



The Greenfinch

The Greenfinch is a familiar bird seen in both rural and urban gardens. The male is a dull olive-green colour with a yellowish breast, grey cheeks and distinctive yellow wing flashes. Females are duller with less yellow and juveniles are paler and streakier. Females and juveniles are often confused with female House Sparrows. The Greenfinch is a gregarious species which tends to nest in loose flocks, especially in conifers. It is, however, often aggressive towards its own kind and other birds at feeding stations.

Once settled on a feeder, it will nibble away contentedly for ages. Having a thick bill, it can eat most types of seed and peanuts, but it favours black sunflower seeds and sunflower hearts.



Greenfinch
Jill Pakenham / BTO

Over the past few decades the Greenfinch has experienced a few peaks and troughs in its population. Research has shown that in the 1970's and 1980's the species declined but then dramatically increased during the 1990's. Unfortunately, it is now in decline again and this is mainly due to a parasitic disease called Trichomonosis.

It was in 2005 that people began reporting that Greenfinches were being found sick or dead. The disease is also found in other species such as pigeons, doves, House Sparrows and Chaffinches but Greenfinches seem particularly prone. The disease affects the upper digestive tract and causes lesions at the back of the throat. As they worsen, the throat becomes blocked and the bird is then unable to eat or drink, eventually dying of starvation or dehydration.

Symptoms of Trichomonosis: It is easy to recognise the symptoms, which incidentally are similar to salmonellosis, as the bird behaves in a lethargic manner and will sit in one spot for a long time. Its plumage is fluffed up and it has difficulty swallowing. The disease is spread through regurgitated food and saliva, possibly during the breeding season, when breeding birds pass food to each other or at feeding stations from infected birds. If you happen to find a dead Greenfinch, visit www.gardenwildlifehealth.org which explains how you can help in the research of disease in wild birds by sending a record plus the carcass to them for a post mortem. It should be noted that Trichomonosis does not affect humans or domestic animals.

Preventative measures: You should maintain a good standard of hygiene around feeding stations and bird baths, and if possible, rotate feeders to different parts of the garden. Feeders should be cleaned with a specially-designed commercial product or a weak solution of bleach, then thoroughly rinsed and left to dry before re-using. If you find many birds are affected, you may have to stop putting food out for two to four weeks. The birds will move on and hopefully disperse thus avoiding crowded feeders. If you follow this advice, you will have done all you can to keep Greenfinches and other garden birds healthy.

Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you enjoy watching birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, Garden BirdWatch may be perfect for you. If you would like a free information pack about the scheme, contact Jean at jobirds@talktalk.net or visit www.bto.org/gbw