



Looking out for birds

The Goldfinch

As I write this article, a small flock of Goldfinches are flitting about in an Ash tree opposite my house. It was their beautiful tinkling sound I heard which brought them to my attention. As I watch them, I notice there are few young ones amongst them. These are easily distinguished by the lack of red, white and black feathers on their heads.

The Goldfinch is a most colourful finch, and is really quite unmistakable in appearance. Its body is a subtle buff colour and it has a red, white and black patterned head. It has striking, gold coloured bars on its black wings, which of course, give rise to its name. Its attractiveness and musical song led the species to be a popular cage bird during the 19th century. Fortunately, they are now protected by law from this practice.

Over the last twenty five years Goldfinches have increased dramatically in numbers and are now a common garden bird. It is thought they were attracted to gardens not only because of the reduction of natural food in the countryside but also by the introduction of nyger seed by the bird food industry. Nyger seed is so fine that it has to be contained in special feeders with very tiny port holes. Goldfinches, with their long pointed bills, can easily extract the seed from these feeders, whereas other birds are unable to do this. One of the Goldfinch's natural foods is teasel seed and again the same principle applies – the birds can easily tease the seed out, though it is mainly the males that are able to do this as the female's bill is just slightly shorter.

A few years ago, I once counted thirty Goldfinches on my lawn eating fallen seed; now numbers tend to average between five and eight, but they are still a regular, all-year round visitor to my garden. I have also noticed that their taste has changed and although they still take the nyger seed I put out, they seem to prefer sunflower hearts. Such observations have also been noted by many other BTO Garden BirdWatchers.

When you next see a group of these stunning birds, remember that their collective term is a 'charm' which, I think you will agree, is a very apt description for this distinctive species.



Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you are interested in the birds and other wildlife which visit your garden and would like to learn more about the scheme, please contact Jean on 07704809741 or e-mail her at jpbirds@talktalk.net