

CHANGING THE GUARD AT UK BIRDTABLES

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In winter 2008/09, Goldfinch usurped House Sparrow from the 'Top 12' league of BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS). *David Glue*, BTO Research Ecologist, explores findings from last winter, the ever-evolving feeding community and the need to continue monitoring.

CAMBIO DE GUARDIA EN LOS COMEDEROS DEL REINO UNIDO

En el invierno 2008/09, el jilguero le usurpa el puesto al gorrión común en la liga de los '12 principales' del censo de comederos de jardín del BTO. *David Glue*, ecólogo del BTO, explora los resultados del invierno pasado, la siempre cambiante comunidad de los comederos, y la necesidad de seguir monitorizando.

BUSIER BIRD TABLES BY DESIGN

When GBFS was launched in 1970/71, home-crafted tables, wire-mesh peanut feeders and seed mixes purchased from corner shops were the staple fare for birds in our gardens with an average of 16–17 species recorded. Spin forward 40 years and our garden bird scene is very different, averaging 18–23 species supported by huge improvements in bird care provisions, with the BTO at the forefront of research into garden bird 'furniture' and feeding.

ALL POINTS ON THE COMPASS

As ever, birdtables from around the UK revealed contrasting bird assemblages. The most northerly site (Orkney) supported 15 species, including Peregrine and Hen Harrier, whilst in the south-west (Scilly) only 10 species were recorded, but included Water Rail coming to water and good numbers of Song Thrush. Interestingly, both these gardens held good

numbers of House Sparrow and Starling, in welcome contrast to many UK mainland sites. Data from Garden BirdWatch (which in comparison to GBFS has had a considerably shorter amount of time in which to record changing trends) has shown a marked decrease in reporting rate for these two species. This could reflect a decrease in breeding populations as two thirds of House Sparrows and Starlings nest in human habitats. The 'barest' birdtable (Kent) held just five species, whereas the richest garden was once again in Dyfed, with a fantastic 59 species, including Teal, Green Sandpiper, Buzzard and Goshawk coming to a modest hillside plot with shallow pools crafted with wildlife in mind.

GARDEN TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

After a frenetic feeding winter the previous year, predictions were for a quieter season in 2008/09,

Changing faces...

...at UK feeders showing percentage of GBFS garden feeding stations used

SPECIES	1970s AVERAGE	1990s AVERAGE	WINTER 2008/09
RELIABLE EACH WINTER...			
Robin	99	99	99
Blue Tit	99	100	99
Blackbird	99	99	98
Duncock	95	95	96
DECLINING AT FEEDERS...			
Starling	96	92	81
House Sparrow	97	92	79
Song Thrush	88	65	62
Mistle Thrush	35	24	14
INCREASING IN NUMBERS			
Coal Tit	70	85	94
Goldfinch	3	33	84
Long-tailed Tit	11	40	80
Brambling	10	21	31

but the unusually severe cold weather quickly pushed many birds into gardens. Intriguingly, birds appeared to move progressively into

warmer urban areas as the winter went on, and GBWers also picked up an increase in the number of Long-tailed Tits during the cold snap. Overall, an impressive 89 species took food or water provided, with Robin, Blackbird and Blue Tit continuing to occupy the top three positions. Wood Pigeon maintains its new presence in the Top 12, joined this year by Goldfinch which is also being increasingly recorded by GBW. This does not necessarily indicate an overall population increase but rather a change in feeding behaviour. Where there are winners there are always losers, and House Sparrow and Song Thrush have both been knocked off the leader board. Several other species are increasingly being recorded at feeding stations, including Long-tailed Tit, Goldcrest and Wren. Sparrowhawk, in half of all sites, easily retains 'Top Predator' slot, but Raven, Buzzard and Red Kite continue their expansion into new gardens. Sadly, some birds were noticeable by their absence, with both Marsh and Willow Tit failing to materialise at many GBFS feeding stations.

Some unusual species were noted during the February cold snap with Grey Partridge (Gwynedd), Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Dyfed) and escapee California Quail (Kent) adding variety. Some species could only be tempted by water with Crossbill (Herts) and Waxwing (Perth) the stars. A Little Grebe taking grain (Dyfed) from the side of a pool brings the total number of species recorded by GBFS to 175 in its 39th winter. One wonders what the 40th year may bring, as we continue to see changes unimagined when the survey started, showing just how important continued long-term monitoring is.

WINTER 2008/09 EXPLAINED

- A second successive abysmal breeding season – fewer tits, thrushes and some finches.
- Coldest early winter for 30 years – pushing birds into gardens earlier than normal.
- Bumper crop of apples and pears – lots of windfalls for thrushes and gamebirds.
- A bitter new year and February snows – more thrushes, Goldcrest, Pied Wagtail and Wren pushed into gardens.
- Ongoing disease-related losses to *Trichomoniasis* and *Fringilla* papilloma virus.
- A warm, dry spring bringing thirsty birds into bird baths and feeders.

Changing fortunes...

...at UK garden birdtables. Starlings are being recorded in their smallest numbers ever, whilst Great Spotted Woodpeckers become increasingly frequent visitors. Fieldfares are drawn to garden fruit and seeds in cold winters and Bullfinches are venturing into gardens in larger numbers.

● All Gardens ● Rural ● Urban (dotted)

