

# Feeding garden birds: updated advice



Greenfinch, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Advice on feeding wild birds is shaped by scientific research, to which BTO has made a significant contribution. As understanding evolves, we refine that guidance to reflect current knowledge. A recent RSPB-led review, with significant BTO input, has prompted updates to our approach. Here, **Mike Toms** and **Kate Plummer** explain what has changed – and why.

**G**arden BirdWatchers will be very aware of the emergence and impact of finch trichomonosis, a disease that has brought about significant declines in UK Greenfinch and Chaffinch populations. Many Garden BirdWatchers have helped us to chart the emergence of this disease – caused by the protozoan parasite *Trichomonas gallinae* – by contributing vital information on bird numbers and accompanying reports of sick individuals. BTO scientists have been at the fore of research into the disease and its impacts.

The long-term impacts of finch trichomonosis have prompted a structured review of the scientific evidence surrounding garden bird feeding. This review has been led by RSPB, with significant input from BTO. The review has examined the possible pros and cons of feeding wild birds, using published science to establish what we know and what we don't. It has looked at how the provision of food influences individuals, populations and communities, through effects on survival, disease risk and competition, amongst others. It was overseen by a Technical Steering Group bringing together expertise in ecology,

wildlife disease and conservation science, with BTO Senior Research Ecologist Kate Plummer contributing to the evaluation and interpretation of the evidence base. RSPB has used the review to inform its approach to feeding wild birds, both in terms of its commercial sales operation and the advice that it gives to the public. BTO is also updating its advice.

## WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

The review brought together a wide body of evidence to clarify both the benefits and potential risks associated with garden bird feeding. Feeding can support birds in various ways, and also provides valued opportunities for people to connect with nature. While the scientific evidence is limited for some aspects, the strongest and most clearly understood evidence currently relates to disease transmission at feeding stations – particularly finch trichomonosis. Concerns about competition and its effects on subordinate species, such as Marsh and Willow Tits, were also examined, but findings in this area remain less conclusive regarding the scale of any impact or delivery of effective mitigation options.

BTO research has played a central role in our understanding of finch trichomonosis and its effects. Analyses led by BTO's Hugh Hanmer show that declines in adult survival associated with the disease have been more pronounced in residential settings, consistent with elevated transmission risk at feeding stations. Ongoing collaborative research between the RSPB, Institute of Zoology and BTO is further examining how feeding practices influence disease dynamics. Recent results from this work, led by Hugh Hanmer and Kate Plummer, identify the post-breeding period as a time of elevated outbreak risk in gardens. These findings have directly informed the view that best practice advice on when to feed should include a seasonal component.

A complementary field-based study is investigating transmission routes at shared food and water resources in gardens. Early results from this work have helped to clarify how feeder design and hygiene measures influence disease risk, informing practical decisions such as the halt to sales of 'flat surface' feeders announced by RSPB and BTO partners Vine House Farm back in the winter of 2024/25. These flat surface feeders appear to carry a higher risk of onward transmission than is the case with hanging feeders.

Taken together, this growing body of evidence points most clearly to disease transmission at feeding stations as the area where mitigation is both feasible and likely to be effective. On that basis, the RSPB has issued updated feeding advice and we are doing the same, prioritising measures aimed at reducing trichomonosis risk as a proportionate and precautionary step. The review provides the scientific foundation; policy decisions translate that evidence into practical guidance, reflecting both the strength of the evidence and judgements about feasibility and proportionality.

### A NEW APPROACH TO GARDEN FEEDING

Based on the review's findings, the revised guidance recommends **halting the provision of seeds and peanuts in the warmer months of May to October**, when the risk of finch trichomonosis outbreaks is elevated. Other foods, such as mealworms and fat / suet products – which are rarely used by species typically affected by trichomonosis – may continue to be provided, although attention to spoilage remains important and it is worth noting that fat products are generally less suitable in hot weather.

Whatever the time of year, good hygiene remains essential – **offer food little and often, clean feeders regularly, and move them periodically to reduce build-up of waste and contamination.**

The updated guidance also highlights the importance of water hygiene, since water sources can be a transmission route for the *Trichomonas* parasite. If you, or a neighbour, has a shallow-edged pond that allows birds to drink and bathe, there is generally no need to provide additional water unless the pond has dried out or frozen. **Where water is provided, replace it daily. Bowls or trays should be cleaned weekly, then rinsed and dried before reuse.**

Taken together, these adjustments reflect a shift towards more considered and lower-risk feeding practices, particularly during periods when disease transmission risk is elevated. By adjusting the timing and type of food provided, it is possible to reduce opportunities for trichomonosis transmission while continuing to enjoy the benefits of feeding.

While the evidence base is not complete, acting now offers the opportunity to reduce disease transmission and support the recovery of affected finch populations. We will continue to work

Great Tit and Greenfinches, by David Tipling / BTO



## RETHINKING HOW WE FEED GARDEN BIRDS

In nature, food comes and goes. In gardens, it can become constant. Feeding in ways that reflect natural patterns can support birds while reducing unintended impacts. The ecological principles below help make sense of the recent changes to feeding guidance.

Under natural conditions, birds exploit food that is scattered and short-lived. Flocks gather, resources are depleted, and birds disperse. Different species often forage in slightly different places or at different heights, so patterns of contact are dynamic and continually changing.

Supplementary feeding can alter those patterns. When food is provided consistently at fixed locations, many individuals – sometimes from multiple species – may return repeatedly to the same feeders over extended periods. Over time, this can increase opportunities for disease transmission.

A more considered approach to feeding, grounded in these ecological principles, aims to:

- reduce repeated use of the same feeding spots by large numbers of birds
- avoid creating predictable, long-lasting feeding sites where contamination can build up
- encourage movement and turnover, more like natural food patches that appear and disappear
- adjust food types seasonally, particularly during higher-risk periods
- retain the benefits of feeding while reducing unintended disease risk

There is no single formula – every garden is different, and conditions change from season to season and from one day to the next. Feeding well means observing, adapting and responding to what you see in your own garden.

collaboratively to address areas of uncertainty surrounding the pros and cons of feeding wild birds.

Our understanding of finch trichomonosis has only been possible because of the long-term data provided by Garden BirdWatch participants and contributors to Garden Wildlife Health and other core schemes, including the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey, the Ringing Scheme, and the Nest Record Scheme. Continued volunteer contributions to these schemes will be crucial as we assess the impact of these changes, address key knowledge gaps and refine bird feeding advice in future. **Whatever you decide to do personally, please keep recording your weekly observations of food provision, birds, other wildlife and signs of disease or other mortality** – your data underpin our understanding of garden wildlife ecology.

In acknowledgement of the significant conservation value brought by bird ringing activities dependent on provision of food during the breeding season, and the extremely small contribution that these make to bird feeding at a national scale, we will not be mandating that ringers cease use of peanuts and seed. We will, however, be producing targeted hygiene guidance to enable them to minimise possible risks.

### DETERMINING WHAT TO DO

People feed wild birds for good reasons – to support wildlife and to enjoy close contact with nature. Supplementary feeding is one way to do this, alongside providing natural food sources through wildlife-friendly planting. As our understanding evolves, so too must our approach. Based on the best

available evidence, we support halting the provision of seeds and peanuts during the warmer months as a proportionate step to reduce the impact of finch trichomonosis. For those who choose to feed birds, this represents best practice under present conditions.

In practical terms, the updated guidance means:

- Adopting a more considered approach to feeding (see box above).
- Adjusting food types seasonally – feed seeds and peanuts from November to April, pausing during May to October.
- Continuing mealworms and fat / suet provision year-round, though note the earlier comment about suet and warm weather.
- Maintaining good food and water hygiene.

Full details, including frequently asked questions, are available on our website, along with information on how to contact us if you have further questions.

While disease risk is just one aspect of the wider discussion around feeding wild birds, the current evidence suggests these adjustments represent the next stage in refining best practice. Through Garden BirdWatch, and our wider research programmes, we will continue to lead in evaluating how feeding influences bird populations – including areas where the scientific evidence remains limited – and we will refine our guidance as our understanding develops. ■