



Who is benefiting the most, these Blue Tits or the person who filled the feeder?

A close connection

The benefits of birdwatching

A growing body of research is investigating the benefits to our health of spending time enjoying nature. But how does feeding garden birds fit in? **Claire Boothby** summarises what we know so far.

Why do we feed the birds in our gardens? The simple answer is because we like them and we enjoy watching them. From Blue Tits darting onto the feeders and Blackbirds singing from a favourite perch, to the ever-present Robin that keeps us company when we're gardening, watching and interacting with garden birds brings us a great deal of happiness. In fact, we spend a lot of money feeding the birds. The Pet Food Manufacturers' Association estimated that in 2015 alone we spent £210 million feeding birds. But what is driving our love of watching birds and our desire to feed them?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Our habits have changed considerably over the last two decades and we are feeding the birds more than we used to. The volume of wild bird foods, such as fat products and sunflower hearts, has more than doubled since the late 1990s. Whilst there could be a number of motivations for feeding the birds in our gardens, research has highlighted some key factors, including conservation benefits, providing a sense of wellbeing, and feeling closer to nature. Interestingly, they also found that as we get older, we are more likely to feed the birds regularly; however, income did

not appear to be related to whether food was put out for birds.

It was found that many people report feeling a moral responsibility to feed the birds, to aid their survival. In an increasingly urban landscape, with green space under pressure from a need for more housing, gardens give individuals the opportunity to help conserve wildlife, and to make a difference, through planting schemes and provision of food and water. It was estimated in 2009 that



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domestic gardens in the UK held 3.5 million ponds and 28.7 million trees, which is a substantial resource for biodiversity.

In fact, we know that human intervention and changes in the way we are feeding the birds can have large scale impacts. For example, over the last 60 years we've seen an increase in Blackcaps from continental Europe migrating to the UK, instead of heading south to the Mediterranean. BTO research, led by Dr Kate Plummer, has found an increasing association between these birds and the supplementary food we provide, which suggests that they are adapting their feeding habits to take advantage

of this food source. A changing climate is also thought to have aided this rapid evolutionary change in migratory route.

GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

As well as wanting to feed birds to benefit them, people also report wanting to feed birds in their gardens because this activity gives them a better connection with nature, with associated improvements in their mental wellbeing. This is an increasing cause for concern, as sedentary lifestyles and the disconnection with nature have been blamed, in part, for increases in mental health disorders. A growing body of research has found that spending time outdoors and in natural surroundings can benefit our mental health, and help us to relax and unwind from our demanding and busy lifestyles.

This raises questions as to whether the specific kinds of plants and animals that inhabit these green spaces affect our opinion of their quality, or the associated health benefits.

Birds are important ecologically, for their roles in seed dispersal, nutrient cycling and pest control, to name a few, but they can also provide a less tangible benefit to humans. In recent research



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The nation's favourite bird? People generally feel more positive towards Robins than Starlings.

from Exeter University, in collaboration with the BTO, it was found that areas with more birds present in the afternoons, coinciding with times when a lot of people were out and about, were associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression in the local community. Interestingly, however, it was the total abundance of all birds in an area, rather than the number of different species, which seemed to provide a positive impact for mental health.

Research published in 2012 in the journal *BioScience* found something similar, that a greater number of species in an area did not necessarily lead to increased benefits for mental health. Instead, it was the *perceived* richness of birds, butterflies and plant, as reported by the subjects of the study, which made a difference. There is often a disparity between how diverse and rich in wildlife an area is perceived to be, and the reality. For many non-birdwatchers a little brown

warbler hidden in the vegetation is less noticeable than a colourful Blue Tit flitting from tree to tree and regularly visiting a feeder.

Importantly, as you might imagine, people feel more favourably about birds that they are able to identify and name. However, studies have found that many people are unable to identify wildlife in their local area, and anecdotal evidence suggests this kind of knowledge is in decline. Increased knowledge and accompanying positive feelings towards a bird are likely to lead to increased health benefits associated with seeing it in the garden or in the countryside. This opens up new questions as to whether teaching of bird identification could enhance the mental health benefits of seeing wildlife.

ARE ALL BIRDS EQUAL?

Whilst the perceived diversity of life might be associated with better mental health, research is now starting to explore whether particular species aid or detract from the enjoyment and positive benefits provided by seeing them. For example, would seeing a Magpie, a bird often viewed as a villain, lead to the same

benefits as seeing a Robin, which has been crowned our unofficial national bird? Our personal opinions of these species are likely to influence the effect on us and our mental health.

While from an ecological perspective we should consider all birds equal, and explore the role they play in the ecosystem without prejudice, we know that people show a range of positive and negative emotional reactions towards different species. Research in America revealed negative reactions to two common non-native species in the area, House Sparrow and Starling, attributed to disturbance through noise and mess.

Non-native species are a category that often elicit strong negative reactions, but even when we just consider native species, research from Exeter University suggests that many people react more positively to 'songbirds' than to other species.

Although it is clear that some birds are liked or disliked, and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence about the reasons behind this, there has been little research into general patterns that drive people's emotional reactions to birds. We may be endeared to species by their behaviour, such as a group of Starlings splashing about in the bird bath. Other people could feel more favourably about rarities to the garden, excited about adding another bird to the garden list.

Many also feel a connection to individual birds in the garden, and species that are more tolerant of people, such as Robins, might be more favoured.

It's extremely interesting to consider the wider implications of what makes us like or dislike particular species, and whether these preferences will affect the value for our mental health of green spaces in our urban areas. Stay tuned for a project exploring how factors such as plumage, rarity and visual attractiveness of birds, birding knowledge, or geography, influence how much we value birds.



We generally feel more positive towards birds we can name and identify.

Research led by Exeter University suggests that many people react more positively to 'songbirds' than to other species.

BIRDWATCHER, ROBIN: DAVID TIPLING, STARLING: JOHN HARDING



Further reading

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