

The Big Garden Birdwatch



The Big Garden Birdwatch is organised every January by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to provide a count of individual birds and species. People are asked to spend an hour watching the birds in their garden (mostly from the safety of a warm kitchen or bedroom) during the last weekend in January and to report to the RPSB the maximum number of each species that they see at any one time during that hour.

Summary results are published and given as overall (national) results and by county. The average number of individual birds recorded per garden for each species and the percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded are used to track population changes.

In 2011 over 600,000 people took part nationally and counted 10.25 million birds in their gardens. Several people in our parish participate in the Big Garden Birdwatch and 10 sent me their records for the year. It is interesting to compare these data with the records for East Sussex as a whole.

These 10 observers recorded 427 birds of 33 species. That is an average of 43 birds and 14 species per garden. The range was 18–61 birds and 10–16 species per garden. That's pretty similar to the 2010 results, but with a significant increase in the range of species recorded (helped by the contribution of someone with a large lake in their garden that attracted a range of waterfowl and a little egret) and well above the national average number of birds per garden (c.17). Nothing very rare was recorded but 15 of the Plumpton species were not in the top 20 for East Sussex. Two species in the top 20 for East Sussex and not recorded here were feral pigeon and herring gull.

Blackbird, blue tit, chaffinch and robin were recorded by all observers, and nearly all observers recorded great tit, house-sparrow and starling. There are always disappointments with such surveys but this time two people saw a great spotted woodpecker. And it was good to see that species such as long-tailed tit and coal tit did quite well, despite a series of two cold winters. On the other hand, very few winter thrushes (redwing and fieldfare) were counted.

Our small sample showed an overall similarity with the county figures but some interesting differences. Species are ranked according to the average number of birds counted per garden. In 2011 in East Sussex blue tit was no. 1, with 3.99 per garden; magpie was no. 10, with 1.1 per garden. In Plumpton, house sparrow came top and blue tit second; chaffinch, jackdaw and long-tailed tit ranked higher than in the whole county, while dunnock, magpie, robin, song thrush and woodpigeon lower.

It will be some time before we have enough long-term data to look at trends in Plumpton, but I am happy to continue to receive copies of records from contributors to the Big Garden Birdwatch, so that in time we can see which species are doing well (or even too well) and which could perhaps do with a bit of help.

This year The Big Garden Birdwatch is on 28/29 January. For more information and how to submit your results to RSPB see <http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/>.

Tony Hutson
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