

# Garden birding



Although a much loved pastime, we should not complain too much about the British weather. At least in the vicinity of Plumpton, we are lucky to have relatively gentle, well-timed seasons to shape the natural cycles of our flora and fauna, and bring variety into our lives. And when the April showers finally stop and the sun comes out, it makes the dark, wet, cold(ish) days of Winter the perfect prelude to our Spring spectacular.

Back in those dark days at the end of January, half a million people took part in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch. Despite a 57% decline in numbers since the BGB started in 1979, the House Sparrow was still the most commonly seen bird, as it has been for the last 15 years. Second was the Starling, even though their numbers have declined by a massive 80%. Blue Tit, Blackbird, Wood Pigeon, Goldfinch, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Robin and Collared Dove completed the top 10, in that order.

Admittedly rather fewer in number, some of our local residents kindly also submit their sightings to the P&ECWG to enable the creation of Plumpton Big Garden Birdwatch statistics. This year, 255 birds of 23 species were seen. Outside the 'top 10', these included the Great Spotted and Green Woodpecker, Nuthatch and Fieldfare. The most common bird seen was the Blue Tit (48), with the House Sparrow (35) second. The Rook was third (does someone have a rookery in their garden?), followed by the Great Tit and Goldfinch, Wood Pigeon, Long-tailed Tit, Jackdaw, Dunnock and Robin, Chaffinch and finally Blackbird. Although a hugely unscientific sample, there is a correlation with the national results: apart from the rookery, the other finding that stands out is our lack of Starlings (only 2). Perhaps they were all practising murmurations over Brighton at the time. To improve our knowledge of local garden bird populations, perhaps you would consider copying your future BGB results to us, and we will publish the summary and compare with the national numbers.

I find it interesting how observations from the kitchen window can seem to reflect the statistics. On the positive side, we still have a healthy population of House Sparrows, and we are often descended upon by querulous Starlings when the bird table is replenished. Twenty plus years ago when we moved into the house, Goldfinch and Long-Tailed Tit were a rather special sighting, interesting enough to call the family to have a look. Although always beautiful and a pleasure to see, they are now positively common (incredibly 4th & 6th across the country). Coal Tits are also a much more frequent visitor to the feeders than before. Greenfinch, on the

other hand, have become increasingly rare for us, although we are seeing a few more at the moment, and the declining national population is up 11% this year.

Of course, the Big Garden Birdwatch is a snapshot of populations in mid-Winter. Perhaps the most exciting symbol of impending Summer is the arrival of the Swallows and House Martins. Sadly, this is our worst bird-related experience. When we first moved in, we had a couple of Swallow families nesting in an outbuilding and six or more very active House Martin nests in the eaves. The Swallows were the first to go, probably 15 years ago, and the House Martin numbers gradually declined until we had our last pair about 8 years ago. Every year around this time, we live in hope of another visitation, but it hasn't happened yet.

Undoubtedly, these birds are victims of habitat loss, persecution, Climate Change, not to mention plastic pollution and all the other things humans inflict on the planet. So, to move briefly from matters avian to amphibian, it was incredibly heartening to see how the good citizens of the area so rapidly mobilised to form The Toad Patrol back in February. Their mission, to prevent toads from being flattened on Plumpton Lane on their way to the spawning ponds of the Sandpits. It seems that this mini-migration is temperature and rainfall related so come January 2019, we trust that the Patrols will be standing by their buckets once again. In fact, with a little more planning next year, it will hopefully be possible to organise patrols at more sites across the parish. Watch this space.

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