

Big Garden Bird Watch



The RSPB has been running the Big Garden Birdwatch since 1979, to allow as many people as possible to provide data to track the changes in populations of garden birds in winter. This year, in the last weekend of January, nearly half a million people spent an hour logging the birds in their garden. They record the maximum number of each species at any one time in that period.

The RSPB has recently made available the results for this year (2014), which suggest that nationally there are increases in populations of some species such as blue tit, goldfinch and great spotted woodpecker, but continued declines in others, such as house sparrow (which nevertheless remains at the number one spot), starling, greenfinch and song thrush. The available results are broken down by county and so we can look at the results for East Sussex.

A number of people in Plumpton contribute to this survey and seven sent me their results. The seven people recorded 246 birds of 22 species, but only robin was recorded in all seven gardens. Despite the fact that many of them thought that it had been a very low count this year, that total is very similar to last year, when seven people recorded 239 birds of 24 species. In the last four years that people have sent me their results, they have recorded a total of 40 species.

As a whole, East Sussex recorded 61 species. House sparrow and blue tit were the most commonly recorded (average number of birds per garden), but otherwise the top ten most recorded species in Plumpton were a little different from the general East Sussex counts. Ours included rook, jackdaw and dunnock, while the accumulated East Sussex counts included woodpigeon, collared dove and magpie. The other species in the top ten on both lists were chaffinch, starling, blackbird, great tit and robin. For the county's top 20 list, we missed out on feral pigeon and herring gull (none recorded), but we did include great spotted woodpecker, nuthatch and wren, which were just outside the top 20 list for the county.

In terms of numbers, we are doing better than average for species such as house sparrow, blue tit, chaffinch, jackdaw, greenfinch (although numbers were well down on last year), song thrush and rook; and less than average for

starling, wood pigeon and magpie. Well, I know that some people will not regret the low numbers of magpie and woodpigeon, but the starling is still suffering widespread decline, and some of the species where we are doing well (such as house sparrow, greenfinch and song thrush) are still struggling to recover from heavy declines over many years.

Of course, it is difficult to rely on one project like this to provide reliable data on population changes. It is a snapshot and the results are dependent on a range of factors, including the weather at the time, but it does have strength in numbers of contributors. And the data can feed into a range of other monitoring projects that together help to assess the changing fortunes of Britain's bird species, such as a wider year-round garden bird survey organised by the British Trust for Ornithology, as well as a range of breeding, winter, wetland and farmland bird surveys, and periodic special surveys of individual species. The Sussex Ornithological Society always plays a full role in such national surveys as well as organising its own. This all helps to identify species of concern and hence to develop the research and conservation action required to help species at risk – or to stop vulnerable species becoming at risk.

Similarly, it is difficult (or unreliable) to draw too much conclusion about the birds of Plumpton from a sample of seven survey reports, but maybe it will help to identify significant changes over the years to come.

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