

Birdwatch



Picture: Edmund Fellowes/BTO

NOVEMBER

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

Bird of the Month: Sparrowhawk

The Sparrowhawk, which is about the size of a pigeon, is one of our most familiar birds of prey, and is certainly the one most likely to visit your garden. The male has a slate-grey back with orange-brown cheeks and orange-brown bars on a white underside. The female can be 25% bigger than the male; her underside is white with black bars and she has a dark grey-brown back. Both sexes have yellow talons and a pale white line above the eye (more prominent in females); a white patch is often visible on the back of the crown. Opinions often polarise when it comes to Sparrowhawks, especially in gardens. Some are enthralled to watch this highly manoeuvrable hunter taking advantage of the fence, hedge or even washing line in order to surprise and catch a bird on the bird feeder. Others view the Sparrowhawk as a villain and are extremely distressed to think that they have provided a 'ready-meal' for this predator. This hunter relies on an element of surprise to catch their prey and will often follow a regular route through a garden, so it is possible to tip the balance in favour of smaller birds. Firstly, position your feeders and bird table close to cover so that the birds have somewhere to dive into should danger arise. Secondly, move your feeders around regularly as this will make it more difficult for the Sparrowhawk to predict where the birds will be feeding. Persecuted by gamekeepers and more recently a victim of pesticides such as DDT, which increased adult mortality rates and weakened egg shells, the Sparrowhawk population crashed but they are now recovering well.



Did you know?

- Sparrowhawks are specialist bird hunters. Due to their size difference, males hunt small birds such as tits and finches, whilst females prey on larger birds such as Starlings and thrushes.
- Studies show that Sparrowhawks are not behind the decline of songbirds.
- The Welsh name is Gwalch Glas.

How to attract them to your garden: Sparrowhawks can be found in any gardens that hold sufficient numbers of smaller birds to hunt.

Conservation Status: **Green** listed following a rapid increase in population since the 1970s, which has now levelled off.

BTO Garden BirdWatch data show that November has the highest proportion of gardens recording Sparrowhawk. More often than not, whilst I don't actually see the bird, I know it has 'dined' from the feathers of the victim left behind! If there is a split in the shaft, they have been plucked; if the end is broken, it's the work of a cat or fox as they bite off the feathers.

Make Your Garden Count!

If you enjoy watching birds and other creatures in your garden, and want to help track their fortunes, then BTO Garden BirdWatch could be perfect for you. Please contact me for your free enquiry pack, including a guide to feeding garden birds, or to book a talk.

Happy Garden Bird Watching!

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