

GBFSnews

The newsletter for participants in the
BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



Number 8

August 2016

Welcome return of finch species this winter.

After a couple of quiet winters, average numbers of some species finally rose in winter 2015-16, much to the delight of GBFS participants. This was most likely caused by stormy weather, interspersed with the odd frost. While winter thrushes were still scarce at garden feeding stations, there was a welcome return of some of our finch and tit species due to a less abundant seed crop.

Last winter was an interesting one for us as Garden BirdWatchers. Winter 2015-16 was another extremely mild season, especially in England and Wales, and there was a good crop of berries. This meant that thrush species and other berry-eaters such as Blackcap were less in need of supplementary bird food. Conversely, a poor seed crop in some areas meant that there were more Nuthatches, Coal Tits and finch species using feeders than in recent years.

While some of you had a slow start to the season thanks to the extreme storms and mild weather, others went through bird food very quickly as, in some parts of the country, birds struggled to find natural food sources owing to the inclement weather. Foods such as peanuts and fats were barely



JOHN HARDING

touched in some gardens during the first quarter and many people commented on how quiet it was, especially during the mild, dry periods. Things picked up, however, especially towards the end of the second quarter and there were even new species turning up in the last week, with people getting their 'first' Bramblings and Siskins.

172 people took on the extra challenge of the Goldfinch Feeding Survey last winter. As average Goldfinch numbers were up on the previous winter, it turned out to be a good winter to look at what they were feeding on. The results are still being analysed and will be included as part of Kate Plummer's final research on Goldfinches but sunflower hearts were the overwhelming favourite and nyger seed came second.

Thank you for persevering through the quiet periods this winter. Between you, you recorded 275,438 birds from 77 different species which is a phenomenal amount of data. I hope you enjoyed watching the birds in your garden, and that you will enjoy reading this year's *GBFS news*. **Clare Simm**

GBFS Review of winter 2015-16

Last winter was a record breaking one in the UK. It was provisionally the warmest in England and Wales since records began, and the wettest winter for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The country was battered by storms and even when birds came to feeders, they struggled to hold on in the wind. There were plenty of berries in the wider countryside but with an apparent poor crop of seeds in autumn 2015, many of our seed-eating birds made a welcome return to garden feeding stations.

Indian summer

Despite some unsettled spells of weather at the beginning and end of the month, 2015 saw the driest October since 2007 with mild temperatures to match. The wet weather at the beginning of the month did see a favourable start to the GBFS season with higher average counts of most species than in the previous five years. Bullfinch, in particular, had an average peak count per garden 133% higher than the average of the previous five years in the first week. Nuthatch (Figure 1) and Coal Tit

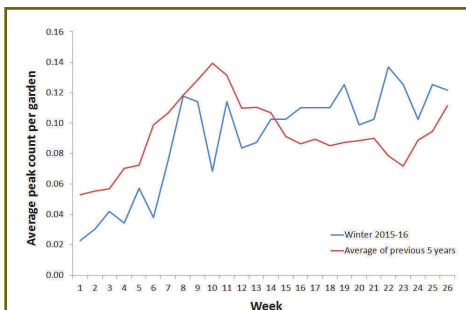


Figure 2: Average peak count per garden for Jay in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.



JOHN FLOWERDAY

numbers also started high in October reflecting a pattern seen in Garden BirdWatch data. This suggests that there was a shortage of seeds in the wider countryside. Acorns definitely were not in short supply, however, as Jays were barely seen at garden feeding stations in October.



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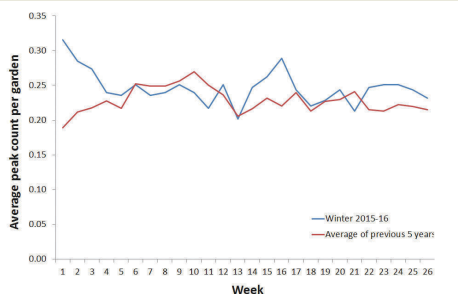


Figure 1: Average peak count per garden for Nuthatch in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.

Wet but warm

November 2015 was the third warmest since records began in 1910. The month was dominated by unsettled and windy weather with storms battering the country. There was a brief spell of cold weather in Weeks 8 and 9 which brought snow to northern and eastern England, and Scotland. The cold weather finally drove Blackcaps into gardens, about three weeks later than normal. There was also a small peak in House Sparrow numbers, with an average of 6.3 birds in gardens.

Some species finally started to move into gardens in November. Average Jay numbers shot up over two weeks by almost 200% (Figure 2) and Great Spotted Woodpecker numbers increased rapidly by 78% between Weeks 5 and 6, probably driven by a combination of natural food starting to run out and the stormy weather. Chaffinch and Long-tailed Tit numbers

also started to rise from Week 6 and Bullfinch numbers, which had dropped throughout October, started to increase again.

Record-breaking temperatures

The cold weather didn't last long. Temperatures increased again in December making it the warmest December ever in Central England Temperature series from 1659. With 182% of the average rainfall, it was also the wettest December ever. Despite the storms, numbers of some species remained well below the five-year average including Blackbird and Brambling. Towards the end of the month, however, things changed as Siskin numbers started to increase and average Robin numbers, which were well below the five-year average until Week 13, finally started to rise. Reed Bunting counts also started to increase, eight weeks later than the average (Figure 3).

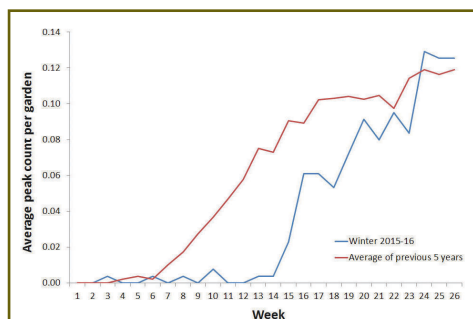


Figure 3: Average peak count per garden for Reed Bunting in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.



JILL PAKENHAM

Wet, wet, wet

While the south of England was generally mild and dry in January, the rest of the country continued to be wet, with north-east Scotland worst hit. Overall, it was another mild month but there were a few days in the middle when there were widespread frosts and some snow during which Blackbird, Blue Tit and Great Tit reached their highest average counts for the season. The tit species then dropped off as they usually do in the later part of the winter. Long-tailed Tit numbers also naturally start to decrease after January as family groups split up and pairs start to think about breeding, but there was a short, sharp peak in numbers in January potentially also caused by the snap of cold weather.

There were sharp increases in average Brambling and Jay numbers in January. Between Week 15 and Week 17, average Brambling numbers increased by 800% though they dropped off again at the end of January (Figure 4). Normally Jay numbers drop off from January onwards, but last winter they continued to increase and remained above the average from the previous five years for the rest of the GBFS period, suggesting a lack of food in the wider countryside (Figure 2).

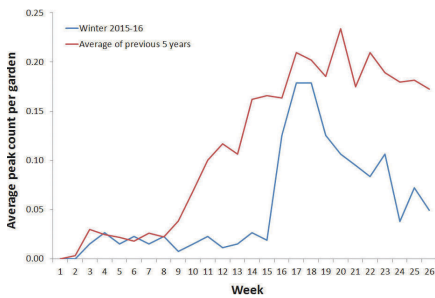


Figure 4: Average peak count per garden for Brambling in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.

Cooler weather

Despite starting off wet and windy, February did turn cooler and drier towards the end of the month. Robin reached its highest average numbers for the GBFS season at the end of February, taking it above the five-year average for the first time since September (Figure 5). Robin

was one of the species that had a poor breeding season in 2015, according to the BTO Nest Record Scheme, so the low numbers may reflect fewer Robins around in general, as well as the fact that it was a generally mild winter. In February, Siskin numbers also increased above the five-year average for the first time in winter 2015-16. They continued to increase for the rest of the season, reflecting Garden BirdWatch data in which March 2016 saw the highest average count of Siskins per garden since the extremely cold winter of 2013.

Variable weather

March was a month of variable weather, beginning with rain and snow, turning dry and sunny, and then wet again towards the end. There was a sharp drop off in Blackcap numbers at the end of the month (Figure 6), as wintering birds started to migrate back to their breeding grounds in central Europe. Other species, however, reacted to the bad weather at the end of the month by returning to feeders, including Bullfinch, Wren and Rook. Reed Bunting also turned to feeders with average numbers increasing by 62.5% at the beginning of the month (Figure 3), though they levelled off towards the end of the month, following their classic pattern of peaking in gardens in late winter when there is less food, but moving out again by April to their breeding grounds. The last week of March was when many participants commented on seeing their 'firsts' of the season including Blackcap, Brambling and Siskin – all of which were presumably on the move.

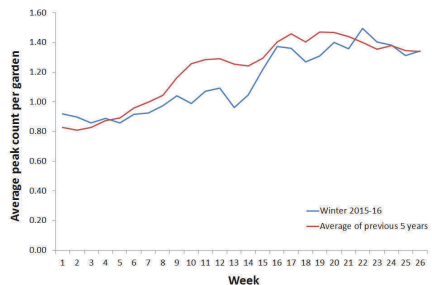


Figure 5: Average peak count per garden for Robin in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.

MARK R TAYLOR

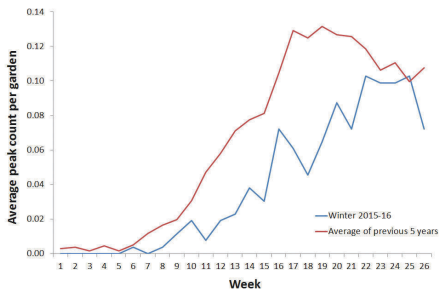


Figure 6: Average peak count per garden for Blackcap in winter 2015-16 compared to the average for the previous five years.

Unusual visitors

Despite another relatively quiet recording period for winter migrants, there were still some unusual visitors to cheer people up. There was a record of an Oystercatcher in a Scottish garden and a Curlew on the Isle of Man. The Great Black-backed Gulls were back along the coast and three lucky participants had Linnets feeding in their gardens. Four gardens attracted Red Kites and one garden in Cheshire not only had a Meadow Pipit but also Whinchats passing through on migration!



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Where are the winter thrushes?

Last winter was extremely quiet for winter thrushes, even more so than the previous winter of 2014-15. Average counts for Redwing were the lowest they've been since 1974 and Fieldfares were the lowest since the survey started (Figure 7). Only six GBFS gardens reported Redwing and only five reported Fieldfare. The low numbers of the two winter thrush species were reflected in data from the wider countryside suggesting that fewer birds migrated here from mainland Europe, probably due to bumper crops of berries and relatively mild temperatures.

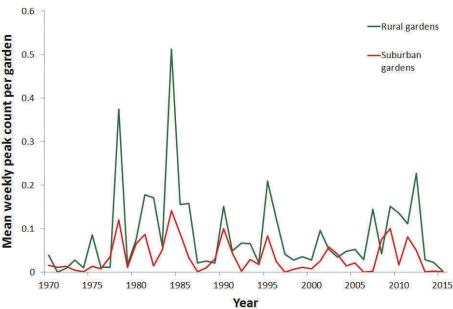


Figure 7: Mean weekly peak count per garden of Fieldfare



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Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

Winter 2015 - 2016

Top Twelve Species

| Species | Plots | % | Species | Plots | % |
|-----------|-------|------|---------------|-------|------|
| Blue Tit | 262 | 99.6 | Coal Tit | 242 | 92.0 |
| Robin | 262 | 99.6 | Woodpigeon | 232 | 88.2 |
| Blackbird | 261 | 99.2 | Goldfinch | 217 | 82.5 |
| Great Tit | 257 | 97.7 | Greenfinch | 215 | 81.7 |
| Dunnock | 256 | 97.3 | House Sparrow | 211 | 80.2 |
| Chaffinch | 247 | 93.9 | Magpie | 208 | 79.1 |

Additional Species

| Species | Plots | % | Species | Plots | % |
|--------------------------|-------|------|--------------------------|-------|------|
| Collared Dove | 203 | 77.2 | Herring Gull | 37 | 14.1 |
| Long-tailed Tit | 186 | 70.7 | Stock Dove | 31 | 11.8 |
| Starling | 179 | 68.1 | Goldcrest | 29 | 11.0 |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | 156 | 59.3 | Black-headed Gull | 26 | 9.9 |
| Jackdaw | 146 | 55.5 | Reed Bunting | 25 | 9.5 |
| Sparrowhawk | 139 | 52.9 | Grey Wagtail | 23 | 8.7 |
| Siskin | 131 | 49.8 | Marsh/Willow Tit | 21 | 8.0 |
| Wren | 113 | 43.0 | Mistle Thrush | 20 | 7.6 |
| Nuthatch | 102 | 38.8 | Yellowhammer | 18 | 6.8 |
| Carrion Crow | 101 | 38.4 | Mallard | 14 | 5.3 |
| Pheasant | 89 | 33.8 | Treecreeper | 11 | 4.2 |
| Song Thrush | 76 | 28.9 | Red-legged Partridge | 10 | 3.8 |
| Jay | 62 | 23.6 | Marsh Tit | 10 | 3.8 |
| Bullfinch | 61 | 23.2 | Moorhen | 9 | 3.4 |
| Feral Pigeon | 52 | 19.8 | Chiffchaff | 9 | 3.4 |
| Brambling | 46 | 17.5 | Lesser Black-backed Gull | 9 | 3.4 |
| Rook | 46 | 17.5 | Buzzard | 7 | 2.7 |
| Blackcap | 44 | 16.7 | Redwing | 6 | 2.3 |
| Pied Wagtail | 43 | 16.3 | Common Gull | 6 | 2.3 |
| Tree Sparrow | 42 | 16.0 | Kestrel | 6 | 2.3 |
| Lesser Redpoll | 42 | 16.0 | Fieldfare | 5 | 1.9 |

| Species | Plots | % | Species | Plots | % |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|---------------|-------|-----|
| Hooded Crow | 5 | 1.9 | Meadow Pipit | 1 | 0.4 |
| Heron | 5 | 1.9 | Barn Owl | 1 | 0.4 |
| Great Black-backed Gull | 4 | 1.5 | Corn Bunting | 1 | 0.4 |
| Ring-necked Parakeet | 4 | 1.5 | Raven | 1 | 0.4 |
| Red Kite | 4 | 1.5 | Hawfinch | 1 | 0.4 |
| Green Woodpecker | 3 | 1.1 | Coot | 1 | 0.4 |
| Linnet | 3 | 1.1 | Curlew | 1 | 0.4 |
| Willow Warbler | 3 | 1.1 | Oystercatcher | 1 | 0.4 |
| Tawny Owl | 3 | 1.1 | Whinchat | 1 | 0.4 |
| Peregrine | 2 | 0.8 | Rock Dove | 1 | 0.4 |
| Willow Tit | 2 | 0.8 | Cormorant | 1 | 0.4 |

Number of sites recording: 263

Focus on sites

We had a total of 263 people take part last winter, with 181 sites in England, 38 in Scotland, 33 in Wales, six in Northern Ireland, four in the Isle of Man and one in the Isles of Scilly. As with winter 2014-15, last winter an average of 20 species visited each GBFS garden. Five sites were lucky to have 30 or more species visiting, and while we may think of rural sites as being more biodiverse, the two sites with the most species last winter were both northern suburban gardens. A suburban garden in Kent was the site with the fewest species visiting, just seven, though this was two more than last year.

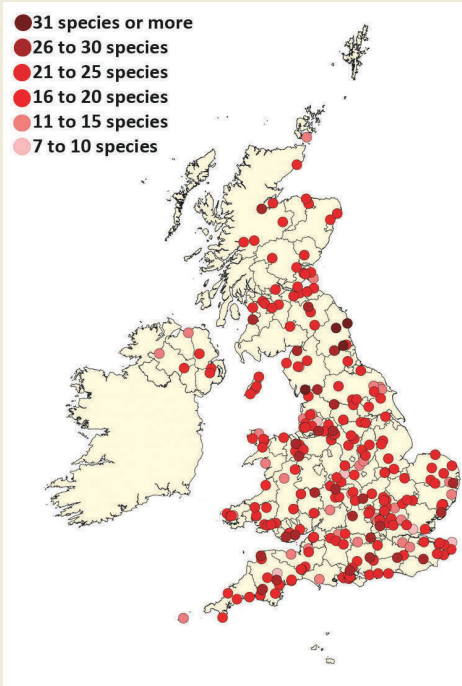


Figure 8: Number of species seen in each garden

Species focus: Siskin

Very much a late winter visitor to garden bird feeding stations, Siskin is a welcome and increasingly familiar sight in any garden. Overall, they are a more common visitor to garden bird feeders than they were 46 years ago, but they have an interesting relationship with garden bird food which can be seen through their variable numbers.

While it is estimated that the breeding population of Siskin is about 410,000 pairs, the winter population fluctuates from year to year depending on how many birds migrate here from mainland Europe. This is subject to the weather and the seed crop in mainland Europe as well as in the UK; these factors also affect the tendency of Siskins to use garden bird feeders during the winter. Siskins are known to feed on pine, Alder and Birch seeds but research has shown that the Sitka Spruce crop, in particular, is important to them. A study discovered that in years where there was a high abundance of Sitka Spruce seeds available in the autumn, the numbers of Siskins visiting Garden BirdWatch gardens was lower, and vice versa. This can also be seen in GBFS data to a certain extent with lower average numbers of Siskins visiting

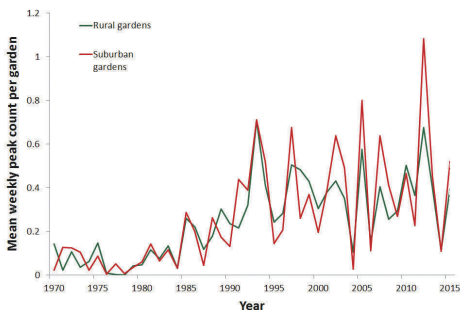


Figure 9: Mean weekly peak count per garden of Siskin

Breeding Abundance Change 1988-91 to 2008-11

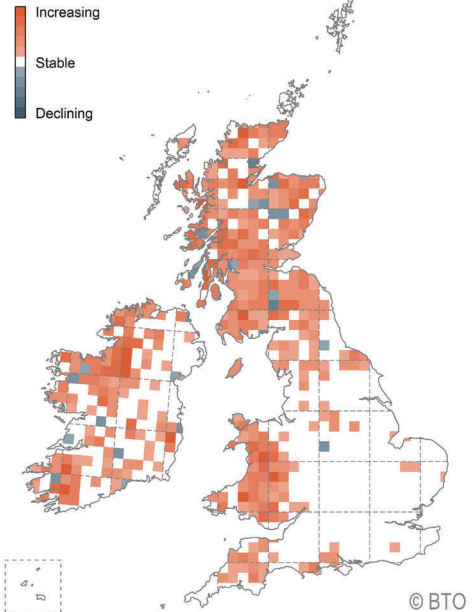


Figure 10: Siskin breeding abundance change

Map reproduced from *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, a joint project between BTO, Birdwatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club

garden bird feeders in 1996, 1998 and 2000 (Figure 9) which were shown to be good years for Sitka Spruce.

It is thought that Siskins started coming into gardens from about the mid 1960s attracted by fat products, but quickly discovered sunflower seeds and peanuts; supposedly because the red bags that peanuts used to be hung out in looked like catkins. GBFS data shows that while they visited some GBFS gardens in the 1970s, they did not really start to increase at garden feeding stations until the 1980s. Initially their range was mostly restricted to Scottish coniferous forest, but as new conifer plantations were planted across Britain, their breeding range expanded allowing them to access more gardens (Figure 10). Garden bird feeding stations became particularly important in

the late winter months when natural foods ran out – a pattern that we still see today. The numbers visiting gardens do fluctuate naturally with the weather, as on wet days conifer cones remain closed, meaning that the Siskins cannot access their seeds.

Winter 2015-16 in detail

Despite fluctuating numbers overall, average counts of Siskins have continued to increase at GBFS garden feeding stations since the 1980s (Figure 9). They're still not a common visitor but almost 50% of GBFS participants recorded them last winter, and by the end of March there were an average of 1.2 birds visiting per garden (Figure 11). This was an increase on winter 2014-15 when they were only present in 22.3% of GBFS gardens.

As discussed, bird feeding stations can be important for Siskins, not only in years of poor seed crops, but also on days when the weather is particularly wet. We saw peaks and troughs

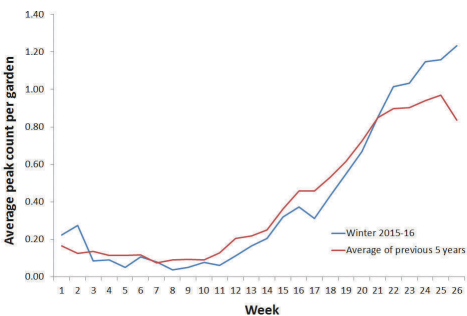


Figure 11: Average peak count per garden for Siskin in winter 2015-16 compared to the average from the previous five years

throughout last winter, but one of the most notable was at the start of October when there was a peak in numbers above the average of the previous five years. While this could have been in part due to an influx of migrants from continental Europe, it may also have reflected the wet weather at the beginning of the month.

Between the end of October 2015 and mid-February 2016, Siskin numbers remained just below the five-year average, though they mirrored its pattern very closely. By mid-February, however, numbers overtook those seen in the previous five years, probably driven by a lack of food in the wider countryside as well as by the wet weather experienced in March. Average numbers were still increasing at the end of March but Garden BirdWatch data shows that they then started to move out of gardens by April, as they headed off to breed either in the UK or back to mainland Europe.



EDMUND FELLOWES

Coal Tit

Another seed-eating bird, Coal Tit, was also seen in more GBFS gardens last winter, after decreasing in average numbers for the previous two winters. This suggests that that seed crop was generally poor, as they also have an association with Sitka Spruce and other conifer seeds. Average Coal Tit numbers in winter 2015-16 remained well above the average for the previous five years (Figure 12).

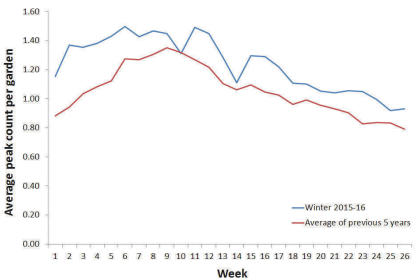


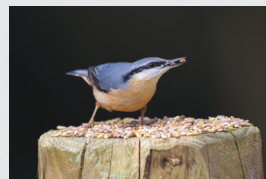
Figure 12: Average peak count per garden for Coal Tit in winter 2015-16 compared to the average from the previous five years

Extracts Winter 2015–16



(Nov) Devon – Smart male Brambling briefly on bird table – first sighting since March 2011.

(Jan) Oxfordshire – Dunnock learnt to perch on hanging feeder.



(Oct) West Yorkshire – First time in 17 years I have seen a Nuthatch in my garden.

(Mar) Perth – First time I have seen a Wren using the hanging feeder.



(Dec) Nottingham – Lesser Redpoll are delightful visitors in varying shades of pinky red and quite feisty!



(Oct) North Yorkshire – Sparrows have decided they like the nyger and are crowding Goldfinches out!



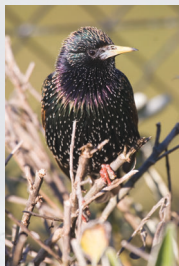
(Nov) Hampshire – I've seen both male and female Great Spotted Woodpeckers on my feeders but never at the same time!



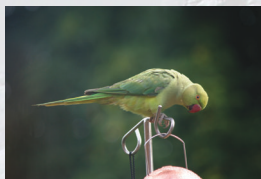
(Mar) Cambridge – A pair of Siskins on sunflower feeders – the first seen here since 2006.



(Feb) Inverness-shire – At least one Rook has worked out how to unhook and break open the fat holders. A slab of suet then lasts less than five minutes.



(Dec) Tyne and Wear – 11 weeks without a Starling! Longest absence since Jan 1987 when I first recorded birds here.



(Dec) North Yorkshire – First ever visit by Ring-necked Parakeet squawking loudly.

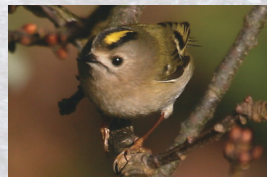
(Nov) Cumbria – Gale force winds and flash floods – birds manage to cling onto feeders despite severity of wind and rain!

(Feb) Warwickshire – Jackdaw mugged Blackbird for suet!



(Nov) Kent – Robin flying at feeders for sunflower hearts; Jackdaw trying to cling to fatball feeder.

(Nov) County Tyrone – Two days after putting out two sunflower heart feeders, 28 Goldfinches were feeding – before that only two were seen!



(Mar) Burton-on-Trent – First young Robin seen being fed by parents.

(Jan) Cheshire – First time I've seen Goldcrest eating fat.

(Nov) Glasgow – Wild dash for, and squabbles over, raisins by male Blackbirds; females pushed out unceremoniously!



(Jan) Angus – Amazing moment when Sparrowhawk took a Blackbird and then Buzzard came down and tried to rob it.

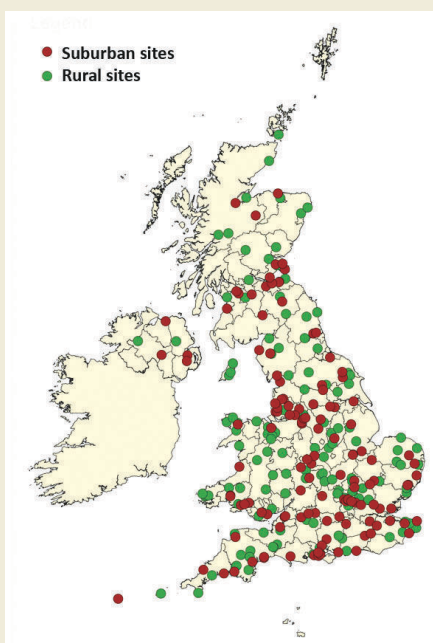


(Nov) Dorset – Blackbird has made an appearance, possibly first time this autumn!

Looking ahead: Winter 2016–17

While the 2016 breeding season seemed to get off to a good start, we had a very wet June which meant that breeding birds would have found it hard to get food for their chicks. Whether this will affect the numbers in gardens this winter remains to be seen, but Garden BirdWatch data for the end of July showed that most species were still being seen in average numbers, and multi-brooded species such as Blackbird and Dunnock were being seen in above-average numbers. In some areas, berries seemed to be coming out early which could cause a shortage of food earlier in the winter than usual. It will be interesting to see what this winter holds, so we look forward to receiving your results.

GBFS sites from which data were submitted in 2015–16



BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



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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 Simm: GBW Development Officer

Kate Risely: Garden BirdWatch Organiser

Donna Hobbs, Heather Pymar and Nicky Ward: Garden BirdWatch Team

Sandra Sparkes: DTP

A special thank you to Alic Prior for his invaluable help with data entry.

Clare Simm has moved on to a new job, and so Kate Risely will be organising GBFS in 2016–17. We are very grateful to Clare for her work running GBFS.

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