

Going for Gold: Goldfinch

by Mike Toms



Goldfinch, by John Harding and (insert) juvenile Goldfinch, by Amy Lewis



Identification should pose few problems. With its red, white and black head, the Goldfinch looks very different from other birds, although young birds (see insert to title photograph) lack these features. The gold wing panel, black wings and white wing tips are, however, characteristic.



Goldfinch, by Jill Pakenham

There can be few birds that are more charming than the Goldfinch, with its clown-like plumage. Even the collective noun for a flock of Goldfinches is 'charm', although the origins of this association may actually be linked to the use of the term for the blended voices of a choir – perhaps alluding to the gentle jingling calls and song of the Goldfinch.

The combination of attractive plumage and a delightful song may be one reason why Goldfinches were so popular as cage birds throughout much of the 19th Century. Sadly, the practice of trapping wild Goldfinches still goes on in some parts of Europe, where small birds are caught in traps known as chardonnerets – 'chardonneret' also being the French word for Goldfinch.

Goldfinches feature in art, particularly in French and Italian works, where, for example, they are used as a symbol of fertility or resurrection in early devotional paintings.

GOLDFINCHES AND GARDENS

Results from the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS) highlight the meteoric increase in garden use by this species over the last 25 years. GBFS shows that the mean peak count for Goldfinch during winter has risen from just 0.01 birds in 1983/84 to 3.26 birds last winter. Much of this increase is likely to be linked to the increase in breeding numbers seen over the same period (data from the BTO/RSPB/JNCC Breeding Bird Survey and BTO Common Birds Census reveal an 85% increase over 25 years). Some of the change, however, may also be linked to changes in wintering behaviour.

Goldfinches are mobile feeders, moving around to find the seeds that they favour (typically plants belonging to the family Asteraceae). Such movements are not just contained within Britain & Ireland, as birds may move to the Continent during late autumn. Interestingly, the birds don't simply up sticks and move to a specific wintering area; instead, they move south and stop once they find the food and conditions they are looking for. Not all of the British & Irish breeding population moves, with some individuals moving in some years but not

others, something that is known as 'partial migration'. Individual decisions about whether or not to migrate are linked to local conditions, age and sex. The increasing quantities of suitable food now provided in garden feeders may be exerting an influence on these migratory decisions. With suitable food available at garden feeding stations, coupled with generally warmer winters, Goldfinches may remain here instead of moving south.

SEED PREFERENCES

Take a close look at the bill of a Goldfinch and you should notice that it is rather long and thin, compared to our other common finches. This allows the Goldfinch to extract seeds from plants that are not normally available to other species. For example, the Goldfinch is the only one of our finches to be able to extract seeds from Teasel; admittedly, even female Goldfinches find this difficult because their bills are slightly shorter than those of the males.

Goldfinches have taken quickly to the foods on offer at garden feeding stations. Many BTO Garden BirdWatchers have commented that they first attracted Goldfinches to their gardens by providing Nyger seed. Since this is a particularly small and fine seed, it suits the rather narrow-billed Goldfinch and tends to be ignored by other birds with their more robust bills. While Nyger was a great success initially, the feedback we are getting suggests that Goldfinches now largely ignore it if sunflower hearts are also available. In fact, it seems that it is the juvenile Goldfinches that make greatest use of Nyger, perhaps because they are excluded from sunflower heart feeders by the more dominant adults. My personal experience reflects this, in that Goldfinches only turn to the Nyger feeder if the other feeders are running low and are dominated by House Sparrows or Greenfinches.

BREEDING SUCCESS

A good number of Garden BirdWatchers are reporting young Goldfinches in their gardens this year, suggesting that it has been a good breeding season (although we will have to wait for this year's Nest Record Scheme records to be analysed and published before we can say anything definitive). Some of these birds may well have been breeding locally, as many gardens have suitable trees or shrubs in which Goldfinches like to nest.

A Goldfinch nest is often placed fairly high (up to 15 m above the ground) - we watched a pair carrying nesting material on the BTO reserve this summer and were disappointed to see them fly up to the very top of a mature Scots Pine; this was one nest we would not be monitoring. Most nests are placed in one of the outer forks of a suitable branch but some are placed against the trunk. The nest is neat, compact and made of rootlets, wool, grass and plant down. Although difficult to spot, do watch for birds carrying nesting material early in the season and listen out for the singing male.

Whether you are watching Goldfinches feeding on your sunflower hearts or have the good fortune to have them nesting in your garden, I suspect that you have a soft spot for this delightful little finch. It is a bird that adds a splash of colour to any bird table, be it rural, suburban or urban. Looking at the latest figures, it seems likely that will see even more Goldfinches in gardens in the future. ■



▲ Goldfinch is a partial migrant (see text); while some individuals migrate others remain here for the winter.

FACTBOX: Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Population:

Breeding: 299,000 breeding pairs

Winter: currently unknown

Conservation status:

GREEN

Diet:

Small seeds, some invertebrates in summer

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 2 years

Max recorded lifespan: 8 years, 8 months and 4 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 4-5 (range, 3-7) eggs

Number of broods: 2 (3)

Incubation: 12-13 days

Young in nest: 14-15 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year

