



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

Garden Bird Survey



Goldcrest
Michael Finn

Winter 2006/07 will be remembered as mild, warmer and wetter than usual. The weather stations at Rosslare and Valentia recorded the warmest Irish winter for 18 years; it was also the warmest winter on record over eastern Europe. So how did all this affect our garden birds? Did the moderate temperatures in continental Europe reduce hard weather movements to Ireland of typical winter migrants such as Fieldfare and Redwing? Read on.

Despite the mild weather, there was no lack of enthusiasm for feeding garden birds amongst our surveyors. The total of 607 respondents for the winter was comfortably above the average of 579.

The top 15 gardens recorded from 31 to 37 species; all of these gardens were rural in type. The next three top gardens were in Dublin suburbia and recorded a very respectable 30 species each.

Over half of all gardens participating in the survey were suburban. Only 5% of gardens were classified as urban; the remainder were rural.

Top of the tree

Ireland's favourite garden bird, the Robin, is firmly established as our top garden bird – it retained its No 1 position and has been the most widespread

garden species for three years in a row. The most consistent performer in the top 10 is the Coal Tit, unchanged at No 8 for five years now and found in 84% of gardens this year.

Winter warblers

Irish gardens are increasingly important for one species of warbler, the Blackcap; Chiffchaffs are also recorded, though in much smaller numbers and in only 2% of gardens. Lesser Whitethroat, another warbler recorded in winter gardens, is rarer still, and is a very rare breeder in Ireland.

The Blackcap has moved up one position to No 19, its highest position in the history of the Garden Bird Survey.

David Dillon



Blackcap

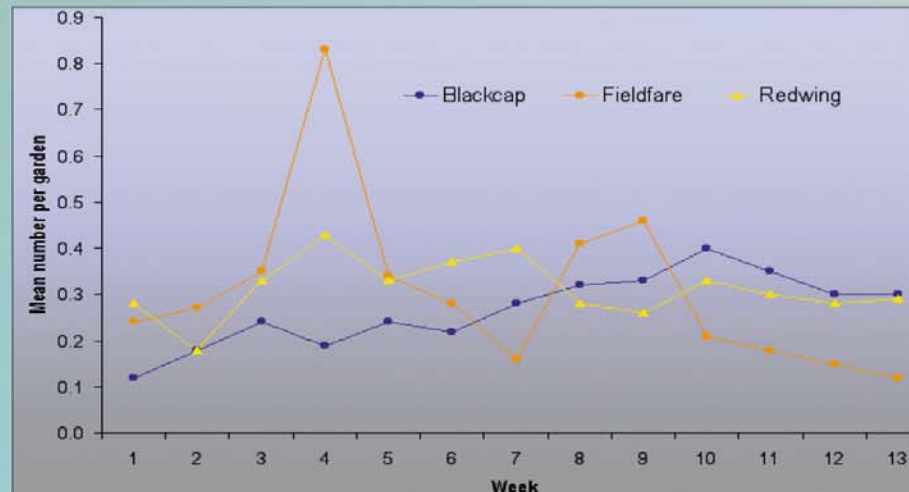


Figure 2. Trends in Blackcap, Fieldfare and Redwing since 1994/95.

The Blackcaps wintering in our gardens originate from a breeding population in central Europe that formerly wintered in Iberia. On the back of warmer winter temperatures, coupled with bird-friendly gardens and a shorter migration commute to Ireland, these Blackcaps now winter here, as well as in Britain, and return to their central European breeding grounds earlier than the southern wintering population. Not surprisingly, they claim the best breeding territories, stealing a march on their southern counterparts. This probably explains their increasing success and rise in numbers in winter gardens.

Wintering Blackcaps will take a variety of ornamental berries, particularly Ivy berries, a great late winter stand-by, and also congregate on showy Cordyline trees, feeding on their white berries. They are known to be highly territorial, chasing tits from peanut and fat feeders.



Male Bullfinch
Michael Finn

highly mobile, particularly in late winter, and ringing studies have confirmed that they journey around Britain and Ireland.

Redpoll has a similar winter profile to Siskin, though it is not as closely linked to coniferous plantations, and occurs in Alder, Birch and Willow scrub. Its position in the garden hierarchy is 28th and it occurs in 23% of gardens, representing an increase of 20% over the last 13 years.

The 'forgotten' finch is probably the Bullfinch, glaringly bright in its breeding plumage but generally quiet around the garden where its subtle but characteristic 'piuu' call draws attention. It is not generally associated with provisioned food, and indeed it has a bit of a reputation as a destroyer of fruit buds in orchards. Bullfinches utilise Birch seed and Rowanberries in autumn and Hawthorn berries and buds in late winter, all with great gusto and with food remains often sticking to their pug faces! With the advent of specialist provisioned foods such as sunflower hearts (i.e. dehusked sunflower seeds), will the Bullfinch respond in numbers? They currently lie in 27th position: watch this space!

Finches at the feeder

The Chaffinch has traditionally occupied the top spot as the most widespread of finches. They are colourful birds that depend on seeds to see them through the winter. This year, Chaffinch was the sixth most widespread garden bird species, moving out of the top five for the first time in five years, but was still one above Greenfinch, a pretty consistent performer at sixth or seventh in most years. The Chaffinch's slip in position may have been a reflection of the milder conditions across Europe, which may have lessened the need for northern European birds (often females only) to migrate down the fringes of the North Sea and English Channel into Ireland for the winter.

Greenfinches were recently in the headlines for falling foul of a bacterial infection called avian trichomoniasis. This parasite is transmitted through infected food and water and is a recurring problem for Greenfinches and Chaffinches. The disease causes birds' throats to swell and prevents them from eating. Stricken birds become lethargic and will not easily fly off when approached. They fluff up their feathers and may regurgitate their food. However, the winter Greenfinch population is stable and they occupy 89% of gardens surveyed.

After breaking into the top 10 last year, Goldfinch dropped back this year to 11th position, though occurring in a huge 78% of gardens. For the coming winter, we have added a few extra questions to the survey questionnaire, such as: 'Do you provide Nyjer seed?' This seed is a veritable magnet for Goldfinches and also for the next two most commonly recorded finches, Siskin and Redpoll.

The Siskin is a bouncy character, a reasonably recent addition to the garden bird scene, characteristically clinging upside down to peanut feeders while threatening all comers with a fanning of its wings. Its garden fortunes ebb and flow; it fell from 15th position last year to 22nd this year.

Siskin numbers in our winter gardens are affected by the weather on the continent and on the availability of its natural forest food, conifer seeds, as well as the seeds of Alder and Birch. Siskins are

Ireland's Top 30 Garden Birds in winter 2006/07

The top 30 most frequently occurring species in our gardens in winter 2006/07.
(Note that this should not be confused with most abundant.)

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2006/07	Difference in rank between 05/06 & 06/07	Rank 2005/06	Rank 2004/05	Rank 2003/04
Robin	99.0	1	-	1	1	2
Blue Tit	98.4	2	↑ 1	3	2	3
Blackbird	97.9	3	↓ 1	2	3	1
Great Tit	92.8	4	↑ 1	5	4	5
Magpie	92.6	5	↑ 2	7	6	6
Chaffinch	90.9	6	↓ 2	4	5	4
Greenfinch	89.1	7	↓ 1	6	7	7
Coal Tit	84.4	8	-	8	8	8
Wren	84.2	9	-	9	9	10
House Sparrow	82.2	10	↑ 1	11	10	11
Goldfinch	77.8	11	↓ 1	10	13	13
Starling	77.6	12	↑ 2	14	12	14
Dunnock	77.4	13	↓ 1	12	11	12
Song Thrush	69.0	14	↓ 1	13	14	9
Jackdaw	67.6	15	↑ 1	16	15	15
Woodpigeon	61.9	16	↑ 2	18	17	16
Collared Dove	61.5	17	-	17	18	18
Rook	60.6	18	↑ 1	19	16	17
Blackcap	45.5	19	↑ 1	20	23	20
Hooded Crow	42.7	20	↑ 3	23	22	22
Long-tailed Tit	41.2	21	↑ 1	22	21	23
Siskin	40.5	22	↓ 7	15	25	19
Pied Wagtail	40.4	23	↓ 2	21	20	21
Goldcrest	39.4	24	↑ 1	25	19	25
Mistle Thrush	35.3	25	↑ 1	26	27	24
Sparrowhawk	34.9	26	↑ 1	27	26	26
Bullfinch	25.7	27	↓ 3	24	24	27
Lesser Redpoll	22.9	28	-	28	28	28
Feral Pigeon	21.4	29	-	29	30	31
Redwing	15.5	30	↑ 1	31	29	30

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2006/07.



GARDEN BIRDS



Jay carrying acorn

Terry Flanagan

Bullies and thieves

Some of our surveyors are concerned that smaller birds are affected by the presence of predators such as Sparrowhawks and crows, with the Magpie being public enemy number one! Magpies are present in 93% of gardens, the fifth most widespread species, but in terms of abundance they are ranked twelfth, well behind the Rook and Jackdaw, in sixth and eighth place respectively. The Magpie's position has been fairly consistent over the last five years; there has been no dramatic change.

The Jay is a species of crow that is shy and retiring on its garden visits. Jays have recently taken to peanut feeders and, while occurring in only 2% of Irish gardens, they are typical garden visitors in other European countries; perhaps this is one to watch in the future.

Winter thrushes

Redwings and Fieldfares are welcome additions to the winter scene. They breed in Scandinavia and migrate south in winter, typically foraging over open farmland where traditional hedgerows such as Hawthorn and Holly provide a source of berries. In late winter they often move south and west to avoid hard frosty weather and will visit urban and suburban gardens and parks to avail of remaining berry stocks of Rowan and Cotoneaster. Rowanberries seem to last longer in built-up areas, there being less demand for these from resident species. This can affect the

distribution of a rarer winter visitor, the exotically coloured Waxwing, often seen in urban areas.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks to Aidan Kelly, Susan Brady and Elsa Chapaud who inputted the Garden Bird Survey data and to Olivia Crowe for assisting with statistical analysis.

Garden bird hygiene

Garden bird surveyors are encouraged to clean bird tables and feeders regularly using a biological disinfectant spray and a dedicated scraper and brush.



Jim Wilson

Some of your comments

Nuala Lynch, Ennis, Co Clare, enlisted the help of her pupils for the survey and, with the aid of binoculars, helped partially-sighted Fiachra Heffernan to discover garden birds for the first time. "Witnessing his joy at seeing Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies and Starlings for the first time is something that I will always remember," she said. "I really enjoyed birdwatching," said Fiachra. "After feeding the birds, we'd get out our binoculars, watch the birds and identify them."

"I was surprised by a sick Coal Tit, barely able to fly and unable to compete at the feeders. Instead of hiding, it fluttered over to my hand and stayed to feed on tiny bits of peanut. Happily, it recovered," said Hugh Shepherd, Wolfhill, Co Laois.

No matter how well you know your garden, there may always be a surprise lurking in the bushes. "The very last day was the highlight for me," said Andrea Begg, Co Kildare. "A Linnet was seen feeding on the peanuts and, only two days later, two Redwings appeared in the Hawthorn tree! It was lovely to see the return of Siskins in good numbers and a pair of Blackcaps."

"Yet again, I really enjoyed doing the survey," said Lynda McCann, Athy, Co Kildare. "Saw a Goldcrest for the first time – recognised him from the postage stamp! – and discovered that Siskins feed differently on the peanut feeders to the rest of the birds; they feed with their heads pointing towards the ground."

"Every year is different but so interesting," admits Hazel Crawford, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16. "One of the Blue Tits fell in love with itself in a mirror feature in the garden so I had to cover it with a black sack!"

Nicki Griffin, Caher, Co Clare, had an unusual surprise waiting for her one morning – a Kestrel on her kitchen window sill! "I was startled to look up from my breakfast and see it there... it appeared stunned and I suppose it must have flown into the window. It remained for about half an hour and then flew off. I also had a partially albino male Chaffinch that's been visiting for the last 2 or 3 years," she added.

"I was delighted not to have mown the lawn early as it was a joy to see so many Goldfinches feeding on the grass that had seeded. The Blackcaps are also frequent visitors... by the way, they love pears!" discovered Lynne McKeown from Shanagarry, Co Cork.

"There has been a sharp drop in both numbers and variety of birds here in the past two years. Thrushes have disappeared, Greenfinches, once the most numerous, have nearly gone. Coal Tits are absent, as are Dunnocks and Blackcaps. Robins, however, are as feisty as ever," said John Glendinning from Kinsale, Co Cork.

It is important to beware of how and where you provide food for birds in your garden as Peter Wolstenholme from Bandon, Co Cork discovered. "We lost five House Sparrows to botulism before realising they were being infected from a gutter below a roof where we threw out scraps!"

"I had one visit from my Bullfinch and this time he brought a lady friend! I felt privileged she felt safe enough to call," said Geraldine Hurley, Rathfarnham, Dublin 14.

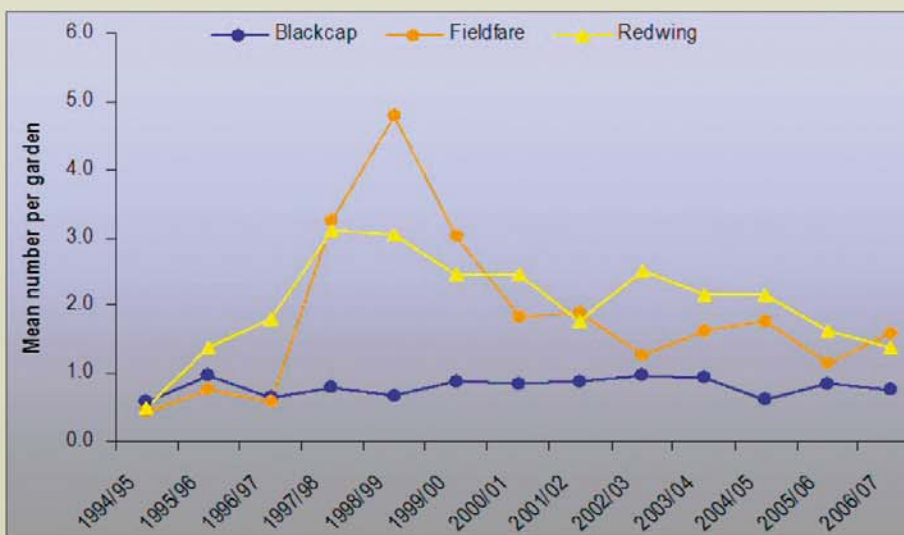


Figure 2. Trends in Blackcap, Fieldfare and Redwing in the years since 1994/95.