

# Birdlife in your Garden

With the arrival of October, and the threat of cool days and frosty nights, it is time to think about what we might be doing or not doing in the garden to enhance its value as a resource for birdlife in the coming winter. Here are some tips to make your garden more attractive to birds in the coming months.

October is an ideal time to clean out your nest boxes after the breeding season. Check to ensure they are not occupied by any sheltering mammals and then remove the contents, including the nest, any dead young or infertile eggs which you are legally obligated to destroy. Wear rubber gloves to do this. Parasites and disease micro-organisms can overwinter in a nest box and adversely affect next year's brood. To avoid this, disinfect boxes, either by spraying with an appropriate veterinary disinfectant do not use an ordinary domestic product, or by pouring a couple of kettlesful of boiling water through the box. Once dry, you can put a small amount of moss or dry grass into the box to enhance its usefulness to roosting birds during the winter. Incidentally, if you have a nest box that has not been used for three years, this might be an ideal time to try another location.

While you have your rubber gloves on, now might be a good time to clean your feeders too. Birds may have an enhanced susceptibility to disease in winter if they are under-nourished and stressed by cold weather. Hanging feeders can be sprayed with veterinary disinfectant but it is probably better to go for a thorough cleaning. Disassemble the feeder as much as possible, clean out any old, congealed food and soak it for a couple of hours in hot water to which has been added a small amount of domestic bleach. Then rinse several times to remove the bleach, reassemble and dry thoroughly. Table feeders should be scraped off and doused with boiling water and can also be sprayed with an appropriate disinfectant. Allow to dry thoroughly before restocking the table with food items.

While autumn is traditionally a time for 'tidying up' the garden, do not be over-enthusiastic in this task. Do not dead-head any garden plants which offer seeds to birds during the winter, such as teasels, thistles and sunflowers. Avoid pruning bushes and trees that are well-stocked with seeds and berries and leave cutting back fruit-bearing brambles until later in the year, when the fruit have been eaten. Postpone the clean-up of fallen leaves until spring, unless the litter is in a place where it may cause damage, e.g. on a lawn. Leaf litter supports a rich ecosystem of invertebrate life and also delays soil heat loss keeping worms and other soil animals near to the surface, which both provide valuable food sources for insectivorous birds like Thrushes, Blackbirds and Robins. Evergreen plantings offer excellent shelter for roosting birds during cold weather try to avoid pruning them until after the cold weather to retain their effectiveness as warm, wind-free environments. If you have a brush pile in your garden from pruning jobs earlier in the year, leave it intact throughout the coming cold season. Not only do such piles offer roosting opportunities for small birds, such as Wrens, but they also harbour insects and other invertebrate food to keep birds that require such food supplied throughout the cold months. They can also shelter mammals and amphibians.

Some forethought now will set the scene for a bird-filled winter to come. Almost all of our resident bird species are found in more gardens in winter than in summer. For example, the number of gardens reporting Blue Tits increases by about 10% between summer and winter, while equivalent increases for Chaffinch and Starling are roughly 20% and 30%, respectively. This is partly because gardens are more attractive to our native birds in winter, when food is scarcer in the countryside, but also because Britain and Shropshire, experience the effects of in-migration of the same species escaping the rigours of winter in Scandinavia and the countries of the North European Plain. In addition, winter visitors that are not resident species, such as Fieldfare, Redwing and Brambling, supplement the populations of our gardens in the coldest months. In my next article, I will explore the issue of what food is best to offer your garden's avian visitors during the winter.

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*Avoid dead-heading seed-bearing plants too early as they can provide a valuable food source for birds like Goldfinches  
Picture by Jill Pakenham (BTO Library)*



*Starling on fat feeder, in spotted winter plumage. Large influxes of this species from continental Europe will swell our garden populations in winter. Picture by John Harding (BTO Library)*