

The Big Garden Birdwatch 2016



Around the village people contribute to the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch on the last weekend of January. People are asked to watch their garden for one hour and record the maximum number of each species occurring at any one time within that hour. This year seven people have also sent their results to me. These seven gardens recorded a total of 309 birds of 24 species. Individually people recorded between 11 and 21 species (average 14.3) and 18 and 72 birds (average 44).

The only species recorded in all seven gardens were blackbird, blue tit and robin; the rarest species (only recorded in one garden) were blackcap (normally a summer visitor but increasingly overwintering in Britain), goldcrest, great spotted woodpecker and rook. The most abundant species were jackdaw (not so welcome by many observers, but in this case perhaps exaggerated by one observer counting 30 in the garden together), blue tit and goldfinch (apparently a very welcome increase). Long tailed tit, house sparrow and starling were all in the top ten, with magpie at number ten (again not so popular with many people). Just outside the top ten were greenfinch, great tit, robin and dunnock, and nice to see several reports of coal tit and nuthatch. Disappointingly low down the list are wren and song thrush.

The RSPB has now made national results available. I'm not sure how many people participated this year, but over 8 million birds were counted around the UK. Nationally, the top ten included wood pigeon, great tit and robin, which in our list are replaced by jackdaw, collared dove and magpie. At the national level, house sparrow and starling are still showing small declines, while goldfinch and long-tailed tit are showing marked increases.

At a more local level, East Sussex participants recorded 61 species. We recorded six species that were not in Sussex's top 20 (great spotted woodpecker, rook, nuthatch, song thrush, goldcrest and blackcap) but they were all down at the bottom of our list. Looking at the order of abundance of species, there are significant differences and only seven of the top ten for Sussex are in our top 10. For the average number of a species per garden, we have recorded well above average for quite a range of species, such as blue tit, long-tailed tit, goldfinch, chaffinch and collared dove, but less well for some, such as house sparrow.

The project's primary aim is to track population changes. At present we are only given changes from one year to the next and at the national level. But that may not be very indicative of longer term change and I look forward to looking at, say, how ten years of contributions to this project might show quite local changes. Also published recently is a revised version of Birds of Conservation Concern.

This, the fourth version, reviews the status of British birds using a range of criteria and assigns them to the Red List, Amber List or Green List, with the Red list being those species most threatened (not necessarily the rarest) and the Green list being species that are OK in the current circumstances. The Amber List includes species to watch carefully, since they might slip into the Red List if things do not improve for them. This list updates Version 3 which was published in 2009. Sadly, 20 species have moved into the Red List while only three have been downgraded (i.e. species not as threatened as they were in 2009).

Local species that have moved into the Red List include grey wagtail, common nightingale and mistle thrush, where they join such species as lapwing, turtle dove, cuckoo, skylark as well as the humble song thrush, house sparrow and starling. In all about 19 local species are in the Red List. One species that has moved from the Red to Amber list is nightjar, which now breeds just over the parish border in Chailey Commons. The new Amber List removes quite a few local species, such as little grebe, little egret, red kite, barn owl, green woodpecker and common whitethroat, but adds tawny owl and meadow pipit.

The species that have been downgraded include some that are naturally doing well, such as little egret, red kite and green woodpecker, and others whose situation is improving due to intensive conservation efforts, such as barn owl. In all, about 23 Amber List species are recorded locally, including kestrel, stock dove, swift, kingfisher, house martin, dunnock and bullfinch.

Tony Hutson