

The Siskin



In late winter, especially during February, I occasionally have sporadic numbers of Siskins visit my bird feeders. Last winter however, was a record-breaking year and large numbers visited my garden for a period of fifteen weeks. They first appeared during the last week of January, and peaked with a number of sixteen visiting in mid-March. My last record was one bird during the first week in May. This pattern was reflected in the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch records which showed there were huge influxes of these birds in our gardens during the 2012/2013 winter.

Looking out for birds **Where are they normally found?** Siskins were once restricted to coniferous plantations in Scotland and Wales but over the last few decades have since spread to England where large plantations have been created. They also appear in mixed woodland especially where there is birch and alder. In winter we also have migrants arrive from northern and eastern Europe.

How will I recognise them? The Siskin is our smallest finch and is the size of a Blue Tit. The plumage of the male is streaky yellow-green with a black cap and small black bib. The female, which is often confused with female and juvenile Greenfinches, is more subtle in its markings than the male and lacks the black cap and bib. Both sexes have two bright yellow wing-bars edged with black. The female can be identified from the Greenfinch as she is much smaller and streakier. Both male and female have an obvious forked tail and their bills are long and narrow, ideal for extracting seed from pine cones. They are also acrobatic birds and are able to reach the tips of smaller branches quite easily. When large flocks are present, you will see them high up on tree tops where they make a lot of noise with their constant twittering.

Will they come pouring in to our gardens this winter? That will mainly depend on the availability of their natural food. Like all finches, Siskins are seed eaters. As their usual habitat is restricted to coniferous and mixed woodland, they eat spruce, pine, birch and alder seeds. The records of BTO Garden BirdWatchers show that their movements are down to the availability of these natural seed stocks. If stocks are low, they will visit gardens and take peanuts from feeders, although I find they especially enjoy nyger seed which I put out. They also have a tendency to visit gardens on wet days when pine cones are closed as this makes it difficult for them to extract the seed. During dry weather, they will return to the woodland as it is easier for them to take out seed from opened cones. The winter of 2014 may be different and if seed stocks are abundant, we may not have as many Siskins visit our gardens. However, do still keep an eye out for this attractive, small finch, on your bird feeders this winter.

Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the BTO Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. Joining the scheme helps you to learn a lot about garden birds and how they use your garden. If you would like to learn more, please visit www.bto.org/qbw or request a free enquiry pack from Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net



Female Siskin



Male Siskin

Photos by John Harding