



# GBFSnews

The newsletter for participants in the  
BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



Number 6

August 2014

## Mild winter keeps birds away from garden feeding stations



JILL PAKENHAM

**Nobody was expecting to have another winter like that of 2012/13, where birds were seen in extremely high numbers, but it was a shock to all of us to have almost the complete opposite last winter.**

It has been a rollercoaster for our birds over the last few winters. The winters of 2010/11 and 2012/13 saw very busy gardens but 2011/12 and last winter, 2013/14, saw the opposite. Whilst mild winters make us feel that we have been abandoned by 'our' birds, it shows how our garden feeding stations are there as supplemental food and that the birds are not dependant on them. And, as many of you commented, at least it meant you all saved money!

Last winter birds could make the most of the food outside of our gardens, whether it was seeds or invertebrates, thanks to a combination of a bumper crop of natural foods in the autumn and fairly mild weather. Even our garden berry-laden bushes were of less interest than in previous years, until seeds and berries elsewhere had run out.

However, when compared to the average count from the last five years, most species followed a similar pattern of garden use, just in much lower numbers.

Whilst numbers of some populations were probably boosted by the mild weather, unfortunately warmer winters mean that birds do not get a break from prevalent diseases. There were many comments about seeing sick birds, especially Greenfinches, with the assumption that they were mostly suffering from trichomonosis. The decline of the number of Greenfinches seen in GBFS gardens over the winter continued this year, though it is too early to say whether that was due to the quiet winter or the overall decline.

Thanks to your patience and perseverance, despite quiet garden feeding stations, 75 different species were recorded in rural areas and 64 at suburban sites. In addition your results gave us new highs and lows so I hope you enjoy reading about them in this *GBFS news*.

Clare Simm



# Review of winter 2013–14

**With the combination of plenty of natural food and mild weather, last winter we had startlingly few birds visiting our garden feeding stations. As the weather descended into storms from December, more birds started to venture into gardens. For many species garden use dropped off again towards the end of the GBFS season as the breeding season started.**

## Quiet in the garden

With one of the warmest winters for many years, the GBFS season started with some species, such as Mistle Thrush, notably absent and others, including Coal Tit and Nuthatch, seen in surprisingly low numbers. Throughout the winter, however, most birds followed similar patterns to previous years, just in fewer numbers and, towards the end of the survey period, numbers of various species reached, or in the case of the Wren exceeded, the average of the previous five years (Figure 1). Overall, suburban gardens were relatively busier than rural ones, presumably because natural food was harder to find.



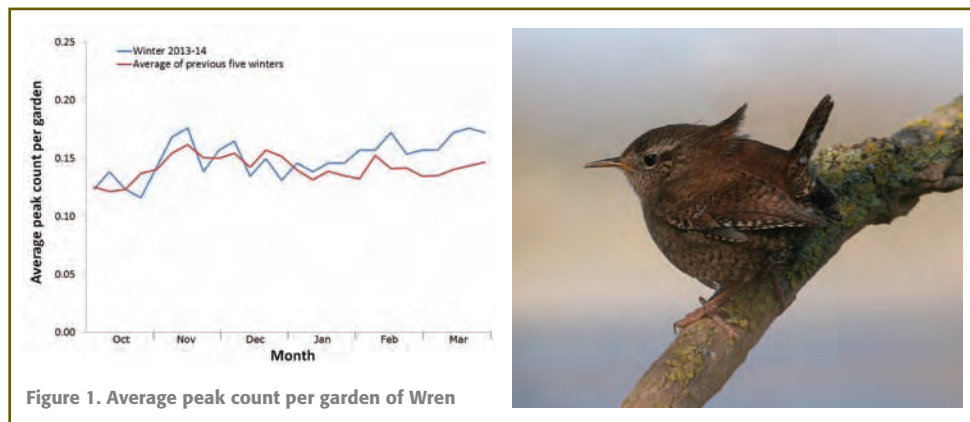
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## Visitors with a difference

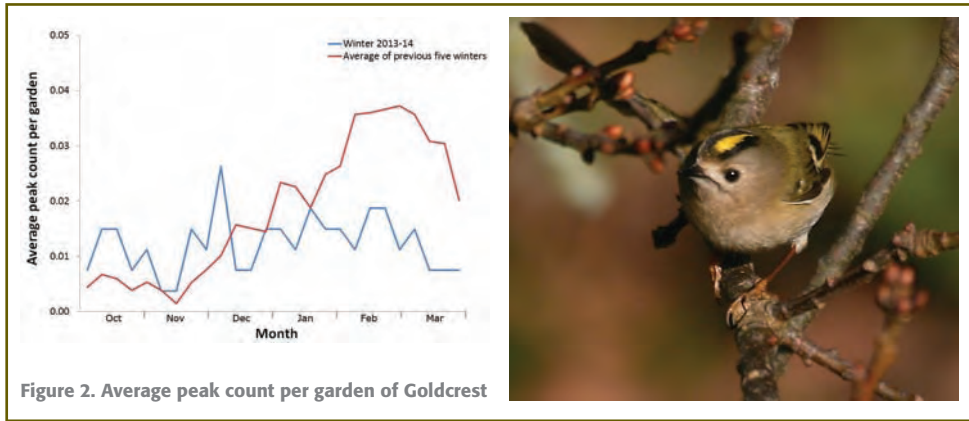
While our regular garden visitors were mostly scarce, some garden feeding stations were graced by more unusual species. These include Willow Warbler in Cambridgeshire, Water Rail in West Sussex, Black Redstart in Norfolk, Common Redpoll in Kent, Turtle Dove in Lincolnshire, Raven in Hampshire and, a bird that many people will be particularly jealous of, a Hen Harrier in Orkney.

## Autumn blues

Whilst the weather was extremely mild last autumn, it was also very wet. October's weather started with constant showers and ended with a major storm, with the country as-a-whole experiencing 129% of the average rainfall for the month. Thankfully most species were buffered against the weather by the size of the autumn fruit and seed crop, notably of oak



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and beech. According to the late David Glue, spikes in food like this tend to happen every four to seven years, possibly due to the right sequence of weather throughout the rest of the year.

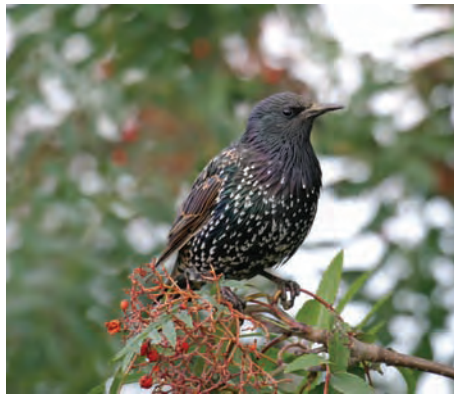
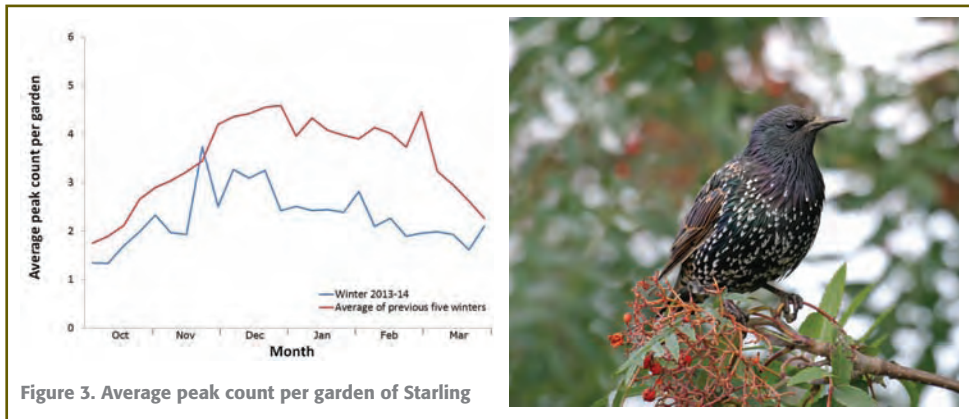
This meant that species which rely on tree mast and fruits, such as Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker, were seen in notably low numbers. Even Blackbirds became a relatively rare visitor to garden feeding stations, choosing instead to feast on berries. In contrast, a higher than average number of Goldcrests were seen feeding across the country, presumably failing to find enough invertebrates to keep them going throughout the wet weather (Figure 2).

**Early winter**

November started off with immense storms but gradually moved into colder, drier weather with

the mean temperature dropping below average. It was the driest November since 2004, providing a welcome respite for birds. With natural food diminishing and dry weather making access to feeding stations easier, some species such as Blackcap, Blue Tit and Starling either reached, or exceeded the previous five-year average count in gardens (Figure 3).

The weather renewed its bombardment of our gardens in December. While it was the warmest December since 1988, it was also the windiest since 1969, with wind gusts reaching up to 109 mph in Gwynedd in Wales. One participant commented that birds struggled to cling onto feeders in the gales, thus reducing the likelihood of seeing birds at feeding stations. More species did return to gardens to make the most of garden berries but few ventured onto feeders.



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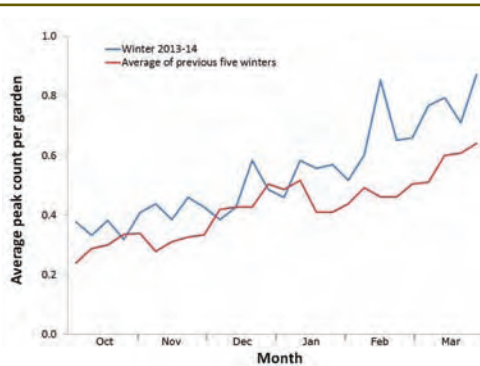


Figure 4. Average peak count per garden of Rook



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### Setting the stage for spring

January continued with high winds and persistent rain with some areas in the UK receiving in excess of 200% of the average rainfall. Having mostly lost the buffer of the food in the countryside, and with insects also taking a battering, many species, including Great Tit and Dunnock, returned to numbers similar to the average of the previous five years. The country was then hit with the third wettest February on record, punctuated by terrible storms. The damage done by extensive flooding meant garden feeding stations increasingly provided a valuable food resource and numbers of Blackcap, Reed Bunting and Rook all peaked (Figure 4).

While there was some wet weather, March was mostly dry and sunny with 127% of the average sunshine hours and a maximum temperature of 20.9°C in Greater London and Santon Downham

in Suffolk. This came a bit late for GBFS participants however, as numbers of birds started to drop with an early start to the breeding season brought on by the mild weather. What a contrast to March 2013 when the country was still in the throes of cold weather.

### New highs and lows

The top three species last winter were still Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit but the Robin hasn't been seen in such low numbers across the country since 1979, and in rural areas, it was the quietest winter since the survey started. Read more about this in detail on pages 8 and 9.

For Blackbirds, it was the 3rd quietest winter on GBFS record, the last one having been another mild season in 2006 (Figure 5). Blue Tit numbers were not as affected, with little difference between the number of Blue Tits at garden feeding stations last

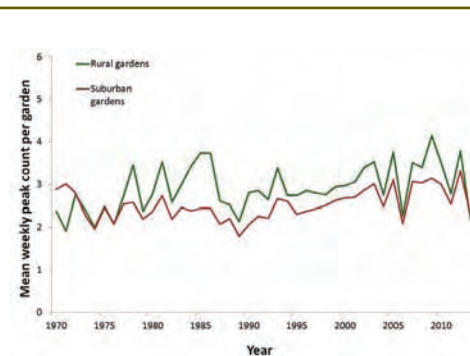
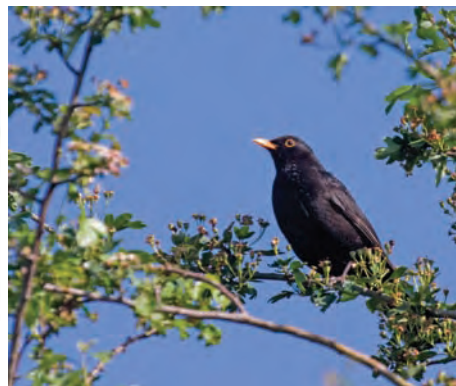


Figure 5. Average peak count per garden of Blackbird



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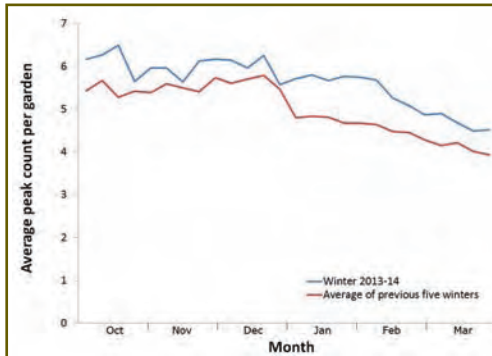


Figure 6. Average peak count per garden of House Sparrow



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winter and the average of the previous five winters.

Unlike many of the smaller birds, corvids were seen in much higher numbers at garden feeding stations, especially in suburban gardens. Last winter saw the most Rooks in suburban areas since 1972, and numbers feeding across the country grew as the winter came to an end (Figure 4). Suburban Rook numbers may have been supplemented by rural Rooks, whose numbers were the lowest for five years. This could be due to the combination of farmland grain running out and the soil becoming too waterlogged to find earthworms and other soil invertebrates.

Jackdaws underwent a similar pattern with suburban gardens experiencing the highest numbers seen since the beginning of GBFS, and rural numbers dropping to the lowest seen since 1998. Their numbers also increased across

the country towards the end of the season, presumably as food crops became depleted, and the weather became worse.

### Good news for House Sparrows?

House Sparrows seemed to have experienced a good winter, probably boosted by the mild weather. Their numbers plateaued from last year in rural areas, and suburban gardens saw a slight increase. Garden BirdWatch data suggests that their numbers in gardens have stabilised and this, combined with the abundance of food available throughout the winter, is probably the cause for them doing well. Compared to the previous five-year average count in gardens, numbers were constantly higher and followed the general pattern of declining towards the end of the season as they presumably went off to breed (Figure 6).

### Where were the migrants?

Last winter, migrant birds were noticeably lacking in numbers. Compared to winter 2012/13, the number of sites with Redwing was down 50% and the number with Fieldfare was down 76% (Figure 7). No Waxwings were reported from GBFS gardens and species like Starling and Blackbird, whose populations are normally added to by migrants, were also down in numbers. This is probably due to the mild weather and berry crop extending across the continent, providing less need to migrate.

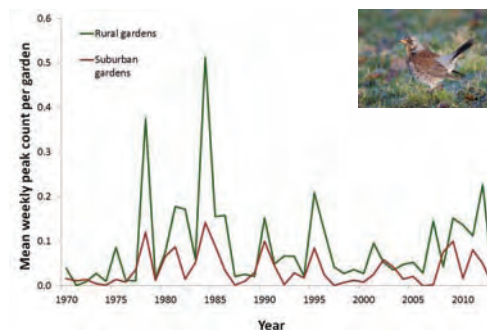


Figure 7. Average peak count per garden of Fieldfare

EDMUND FELLOWES

# Garden Bird Feeding Survey Results

## Winter 2013 - 2014

### Top Twelve Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Robin	266	100.0	Greenfinch	234	88.0
Blackbird	264	99.2	Woodpigeon	229	86.1
Blue Tit	262	98.5	Coal Tit	217	81.6
Dunnock	257	96.6	Goldfinch	217	81.6
Great Tit	254	95.5	Collared Dove	216	81.2
Chaffinch	250	94.0	House Sparrow	215	80.8

### Additional Species

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Magpie	190	71.4	Black-headed Gull	28	10.5
Long-tailed Tit	181	68.0	Herring Gull	27	10.2
Starling	177	66.5	Reed Bunting	25	9.4
Great Spotted Woodpecker	153	57.5	Stock Dove	24	9.0
Jackdaw	147	55.3	Yellowhammer	21	7.9
Sparrowhawk	141	53.0	Mistle Thrush	18	6.8
Siskin	121	45.5	Redwing	18	6.8
Wren	113	42.5	Goldcrest	17	6.4
Song Thrush	92	34.6	Marsh/Willow Tit	16	6.0
Carrion Crow	92	34.6	Mallard	12	4.5
Pheasant	86	32.3	Fieldfare	11	4.1
Nuthatch	79	29.7	Grey Wagtail	10	3.8
Bullfinch	59	22.2	Buzzard	10	3.8
Rook	58	21.8	Moorhen	9	3.4
Lesser Redpoll	49	18.4	Grey Heron	9	3.4
Blackcap	48	18.0	Red-legged Partridge	8	3.0
Pied Wagtail	46	17.0	Lesser Black-backed Gull	7	2.6
Feral Pigeon	42	15.8	Hooded Crow	6	2.3
Tree Sparrow	41	15.4	Marsh Tit	6	2.3
Jay	41	15.4	Common Gull	5	1.9
Brambling	39	14.7	Kestrel	5	1.9

Species	Plots	%	Species	Plots	%
Green Woodpecker	5	1.9	Water Rail	1	0.4
Treecreeper	5	1.9	Black Redstart	1	0.4
Chiffchaff	5	1.9	Common Redpoll	1	0.4
Tawny Owl	5	1.9	Turtle Dove	1	0.4
Linnet	4	1.5	Raven	1	0.4
Red Kite	4	1.5	Coot	1	0.4
Great Black-backed Gull	3	1.1	Willow Tit	1	0.4
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	2	0.8	Hen Harrier	1	0.4
Barn Owl	2	0.8	Lesser Whitethroat	1	0.4
Ring-necked Parakeet	2	0.8	Mandarin Duck	1	0.4
Willow Warbler	1	0.4	Rock Dove	1	0.4
Little Owl	1	0.4			

Number of sites recording: 266

### Sites with the most species

Whilst the average number of species visiting GBFS sites was around 20, we had 15 sites with 28 or more species visiting over the winter (Figure 8). Of these sites, five were suburban and 10 were rural. The site with the most species was Ken Russell’s suburban garden in Tyne and Wear, with 34 species including Herring Gull and Stock Dove. Closely behind him were the rural gardens of Dr J Patrick and Kevin Tunnicliffe with 33, including Mallard, and 32 species, including Yellowhammer, respectively.



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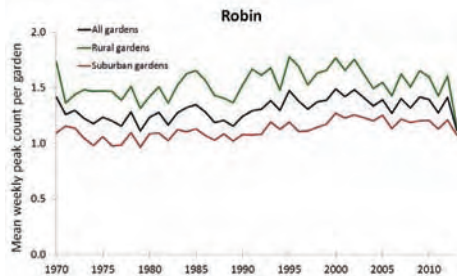


Figure 8. Fifteen GBFS sites with the most species submitted

## Species focus: Robin

**As the GBFS results from the last few years show, there is rarely a UK garden that does not have a Robin. It is an ubiquitous garden bird, seemingly ever constant, following us when we are gardening and adding a bright splash of colour to our grey winter days. Last winter, however, Robins were seen in their lowest numbers since 1979 and, in rural areas, their lowest numbers since the survey began, prompting us to take a closer look.**

Since the Garden Bird Feeding Survey started, our garden bird populations have consistently changed, with some species declining and others moving in. However, Robins have been a constant presence in the majority of gardens. The percentage of GBFS gardens reporting Robins since 1970 has consistently been above 96% with an average of 99%. Since the beginning of the survey in 1970, suburban gardens have reported an average peak count of 1.1 Robins per garden and, although numbers are more variable in rural gardens, the average peak count has been about 1.5 per garden (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. Mean weekly peak count per year of Robins at GBFS sites.**

A BTO study (Henderson *et al*, 2007) found that the densities of Robin were higher in association with woodland habitats than suburban, suggesting that the suburban habitat, on average, does not contain the right resources for the species. This is supported by the fact that last winter, in suburban areas

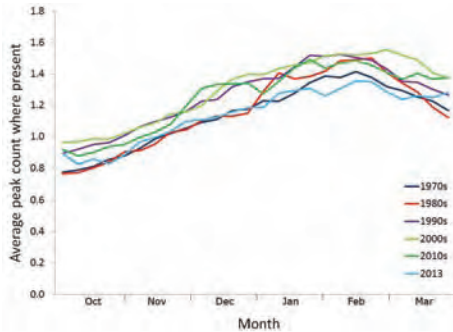


AMY LEWIS

where Robins generally have less access to the autumn abundance of natural foods, the average peak count per garden dropped to 1.08, which is the lowest numbers seen since 1989. In rural gardens, numbers dropped to 1.15 (Figure 9).

The seasonal use of garden feeding stations by Robins has been fairly consistent – as with many species, their numbers are lower in the autumn when there is usually plenty of food (including invertebrates, fruit and seeds) for them to feed on, thus reducing their need for our supplementary food. Numbers increase at feeding stations as the winter goes on and food elsewhere becomes scarce, with a peak in February. The average count then drops off towards the end of the GBFS season as the weather gets warmer and invertebrates start to emerge again. This is evident across the decades though unlike the average count ‘where present’ each decade, winter 2013/14





**Figure 10. Average peak count per decade of Robins at GBFS sites from which the species was recorded. 2013 data included in 2010 decade and separately**

did not have so much of a peak in February (Figure 10).

The breeding population size of Robins has always fluctuated as they can be severely affected by cold winters and the winter of 2012/13 was no exception. According to population and ringing surveys, despite increasing since the mid-1980s, their numbers have dropped sharply in the last few years, perhaps in response to weather conditions. Considering those two facts, last winter's low numbers could be a combination of an even-further reduced population thanks to the cold winter of 2012/13, and the fact that the 2013/14 winter was very mild.

Due to Robins having individual winter territories, we would rarely expect to see more than one or two Robins at garden feeding stations, especially as the average size of a territory is  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre. Given that the average UK garden is approximately 90 square metres, the territory would encompass around 34 gardens. The average territory size does vary with habitat, depending on how many birds can be supported by available resources, and food 'trespassing' does occur more in bad weather. Last winter, it was evident that this happened more in rural gardens. The majority of suburban sites only recorded zero to two birds per week, with a handful recording three or four birds in a week. In contrast, several sites in rural areas were recording five birds and one even saw seven.

## Migration

Did you know that some Robins migrate? The UK's Robins are mostly sedentary and do not move more than a few kilometres. Colour-ringing studies have showed that once a male Robin has established its territory, they are generally non-migratory for the rest of their lives, excluding the odd shift locally as territories expand or contract. However, some female Robins will cross over to mainland Europe or, as ringing data shows even North Africa, to spend their winters. Interestingly, those females that do stay show characteristics of male behaviour including singing, fighting and maintaining territories, suggesting that it might be an effect from sexual hormones. In addition to our birds going abroad, we also gain immigrants from Scandinavia and northern continental Europe during particularly severe winters. These visiting birds are generally paler in colour and less 'tame'.



**Figure 11. Robin migration map from *Time to Fly* by Jim Flegg**

# Extracts Winter 2013–14

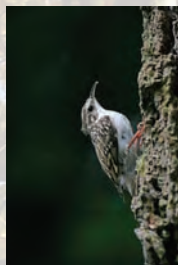


(Mar) **Menai Bridge, Anglesey:** Jay feeding on seed fallen from feeder – new 'first'.

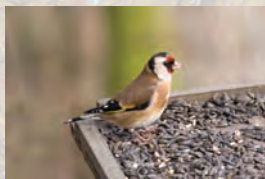


(Mar) **Llangollen, Clwyd:** Rooks have now learned to hang on to nuts and fat.

(Dec) **High Peak, Derbyshire:** Treecreeper visits garden – feeding on fat pressed into fissures in trunk of larch tree.



(Dec) **York:** We wait five weeks for a Pheasant then four come at once – thought this was just buses!



(Mar) **Beaulieu, Inverness-shire:** Four Yellowhammers braved hostile Siskins and Goldfinches to take food from under feeders.



(Dec) **Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear:** Garden record number of 24 Goldfinches feeding on sunflower hearts.



(Mar) **Cowbridge, South Glamorgan:** So many species not seen for ages all arrive on the same day - Siskin (2), Bullfinch (1) and Blackcap (1)!



(Mar) **Hayling Island, Hants:** Carrion Crow on seeing Herring Gull eating something it wanted, grabbed the tip of the gull's wing in its beak and dragged it away from the food!

(Mar) **Camberley, Surrey:** First House Sparrow since moving to property.

(Oct) **Cambridge:** Green Woodpecker seen feeding on bird table for first time.



(Jan) **Carmarthen, Dyfed:** A joy to see six Long-tailed Tits feeding together on peanut feeder.

(Dec) **York:** 20 House Sparrows seen this week which is a relief, but nothing like the 40+ we used to see.

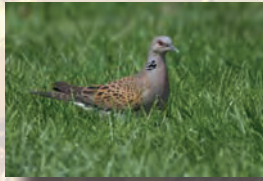
(Oct) **Holt, Norfolk:** Black Redstart drank and bathed in bird bath.



*Photographs courtesy of: Adrian Dancy; Christine M Matthews; Edmund Fellowes; Jill Pakenham; John Harding; Peter Howlett; Ron Marshall; Peter M Wilson.*



**(Oct) Mablethorpe, Lincolnshire:** First Turtle Dove seen in 12 years – fed on seed on the ground.



**(Jan) Totton, Southampton:** Jackdaw on bird table – very rare.



**(Nov) Worthing, West Sussex:** Bold Water Rail going into water bowl several times during day. Suddenly disappears. Suspect Sparrowhawk.



**(Jan) Antrim, County Antrim:** First Tree Sparrow seen in 20 years of living in the house – taking food from tray feeder.

**(Nov) Kyle, Ross-shire:** Flock of ~35 Lesser Redpoll but none seen visiting feeding station...



**(Oct) Perth, Perthshire:** Noticed one intrepid Tree Sparrow using peanut feeder at same time as the Great Spotted Woodpecker.



**(Nov) Longton, Lancashire:** Welcome visit of Great Spotted Woodpecker and Bullfinch during weekend interval of noisy building work.

**(Nov) Reading, Berkshire:** Surprise visit of Song Thrush feeding on seed on ground.

**(Dec-Mar) Harpenden, Hertfordshire:** Ring-necked Parakeet pair seen daily in early morning hogging peanut feeders and bird bath.



**(Nov) Amersham, Buckinghamshire:** Red Kites (3) and Buzzards (2) quarrelling over meat provided.



**(Mar) Christchurch, Dorset:** Great Black-backed Gull seen on bird table – imposing sight.



**(Jan) Swindon, Wiltshire:** Saw Collared Dove try to feed from hanging feeder – it took one beakful and overbalanced!



**(Dec) St Mary's, Isles of Scilly:** First record of Moorhen for 14½ years – feeding on scraps of meat and bird seed.

## Looking ahead: Winter 2014–15

Last winter provided a respite from the previous colder-than-average winters preceding it, potentially increasing survival and allowing an earlier start to the breeding season. This could mean higher numbers of birds going into our 45th GBFS season but, as last winter showed, this does not necessarily mean more birds in our gardens. Many of us will be torn between the easier times of a mild winter and the excitement that a cold winter brings, so we look forward to working with you and seeing what this winter brings.

### GBFS sites from which data were submitted in 2013-14



### BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey



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GBFS has been monitoring the numbers and variety of garden birds coming to supplementary foods in winter since 1970. It is the longest running annual survey of its kind in the world and allows direct comparison of garden types and locations over time.

#### The GBFS Team

**Clare Simm:** GBW Development Officer

**Kate Risely:** Head of Garden Ecology

**Donna Hobbs, Heather Pymar and Nicky**

**Ward:** Garden BirdWatch Team

**Sandra Sparkes:** DTP

**A special thank you to Alic Prior for his invaluable help with data entry. A special mention also for David Glue, our Research Ecologist, who many of you knew well. He was instrumental in establishing GBFS and helped to interpret the data, providing valuable expertise, until this year when he sadly passed away.**

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