



Bird Watch May



Welcome to this month's Bird Watch. I'm one of two Ambassadors for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch Scheme in South Wales. Each month I introduce you to a bird or other animal that you might see in your garden.

Species of the Month: Grey Squirrel

The Grey Squirrel was introduced to the UK in the late 19th or early 20th century from the USA. It is often considered to be a pest, mainly due to its habit of stripping the bark off trees, and is blamed for the decline of the native Red Squirrel. Grey Squirrels transmit the squirrel-pox virus; whilst the disease kills the red it does not appear to affect the grey. In Wales, there are now only a few pockets where the reds are still holding-on (mid-Wales, Anglesey and Clocaenog in the north).

With Grey Squirrels here to stay, can we learn to love them? They certainly liven up my garden as they chase one another and bury their peanuts in the lawn. Squirrels are scatter-hoarders meaning that they cache small amounts of nuts and seeds in hundreds of different places, ready to be re-found when times get tough (they don't hibernate). This month, look out for young squirrels leaving the drey (a squirrel's nest) which have been raised entirely by the female.

Although predominately grey, Grey Squirrels may also show a warm-brown colour on their backs and flanks (some are even completely white or black). An angry squirrel utters a slow *chuk-chuk-chuk* and flicks its tail up and down – the faster the flick, the crosser it is. A sideways tail swish indicates uncertainty or preparation for a difficult leap.

Did you know?

- Squirrels 'weigh' food (such as hazelnuts) in their palms to decide whether or not the nut inside is worth the effort of breaking open the shell.
- It is illegal to keep Grey Squirrels without a licence and it is illegal to release them into the wild.
- The only colour squirrels can see is yellow; all other colours are shades of grey.
- Their Welsh name is *Gwiwer Lwyd*.

How to attract them to your garden: Make the squirrels work for their keep by providing monkey nuts or hazelnuts, although they're just as likely to eat the peanuts and sunflower hearts you put out for the birds! A wide range of 'Squirrel-proof' feeders are now available. A squirrel feeder box positioned on the entry route into the garden can help deter them from the bird feeders. If you have nesting birds, Grey Squirrels may eat eggs and chicks given the opportunity.

My BTO Garden BirdWatch data show that Grey Squirrels are present in my garden for 63% of the year. In the summer of 2012 there were up to six squirrels in my garden at the same time, and this year we've seen up to four.

Make Your Garden Count!

If you enjoy watching the birds and wildlife in your garden why not take part in BTO Garden BirdWatch – the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world? Please contact me for a free enquiry pack or to book a talk (Swansea and surrounding areas).

Happy Garden Bird Watching!

Amanda Skull, Garden BirdWatch Ambassador
07952 758293 (evenings & weekends only)

gbw@hiafi.co.uk www.bto.org/gbw

Follow me on Twitter @amanda_skull



Grey Squirrel: Will Lewis