

Siskin 1971

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

In the 1960s Siskins *Carduelis spinus* were increasingly being reported feeding in gardens. The first reports were from Surrey, and by 1971 the behaviour had been noted in 18 other counties, nearly all in SE England, and it was suggested that the habit had spread by learning. In 1970 and early 1971 there were five reports of Siskins feeding on peanuts from plastic mesh bags in gardens (Cambridgeshire, Surrey, Suffolk and Oxfordshire), and these generated further correspondence.

As a result a request was placed in various journals and newsletters and those who responded were sent a questionnaire to try to find out how widespread was the habit and whether there were any particular characteristics of gardens which were associated. Scoring one unit for each garden where one or more Siskins were observed to take 'unnatural' food at least once during the week, there was an increase from two garden/weeks in the winter of 1964/65 to 237 in the winter of 1970/71. In each year there were few records before January, and with a peak towards the end of March, but the birds often remained in gardens until April or May. This suggested that the birds involved belonged to populations with a late start to the breeding season, and ringing recoveries showed that birds came from several parts of Europe. The maximum numbers of Siskins believed to be feeding in the gardens concerned were mostly less than ten but there were 11 reports of 40 or more.

Of the 73 questionnaire replies which gave sufficient details, ten related to town gardens, 41 to suburban ones, 16 to villages, and only six to gardens described as rural. However these figures probably reflect mainly the distribution of birdwatchers' homes in England. There was no evidence of preference for large, wild gardens, and the two smallest sites reported were a window-sill and the roof of a flat. The main human-provided foods taken were shelled peanuts and meat fat.

Methods of Data Capture

Most of the results were gained from responses to a questionnaire which was sent to those who responded to publicity. This appeared in *British Birds*, in BTO publications, in those of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (especially *Bird Life*, the magazine of the Young Ornithologists' Club), and several county societies.

Not every correspondent returned a questionnaire, so for some there is no more than their original letter, typically such as: 'Two Siskins started feeding from my bird table at the end of March.' Also, some of those who did return questionnaires were not able to answer every question. Consequently, the volume of data available on each aspect varied, and for some aspects were inadequate for even tentative conclusions to be drawn.

Four of the questions were designed to discover what kinds of gardens are frequented by Siskins and their relationship, if any, to customary winter haunts in the district. In particular they were asked to list any trees in their gardens which appeared to attract the Siskins.

Purpose of Data Capture

The survey aimed to find out how widespread was the habit of Siskins using gardens; and three specific aspects seemed worth further investigation: whether favoured gardens had anything in common which might account for their attracting Siskins; whether the habit could be traced to a single point of origin; and if so, how it had spread.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain but in practice mainly in the southeast.

Temporal Coverage

Records from the winters of 1964/65 to 1970/71 were included in the analysis, with many of the later reports being responses to the questionnaire sent out in 1971.

Other Interested parties

Several journals and newsletters published the request for information and gave this publicity. The survey was organised and run by the BTO.

Organiser(s)

Bob Spencer and Geoffrey Gush

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Spencer, R. & Gush, G.H. 1973. Siskins feeding in gardens. *British Birds* 66: 91-99.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

2 Transfer Cases containing data and letters.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis