

## KITES AND PARAKEETS ADD COLOUR TO MIDWINTER BIRDTABLES

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, summarises findings from Winter 2001/02, the 32nd for the Garden Bird Feeding Survey, revealing fresh species, as well as changes in status and behaviour at UK birdtables.

### MILANOS Y PERIQUITOS DAN COLOR A LOS COMEDEROS DE INVIERNO

El biólogo investigador del BTO David Glue resume los hallazgos del invierno 2001/02, el trigésimo-segundo del Censo de Aves en Comederos de Jardín (Garden Bird Feeding Survey), descubriendo nuevas especies y cambios en el estatus y conducta de aves en comederos del Reino Unido.

To the joy, interest, and sometimes frustration of garden birdwatchers, no two UK winters are quite the same. In terms of the volume of natural food supplies, severity of weather, and numbers of many species using birdtables, the two most recent winters — 2000/01 and 2001/02 — were among the most divergent in the history of the Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS).

### COASTAL AND UPLAND GARDENS BAREST FOR FEEDING BIRDS

GBFS was set in motion in Winter 1970/71 to explore the impact of supplementary feeding on UK's wild birds. Last winter, 277 householders (124 in rural villages, hamlets and farmsteads, 153 in towns) methodically recorded the peak counts and noted the feeding antics on a weekly basis, from October to March inclusive.

In total, just 72 species came for food or water provided. Species richness varied widely. Rural gardens ranged from Dr E I Garvie in remote Duncanstown, Dingwall, Ross-shire, holding just

eleven species, to Capt E T Burke of wooded Presteigne, Powys, supporting 31 species. The suburban garden equivalents, respectively, were S M Harper of coastal Ramsgate, Kent, attracting a meagre four species and K Russell of Walbottle Village, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, supporting an impressive 34 species.

Blackbird was the only species to take food in all gardens (Table 1). The Top Twelve species matched that of the previous Winter 2000/01 (*BTO News* 236), but the higher incidence of certain seed-eating tits and finches was noteworthy. The same dozen species featured among those for winters averaged across the 1990s. The most striking contrast was the decline in the proportion of gardens with Starling and House Sparrow.

Interestingly, in Winter 2001/02, gardens in suburbia held marginally more species than their rural counterparts (21.1 and 20.2 species respectively), in contrast to recent winters (*BTO News* 236). In Winter 1994/95, when fruiting yields in UK forests were also low, more species

TABLE 1. GBFS Top Twelve garden feeding species Winter 2001/02.

Rank	Species	% of gardens	% of gardens in 1990s (*)
1	Blackbird	100.0	99
=2	Blue Tit	99.6	100
=2	Great Tit	99.6	97
4	Robin	99.3	99
5	Chaffinch	96.8	95
6	Greenfinch	96.0	96
7	Dunnock	95.7	95
8	Coal Tit	90.6	85
9	Collared Dove	89.2	86
10	House Sparrow	87.0	93
11	Starling	84.1	93
12	Magpie	72.6	71

\*Figures are the average of 10 winters from 1990/91 to 1999/2000.

turned to birdtables in towns and cities (19.3 species) than those in open country settings (18.0 species) (*BTO News* 200).

### BARE WINTER LARDER AND COLD NEW YEAR LIVEN BIRDTABLES

Three major features profoundly affected the variety of species and flock sizes of garden birds in Winter 2001/02:

- low yields of many important tree fruits, including beech mast, acorns, haws; seeds of alder, birch, hazel and certain conifers, only part compensated for by a glut of culinary soft fruits.
- 2001 was another comparatively poor breeding season for many single brooded tits, certain finches and thrushes, resulting in fewer first-year birds at birdtables.
- another winter essentially free of severe frosts and lengthy snow cover, although punctuated by cold snaps either side of New Year.

### AUTUMN HIGHLIGHTS

The coolest September since 1994 prompted an early return to birdtables of tits, doves and finches from the open countryside. Record-breaking Indian Summer heat in October helped a spate of late nesting attempts, with family parties of Collared Doves, Woodpigeons, Greenfinches and House Sparrows appearing at feeding stations. From mid October, many observers noted very busy feeding groups of Coal Tits, Great Tits and

Nuthatches. For others, Marsh Tit, Jay and Great Spotted Woodpecker were seen at feeders for the first time, with excessive food hoarding by some, against the background of a barren wild fruit supply.

Late autumn remained essentially frost-free, but northerly gales in mid November, with wintry episodes in parts of the north and east, brought the first Bramblings, Siskins and Redwings to feeding stations. The coldest December since 1996 and bitter cold on the nearby continent, forced many Starlings, finches and winter thrushes to the UK. Initially, Fieldfares and Redwings were content to forage on pasture and playing fields or exploit limited stocks of berries in hedges and gardens. Progressively, winter thrushes and Starlings, along with corvids, Mallard, Moorhens, Mistle Thrushes and Green Woodpeckers, were tempted to stocks of windfall fruits, available in gardens.

### WINTER BITES

A numbing blast of arctic air over the Christmas period, brought the first Rooks, Wrens, Blackcaps and Reed Buntings of the winter to some birdtables. Severe frosts and fresh snowfall in the New Year soon gave way to melt conditions from the 14th, elements favouring visiting Woodpigeons, Meadow Pipits and Grey Wagtails. Climbing temperatures, contributing to the mildest January since 1990, reduced stress on wintering songbirds. Also of note were three stormy episodes over the New Year, late January and mid February. Winds flattened

garden bird furniture and depressed feeding activity. The New Year saw Long-tailed Tits, Treecreepers and Blackcaps turning more to fatty products.

From early February through to mid March, unseasonably mild spring-like spells lifted the pressure on garden birds. Winter thrushes soon vacated gardens that lacked berries and stocks of windfall apples. In contrast, the widespread scarcity of wild fruits and seeds, saw increasing numbers of Pheasants, Woodpigeons, finches and buntings at feeding stations. Chaffinches and Greenfinches invariably dominated, with Siskin and Yellowhammer well represented. Brambling also featured regularly (18% of sites), recovering from just 4% in the previous winter. This was the lowest since 1976 (2%), when there was an exceptional beech mast crop ripened by the hot summer (*BTO News* 202). By mid March, early nesting activity resulted in Robins, Blackbirds and Collared Doves bringing families to feeding sites.

### GOLDFINCHES AND NUTHATCHES TAKE TO MORE BIRDTABLES

The feeding community at UK birdtables continued to change in Winter 2001/02. Among those regular visitors to feeders, seven species hit all-time high levels of attendance — Great Tit (100%), Coal Tit (91%), Goldfinch (72%), Woodpigeon (69%), Great Spotted Woodpecker (50%), Nuthatch (36%) and Pheasant (26% of sites). These increases were a reflection of a growing reliance on supplementary foods in winter, a paucity of wild fruits, or a combination of both factors.

The lack of beech nuts and other tree seeds matched that of 1995 and rivalled that of 1976 (BTO and Forest Enterprise records). In October–November 2001 unprecedented roving flocks of Coal Tits in gardens with feeding groups 10–14 strong (often outnumbering Blue and Great Tit), were noted as far afield as Durham and Southampton. First-ever feeding by Nuthatch was also observed widely.

The continuing upsurge in garden use by Goldfinches saw first-time use of feeders as distant as Co Tyrone and Leicester. Tenacious, site-faithful flocks 25–65 strong, were reported from some areas. Equally encouraging, Bullfinch, Yellowhammer and Tree Sparrow, consolidated

their use of gardens (17%, 9% and 9% respectively), invariably attracted by better propriety seed-mixes. However, some observers ‘complained’ of Pheasants, Rooks, Jackdaws, Woodpigeons and Feral Pigeons monopolising feeding stations.

Worryingly, a quartet of species with declining UK populations, dipped to equal (Reed Bunting – 8%), or reach all-time low levels of GBFS attendance, (Black-headed Gull – 16%, Starling – 84% and House Sparrow – 87% of sites).

### WATER RAIL AND FIRECREST AMONG SURPRISE FEEDERS

Strongly tipped, and long awaited, Red Kite finally snatched food scraps (Trefil, Tredegar, Gwent), bringing the 32-year GBFS tally to 162 species. Elsewhere, observers were frustrated by visiting but non-feeding Little Egret (West Sussex), Green Sandpiper (Herts) and Red Grouse (Aberdeen). Waxwing visited gardens in Mansfield (Notts) and Glasgow, exploiting shrub berries.

Some observers noted the intensity of Sparrowhawk attacks (hunting in 52% of gardens sampled), with some cases of two birds working in-tandem. Collared Dove comprised one-fifth of confirmed kills, though Greenfinch, Starling and House Sparrow were also prime targets. Kestrels are less well equipped to hunt within the garden environment (active in just 3% of sites). Lucky homeowners noted foraging Merlin (Borders and Powys), Peregrine (Flint and Gwent) and Barn Owl (Suffolk). Buzzard maintained their recent increased exploitation of rural gardens, scavenging for the first time on Anglesey, the fringes of Salisbury Plain (Wilts), Mendips (Somerset) and the Black Mountains.

As ever, surprised householders registered the unexpected. Water Rail (Isles of Scilly), Serin (Devon), Stonechat (Gwynedd), Firecrest (Cornwall and Norfolk), Red-legged Partridge and Ring-necked Parakeet (several localities), all added interest to weekly observations. As a fresh winter of recording beckons, one ponders quite what surprises are in store.

### THANK YOU

Thanks to the dedicated team of GBFS counters who contribute each winter to this small but

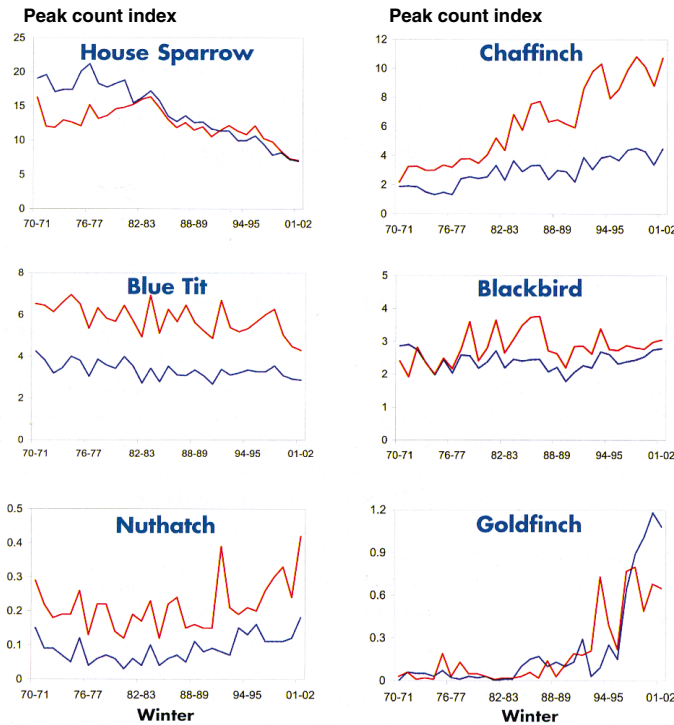
important BTO survey. Carol Povey, Jacky Prior and Frances Bowman kindly helped with the

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### CHANGING FORTUNES AT UK BIRDTABLES: GBFS PEAK COUNT INDEX 1970–2002

In Winter 2001/02 the garden House Sparrow decline continued. Feeding flock sizes fell to their lowest levels over the last three decades, reduced by more than one-third in towns and cities, and more than halved in open country gardens. Worryingly, the more modest demise in garden feeding status of Starling and Dunnock since the mid 1970s continued, while the encouraging upturn in fortunes of the vulnerable Song Thrush in recent winters (mirrored by breeding numbers) was not maintained. Reduced breeding success of Blue Tits, attributed in part at least to a series of cool, wet late spring spells, resulted in fewer birds at garden feeders.

Blackbirds continue to visit UK garden feeding stations in good strength. The peaks during winters in the late 1970s and mid 1980s, notably in rural sites, no doubt included good numbers of birds of continental origin. Feeding numbers of seed-specialists such as Coal Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker are inversely related to the size of beech mast and allied forest seed yields. Following the sparse crops in autumn 2001, this duo, along with Nuthatch, resorted to UK birdtables at record levels. The upturn in feeding fortunes of Chaffinch (most markedly in country gardens) continued. Goldfinch maintained their growing exploitation of supplementary foods.



The Peak Count Index is the average maximum count per week. Scales of vertical axes vary greatly for species.

— = rural  
— = suburban