

Mortality in garden birds

Every year, we get many reports of dead or dying garden birds. The mortality rates of garden birds, especially of birds in their first year, are quite high. However, most people rarely see ill or dead birds with the exception of those killed by cars, domestic cats or through flying into glass windows.

Wild birds are susceptible to a wide range of infectious and non-infectious diseases. In particular, garden birds have the potential to carry other infectious diseases that can affect humans and pets, for example *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Trichomoniasis* and *E.coli* bacteria. The likelihood of a disease outbreak in garden birds is particularly increased during the winter months, between December and April, when large numbers of birds congregate at feeding areas for prolonged periods of time.

Affected birds appear fluffed-up, weak and lethargic. Birds often stay close to feeders or water baths and to continue to try to feed until just before death, and are often reported as being visibly ill for several days before they die. Some birds die more rapidly and while still in moderately good body condition.

Outbreaks of these diseases are a constant threat and can quickly spread from infected birds to healthy birds sharing the same feeding areas. *Salmonella* in particular is present at a low level in wild bird populations, and poor hygiene at feeding stations, particularly where droppings are allowed to accumulate, can fuel a local outbreak. Greenfinches and House Sparrows are most susceptible to this infection, which is transmitted by droppings from an infected bird.

The risk to human health from wild birds in Ireland is remote and can be minimised by avoiding direct contact with sick or dead birds or their droppings. It is recommended that sensible hygiene precautions are adopted when feeding garden birds:

- Feeders and bird tables should be thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis as most diseases are transmitted via infected droppings. If an infection occurs, disinfect regularly.
- Bird tables, where birds actually stand on and amongst the food, have a greater risk of contamination from droppings, though with good hygiene practice, bird tables should present few problems.
- When refilling your feeders always give the feeder a good shake before refilling them, this will dislodge any compacted or clumps of wet seed.
- Use a stiff brush to remove stubborn accumulations of seed on wooden feeding stations a round headed brush is advisable for the cleaning of enclosed or round feeder types.
- Brushes and cleaning equipment for bird feeders, tables and baths should not be used for other purposes and should not be brought into the house, but be kept and used outside.
- Always rinse and dry all washed feeder items before repositioning them or refilling them. A wet feeder only creates problems for you. If food becomes damp it is likely to be more susceptible to moulds and contamination by other harmful agents.
- Observe strict personal hygiene when handling bird feeders and tables, particularly if infection has occurred. It is recommended that you wear gloves when cleaning and wash your hands thoroughly afterwards. Feeders should not be cleaned indoors or near food preparation areas.
- Regularly clean up areas underneath feeders, particularly when black sunflower seeds are being fed as the husks can pile up. Clean up any uneaten or mouldy food and dispose of it.
- Food left out on the ground will also attract rats and mice.
- If possible, have several different feeding sites within the garden and keep them spread out to avoid having large numbers of birds in one location at the same time. Try to move the

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feeding station(s) around the garden throughout the year, as this will enable the grass under the site(s) to recover.

- Put out only as much seed as you estimate the daily intake of the birds will be, this will help with the control of vermin that may visit the area at night. If there is no food available they will move on.
- Suitable disinfectants that can be used include a weak solution of domestic bleach (5% sodium hypochlorite) and other specially designed commercial products. Always rinse thoroughly and air dry feeders before re-use.
- If water is provided in birdbaths or other drinking devices, change it regularly. Water containers should be rinsed out daily during the warmer months and fresh water added. De-ice during cold weather, and don't be tempted to use anti-freeze, salt or glycerine as it can be harmful to the birds.
- If you find a dead bird in the garden, do not handle it directly or bring it inside the house. Avoid direct contact with the bird by wearing gloves or by handling the bird through a plastic bag. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- If you find a dead bird with a ring on it (in a garden or elsewhere), please note the number carefully. Report the ring details to BirdWatch Ireland on 01 2819878.