



Greenfinch. Photo: David Dillon

# The Garden Bird Survey

In advance of this season's Garden Bird Survey, starting in December, **Oran O'Sullivan** looks at the results from last winter's survey and picks out some interesting trends.



Last winter will be remembered for its wet and mild conditions, but especially for a series of six named storms that occurred in December through to February.

With maximum values of 16°C in mid-December, Malin Head in Donegal had its highest winter temperature since 1955. By contrast, the lowest winter temperatures were recorded during the last week of February, with an air temperature of -5.9°C in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, and grass temperatures of -10.4°C in Oak Park, Carlow.

The highest sustained wind speeds were recorded at Sherkin Island, Co Cork, on December 30<sup>th</sup> (during Storm Frank) – 55 knots (or 102km/h).

How did these weather conditions influence garden bird populations in the short term? As our respondents noted, **Siskins** made a welcome return to gardens and **Goldfinches** continued to thrive.

## Results from last winter

### Finches making headlines

**Greenfinches** seem to be literally returning to good health after years of falling numbers, due at least in part to the pervasive trichomonosis disease. They just made it into

the top 10 this year, in ninth position, occurring in a very respectable 84% of gardens surveyed.

**Goldfinches** increased their share, reaching eighth position, being found in an all-time high of over 86% of gardens.

**Siskins**, whose numbers yo-yo back and forth from year to year; dropped back to nineteenth position last winter; they were recorded in over 59% of gardens.

### Birds of prey

The stand-out predator of last winter's survey, the **Sparrowhawk**, attended over 40% of gardens, its highest position to date, its ranking no doubt buoyed by the hordes of Goldfinches visiting garden feeders.

**Red Kite** put in an appearance at 2% of gardens surveyed and just made it into the top 50 birds – remarkable, really, for a bird that was only reintroduced to Ireland in 2007. It has now occurred in nine winters of the Garden Bird Survey.



Red Kite

MARC RUDDOCK

## Ireland's Top 20 Garden Birds in Winter 2015/16

The top 20 most widespread species recorded in the Garden Bird Survey in winter 2015/16

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2015/16
Robin	99.8	1
Blackbird	99.3	2
Blue Tit	98.1	3
Chaffinch	95.3	4
Great Tit	95.1	5
Coal Tit	92.4	6
Magpie	91.9	7
Goldfinch	86.5	8
Greenfinch	84.0	9
House Sparrow	83.3	10
Dunnock	78.9	11
Wren	77.5	12
Starling	75.3	13
Jackdaw	72.6	14
Woodpigeon	72.1	15
Song Thrush	67.4	16
Rook	64.4	17
Collared Dove	63.0	18
Siskin	59.3	19
Hooded Crow	56.8	20

\* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2015/16

## Relative newcomers

Jay equalled its highest ever position: it was recorded in nearly 9.5% of survey gardens. It has been on a good run in our gardens since 2011, perhaps reflecting its ongoing increase and spread nationally.

Continuing on the rare garden bird front, **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** have now occurred in Garden Bird Survey gardens for six winters in a row, though were still only seen in 0.5% of gardens surveyed.

## Siskin trends

No doubt, participants in the Garden Bird Survey will have noticed that **Siskin** is a real "last few weeks of the season" number. Relatively few are seen before Christmas but numbers build up in the last few weeks of the survey. This trend has been consistent over the last six years (see graph, below).

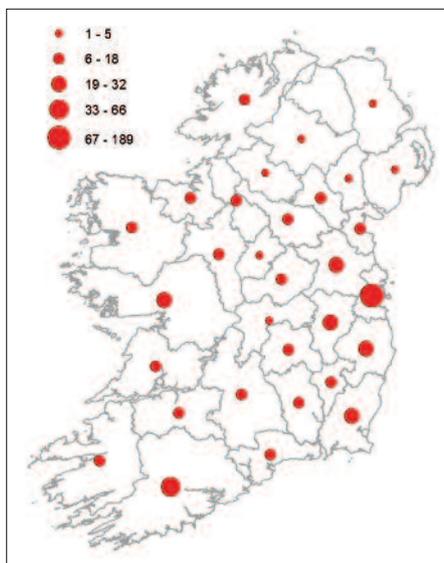
## Goldfinches: food for thought

Between November 2015 and February 2016 an amazing 5,183 households across Britain and Ireland took part in the **BTO Goldfinch Feeding Survey**, to help determine what it is about our gardens that Goldfinches are attracted to.

With households seeing an average of eight Goldfinches at a time, the survey highlighted the fact that the population of this colourful bird has been increasing in gardens.

In Ireland, Goldfinch is now reported in 86% of gardens taking part in our Garden Bird Survey, with an average abundance of 6.6 birds per garden – a big jump on its position in the rankings 20 years ago.

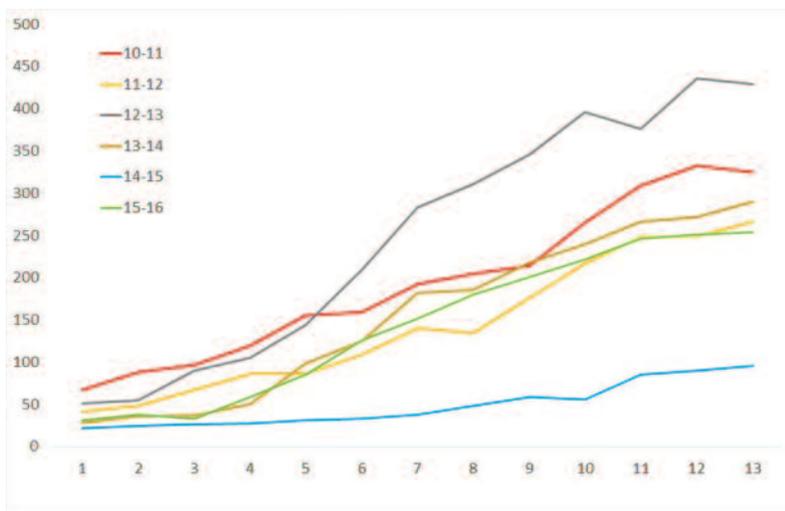
The preliminary results of the BTO feeding survey revealed that Goldfinches appear to prefer feeding on the supplementary food that we provide, rather than on the natural foods available in gardens. **Sunflower hearts** were



Numbers of gardens per county which took part in the Garden Bird Survey last winter. We would greatly welcome more garden surveyors, especially in the midlands and west.

overwhelmingly the preferred option, with **Nyjer seed** coming second. Where natural foods were taken, seeds of **Teasel** and **thistles** were often the favourites.

As the number of Goldfinches visiting gardens continues to rise, these findings will inform further BTO research into whether their use of bird foods is driving the increase in their populations.



Siskin numbers recorded over the thirteen weeks of the Garden Bird Survey last winter (green), compared with the numbers in the five previous winters. Last winter was about average.

## What you said:

On the last Sunday of the survey, I had five Buzzards soaring over the house and two Dippers on a rock in the river at the bottom of the garden – a nice way to end the survey!

No Blackcap again this year: they seem to have curtailed their journey westwards, perhaps another sign of climate change; at least we get good numbers breeding in spring and summer.

**Ger Clerkin, Ballinode, Monaghan**

It was more interesting than the 2014/15 winter: Fieldfares returned after an absence of five years; the tit family members were back in numbers and there was an explosion in the numbers of Siskins, which continues. As the Siskin numbers increased, Goldfinches decreased.

**Anne O'Neill, Ballyhooley, Mallow, Cork**

My urban garden near St James' Hospital in Dublin had 20 bird species over the survey period, including a Sparrowhawk, with up to 15 Goldfinches in March.

**Elaine Blake Knox, Rialto, Dublin 8**

I was delighted and thrilled to see a flock of 40 or more Goldfinches on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January. I think it was the Sunflower hearts that attracted the big numbers.

**Anne O'Meara, Santry, Dublin**

I was delighted to welcome back so many Siskins this year, as I had none last year! They were very bossy and hogged the Nyjer seed feeders continually!

**Hazel Crawford, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16**

## Special thanks

We are indebted to Olivia Crowe for data management and analysis and also to our volunteer data inputters – Gráinne Barron, Tim Morgan, Mary Grehan. **Thank you all.**