

# **BTO Garden BirdWatch**

## **Title**

BTO Garden BirdWatch (GBW) 1995 - present

## **Description and Summary of Results**

Until the 1990s at least gardens were a poorly-monitored but potentially important habitat for many wild birds, providing a useful refuge for those affected by changes in the management of our countryside. The UK has a long history of both gardening and of providing food for wild birds in those gardens, and the year-round BTO Garden BirdWatch seeks to capitalise on this in order to quantify how, when and why birds (and other species of wildlife) use gardens.

In addition to providing useful scientific information another important aim of the project is to introduce people to wildlife recording and monitoring, and thus providing observations which can be (and are) used to determine conservation policy, ie 'Citizen Science'. For many people, their only interaction with wildlife is with those birds and animals that visit and use their gardens. Involving them in a monitoring programme like the BTO Garden BirdWatch is a way of increasing their interest and making them stakeholders in the research. For many it is the first 'bird-recording' project they have taken part in. For some that is sufficient but others go on to become regular participants in other, in some cases more demanding, surveys and projects both for the BTO and others.

There are currently about 15000 registered active participants although the number of submissions (counts of birds from one site) sent in during any given week has rarely exceeded about 8000. The information can be submitted on paper count forms or by using Garden BirdWatch online. Each participant also supports the project financially through an annual contribution.

Observers vary in ability and confidence and the data collection methods include validation components designed to catch misidentifications and incorrect submissions.

More details of the survey and taking part can be found at: [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw)

## **Methods of Data Capture**

Observers keep a record of the maximum number of each species, seen together at any one time, during their weekly observation period and within the designated recording site – in most cases this is the whole garden. How much time is spent recording is left to the observer but they are asked to be consistent from one week to the next, thus allowing comparison of the submissions over time. Observers can submit their records either through Garden BirdWatch online on paper recording forms (which are subsequently read by an Optical Mark Reader). The paper forms only allow a count to be recorded for the 10 most common species with the rest simply recorded as present or absent, but the online

form allows counts to be entered for all species, and includes sections for mammals, bumblebees, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians and dragonflies.

When a garden is first registered observers are asked to note the habitats available and the resources that the garden provides for birds, to enable analyses of how birds use different types of gardens.

Observers are also asked to record what types of food they put out.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

To provide information on the use of garden habitats by birds and other taxa.

### **Geographic Coverage**

The survey covers all of the UK and with a few in Republic of Ireland. In practice though the countrywide distribution of participating gardens broadly parallels the density of the human population although inner city gardens are underrepresented.

### **Temporal Coverage**

The survey started at the beginning of January 1995 and continues to the present. Recording is weekly throughout the year.

### **Other Interested parties**

CJ Wildbird Foods Ltd supported the survey 1995-2007. Participants contribute an annual subscription to the running costs of the survey (and separate to any BTO membership subscription) and are thus the major stakeholders.

### **Organiser(s)**

Kate Risely with help from the Garden BirdWatch team: Claire Simm, Heather Pymar, Donna Hobbs, Nicky Ward,. In addition several volunteers regularly help in the office at busy times.

Derek Toomer organised the project for the first 3 months, Andrew Cannon from April 1995-2003 and Mike Toms 2003-2014.

### **Current Staff Contact**

gbw@bto.org

### **Publications**

There are extensive pages of results on the website:

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/results> which is updated daily.

*Bird Table*, a magazine published quarterly, contains a summary of results from the previous quarter of the year as well as popular articles, notes, news and comments on garden birds generally and the survey in particular. Most years there is an annual report in *BTO News*. There have been three handbooks which contain some results as well as serving as a guide to the project:

Toms, M. 2004. *Garden Birdwatch Handbook*. BTO, Thetford.

Cannon, A. 2000. *The Handbook of Garden Birds*. BTO, Thetford.

Toms, M.P. & Sterry, P. 2009. *Garden Birds and Wildlife*. AA Publishing, Basingstoke.

A scientific summary of the results of the first 7 years was published as:

Cannon, A.R., Chamberlain, D.E., Toms, M.P., Hatchwell, B.J. & Gaston, K.J. 2005. Trends in the use of private gardens by wild birds in Great Britain 1995-2002. *Journal of applied Ecology* 42: 659-671.

Other scientific papers relating to the project can be found within the publications section of the BTO Garden BirdWatch website [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw)

#### **Available from NBN?**

No.

#### **Computer data -- location**

The online database contains all the bird and other animal count data. Some are input directly to this by the observers, the remainder is loaded from scans of paper forms each quarter. Data on the habitats and resources available in each garden are also held within this database.

#### **Computer data -- outline contents**

Counts of all birds and other animals from each week are included, as are details of habitats within and around the garden, and details of food provided.

#### **Computer data -- description of contents**

#### **Information held in BTO Archives**

Paper forms from the most recent year (4 quarters) are held on a rolling basis, ie when a new quarter is added the oldest is disposed of. In addition those forms which failed to scan are retained as are all Site Registration Forms and Scarce Species forms.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information needed****Notes on Survey Design**

The survey is open to all volunteers and no restrictions on location or size of garden are imposed.

**Specific Issues for Analysis**