Brambling
It was a Brambling year. The numbers seen were the highest since 1994.
Photo: **John Fox.**

Garden Bird Survey

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

During the Garden Bird Survey of 2010/11, the white Christmas brought birds flocking into gardens

It was a generally dry and sunny winter. Indeed, most of the precipitation fell as snow in December.

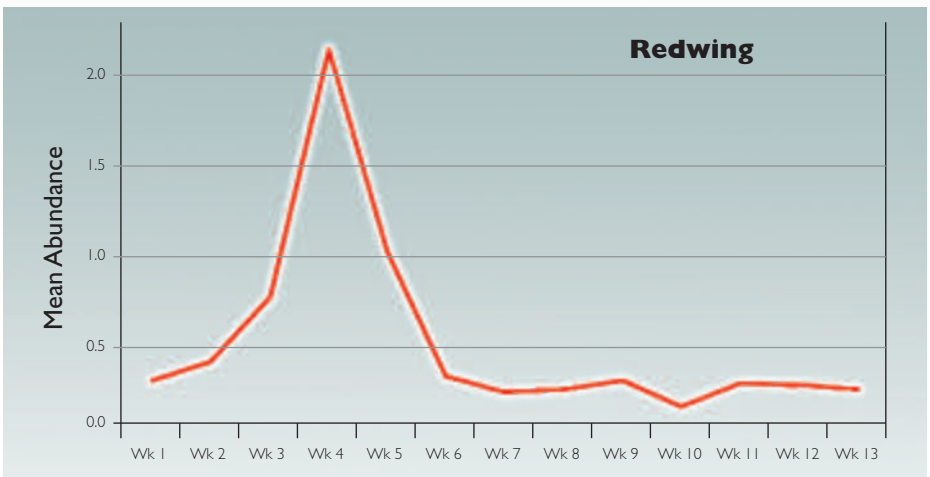
At the end of November, on the eve of the counting season, early snowfalls set a chilly scene for garden bird surveyors. December was one of the coldest months on record, though the winter as a whole was not as cold as the previous one (2009/2010). Mean air temperatures for the season were between 2.5°C and 5.8°C. The lowest temperature of the season was -15°C, recorded during Christmas week.

A rapid thaw set in immediately after Christmas and, although January remained cold, the worst of the winter was over. A very mild February featured relatively warm Atlantic weather systems approaching from the south-west.

Thrush influx in week 3

The early spate of hard weather meant that much garden bird activity peaked in week 3 of the survey, the third week in December. This was particularly true for thrush species. Thus Redwings, which arrived in big numbers in late December, had a good chance of finding that the berry bushes and trees were still bountiful.

Others birds such as the Wren showed a progressive drop-off through the season, perhaps pointing to low survival as a result of the hard weather. Blackcaps peaked early in the new year.



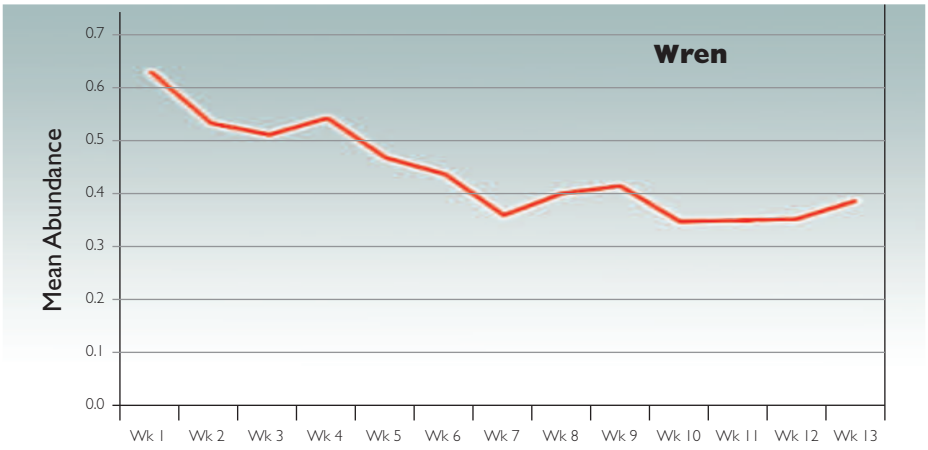
Note the dramatic peak in Redwing abundance in week 4, reflecting the hard-weather movement that began in week 3. However, Redwing abundance was down overall on the previous winter.

Top 25 garden birds

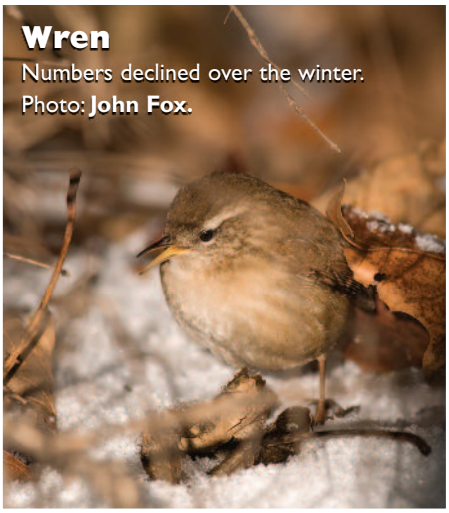
The top 25 (or so) most widespread birds recorded over a span of 17 winters of the survey show some real consistency at the top but some interesting movers further down the list.

Robin, Blackbird and **Blue Tit** have not moved out of the top three positions for many seasons.

Only two species in the top 10 show significant movement: **Starling** is now at a high of 7th place in the overall rankings, having been at a typical value of 14th place over many winters; and **Goldfinches** have made real strides: they spent the first five years of the survey outside the top twenty before flying up the listings to reach 9th place in three of the last four years. Goldfinches are now regular visitors to seed feeders, a fact that no doubt ensures their lofty position in the garden bird charts.



Wren abundance over the 13 weeks of the 2010/11 survey. Note how numbers declined steadily.



The birds seen in most abundance in our gardens last winter were Chaffinch followed by Starling, House Sparrow, Goldfinch and Blackbird. Greenfinch was in tenth place overall, showing a continuing decline attributed to trichomoniasis disease.

Greenfinch and Wren

Two species which have slipped out of the top 10 have markedly different requirements. The **Greenfinch,** a seed eater, once held 5th position overall and was there or thereabouts for a number of seasons, but its susceptibility to the trichomonad parasite is thought to have affected its survival, and numbers and distribution are now well down.

The **Wren** is a more specialised garden visitor, preferring to shuffle around the margins for scraps: insects gleaned from the field and ground layer flora in gardens form the main part of its diet. The Wren is now at a low in its population curve, not unexpected after two very severe winters when more frequent hard frosts resulted in very difficult feeding and survival conditions. This is particularly true for insectivorous birds such as Wrens.

Wrens are likely to bounce back, however, provided they can achieve breeding success with large clutches and multiple broods. Other strategies such as utilising garden nestboxes for communal roosts can help stave off heat loss amongst Wrens in winter.

Siskin and Lesser Redpoll

Two finches which have recently learned that gardens can provide an important link in the survival food chain are **Siskin** and **Lesser Redpoll.**

Siskins were only recorded as garden birds from the 1970s onwards and have yo-yoed around the mid-teens to mid-

Ireland's Top 32 Garden Birds in Winter 2010/11

The top 32 most frequently occurring or widespread species (not to be confused with abundance). Note the remarkable increase in Brambling, up eight places on the previous year, and the significant drops in Redwing and Fieldfare, actually reflecting a return to more normal levels following the massive influxes of the previous winter, which were associated with a severe cold snap.

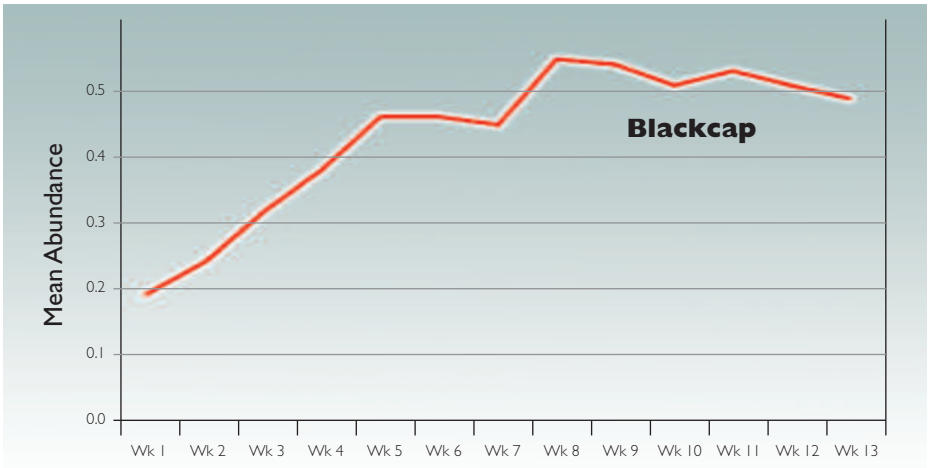
Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2010/11	Difference in rank between 09/10 & 10/11	Rank 2009/10	Rank 2008/09	Rank 2007/08
Robin	99.6	1	*no change*	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.4	2	*no change*	2	2	2
Blue Tit	97.5	3	*no change*	3	3	3
Chaffinch	96.4	4	*no change*	4	5	4
Great Tit	92.9	5	*no change*	5	4	6
Magpie	90.0	6	*no change*	6	7	5
Starling	88.8	7	↑ up 1	8	12	12
Song Thrush	87.7	8	↓ down 1	7	13	14
Goldfinch	85.2	9	↑ up 1	10	9	9
Coal Tit	84.7	10	↓ down 1	9	6	8
House Sparrow	84.0	11	*no change*	11	11	10
Greenfinch	81.6	12	↑ up 1	13	10	7
Dunnock	76.8	13	↑ up 1	14	14	13
Wren	75.9	14	↓ down 2	12	8	11
Jackdaw	70.7	15	↑ up 1	16	15	15
Rook	70.7	16	↑ up 3	19	18	17
Pied Wagtail	68.8	17	↑ up 3	20	22	20
Woodpigeon	67.4	18	*no change*	18	16	18
Collared Dove	66.7	19	↓ down 2	17	17	16
Hooded Crow	52.6	20	↑ up 4	24	23	21
Blackcap	52.6	21	*no change*	21	20	22
Redwing	50.9	22	↓ down 7	15	30	31
Mistle Thrush	48.7	23	↓ down 1	22	25	25
Siskin	43.8	24	↑ up 2	26	21	19
Long-tailed Tit	37.0	25	↑ up 2	27	19	24
Lesser Redpoll	36.0	26	↑ up 2	28	27	28
Bullfinch	33.8	27	↓ down 2	25	26	23
Sparrowhawk	30.2	28	↑ up 1	29	28	27
Fieldfare	26.9	29	↓ down 6	23	32	32
Feral Pigeon	18.8	30	↑ up 1	31	29	29
Goldcrest	17.4	31	↓ down 1	30	25	26
Brambling	15.6	32	↑ up 8	40	39	38

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2010/11.

Cóilín MacLochlainn

Siskin
Numbers pick up as winter progresses.

Siskin abundance in gardens rose steadily as the winter progressed.



Blackcap abundance reached a peak in January and remained relatively stable through February.

twenties in the charts ever since. They are remarkably late in their garden visits, too, only arriving in some gardens just as the survey season draws to a close at the end of February. This is when their regular forest food, seeds of conifer cones such as the Sitka Spruce, runs out.

When in the garden, Siskins habitually hang upside-down on peanut feeders, their small size in no way reducing their feisty behaviour.

These passage migrants move on as quickly as they appear, to breed in conifer forests as far away as Scandinavia, though good numbers also breed in Ireland.

Brambling year

The winter of 2010/11 was the best for Brambling since the survey began 17 years ago, a fact recorded by many surveyors who enjoyed the lovely orange and 'dead-leaf' tones of this smart northern finch.

Bramblings are the northern counterpart of Chaffinches, with a wide breeding distribution across the boreal zone. In winter, they are closely associated with the availability of beech mast. Huge flocks, estimated in their millions, are recorded in some winters from Switzerland and Slovenia. Here in Ireland, they are much scarcer and locally distributed. When beech mast is unavailable – when, for instance, it is covered with snow – then Bramblings will move to gardens and forage for seed on the ground.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all our garden bird surveyors, nearly 1,300 in all. A special thank you, also, to the following volunteers who inputted and managed the big increase in raw data received: David Burkitt, Michael Hogan, Lloyd Johnson-Barker, Frazer McDonogh. Our thanks to Olivia Crowe, as always, for the analysis of the data.

Food value, food miles and food origins

MOST OF US feed birds to help them survive the winter, but also because we are enthused by the quantity and variety of birds that the food brings into the garden.

With an increasing array of food options, some with the attraction of specific species in mind, you may need to look closely at what you buy, and what you spend, and what brings the best return for you. (Elsewhere in this issue you can read how to plant your garden to benefit birds and other wildlife: see pages 18-19.)

Already this season we have seen a sharp rise in the cost of peanuts. Increasingly, consumers will also wish to consider the food miles involved in shipping foodstuffs from around the globe and what the benefits accruing to local producers are. Importantly, can we ascertain that, in growing bird foods, no loss is suffered by indigenous bird species in far-off lands? For example, shelled peanuts are sourced in a selection of countries, e.g. Argentina, India, China, Gambia. Nyjer seed is produced in Ethiopia, and sunflower seeds are produced a little closer to home, in France and other European countries. Are these birdfood crops displacing natural forest habitat? Other seeds such as oats, barley and wheat can, of course, be sourced much closer to home.

Food type	Cost and calorific benefit
Sunflower hearts	45 cent per 100 grammes (600 calories)
Peanuts	43 cent per 100 grammes (560 calories)
Nyjer seed	38 cent per 100 grammes (480 calories)
Black sunflower seeds	25 cent per 100 grammes (500 calories)

Seed mixes	Cost and calorific benefit
All seasons mix (no wheat)	30 cent per 100 grammes (430 calories)
Feeder seed	29 cent per 100 grammes (480 calories)
Table seed	24 cent per 100 grammes (400 calories)

Prices and products as stocked by BirdWatch Ireland