

# GBFSnews

The newsletter for participants in the  
BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



Number 9

September 2017

## The Robin reigns supreme

**Our unofficial national bird, the Robin, pipped the Blue Tits and Blackbirds to the post as being the bird recorded in the most gardens over the winter period, having been seen in 100% of sites. Whilst it was a reasonably quiet winter on the feeders, some fantastic birds were recorded including Waxwing and a Firecrest.**



LIZ HARRIS

This has been my first year taking over GBFS, and I feel very privileged to be part of a survey running for over 40 years, that has provided data for many scientific publications. I have enjoyed the analysis, looking back over the data for last winter and comparing it to previous years. It's been really interesting to read the notes section on the forms and look at your feeder data; a summary of which is displayed on pages 8&9. I am sure that between us, we spend a small fortune on bird food each year!

During last winter we had 241 gardens recording, and an equal division of suburban and rural habitats. Altogether 236,126 individual birds were recorded, with 58% of them recorded in rural, and 42% in suburban gardens.

Together we recorded a grand total of 75 species using the food sources in our gardens

(or predated the birds using the food). This is slightly fewer than the previous two years, with Oystercatcher and Cormorant being on the list of birds recorded in 2015–16 that are not on this year's list. Despite this, last season had its share of unusual sightings (see page 2). What will be in store for the 2017–18 season?

I hope that you've enjoyed doing the survey and are looking forward to starting again for the 2017–18 season, which is now upon us. Unfortunately, we've had a few people who have had to leave the survey after many years. I want to take this opportunity to say thank you, to you all, for your valuable contribution to the survey. I also want to thank Alic Prior for all of his hard work opposite a computer screen, for hours on end, entering all of your data into a central spreadsheet. The coming season will be his tenth year volunteering for GBFS!

Claire Boothby

# GBFS Review of winter 2016–17

**Overall, it was a quiet year on the feeders, which is likely to be due, at least in part, to the mild weather conditions. However, a cold snap in late January, early February saw more birds coming to garden feeders.**

## Mild conditions throughout the winter

The weather was milder than usual over the whole season; with above average mean temperatures for each month. However, some cold spells of weather crept in. Weeks 17 and 19 were the busiest weeks in the gardens, and were the only weeks when we surpassed 18,000 birds recorded. Unsurprisingly, the busiest weeks for birds were periods of colder weather across much

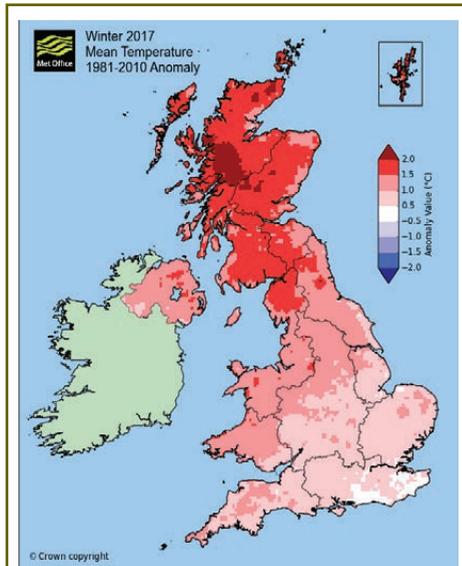


Figure 1: Met Office temperature anomaly map, displaying the difference between the mean temperature for December – February last winter, compared to the average.

of the UK, according to the Met Office. The survey finished on the fifth warmest March recorded, although there were wintry conditions further north. The month also brought in south-westerly winds, which may have helped to bring our early House Martin record in mid-March in Cornwall.

## Unusual visitors

Whilst there weren't hordes of birds on the feeders, we did record a few unusual ones. Included in this category are the two records of Waxwing from two suburban gardens, one in Fife during December and another in Hertfordshire in January. With berry food sources scarce in Europe, we had an irruption year for them in the UK, so it is great to see that they have entered the GBFS list for the first time since 2012–13.

Another unexpected occurrence was the Hen Harrier which graced a garden in Orkney, hunting the small mammals around the bird feeder.



JOHN HARDING

Apparently, the Hen Harriers are often around this garden during the winter, and they usually pass low through it before hopping over the fence in order to quarter the field in front of the house.

Firecrest is another super addition to the list, recorded in Buckinghamshire during December, as well as a Water Rail seen on the Isles of Scilly.

## Birds aplenty

It might have been a quiet season for the most part but some species bucked the trend and were recorded using the feeders more than usual. One of the species to make use of the seeds you put out was the red-listed Tree Sparrow, which were seen in higher counts than the average for the previous five years, across the winter season.

Tree Sparrows weren't the only species to be seen in greater numbers. We seemed to have a slightly better winter for thrush sightings, compared to the previous few years. Redwing sightings, for example were at their lowest levels since 1973 in 2015–16.

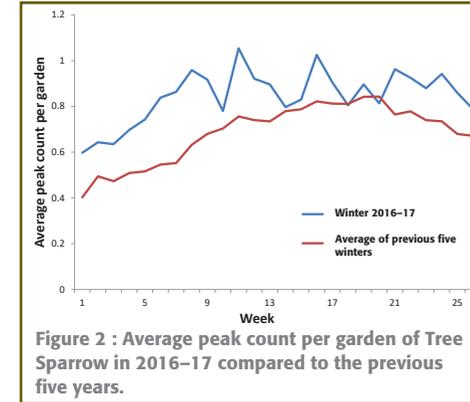


Figure 2: Average peak count per garden of Tree Sparrow in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

During the last winter, however, three times the number of gardens recorded them. Maybe the fruit you put out was inviting, and there was a lack of food in countryside compared to recent years. Song Thrush counts were also marginally higher than the last few years and were also seen in more gardens

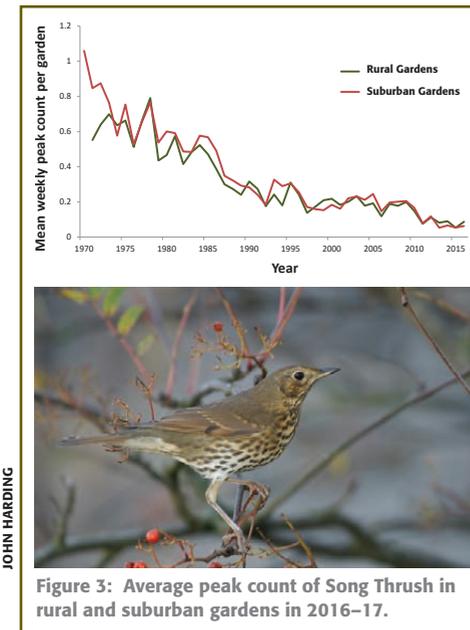


Figure 3: Average peak count of Song Thrush in rural and suburban gardens in 2016–17.

JOHN HARDING



(40% of the gardens 2016–2017 compared to 29% 2015–16). Fieldfares were also slightly less elusive last winter, and were recorded in 12 sites, compared to only five in 2015–16.

## Cold snap brings birds onto feeders

One species utilising garden food resources in late winter was the tiny Goldcrest. Whilst garden sightings are few and far between, February is the period when they are most frequently recorded. They are incredibly light, with a weight approximately equal to a 5p piece, and a lot of energy can be expended in the cold winter weather, so they need sufficient food reserves to help keep them going. Weeks 17–24 show a higher than average count in gardens, which was around the time of cold, frosty weather, and a time when the fat balls in the garden can be a really good resource for a hungry Goldcrest.

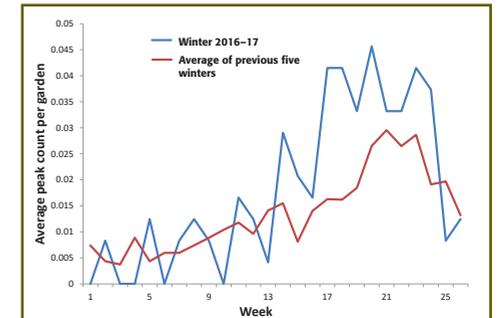


Figure 4: Average peak count per garden of Goldcrest in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

JILL PAKENHAM

Herring Gulls also made better use of garden resources than they have in previous seasons, and like the tiny Goldcrests, were seen in greatest numbers in late January, early February, during colder spells of weather. Whilst they are mainly seen in suburban gardens, there was increase in

both the suburban and rural recordings last season. During this time we also saw a peak in Pied Wagtail sightings.

**Some were conspicuous by their absence**

Many species were recorded in fewer gardens than usual, and many of the common species such as Dunnock, Coal Tit, and Woodpigeon were recorded in fewer gardens than last year. One species which was noticeably down in both rural and suburban habitat types was Sparrowhawk, with a 4% reduction in the number of plots recording them in 2016–17, compared to the previous year. This trend is also echoed in the Garden BirdWatch data and we think that it could in part be a knock-on effect of a poor breeding season, but there is always the possibility that they had sufficient prey in the wider countryside.

Great Tits, a tasty meal for a hungry Sparrowhawk and a regular visitor to the majority of GBFS gardens, were also seen in fewer plots in 2016–17. They were recorded in approximately 2% fewer gardens than last year, and their average counts

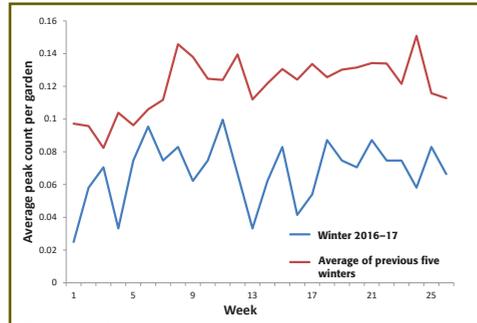


Figure 5: Average peak count per garden of Sparrowhawk in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

shows a dip compared to the previous five years. The BTO Nest Record Scheme has shown that both Great Tits and Blue Tits had a poor breeding season in 2016, and the lack of first winter birds is likely to be at least partly responsible for this result.

**Country living**

Crow species are widespread, opportunistic feeders, which many dismiss, but they are part of our garden birdlife nonetheless. Our results show that our smallest corvid, the Jackdaw, was seen in higher counts in rural gardens than the last few years,

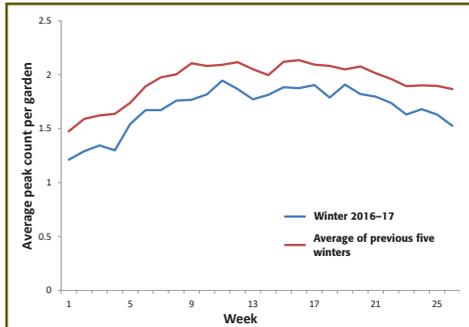


Figure 6: Average peak count per garden of Great Tit in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

but in reduced numbers in suburban habitats. Data from GBFS shows that they tend to be seen mostly in rural gardens, although sightings have increased in both habitat types since the early 1990s. Interestingly, this trend is also shown in Rooks.

One crow species that was recorded in lower numbers in gardens last winter was the Jay, which shows a reduced average count compared with the previous five years. In what was a warm winter, it is likely that there were sufficient food sources to

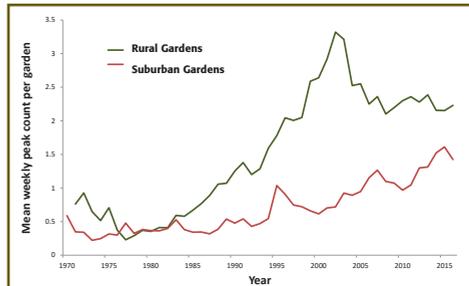


Figure 7: Average peak count of Jackdaw in rural and suburban gardens in 2016–17.

JOHN HARDING

**Creeping up**

It is fair to say that Treecreepers aren't frequent garden visitors, but can steal the odd meal here and there. They're usually recorded in 5% of gardens or under and last winter were only recorded in seven gardens out of the 241 which took part in the survey. In the past, we mainly recorded these birds in rural gardens, but we now tend to record them in both habitat types in similar numbers. In contrast to Rooks and Jackdaws, the peak counts for Treecreeper have increased in suburban gardens over the last two winters, but peak counts are

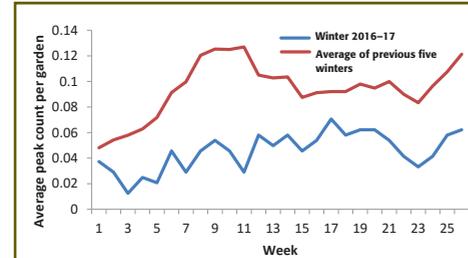


Figure 8: Average peak count per garden of Jay in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

stop these birds relying on garden habitats. Was there a good acorn crop that helped to sustain them through the winter? We know from the BTO/ JNCC/ RSPB Breeding Bird Survey that the population of Jays reduced by 8% between 2015–2016, and therefore a slightly reduced population size might have also influenced this trend.

**Suburban living**

Last season we appear to have had more Black-headed Gulls coming into suburban gardens in mid-November than usual. Numbers tend to increase throughout the winter, reaching a peak in February, as food sources dry up. Whilst our breeding birds are resident, an estimated two-thirds of our wintering population migrate from mainland Europe. Was the spike in sightings due to less food available than recent years or a greater abundance of Black-headed Gulls in the UK?

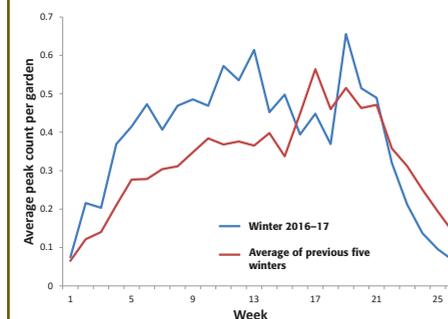


Figure 10: Average peak count per garden of Black-headed Gull in 2016–17 compared to the previous five years.

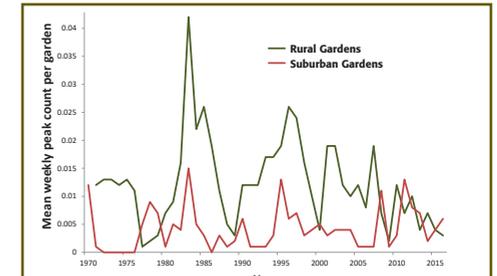


Figure 9: Average peak count of Treecreeper in rural and suburban gardens in 2016–17.

decreasing in rural areas – why? Are birds in suburban habitats relying on more exposed trees, which could make them more vulnerable to frost and ice? Is supplementary food in gardens needed more in suburban areas?



AMY LEWIS

# Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

## Winter 2016 - 2017

### Top Twelve Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Robin	241	100.0	Woodpigeon	212	88.0
Blue Tit	239	99.2	Goldfinch	210	87.1
Blackbird	239	99.2	House Sparrow	202	83.8
Dunnock	231	95.9	Coal Tit	196	81.3
Great Tit	231	95.9	Collared Dove	191	79.3
Chaffinch	225	93.4	Greenfinch	186	77.2

### Additional Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Magpie	180	74.7	Lesser Redpoll	31	12.9
Long-tailed Tit	177	73.4	Goldcrest	30	12.4
Starling	173	71.8	Stock Dove	30	12.4
Jackdaw	143	59.3	Grey Wagtail	25	10.4
Great Spotted Woodpecker	139	57.7	Black-headed Gull	22	9.1
Sparrowhawk	118	49.0	Marsh/Willow Tit	20	8.3
Wren	101	41.9	Redwing	17	7.1
Carrion Crow	98	40.7	Yellowhammer	17	7.1
Song Thrush	97	40.2	Mistle Thrush	16	6.6
Siskin	96	39.8	Reed Bunting	15	6.2
Pheasant	85	35.3	Fieldfare	12	5.0
Nuthatch	83	34.4	Mallard	12	5.0
Rook	63	26.1	Lesser Black-backed Gull	11	4.6
Pied Wagtail	60	24.9	Moorhen	10	4.1
Bullfinch	59	24.5	Green Woodpecker	9	3.7
Feral Pigeon	53	22.0	Red-legged Partridge	9	3.7
Blackcap	51	21.2	Buzzard	8	3.3
Jay	44	18.3	Marsh Tit	8	3.3
Brambling	41	17.0	Treecreeper	7	2.9
Herring Gull	39	16.2	Ring-necked Parakeet	7	2.9
Tree Sparrow	35	14.5	Common Gull	56	2.5

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Chiffchaff	6	2.5	Grey Partridge	1	0.4
Tawny Owl	5	2.1	Firecrest	1	0.4
Hooded Crow	4	1.7	Raven	1	0.4
Red Kite	4	1.7	Coot	1	0.4
Kestrel	2	0.8	Willow Tit	1	0.4
Great Black-backed Gull	2	0.8	Curlew	1	0.4
Water Rail	2	0.8	Yellow Wagtail	1	0.4
Waxwing	2	0.8	Hen Harrier	1	0.4
Heron	2	0.8	House Martin	1	0.4
Linnet	1	0.4	Rock Dove	1	0.4
Willow Warbler	1	0.4			

Number of sites recording: 241

### Focus on sites

Not many people see over 26 bird species in the garden over winter, but 37 of the 241 GBFS-ers did just that, and these particularly species rich gardens are scattered across the UK. A suburban garden in Newcastle upon Tyne had a grand total of 40 species!

It isn't just about species richness however, some of the gardens which recorded relatively fewer birds were responsible for some of the most unusual sightings, such as the Hen Harrier on Orkney.

We also had a nice mixture of suburban and urban gardens (page 12).



JOHN HARDING

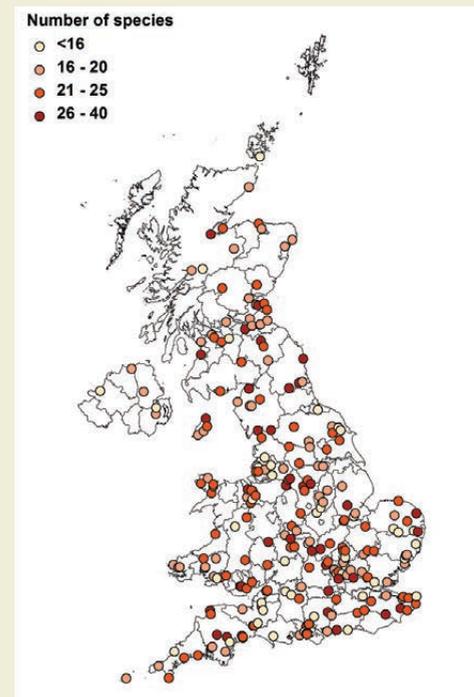


Figure 11: Number of species seen in each garden

# Focus on feeding

As your data is integral to helping us explore how wild birds use supplementary food sources, we thought it fitting to provide you with a summary of the feeding records for last season.

On average six feeding units were supplied per garden each week and was reasonably consistent, both from week to week and in suburban and rural gardens. There was also a slight increase in food provided as winter progressed. Below is a summary table of the average number of units for each feeder type.



JOHN HARDING

Habitat	Quarter	Hanging Feeders		Bird Tables		Ground Feeders	
		average	range	average	range	average	range
Rural	1	4	0-16	1	0-10	1	0-7
	2	5	0-21	1	0-2	1	0-7
Suburban	1	4	0-14	1	0-4	1	0-6
	2	5	0-14	1	0-5	1	0-8

Table: The average amount of units of food put out per week, in addition to the range of the minimum and maximum feeding units.

## Species richness

There was a substantial range in the amount of food put out for birds over the winter. However, Figure 12 indicates that most people are clustered around providing 3–10 feeding

units on average per week and seeing between 10–25 bird species across the winter period.

The garden which saw the most bird species was not the one which provided the most food. In fact, many gardens putting out relatively little food still saw a good variety of birds.

In addition to the quantity of food, there will be other factors determining the number of species visiting the garden, such as the surrounding habitat, the variety of food put out, the distance from the feeders to cover to name but a few.

BTO Researcher Kate Plummer is currently working on a paper using GBFS data, looking at changes in bird communities in gardens, in response to how we are feeding the birds. We'll let you know when this is published.



JOHN HARDING

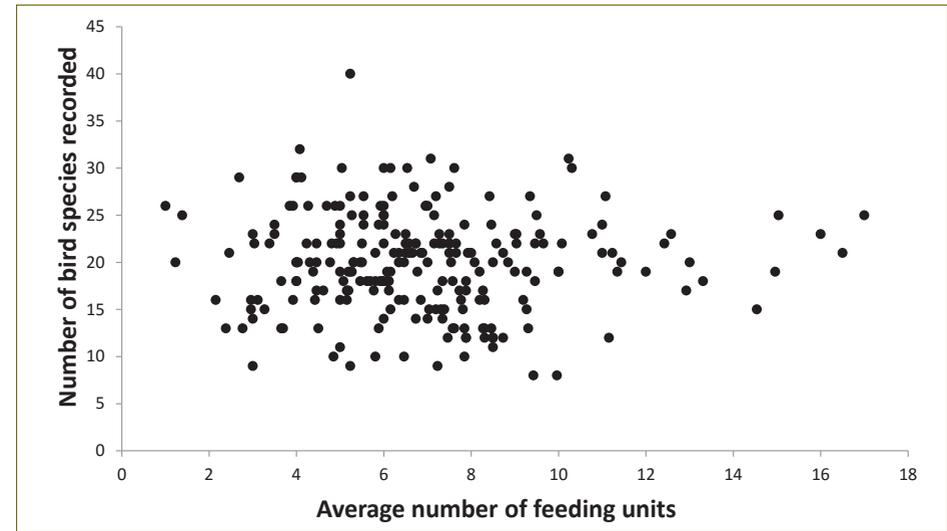


Figure 12: The average number of feeding units per garden, compared to the number of species recorded in the garden across the 2016–17 survey period.

## Change over time

People are getting more in touch with the wildlife on their doorstep and we know that the bird food industry has soared in recent years. The volume of wild bird foods is thought to have doubled since the late 1990s.

Looking at the GBFS data we've found that

there has been a small increase in the number of feeding units per week. Last year the average feeding units in a garden was six, but the average across this decade so far is seven. In the 1970s and 1980s there was an average of five units per week.

## What colour are your feeders?

A study by the University of Hull, published this year, looked into whether birds show preference for certain colour feeders. They conducted an experiment whereby they used seed feeders of eight different colours and observed the birds for 370, 30 minute periods.

Interestingly, there was some difference in the way the birds used the different coloured feeders, and the red and yellow feeders were the least popular. Instead, silver and green feeders were preferred by most of the seed eating garden birds. Why do we see this behaviour? One thought is that red and yellow are often warning colours in the natural world, and another is as they are brighter the perceived predation risk might be higher.

It's definitely something to be conscious of when buying bird feeders and if you already

have different colour seed feeders, you might fancy testing this in your garden.

Rothery, L., Scott, G.W. & Morrell, L.J. (2017) Colour preferences of UK garden birds at supplementary seed feeders. *PLoS ONE* 12(2).



JOSIE LATUS

# Extracts Winter 2016–17

**(Oct) Bedford** - Marsh Tit returned after being a regular visitor 2009–2011 before disappearing.



**(Oct) Lyndhurst, Hampshire** - I saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker on my seed feeder – a first for me, as I only ever see them on the peanuts!



**(Nov) Ipswich, Suffolk** - A flock of Long-tailed Tits were my highlight for the week.

**(Nov) Canterbury, Kent** - The thrushes have eaten most of the Hawthorn berries and have largely disappeared.



**(Nov) Taunton** - Every bush with berries has a pair of Blackbirds in it. My Holly tree has had all its berries taken.



**(Dec) Brecon** - First time to see a Tree Creeper in the gardens for years - chased off by a House Sparrow.



**(Nov) Ferring, Fife** - Brief glimpse of a Water Rail under the feeder on two occasions.

**(Dec) Kirkcudbright** - First Nuthatch in this garden.



**(Jan) Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire** - First male and female Blackcap of the winter, feeding on hanging fat ball and sunflower heart feeders.

**(Jan) Sidmouth Devon** - At last, a Song Thrush in the garden, eating crumbs of sunflower seeds on the ground.



**(Jan) Stamford, Lincolnshire** - First Reed Bunting of the winter and more Blackbirds coming to the flaked maize.

**(Feb) Moray** - A Sparrowhawk zipped through in pursuit of a Starling. It has been a very quiet year for Sparrowhawk here.



**(Early Mar) Reading** - A mild, pleasant week for our first Brimstone.



**(Mar) Matlock, Derbyshire** - Tremendous increase in Lesser Redpolls.

**(Mar) Northampton** - Carrion Crows love the mealworms - strange to see such a big bird with a big beak picking delicately at each one.



**(Mar) Ballynahinch, N. Ireland** - A rare sighting of a male Greenfinch on the sunflower hearts and a pair of Siskins on the peanuts.



**(Mar) Cumbria** - Influx of 30 Siskins, feeding mainly on the sunflower hearts.

## Looking ahead: Winter 2017–18

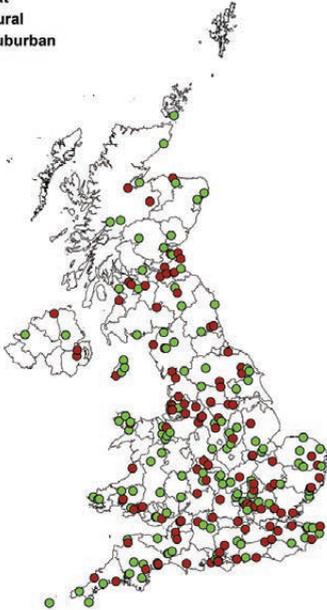
We hope that the relatively mild weather will have helped over-winter survival. The warm weather early in 2017 may have also led to an early start to the breeding season. It certainly felt like it, with the first Goldfinch fledglings reported on 5 April (our earliest record).

I look forward to seeing how the 2017–18 season progresses, after what was a wet summer and now a windy start to the autumn. How important will our supplementary food sources be for wild birds this winter?

### GBFS sites from which data were submitted in 2016–17

#### Habitat

- Rural
- Suburban



### BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



MARK R TAYLOR

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**Website:** [www.bto.org/gbfs](http://www.bto.org/gbfs)

GBFS has been monitoring the numbers and variety of garden birds coming to supplementary foods in winter since 1970. It is the longest running annual survey of its kind in the world and allows direct comparison of garden types and locations over time.

#### The GBFS Team

**Clare Boothby:** GBW Development Officer

**Kate Risely:** Garden BirdWatch Organiser

**Samantha Graham, Donna Hobbs,**

**Caroline Foot:** The Supporter Team

**Sandra Sparkes:** DTP

**Alic Prior:** Data entry

**A great big thank you to Alic Prior who has spent many voluntary hours entering data for GBFS over the last nine years. The time he has given to GBFS has been invaluable, having entered nearly 2,000,000 lines of data in Excel!**

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