

Garden Bird Survey 2008

The Bradford Ornithological Group area recorder receives many reports of exciting birds from our local woodlands, moors and reservoirs but far fewer records of the commoner birds in our gardens. I was sure that many members would already be watching the birds visiting their gardens but keeping track of which species and exactly how many is not always convenient to record. I therefore decided to try and design a survey sheet that would be easy to use but also would give enough detail to try and draw some conclusions. I didn't think it would be necessary to count every bird seen as undoubtedly many individual birds would be regular visitors. I therefore decided to encourage the observers to make their best guess as to roughly how many birds of each species were about each month. I also added a section to record birds seen flying over our gardens. Birds after all are flying creatures and I'm convinced we miss much of what's passing overhead.

The response was pretty good. A total of about 20 people recorded the birds visiting 17 different gardens in the Bradford area. Although records were kept throughout the year, I decided to use the detailed results for January to look at the number of winter birds and then the May results to see if the breeding season numbers differed much. I also looked at all the records throughout the year to try and see if the bird populations varied much with the seasons.

There was a good mix of urban, suburban and rural gardens and as would be expected, the suburban and rural gardens did tend to have a greater variety of species. Almost every garden had a bird feeder but those with a feeder, bird table, nest boxes and a pond attracted the most birds. Only a few records included notes on breeding birds so it is difficult to draw any conclusions on this topic.

The following are the Top Ten birds seen in our gardens for January and May 2008 with the average number of birds seen.

January 2008			May 2008		
1	Starling	5.5	1	Starling	5.9
2	Blue Tit	4.6	2	Blue Tit	3.3
3	Blackbird	3.5		Blackbird	3.3
4	House Sparrow	2.6	4	House Sparrow	2.8
	Magpie	2.6	5	Greenfinch	2.4
6	Long-tailed Tit	2.6	6	Great Tit	2.1
7	Chaffinch	2.3	7	Jackdaw	1.8
8	Greenfinch	2.2	8	Wood Pigeon	1.7
9	Great Tit	2.2	9	Magpie	1.6
10	Feral Pigeon	1.9	10	Dunnock	1.6

It was no surprise that the starling came top of the lists for both months with Blue Tit, Blackbird and House Sparrow not too far behind. It is good to see that we still regularly have sparrows in our gardens despite the national decline in numbers. The unexpected bird in the January list was Long-tailed Tit coming in at number five although a couple of gardens recorded large groups which pushed it up the list. However, in May it was far less common and was only 18th.

Greenfinch and Great Tit were regularly recorded and also made it into the top ten in both months as did Magpie. Feral Pigeons were 10th on the list in January but were just squeezed into 11th place in May by the Dunnock. There were actually slightly more Dunnock's recorded in January but then they only reached 12th position. The Chaffinch was seen in most people's gardens throughout the year but there were far more birds about in the winter. In May the average number of chaffinches was only 1.4 putting them in 12th place just behind Goldfinch. Jackdaw and Wood Pigeon both were well placed in May. Jackdaws however were only seen in a few gardens but typically in groups of 3 to 6 (12 in one garden though!) whereas woodpigeons were more widespread but usually were only about in ones and twos.

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The RSPB conduct the Big Garden Birdwatch in January each year and the top four results for January 2008 were House Sparrow, Starling, Blackbird and Blue Tit. Bradford gardens also recorded these as the top four but in a different order. It is interesting to note that Long-tailed Tit has now made its first appearance in the top ten (at number ten) in the 2009 survey, a trend also seen in Bradford. The collared Dove also made it into the RSPB top ten but in Bradford it was just outside in 11th and 14th positions for January and May.

Looking at the results across the whole year, the commoner resident birds were typically about in similar numbers each month but with slightly fewer in July and August. This is typical as birds start to disperse once the breeding season is over. There were records of Redwing and Fieldfare that of course were only seen in the autumn and winter months. Some garden birds although common are typically only present in small numbers. Robins and Wrens for example were seen in most gardens but usually there was only one or two about so they were quite a long way down the list. Coal Tits were seen fairly often but Goldcrests only rarely but as they both tend to prefer gardens with large conifers I wasn't expecting high numbers. I had hoped to find that Song Thrush was regular but it seems to be mainly an occasional visitor to only a few gardens. In some gardens, Mistle Thrush is the more common bird. Great Spotted Woodpecker also seems to be a fairly common bird and where present is often a daily visitor to gardens.

The number of records for birds seen flying overhead revealed good counts of Black-headed Gulls but far fewer Common Gulls with typically only singles seen at any one time and only one record of a Lesser Black-back Gull. There were also some good numbers of Swallows, House Martins and Swifts, the highest counts being 60, 30, and 50 respectively. Jackdaws were seen passing over many gardens with some counts of over a hundred birds.

Amongst the common birds overhead were plenty of species not normally associated with gardens. These included Grey Wagtail, Cormorant, Oystercatcher and there were two records of skeins of about 100 Pink-foot Geese. It is definitely worth looking up occasionally from your bird feeders as you will add a few new birds to you tally.

The total number of species seen by all observers in the gardens was exactly 50. Another 14 different species were recorded flying overhead. In no particular order (but I think the best bird will be obvious!) are my favourite 'rarities' seen in Bradford Gardens in 2008 These were Brambling, Bullfinch, Waxwing, Redpoll, Two-barred Crossbill, Kingfisher, Sedge Warbler and overhead, Buzzard, Woodcock and Red Kite.

Thank you to all those who took part in the survey.

Chris King