



Fieldfare

The highest numbers in years were seen and it moved up 16 places in the rankings.

Photo: Cian Merne

Garden Bird Survey

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

During the Garden Bird Survey 2009/10, surveyors witnessed big movements of birds during prolonged and record-breaking cold weather, the coldest for nearly 50 years.

The winter of 2009/10 was the coldest winter since 1962/3. The season began with relatively mild weather, but each of the winter months was colder than normal. Mean air temperatures for the season were around two degrees lower than the average for the 1961-90 period.

The season's lowest temperatures were measured in the periods December 24-25th and January 7-9th, when air temperatures fell below -10°C in places and several weather stations recorded their lowest winter values for more than 20 years. An air temperature of -16.3°C on January 7th at the

climatological station at Mount Juliet, Co Kilkenny, was the lowest such value measured in the country since January 1979.

There was a total of between 70 and 80 ground frosts during the season at inland weather stations, while Valentia Observatory's (Co Kerry) total of 62 ground frosts was almost three times its average winter total of 22.

direction of bird movements from the continent, all the east coast counties from Louth to Wexford figured strongly in the bird diversity listing, with 18 of the top 25 gardens from this region, recording between 33 and 42 species.

Some losers

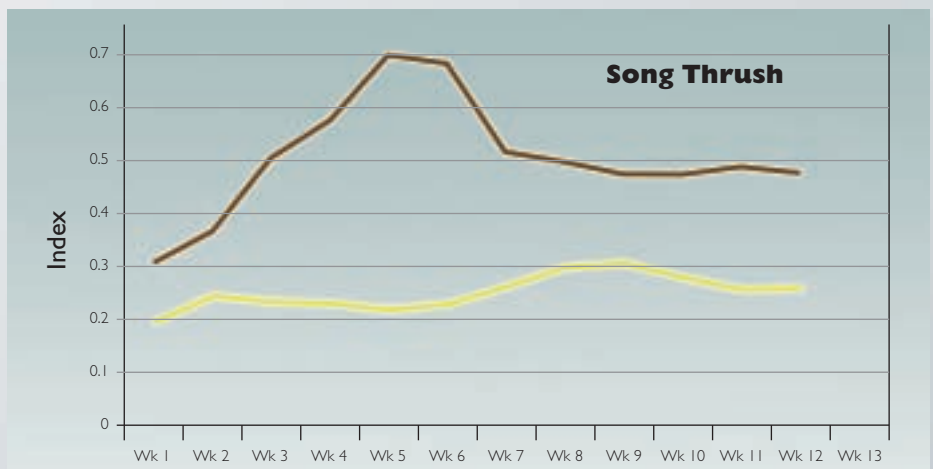
The remarkably harsh winter of 2009/10 followed on the heels of another cold one, 2008/09, and the net effect was a drop in numbers of some of our garden bird populations. This was most noticeable with the more specialised feeders, which typically rely on relatively soft ground conditions to forage

Best gardens

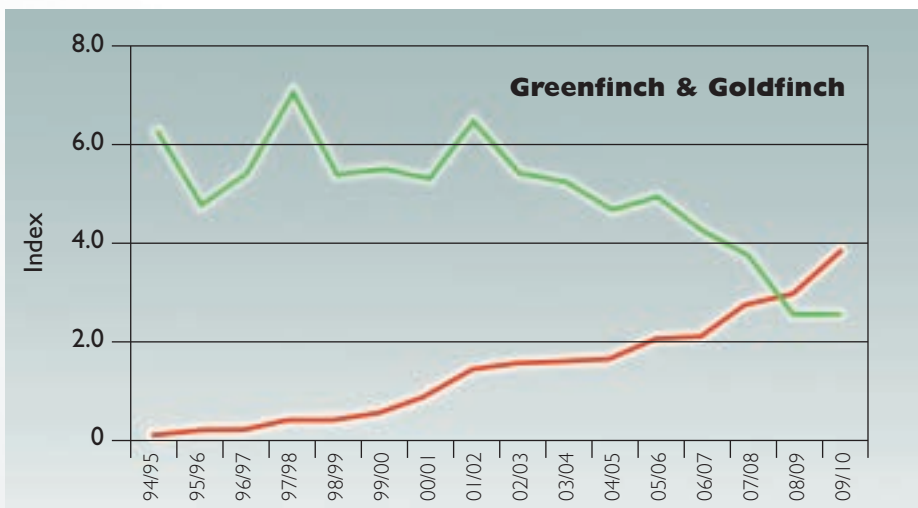
Large rural gardens continued to attract the most species, with a top total of 42 species from a rural Dublin garden. Not unsurprisingly, given the

Michael Finn

Goldcrest
Hit hard by the cold in January.



Song Thrush abundance over the 13 weeks of the survey in 2009/10 (brown) compared to 2006/07 (yellow). Note last winter's peak in week 5 (starting Dec 28th), corresponding to the onset of the coldest spell. Song Thrush rose six places in the rankings last winter as cold-weather migrants flowed in.



Greenfinch (green) and Goldfinch (red) abundance trends over last 16 years of GBS. Greenfinches have been declining; they were overtaken by Goldfinches in the winter of 2008/09.

for small insect prey and are not primary feeders at bird tables, etc.

In terms of ranking, Wren fell out of the top ten, down four places to 12. Other mainly insectivorous species were similarly challenged with Long-tailed Tit down eight places to 27 and Goldcrest, our smallest bird, dropping six places to 30.

Small birds in particular lose a high proportion of their body weight overnight and need to feed constantly during short winter days, just to survive. The colder the conditions, the more energy and food they require, just to maintain body weight and temperature.

January 2010: mass movement of birds

Members of the public responded in kind to the harshest conditions in decades, with record numbers of people phoning, calling and e-mailing the BirdWatch Ireland offices to enquire about 'strange' birds descending on their gardens and wondering how they could help the bird populations in these conditions.

Many people began putting out food for birds for the first time and taking part in the survey. The message is that providing food and planting for birds makes an important if not vital contribution to the winter survival of 'our' garden birds.

Of course, many of the strange or unusual visitors were in fact visitors from an even colder mainland Europe, particularly members of the thrush family, which often arriving depleted and exhausted as they moved ahead of the harshest conditions. Many of these migrants never made it to the sanctuary of well-stocked gardens, but those that did were literally handed a lifeline.

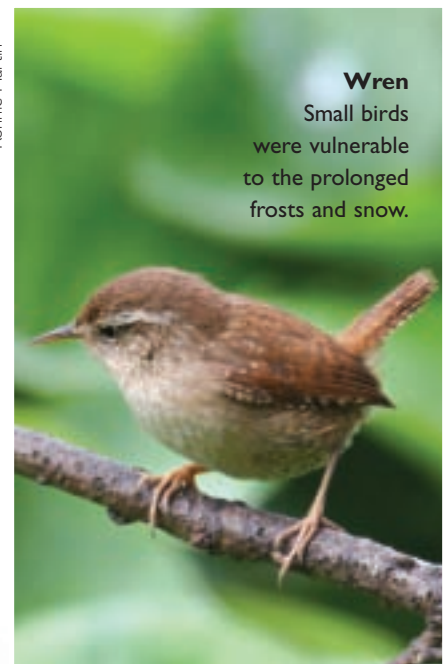
New birds in the Top 10

Two notable hard-weather movers were Song Thrush, in seventh position, up six places and recorded in nearly 90% of gardens, and Starling, a regular winter immigrant from Russia, in at eighth position, up from 12.

Top 20 and beyond

Not surprisingly, given events detailed above, the biggest increases recorded in our gardens were the so-called 'winter thrushes,' visitors from northern Europe, with Redwing at 15th in the survey, up from 30th and present in over 70% of gardens surveyed.

Ronnie Martin



Fieldfares, normally scarce in gardens, were recorded in nearly 50% of gardens, and were at 23, their first ever showing in the top 30.

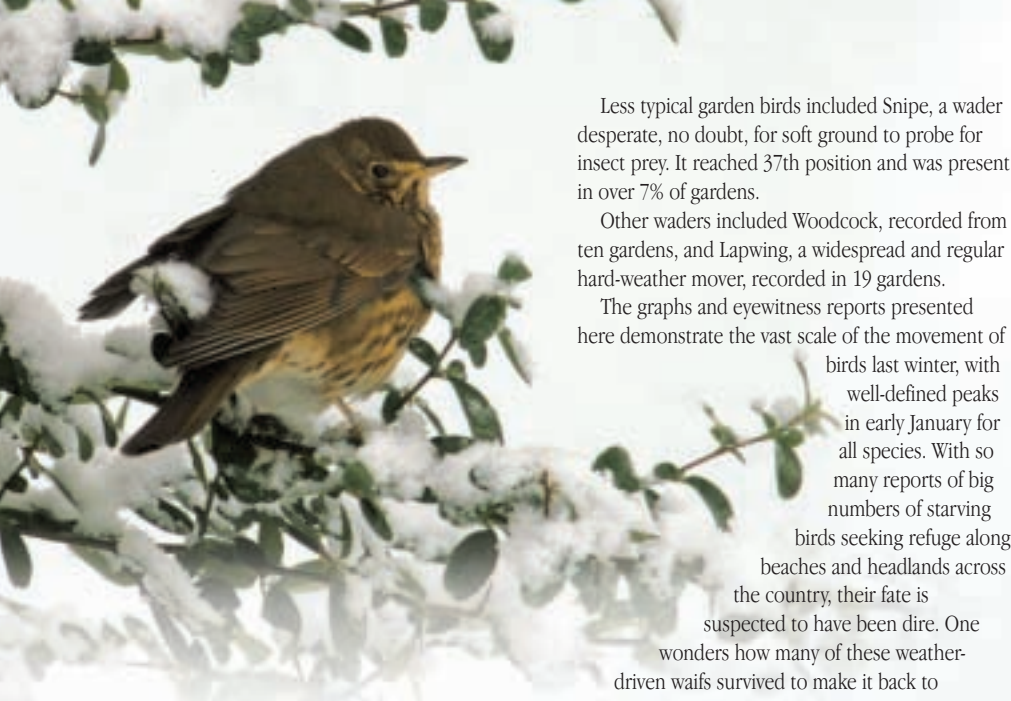
Ireland's Top 30 Garden Birds in winter 2009/10

The top 30 most frequently occurring or widespread species (not to be confused with abundance).

Note the remarkable increases in **Song Thrush**, **Redwing**, **Fieldfare**, **Mistle Thrush** and **Starling**, reflecting the inward migration during the cold snap, and the significant drops in **Coal Tit**, **Wren**, **Long-tailed Tit** and **Goldcrest**, small birds that suffer most during extreme cold weather.

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2009/10	Difference in rank between 08/09 & 09/10	Rank 2008/09	Rank 2007/08	Rank 2006/07
Robin	99.5	1	same	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.5	2	same	2	2	3
Blue Tit	97.9	3	same	3	3	2
Chaffinch	95.1	4	↑ up 1	5	4	6
Great Tit	92.7	5	↓ down 1	4	6	4
Magpie	91.6	6	↑ up 1	7	5	5
Song Thrush	89.9	7	↑ up 6	13	14	14
Starling	86.2	8	↑ up 4	12	12	12
Coal Tit	85.6	9	↓ down 3	6	8	8
Goldfinch	84.7	10	↓ down 1	9	9	11
House Sparrow	84.5	11	same	11	10	10
Wren	83.0	12	↓ down 4	8	11	9
Greenfinch	82.1	13	↓ down 3	10	7	7
Dunnock	81.4	14	same	14	13	13
Redwing	72.3	15	↑ up 15	30	31	-
Jackdaw	69.6	16	↓ down 1	15	15	15
Collared Dove	67.6	17	same	17	16	17
Woodpigeon	67.0	18	↓ down 2	16	18	16
Rook	66.1	19	↓ down 1	18	17	18
Pied Wagtail	63.7	20	↑ up 2	22	20	23
Blackcap	57.9	21	↓ down 1	20	22	19
Mistle Thrush	52.0	22	↑ up 3	25	25	25
Fieldfare	49.2	23	↑ up 16+	-	32	-
Hooded Crow	49.1	24	↓ down 1	23	21	20
Bullfinch	48.1	25	↑ up 1	26	23	27
Siskin	46.8	26	↓ down 5	21	19	22
Long-tailed Tit	42.2	27	↓ down 8	19	24	21
Lesser Redpoll	30.2	28	↓ down 1	27	28	28
Sparrowhawk	25.8	29	↓ down 1	28	27	26
Goldcrest	22.4	30	↓ down 6	24	26	24

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2009/10.



Song Thrush Unusually high numbers were seen in gardens. – (Oran O'Sullivan)

Less typical garden birds included Snipe, a wader desperate, no doubt, for soft ground to probe for insect prey. It reached 37th position and was present in over 7% of gardens.

Other waders included Woodcock, recorded from ten gardens, and Lapwing, a widespread and regular hard-weather mover, recorded in 19 gardens.

The graphs and eyewitness reports presented here demonstrate the vast scale of the movement of

birds last winter, with well-defined peaks in early January for all species. With so many reports of big numbers of starving

birds seeking refuge along beaches and headlands across the country, their fate is

suspected to have been dire. One wonders how many of these weather-

driven waifs survived to make it back to breeding grounds in northern Europe and closer to home?

Counts this coming winter together with returns from the breeding season on the Countryside Bird Survey will no doubt reveal more.

Top 5 most abundant

The five most abundant species as recorded by garden surveyors last winter were House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Starling, Blackbird and Goldfinch.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all our surveyors, nearly 1,000 in all, and a special thank you to Lorylie Farrar, Kieran Flood, Ruth Gaj-McKeever, Lloyd Johnson-Barker and Sean Windsor, who inputted the raw data, and to Olivia Crowe for data analysis. Thanks also to Cilla Farrell, Bernadette O'Brien, Drusilla Wynne, Heather Cuddy and Emily Jennings.

ADVERTISEMENT



CJ Wildlife peanut cake tube and feeder

Eye-witness reports from the big freeze

6th January 2010

"There's an almost continual stream of winter thrushes (90% Redwings, 10% Fieldfares) heading out west from Sherkin this morning, with birds passing overhead at about 100 per minute. There was a similar stream of birds throughout yesterday as well, though numbers weren't so dramatic, maybe 40 birds per minute. Are they going to veer south for Iberia?" – **Julian Wyllie, Sherkin Island, Co Cork**

"My tiny urban garden in Marino has just had 30 Redwings attack the pyracantha. Huge numbers of them in Dublin since New Year's Day – perhaps pushed over from the UK?" – **Gerry Power, Dublin**

10th January 2010

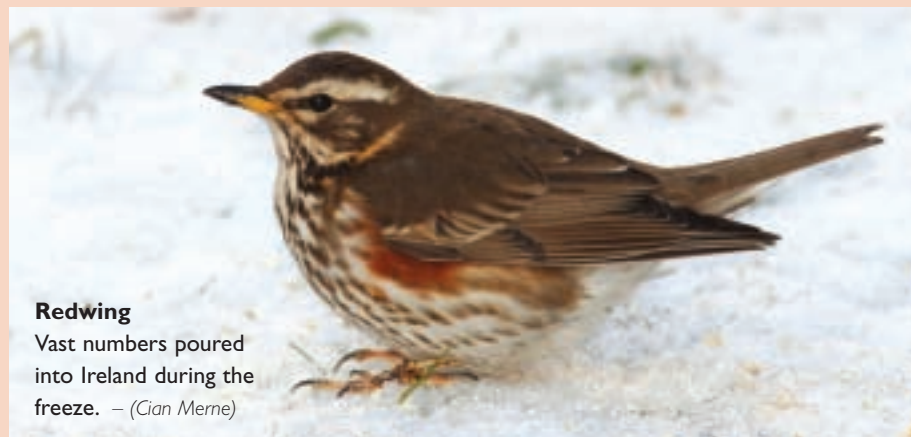
"Extreme cold and deep snow. A Mistle Thrush guarded the food on the ground throughout the entire day, chasing off all comers – Song Thrushes, Redwings, Fieldfare, Chaffinches, Robins, etc. A single Starling was the only bird to attack the Mistle Thrush, unsuccessfully. The Mistle Thrush was too busy warding off all comers to eat any food itself and must have used a vast amount of energy defending the territory...this behaviour cannot be a good survival tactic!" – **Deirdre D'Alton, Arklow, Co Wicklow**

10th January 2010

"There were many flocks of Snipe arriving too, and some were feeding on the road verges, oblivious to traffic. Virtually every field back from the headlands toward Ballinskelligs and Waterville had Redwing and Fieldfare, and often small flocks of Snipe. Totals for the day around Bolus Head alone were 15,000-20,000 Redwings, 5,000-6,000 Fieldfares, 1,000-2,000 Blackbirds and Song Thrushes, 1,200 Snipe, 22 Woodcocks, 200 Lapwings, two Jack Snipes and one Water Rail. Many birds were exhausted and just sat on the ditches. I went over to the Hog's Head area and near Derrynane, and a similar mix and quantity of species was present there too, all arriving from the south." – **Michael O'Clery, Brandon, Co Kerry**

11th January 2010

"Siskins arrive at my garden sometime between mid-December and late January and, when they do, I can have up to 20 present on a busy day. By the time they leave in early April about 150 will have been ringed. To date, I haven't seen or heard any this winter." – **Barry O'Mahony, Cork**



Redwing
Vast numbers poured into Ireland during the freeze. – (Cian Merne)

Say no to nets!

WITH THE weather turning colder, more and more of us will start putting extra food out for our garden birds and it is a common belief that any food left for garden birds is going to help.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

It is easy to believe that the more food, the better, and in today's economic climate this can lead us down the path of selecting cheap bird foods that are sold in their own net bags. We are led to believe this is better as we can buy more food and save money on feeders.

Unfortunately, these cheap foods provide little nutritional value for our garden birds and the net bags can be extremely hazardous. Feet and tongues can easily become tangled in the mesh, leading to permanent or even fatal injuries.

If you do buy your bird food in net bags, always remove the netting before you put these in the garden or, alternatively, consider using a specialist wild bird food company which sells foods without net bags and can assure you of the quality and standard of the food you are buying.

CJ Wildlife sell foods and feeders developed, tried and tested by ornithologists, ensuring only the best for your birds – and not a net bag in sight!



Tel: 01 901 0154
www.birdfood.ie



Garden BirdWatch 2010/2011

Instructions for filling out survey form

Starting Date: Monday, 29th November 2010

First, please read these notes

- You may count birds that come into your garden even if they are not feeding on the food you put out for them.
- Please **don't** count birds that you see **outside the garden**, such as flocks of Whooper Swans or Lapwings on nearby lakes and fields, or those flying overhead.
- If you see some birds almost every day, remember that we only want your highest count for a species in a given week.

Your name and address

Please provide your forename, surname and full address.

It is important to provide these details even if you have taken part in the survey before!

Please use **BLOCK CAPITALS**

Forename

Surname

Address

Email

Details of your garden

State whether your garden is:
(tick appropriate box)

- Urban** (in a city centre)
- Suburban** (on the edge of a town or city)
- Rural** (in or beside open country or farmland)

Has the garden been counted previously? Yes No

How large is your garden?
 Half tennis court-size or smaller
 Approximately tennis court-size
 Larger than a tennis court
 Greater than one acre

Are berries present in your garden?
 Yes No

Do you provide food for birds in your garden?
 Yes No

If 'yes', please state whether you provide:

- Peanut feeders
 Yes No
- Bird seed in feeders
 Yes No
- Nyjer Bird Seed in feeders
 Yes No
- Scraps on bird table/ground
 Yes No
- Fruit (e.g., apples for Blackcaps)
 Yes No
- Fat/suet/"bird cake"
 Yes No

For office use only

Weekly counts

- Count and record birds that come into your garden.
- Each week, enter the highest number (peak count) of birds of each species you observed at any one time during that week. For example, if five was the highest number of Blue Tits you saw at one time during the week, enter '5' on the record sheet.
- Count as accurately as possible. Please do not use plus signs as we do not know whether it means as little as 1 or as much as 500!
- Feral pigeons and racing pigeons should be counted.
- Birds of prey seen hunting in your survey area should be counted (e.g., a hovering Kestrel).
- If observations are not made during any week, please leave the **appropriate column blank**.
- **When a species is not recorded in a particular week, leave the space blank.**
- Only count the species which you can positively identify.

Additional species

Species identified which are not on the list (on the other side of this sheet) should be entered in the spaces provided.

Table for recording birds (weekly counts)

Week starting Monday:

29 Nov	6 Dec	13 Dec	20 Dec	27 Dec	3 Jan	10 Jan	17 Jan	24 Jan	31 Jan	7 Feb	14 Feb	21 Feb
-----------	----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	----------	-----------	-----------

1	Sparrowhawk ▶											
2	Feral Pigeon ▶											
3	Woodpigeon ▶											
4	Collared Dove ▶											
5	Grey Wagtail ▶											
6	Pied Wagtail ▶											
7	Wren ▶											
8	Dunnock ▶											
9	Robin ▶											
10	Blackbird ▶											
11	Fieldfare ▶											
12	Song Thrush ▶											
13	Redwing ▶											
14	Mistle Thrush ▶											
15	Blackcap ▶											
16	Goldcrest ▶											
17	Long-tailed Tit ▶											
18	Coal Tit ▶											
19	Blue Tit ▶											
20	Great Tit ▶											
21	Magpie ▶											
22	Jackdaw ▶											
23	Rook ▶											
24	Hooded Crow ▶											
25	Starling ▶											
26	House Sparrow ▶											
27	Chaffinch ▶											
28	Greenfinch ▶											
29	Goldfinch ▶											
30	Siskin ▶											
31	Bullfinch ▶											
32	Redpoll ▶											
33	other ▶											
34	other ▶											
35	other ▶											
36	other ▶											
37	other ▶											



Please return completed form not later than 1st April 2011 to
Garden BirdWatch, BirdWatch Ireland, Unit 20, Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow

