

Birdlife in your garden

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch (GBW) survey is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, thanks to the dedication of its 13,000 participants. GBW is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. The project, which is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world, is funded by its 'citizen scientist' participants, who have contributed an astonishing 7.3 million hours of their time over the last 20 years, submitting just under 100 million observations.

This wealth of information has also allowed BTO researchers to examine how, when and why birds and other wildlife use gardens and the resources that they contain, and there have been some ground-breaking findings, including several investigating the decline of the UK's House Sparrow population, first discovered through BTO's garden-based data. It was also thanks to the contributions of GBW volunteers that scientists from BTO and the Institute of Zoology were able to reveal the impact of the disease trichomonosis on the Greenfinch population, which has declined by 30% since 2005. These findings are reported in the scientific literature and contribute not only to a deeper knowledge of garden bird ecology but also inform conservation decisions and policies.



House Sparrow (male), a species that has declined by 71% since 1977. GBW data continue to track its fortunes in our garden habitats (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

Since the inception of GBW in 1995, an astounding 481 different species (including birds, mammals, butterflies, bumblebees, reptiles and amphibians) have been recorded in gardens, with an average of 35 species reported per garden, of which 29 are birds. Over the UK as a whole, 30,271 gardens have supplied the simple data on which the survey is based (the maximum count for species seen each week, along with information on any bird food provided). One

interesting finding is that participants see, on average, three more bird species in their garden in 2014 than they did in 1995!

In Shropshire, the bird species reported in most gardens are Blackbird, Blue Tit and Robin (found in 93, 90 and 88% of the county's gardens), with Woodpigeon, Dunnock, Great Tit, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch making up the "top ten". GBW results for Shropshire reveal that there are certain species that occur in far more of our gardens than in the average UK garden, including Bullfinch, Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Dunnock, while Starlings and Feral Pigeons are less common.



Bullfinch (male) at seed feeder. GBW observations show this species is a more frequent garden resident in Shropshire than in the UK as a whole (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

As well as its scientific contributions, the project also provides benefits for its community of GBW volunteers. Clare Simm of the BTO GBW team observed, "The one thing that many of our volunteers comment on is how their knowledge has developed through watching their garden wildlife for GBW, as well as the interest that they gain from seeing the changes in the bird community over the years, all whilst collecting simple but incredibly important data on a weekly basis. Given how much has changed during the last 20 years, it will be fascinating to see what happens over the course of the next two decades."

Gardens are often the place where people first encounter, and learn to love birds and other wildlife. In addition, they are an important habitat in their own right, supporting a wide range of species. If you watch birds and other wildlife in your garden then why not join this community of citizen scientists and develop your interest, while contributing to this fantastic national project?

John Arnfield

The author is BTO Ambassador for the GBW scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you are interested in joining GBW, why not contact John (01694 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu) for further information?