



GARDEN BIRDS

Bullfinch

This finch species has been gradually increasing in winter gardens.

Photo: Ronnie Martin



Oran O'Sullivan reports on the results of last winter's....

Garden Bird Survey

The winters may well be milder and wetter, but interest in the long-running Garden Bird Survey continues to grow with over 630 participants in the latest survey, making it Ireland's most popular bird survey in 2007/08.

That gardens are important havens for biodiversity is evident in the range of bird species recorded in this, the 14th season of the survey. In total, 81 species were recorded, with 34 species or more recorded during the season in over 10% of gardens surveyed.

A high total of 29 gardens recorded between 30 and 37 species. The top count of 37 species was shared by bird gardeners Simon Clark of Killynally, County Monaghan, and Simon Collins of Bree, County Wexford.

The top nine gardens were large and rural in aspect. However, suburban gardens fared well for key garden bird species (best for Robin, Blackbird,

Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Magpie and Starling, and only dropping some of the larger, more farm-based species (such as Rook, Hooded Crow and Bullfinch).

As in recent years, over half the gardens were suburban. Only 5% gardens were classified as urban.

The numbers of garden birds visiting your gardens peaked between mid-January and early February, a time when natural food supplies are nearly exhausted and the feeders provide the boost needed to get garden bird populations over the late winter, and fit and ready for the challenge of spring.



John Fox

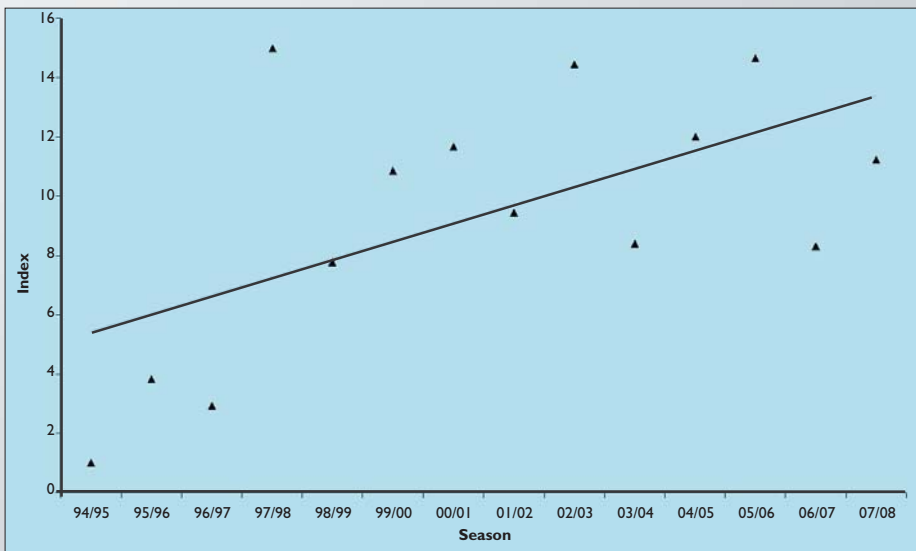


Figure 1. Change in Bullfinch numbers occurring between 1994/95 and 2007/08.

The Top 30

The Robin continues to occupy the top position in the top 30 most frequently occurring species in our gardens. It was recorded in 99.5% of gardens.

The Blackbird and Blue Tit swapped positions, with the former moving into second place (see Table, page 14). The Chaffinch, at fourth place, has moved back into the top five, while Magpie has retained its position at fifth, and Great Tit has slipped back to sixth.

Wren has slipped out of the top ten, to eleventh, with Goldfinch moving to ninth position, the highest ever for this species, which now occurs in over 82% of gardens and is as widespread as House Sparrow.

Species ranked between 11 and 20 have remained pretty consistent, although Pied Wagtail moved back up to its regular 20th slot.

Blackcap dropped back three places to 22, having reached its highest position the previous winter. Perhaps Blackcaps are more noticeable in harsh weather, when they bravely defend a territory

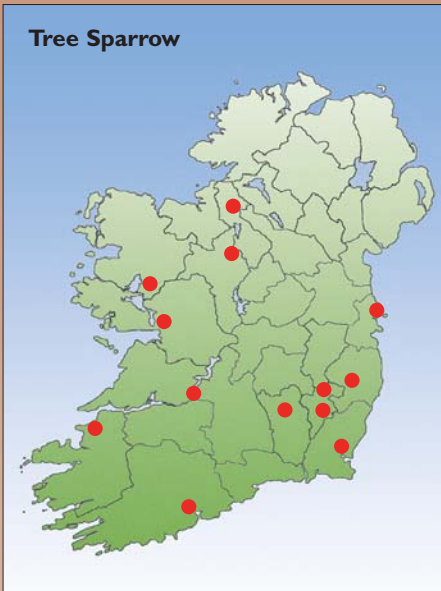


Figure 2. Distribution of Tree Sparrow (a species of conservation concern) records in the survey's gardens in winter 2007/08.

around peanut feeders. They can be more subtle around gardens, feeding on ivy berries and on the seeds of Cordyline trees. Listen out for their sharp tack call, often emitted from deep cover. Come late winter, they sometimes break into song, before departing Ireland for their summer quarters in central and northern Europe.

Upwardly mobile

The predicted move upwards of Bullfinch came to pass, up from 26 to 23, and it is now recorded in 39% of gardens, a significant increase (see Figure 1). Over 84% of surveyors have berry-producing plants in their gardens, while 75% provide seeds and nearly 60% provide fruit – all too good to be missed by Bullfinches!

Winter thrushes, i.e. Redwing and Fieldfare, dropped out of the top 30, to 31 and 32. Mild weather clearly reduces their need to visit the sanctuary of suburban gardens.

Further down the list, and currently ranked number 40, the Jay has become more widespread and now occurs in 4% of gardens.

Two species of conservation concern have small wintering populations in Irish gardens: Yellowhammer is ranked 41, and occurred in 3.7% of gardens, while the Tree Sparrow was recorded in just 2% of gardens (see Figure 2).

Goldfinch bonanza

Goldfinches suffered a setback in the 1970s and 1980s, when agricultural intensification led to a reduction in available weed seeds. However, their adaptation to feeding in gardens, where they are particularly attracted to any Sunflower or Nyjer seeds provided, has led to a steady improvement in their Garden Bird Survey rankings. They peaked at number nine in the last winter, when they were recorded in 82% of gardens surveyed.

You can encourage Goldfinches to visit your garden by growing your own Sunflowers in summer and hanging out the dried seed-heads in a tree for winter use, an ideal project for young gardeners. The seed heads of Teasels are similarly very attractive to Goldfinches (and gardeners).



Photo: Pádraig Kavanagh

Goldfinch

Recorded in 82.7% of gardens last winter, and now ranked 9th in the Top 30 chart, the Goldfinch's ever-increasing numbers continue to surprise and delight.



Siskin

Recorded in 60.3% of gardens last winter, and now ranked 19th in the Top 30 chart, the Siskin is also on the increase, though its numbers can vary dramatically.

Photo: David Dillon



GARDEN BIRDS

Some of your comments

"Hooded Crows took up a very regular perch in a big ash tree nearby. I think this may have affected the Song Thrush, who was not heard as often as in previous years.... A female Blackcap 'took over' the feeding table and drove all other birds off.... I was delighted to see a Siskin again after several years' absence.... No Waxwings this year, but two Kestrels made up for this." – *Frances O'Brien, Ballincollig, Co Cork*

"Delighted to see Blackcap, but it chased most other visitors away.... We always had Collared Doves, but only saw two this year.... Hadn't seen a Jay for years; it was lovely to see one this year." – *Breada O'Meara, Clonmel, Co Tipperary*

"It was alarming to note that the number of Greenfinches had been decimated. Last year I had 20-30, this year 4-6 only." – *Michael Sweeney, Drumsbanbo, Co Leitrim*

"Most of the birds on the survey form are found in our area, excepting Collared Dove and Blackcap.... This year, we had a party of Redpolls in the large spruce tree. Not too many Greenfinches this year, though." – *B.*

"On 6th of January, in windy conditions, I found a fledgling from a Great Tit's nest lying on the ground in the cold. I suspect it was blown out of its nest with the strong winds. Brought it into the house and beside the fire and it came to life. I returned it to where I had found it and ten minutes later it was gone. Very early for nesting!" – *John P McKenna, Howth, Co Dublin*

"Our garden covers an area of 0.8 acres, part of which remains fallow and another part of which we have planted with a variety of native trees and shrubs to encourage wildlife.... We have a busy bird table, which we supply with mixed seeds and peanuts, and a small ornamental pond.... We occasionally see geese migrating overhead in V formation." – *Joe and Lisa Fenwick, Corrandulla, Co Galway*

"The survey has been a regular part of nature study in the school since 1995. Each year, we find out the top 10 birds visiting pupils' gardens. This year, pupils from 5th and 6th classes took part again and their parents also became involved. We made a bird table and a bird hide for the school; these are very effective and led to great investigation and recording.... A lot of Rooks, Jackdaws and Magpies visit." – *Willie McSweeney, Scoil Iósaef Naofa, Cobh, Co Cork*



Blue Tit

Pádraig Kavanagh

Survey goes online

From this winter on, you will be able to enter your records directly onto our new online system. To register, please visit: <http://www.birdwatchireland.ie/?tabid=91>.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all who participated in the survey last

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Ireland's Top 30 Garden Birds in winter 2007/08

The top 30 most frequently occurring species in our gardens in winter 2007/08. (Note that this should not to be confused with most abundant.)

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2007/08	Difference in rank between 06/07 & 07/08	Rank 2006/07	Rank 2005/06	Rank 2004/05
Robin	99.5	1	-	1	1	1
Blackbird	98.7	2	↑	3	2	3
Blue Tit	98.1	3	↓	2	3	2
Chaffinch	94.8	4	↑	6	4	5
Magpie	92.9	5	-	5	7	6
Great Tit	92.7	6	↓	4	5	4
Greenfinch	90.0	7	-	7	6	7
Coal Tit	88.1	8	-	8	8	8
Goldfinch	82.7	9	↑	11	10	13
House Sparrow	82.7	10	-	10	11	10
Wren	81.9	11	↓	9	9	9
Starling	81.7	12	-	12	14	12
Dunnock	77.5	13	-	13	12	11
Song Thrush	76.2	14	-	14	13	14
Jackdaw	67.9	15	-	15	16	15
Collared Dove	64.6	16	↑	17	17	18
Rook	62.2	17	↑	18	19	16
Woodpigeon	62.1	18	↓	16	18	17
Siskin	60.3	19	↑	22	15	25
Pied Wagtail	46.2	20	↑	23	21	20
Hooded Crow	45.9	21	↓	20	23	22
Blackcap	41.9	22	↓	19	20	23
Bullfinch	38.7	23	↑	27	24	24
Long-tailed Tit	38.7	24	↓	21	22	21
Mistle Thrush	35.2	25	-	25	26	27
Goldcrest	29.2	26	↓	24	25	19
Sparrowhawk	29.2	27	↓	26	27	26
Lesser Redpoll	28.4	28	-	28	28	28
Feral pigeon	24.4	29	-	29	29	30
Grey Wagtail	20.5	30	↑	-	-	-

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2007/08.