused a species to evolve a new migration strategy!

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

The numbers of gardens with Blackcaps in winter has remained steady, normally peaking at around 15% of GBW gardens in February. However, if winters get milder, and people continue to provide high energy winter foods, we might start to see more Blackcaps visiting gardens in eastern and northern England.



SONG THROUGH: AMY LEWIS/BTO, BLACKCAP: DAVID TIPLING/BTO, WOODPIGEON: SARAH KELMAN/BTO, HOUSE SPARROW: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

↑ Woodpigeon Ranking change: +10

British breeding population:
5,150,000 pairs.

At the start of Garden BirdWatch, Woodpigeon was the 12th most commonly recorded species, but in 2019 it was nearly at the top of the list at number two, above Blackbird. The national increase in Woodpigeons over the past 40 years has been attributed to agricultural changes, particularly the introduction of oil seed rape and winter-sown cereal, meaning that Woodpigeons are no longer limited by food availability in winter.

In the past they were mainly a farmland bird, but their increasing numbers have been accompanied by a spread into urban areas, perhaps taking advantage of seed-based feeders like so many other birds. Their large size (and accompanying appetite) and bold nature means they can overwhelm bird feeders, particularly where seed is provided on bird tables or falls to the floor.

12th

Woodpigeon was the 12th most commonly recorded species in 1995, but by 2019 it was nearly at the top of the list at number two.



WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

Over the last few years Blue Tit, Blackbird and Woodpigeon have been tied for the top of the GBW list, all being seen in around 88% of gardens on average throughout the year, and over 90% at their peaks, and we can expect these three species to continue to top our garden bird lists.

↓ House Sparrow Ranking change: -4

British breeding population:
5,300,000 pairs.

House Sparrows used to be incredibly common before the 1980s, with national populations three times the size they are today. They then suffered huge declines, for reasons that are still unclear, but these reasons are likely to have been different for urban and farmland populations. These declines continued until the 2000s, and for the past 15 years numbers have remained generally stable. At the start of Garden BirdWatch in 1995 House Sparrows were recorded in nearly 95% of gardens in their peak month of June, but for the past 10 years this has stabilised at around 70%. The population is still around five million pairs, making this still one of our commonest birds, and as a noisy, busy, sociable species they are well known for nesting and sheltering in gardens, particularly taking advantage of dense shrubs and creepers. Recently BTO has been involved in

work that indicated that 74% of London House Sparrows carry avian malaria, and that this affected their survival probability. This appears to be an ongoing issue with House Sparrows, at least in southern urban areas, and we are keen to monitor any reports of dead or diseased House Sparrows in gardens.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN FUTURE?

House Sparrow numbers appear to have stabilised, and are not currently declining. If we could provide improved urban habitats, could populations start to increase again?



74%

of London House Sparrows carry avian malaria.

Incredible GBW records

- All GBW gardens ever registered
- Gardens active since the start of the survey

250

Gardens that started recording at the very start of the survey and are still active today

438 m

Highest GBW garden: 438 m above sea level, in Nenthead in Cumbria

42,104,902

Number of filled-up bird feeders recorded

56,244

Total number of gardens ever registered

160,597

Incidents of sick, injured or dead wildlife recorded

194,029,261

Total number of individual birds and other animals counted

18,274,086

Species with most individual records: House Sparrow

25 years

Years of GBW recording, a total of 1,304 weeks

8,798,585

Total number of GBW lists submitted

Most easterly

garden to be monitored for 25 years: Lowestoft in Suffolk

1,185

Gardens from which we have received over 1,000 weekly lists

387

Total number of species (birds, dragonflies, butterflies, bumblebees, reptiles, amphibians and mammals)

1,300

Most weekly submissions from one garden (see opposite page)

Most southwesterly

garden to be monitored for 25 years: The Lizard in Cornwall

81

Total number of GBW gardens ever registered in the Channel Islands

8,002,323

Species found on most lists: Blackbird