

# Beautiful Bramblings



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An adult male Brambling in full breeding plumage is a truly striking bird. The glossy black head, orange-washed breast and strongly-marked back provide a degree of visual impact beaten by few of our other finches. Of course, the chances of seeing a Brambling in all its breeding finery in a British or Irish garden are remote; this bird is primarily a winter visitor and only a handful of pairs have attempted to breed here over recent years. Mind you, even in its winter plumage the Brambling is still pretty impressive. The glossy black feathers of the head are tipped with buff, but by late winter this will have worn away to reveal the first glimpses of the stunning breeding plumage lurking beneath.

The scarcity of viable beech mast this autumn suggests that it could be a good winter for Garden BirdWatchers, with Bramblings and other mast specialists turning to garden feeding stations in increasing numbers. Bramblings often associate with Chaffinches, so it is worth keeping a careful eye on visiting Chaffinch flocks to see if you can spot one or more of these visitors.

The two species are similar in size but with its stubbier bill and seemingly larger head, the Brambling appears bigger than its close relative. A number of other features can be used to clinch the identification (see box on Page 11).

In many ways, the Brambling can be regarded as being the more northerly counterpart of the Chaffinch, breeding across the boreal and sub-arctic zones of Scandinavia and Asia. Occasional pairs nest outside of this core range, with breeding attempts noted in Iceland, northern Britain and on the European mainland as far south as Italy. While the Chaffinch is a bird of deciduous woodland, farmland hedgerows and urban parks, the Brambling breeds in open mixed birch and conifer forests, where it feeds on seeds, caterpillars and a range of other insects.

## The movement south and west

At the end of the breeding season, the Bramblings switch to a diet of tree seeds and huge flocks move south of the breeding range to seek out areas with good crops of beech mast. This mass movement usually begins in early September and brings Scandinavian Bramblings to the beech forests of southern Sweden, where they will stay just so long as beech mast remains available.

In those years with poor crops, or heavy snow (which prevents access to the mast), the birds move south into southern Germany and Switzerland or west into Britain. Many readers will know that a proportion of our wintering Chaffinches also originate from Scandinavia, migrating south into continental Europe and

Male Brambling, John Harding - BTO Collection; Male Chaffinch, Jill Pakenham - BTO Collection



then making a short hop across the channel. Interestingly, the Bramblings usually undertake a direct crossing of the North Sea, rather than taking the circuitous route to the south. This may be related to another difference between the two species; while Chaffinches are daytime migrants, the Bramblings almost invariably undertake their journeys at night. The migrations made by Bramblings, moving to wherever concentrations of beech mast are to be found, are thought to reduce competition with Chaffinches during the winter months. Chaffinches will only exploit beech mast where it is available locally and Ian Newton, who has studied these and other species of finch, suggests that Chaffinches and Bramblings will only come together in large numbers where mast is plentiful.

One similarity shared with the Chaffinch is the tendency for females to winter further south than the males, and for young birds to winter further south than adults. This pattern (known as differential migration and seen in a number of species) probably results from competition for food in winter, with adult males the most likely to dominate limited food sources and thus best placed to overwinter closest to the breeding grounds. This also enables them to return to the breeding grounds before immature males and thus to secure the best breeding sites.

Huge numbers of Bramblings may congregate together, with roosts numbering many millions of individuals recorded fairly often from parts of central Europe. One central European roost was estimated to number 20 million individuals. Those noted in Britain

and Ireland tend to be much smaller, not least because our wintering population only tops a million birds in the best of years. Even so, a roost in Merseyside exceeded 150,000 birds in one particular winter. Sadly many birds from this roost were killed by motor traffic, having first been incapacitated by the salt applied to the icy road surface from which they were taking fallen beech mast.

### Winter food

The Bramblings that arrive here early in the winter tend to be fairly unobtrusive, spending time within woodland and feeding on the crop of beech mast. As the winter progresses, and this food source becomes exhausted, so the birds either move further south or make increasing use of garden feeding stations.

Although most gardens are only ever visited by a small number of Bramblings, it is possible to build up numbers by providing suitable food. Bramblings much prefer to feed on the ground and tend not to use hanging feeders, so food should be spread on the ground or a low bird table. The late Chris Mead was very successful in attracting large numbers of Bramblings into his rural garden by using a mix of two parts premium seed to one part peanut granules. I remember many winter mornings spent ringing Bramblings enticed down by the food that Chris had put out. These birds would typically arrive in a flock and land in one of the taller trees, from where they could survey the garden. After a short period they would pluck up the courage and descend to feed. Having some tall trees in or around the garden may help draw Bramblings in.

## FACT BOX

**Common name:**  
Brambling

**Scientific name:**  
*Fringilla montifringilla*

**Family:**  
Finches

**UK population**  
0-1 pairs (summer)  
900,000 birds (winter)

**Conservation status:**  
Green listed

**Migratory status:**  
Winter visitor

**Breeding:**  
Clutch size: 5-7 eggs  
Incubates: c.14 days  
Young in nest: c.14 days  
Number of broods: 1  
Breeding season: Apr-Jun  
Age at first breeding: 1

**Typical lifespan:**  
unknown

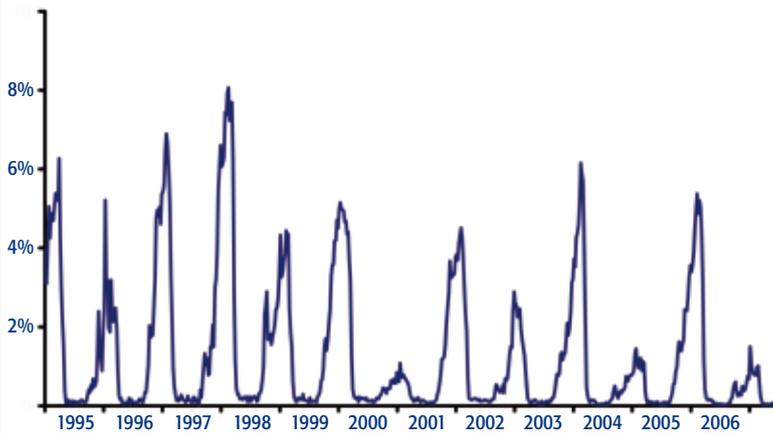
**Max. recorded lifespan:**  
8 years and seven months

[www.bto.org/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/birdfacts)

Male Brambling, John Harding - BTO Collection; Male Chaffinch, Tommy Holden - BTO Collection



### Bramblings in Garden BirdWatch gardens



The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch reporting rate for Brambling shows very nicely the different peaks in garden use that result from variations in the beech mast crop. In years where there is an abundance of beech mast, e.g. the 2006/07 winter, the reporting rate is just 2% of gardens. In winters with very little beech mast, the reporting rate can reach 8% of gardens.

The timing of garden use is also rather interesting, in that the first of the autumn Bramblings appear in gardens during the first half of September. In years with a poor mast crop, the use of gardens continues to increase at a steady rate, reaching a peak during February. In years where mast is abundant, there is a small peak in early October after which time the use of gardens diminishes before increasing again later in the winter to, again, peak in February (though at a much smaller level).

### Safety in numbers

Bramblings seem to be more wary feeders than the Chaffinches with which they associate. Even so, there are reports of extreme tameness, though these are most probably due to hunger – a pattern that is repeated in many other bird species. A degree of nervousness can also be seen when Bramblings congregate to enter communal roosts. The gathering flocks coming into roost will perform a twisting aerial ballet, bettered only by the aerial evolutions of Starlings. Individuals within these roosts often settle tightly packed, with birds sometimes touching. The dominant males occupy the best perches at the centre of the roost, while younger birds are forced to settle on the periphery of the roost where they are more prone to predators and face lower temperatures and the worst of the winter weather.

### What's in a name?

The modern name 'Brambling' suggests an association with bramble, something which is supported by an earlier name 'bramlyng'. However, other authors suggest that the name is actually a derivation of 'brandling'. This was an old word used for any animal showing a brindled pattern and this would make a more sensible association with the plumage of this bird. Thomas Bewick, the naturalist and long considered the finest of English wood engravers, famously noted that the Brambling made better eating than the Chaffinch, referring to the bird as the 'mountain finch' (hence 'montifringilla' for the Latin name). He did qualify his comment somewhat by adding that the bird was rather bitter in taste!

Although less colourful than the males, female Bramblings also show the orange wash, the white rump, and scalloped mantle. It should prove fairly easy to distinguish them from female Chaffinches, especially when both species are seen feeding together.

Brambling, John Harding – BTO Collection



# On the move

Thanks to the efforts of volunteer bird ringers, we know a great deal about the origins of Bramblings wintering in Britain & Ireland. Most originate from breeding grounds in Norway, Sweden and Finland. At least some of these birds spend one winter in Britain & Ireland and another on the Continent.



Brambling, John Harding – BTO Collection; Map taken from 'Time to Fly' by Jim Flegg – a BTO publication available from the BTO Sales Team for £7.50 plus p&p (01842-750050).



## Breeding bonanza

Within its favoured breeding habitat of birch and mixed birch woodland, the Brambling is usually the second most common breeding species (behind the ubiquitous Willow Warbler). Interestingly, breeding numbers in a given area can vary markedly between years. In those years when spring is late, many Bramblings curtail their northward migration. As a consequence they end up breeding further to the south than they would normally do. Perhaps these late springs are behind the occasional breeding records noted from Britain. The first of these was noted in 1920, when a nest containing seven eggs was found in Sutherland. No further breeding records were confirmed until 1979, when another breeding attempt was noted in Scotland. Since then there have been periodic reports, though some of these have just involved singing males, without additional confirmation that breeding actually took place.

## Keep your eyes open

This stunning little finch is a real treat and likely to brighten up even the dullest of winter gardens. With beech mast in short supply in many areas this winter, this could just turn out to be an ideal opportunity to catch up with this species, test your identification skills and add something new to your garden list. Based on the pattern of garden use over the last few years, we can expect some of you to already have Bramblings visiting but for others they are likely to arrive early in the New Year. So, check out those Chaffinch flocks and see if you can spot a Brambling!

## Identifying Bramblings

Bramblings of all ages show a white rump (lacking in the Chaffinch) and this, together with the lack of any white edges to the tail, makes a very useful identification feature. The orange-brown shoulders (see above and below right) can be seen on both sexes but are more pronounced in the male. Young males often show a series of black splotches within the orange-brown shoulder.

The glossy blue-black colour on the head of the adult male is only visible when in breeding plumage. During the winter, buff tips to the crown feathers obscure the black beneath, which only shows through as the weaker light-coloured tips wear away. Female Bramblings have a grey-brown head but are still more brightly coloured than a female Chaffinch.

Bramblings tend to be more nervous when feeding on the ground than Chaffinches and often feed in small flocks. These flocks can be quite noisy, with individuals making a series of nasal sounding notes. Migrating birds also utter a nasal note, though this is slightly different in character from that issued when perched. The flight, although similar to that of a Chaffinch, is more undulating and the white rump should be visible if you flush a bird from the ground.



Brambling, John Harding – BTO Collection