



Goldfinch feeding on thistle seeds.  
Photo: Michael Finn

# Garden Bird Survey



By the time the Garden Bird Survey rolls around again in December, no doubt you will be well tuned in to the comings and goings of the birds you see in your garden. In advance of this season's survey, **Oran O'Sullivan** takes a look back at what he experienced in last winter's survey in his own garden in rural Wicklow.

The 2013/14 winter period, December to February, will go down in memory as wet, windy and at times warm. Not the best set of conditions to ensure a decent list of species visiting the garden, but success was guaranteed for us on week one, and thankfully repeated itself on a weekly basis for the duration of the 13-week survey: our first garden record of **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. This had been anticipated for some time and was celebrated as the sharp combination of black, white and carmine red appeared early one Sunday morning, a vision on the lower reaches of a willow progressing up the trunk the few metres to the sole peanut feeder: Unmistakable but surprisingly small on the feeder, other birds gave the new recruit to the garden plenty of space, respecting the hammer-action drill attached to this intrepid, pied colonist.

Great Spotted Woodpeckers breed within a mile or two of this garden (we are lucky to be located near the Wicklow headquarters of the species) but the visitor showed a remarkably nervous disposition once out of its classic oak forest habitat: any movement from inside the patio window was enough to send the bird off into the nearest canopy, sometimes emitting the distinctive, short 'pik' alarm or contact call.

A scroll down through last December's returns from our garden didn't reveal too many more star performers, but we usually have a few species at the start of the season that don't remain with us for the 13 weeks: thus a couple of **Goldcrests** were probably

winter migrants from continental Europe, still on the move. A **Yellowhammer** on the boundary hedgerow was not unexpected, as the other side of the hedge is in barley stubble. Again, it was not attracted to feed with us. At dusk, sometimes a small group of them flew over; their bubbling call tracing the way to a nearby roost.

With temperatures maxing at 15°C in mid-December, finch and tit numbers were the yardstick for us of how we were doing: **Chaffinches** were on a weekly average of 12 birds, our most abundant, fitting the national trend, while **Coal Tits** were consistent at 6 to 9 birds each week, our commonest tit. **Goldfinches** and **Greenfinches** were the other regulars, the former peaking at ten birds in late December, modest enough numbers compared to some of the flocks recorded by our surveyors. A Nyjer seed feeder blanketed with this most exotic of finches was further enlivened by their wing-flicking antics and chatter – utterly charming!

Cold and stormy weather with easterly gales brought havoc to many lowlying coastal areas in mid-February. We had a doubling in **Chaffinch** numbers, but no influx of any of the **thrush** species.

The out-turn of 32 species for the 13 weeks in our large rural garden was a few short of what we would have liked; no **Starlings** came, and **Collared Doves** breed nearby but copped that we don't scatter seed on the ground and so kept away. **Siskin** scraped in at the end; they are generally a

post-survey, March bird with us. **Redpoll** didn't make it at all this year.

Raptors were in evidence, with a male **Sparrowhawk** being a daily regular. Without warning, it would loop-the-loop around the feeder and usually depart just as quickly. Though its talons were usually hanging bare, I did fear for Woody!

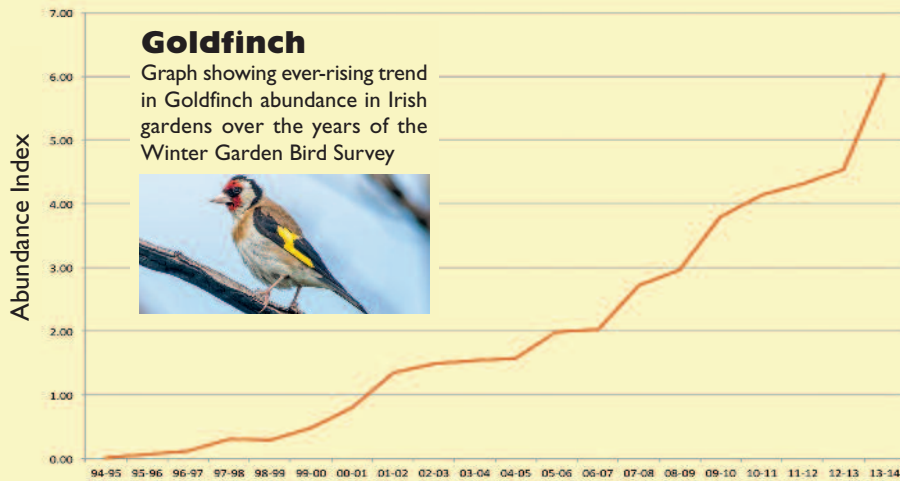
## Goldfinch

Noted in days gone by as stalwart and showy singers, Goldfinches attracted the unwelcome attentions of finch trappers, and this practice may have kept their numbers down. They were considered unusual as a garden species as recently as the 1980s. This is not altogether unexpected: their long, thin bill (by finch standards) is adapted to extracting the seeds of common weeds, typically on 'waste' ground – thistles,

**Sparrowhawk: seen in 38% of gardens, in 24<sup>th</sup> place overall, up from 29<sup>th</sup> last year.**

MICHAEL FINN





## Ireland's Top 43 Garden Birds in Winter 2013/14

The top 43 most widespread species recorded in the Garden Bird Survey in winter 2013/14

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2013/14	Difference in rank between 12/13 & 13/14	Rank 2012/13	Rank 2011/12	Rank 2010/11
Robin	99.9	1	no change	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.0	2	no change	2	2	2
Blue Tit	99.0	3	no change	3	3	3
Chaffinch	96.0	4	↑ up 1	5	4	4
Great Tit	93.0	5	↓ down 1	4	5	5
Magpie	92.0	6	↑ up 1	7	6	6
Coal Tit	90.5	7	↓ down 1	6	7	10
Goldfinch	86.0	8	no change	8	8	9
House Sparrow	85.0	9	no change	9	9	11
Wren	82.0	10	↑ up 2	12	14	14
Dunnock	79.5	11	no change	11	12	13
Greenfinch	79.0	12	↓ down 2	10	10	12
Starling	75.0	13	no change	13	11	7
Woodpigeon	71.0	14	↑ up 1	15	13	18
Jackdaw	70.0	15	↑ up 1	16	15	15
Song Thrush	69.0	16	↓ down 2	14	18	8
Collared Dove	66.0	17	no change	17	16	19
Rock Dove	63.0	18	↑ up 1	19	17	16
Siskin	55.0	19	↓ down 1	18	23	24
Hooded Crow	50.5	20	no change	20	19	17
Pied Wagtail	47.0	21	↑ up 1	22	20	20
Long-tailed Tit	45.0	22	↑ up 1	23	26	25
Blackcap	43.5	23	↓ down 2	21	21	21
Sparrowhawk	38.0	24	↑ up 5	29	25	28
Lesser Redpoll	37.0	25	no change	25	24	26
Goldcrest	34.0	26	↑ up 1	27	29	31
Bullfinch	30.0	27	↓ down 3	24	22	27
Mistle Thrush	28.0	28	↓ down 2	26	27	23
Feral Pigeon	27.0	29	↓ down 1	28	28	30
Pheasant	15.0	30	no change	30	30	33
Redwing	13.0	31	no change	31	33	22
Grey Wagtail	12.0	32	↑ up 1	33	-	-
Treecreeper	10.5	33	↑ up 5	38	32	38
Linnet	10.0	34	↓ down 2	32	31	36
Fieldfare	8.5	35	↑ up 1	36	-	-
Herring Gull	7.0	36	-	-	-	-
Jay	6.0	37	↓ down 2	35	38	-
Kestrel	6.0	38	↓ down 1	37	34	41
Grey Heron	5.5	39	-	-	-	-
Yellowhammer	6.0	40	↓ down 1	39	39	-
Blk-hdd Gull	4.5	41	no change	41	-	-
Buzzard	4.5	42	no change	42	40	-
Tree Sparrow	4.0	43	↓ down 3	40	37	-

\* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2013/14

Dandelion, Groundsel and Ragwort don't really have a place in most trim and tidy garden regimes.

Goldfinches were increasingly recorded in gardens in the 1990s, attracted firstly by the seedheads of annuals and biennials such as Teasel, Lavender, Cosmos and Evening Primrose, and secondly by the increased range of food and feeders that matched their needs, which cemented their presence in the garden.

A short generation ago, garden bird feeding consisted of a selection of scraps and fat products, very basic seed mixes and peanuts threaded in their shells: those were the days of glass milk-bottles with creamy goodness lurking beneath foil caps: **Blue Tits** and their congeners were the first to recognise this potential on our doorsteps.

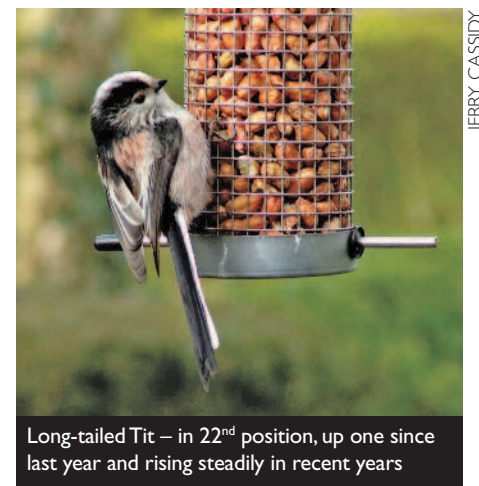
However, once the nuts were shelled and dispensed in an array of feeders, adapted for the purpose, the net was widened to attract birds such as **Siskins** and **Goldfinches**; they responded greedily, particularly when natural seed stocks in the forests and fields were exhausted.

The trend continued apace with the relatively recent arrival of shelled Sunflower hearts and that shiny black seed native to the Ethiopian highlands, Nyjer seed, with its nutritious, high oil content. This finest of seeds, when dispensed in feeders designed to exclude bigger-billed birds, attracts the petite end of the cardeline finch species: **Redpoll**, **Siskin** and **Goldfinch**, all vying for position around the Nyjer feeder, a dramatic display of colour and action.

The Goldfinch abundance graph charts the dramatic rise and rise in the fortunes of this adaptable species, to the high point of third in last winter's rankings.

### Special thanks

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Long-tailed Tit – in 22<sup>nd</sup> position, up one since last year and rising steadily in recent years