



The Garden Bird Survey



Once winter arrives, Magpies start squabbling over diminishing natural food resources. Photo: John Fox

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.

As the Garden Bird Survey reached its 21st year of volunteer data collection, we were hoping for a really interesting winter; but unfortunately it was not to be.

The winter had no snow events, no cold snaps, and hence fewer noticeable movements of birds into gardens during the period December to February.

To our surprise, the number of people completing the survey, 686, was the lowest since the winter of 2007/08. So, please, we ask you all to take part in the survey this coming winter; if you can. **We need you!**

Your results make it possible for us to monitor any changes taking place in garden bird numbers, and their distribution nationally,

over time. As gardens support a high percentage of Ireland's resident birds through the winter; this information is obviously very important to us.

The weather last winter

Mean temperatures for the survey period of winter 2014/15 were a little below average across the country. The highest air temperatures were recorded on January 9th, with over 16°C in Carlow. Less than a month later, the lowest air temperature of -7.9°C was recorded on February 3rd at Dublin Airport. However; the same station reported its sunniest ever winter since records began 73 years ago.

Results from last winter

The top ten

The top-ten list retained a familiar look about it. The **Robin** is in first place for the fifth winter in a row, our most widespread garden bird, recorded in all gardens.

Blackbird and **Blue Tit** share equal second place, and **Magpie**, that often controversial crow, has moved up to fourth place, its highest position ever in the survey rankings. **Chaffinch** and **Great Tit** are fifth and sixth, respectively. **House Sparrows** are holding up well in seventh position, as high as they ever have been. The eighth-placed bird is **Coal Tit**.

Another mover; the **Goldfinch**, is steady at ninth, but that's a long way up from its opening position in the mid-twenties, twenty years ago. The average of 6.6 Goldfinches per garden in 2014-15 is the most abundant ever:

The **Wren** retains tenth spot, not bad for an insectivorous species that takes only a passing glance at most of the bird food on offer at the feeders.

Changes over the years

With the exception of Goldfinch, the changes in rank among the higher-ranked species have been quite subtle when we look back over the 21 years of the survey. For example, we have seen that **Song Thrush** and **Greenfinch** moved down five places in the rankings, and **Rook** and **Blackcap** moved down four places when we compared their rankings in those from the mid-1990s. These contrast with improvements to the rankings of **Woodpigeon**, **Hooded**

Ireland's Top 10 Garden Birds in Winter 2014/15

The top 10 most widespread species recorded in the Garden Bird Survey in winter 2014/15

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2014/15	Difference in rank between 13/14 & 14/15	Rank 2013/14	Rank 2012/13	Rank 2011/12
Robin	100	1	no change	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.6	2	no change	2	2	2
Blue Tit	97.8	2	↑ up 1	3	3	3
Magpie	94.0	4	↑ up 2	6	7	6
Chaffinch	93.3	5	↓ down 1	4	5	4
Great Tit	91.7	6	↓ down 1	5	4	5
House Sparrow	86.2	7	↑ up 2	9	9	9
Coal Tit	85.9	8	↓ down 1	7	6	7
Goldfinch	84.7	9	↓ down 1	8	8	8
Wren	84.6	10	no change	10	12	14

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2014/15



Starling: a glossy but tough garden visitor.

JOHN FOX

2014/15. Again this is a subtle change but you can see from the illustration that it is a definite increasing trend.

House Sparrows are year-round visitors to our gardens: the birds that winter in the hedges and visit our feeders may well stay on to breed around our properties, as they tend not to move very far. This is another species whose average abundance has shown an increase throughout the course of the Garden Bird Survey. Their seasonal chirping and colonial habits are a familiar feature of an Irish summer.

Blackbirds are very widespread and again we benefit from a winter influx of birds from northern Europe. The winters of 2009 and 2010 showed the impact of bitterly cold winters on Blackbirds, prompting an influx into gardens and an increase in their peak abundance to five during these cold winters. Their mean abundance has fallen back to normal levels of, on average, three per garden.

The star of the show, in more ways than one, is undoubtedly the **Goldfinch**. Pugnacious and feisty, Goldfinches are still charmers that have learnt to adapt to garden bird offerings where others have remained static. Their bill shape is well adapted to extracting fine weed seeds such as thistle and groundsel. The long, fine bill is also ideal for sorting out fine, oil-rich Nyjer seed, native to Ethiopia but increasingly provided in specially designed feeders in Irish gardens. This Goldfinch 'magnet' also attracts the other small finches, **Siskin** and **Redpoll**. We have witnessed an increase in Goldfinch occurrence in Irish gardens from just six gardens in 1994/95 to an impressive 588 gardens in 2014/15.

Special thanks

We are indebted to Olivia Crowe for data management and analysis and to our volunteer data inputters – Maeve Quaid, Stephanie Costello, Cathy Connelly, Gráinne Barron, Tim Morgan, Jen Lynch, Lesley Timmons, Mary Grehan.

Crow and **Wren**, which have moved up 6, 4 and 3 places respectively. But as mentioned these changes are relatively small, and we will be keeping an eye on these patterns of change into the future.

Siskins were scarce

Siskin is another species that has dropped rank over the past 21 years. There was much talk, last winter, of the scarcity of Siskins in our gardens. This was also noted in similar garden bird surveys in the UK and with reports of a very good seed harvest in conifer forests, meaning that these birds did not require the additional food supplies of many gardens.

Traditionally, Siskins make a late-winter appearance in our gardens, usually around late February, when the cone harvest in plantations is depleted, but this was barely noticed last winter. Thus Siskins trailed in at 29th place.

More findings

The 21 years of survey data reveal some positives for familiar birds that are often reported to be under pressure in the wider environment.

Starlings, for example, visit us in numbers in winter, and we know from ringing recoveries that birds migrate to us for the winter months from northern Europe and Russia. Many of us are familiar with the great swirls of winter roosting flocks, called murmurations. From an average of three Starlings per garden in 1994/95, they have increased to seven in

What you said:

☺ A total of about 25 bird species for our garden was about standard. We did notice fewer of the tit family. Greenfinch and Starling were up, which is good to report.

Nuala & Tom Lynch, Ennis, Co Clare

☺ No Siskins at all, though I have Alder trees with seeds and Nyjer seeds in plenty.

Lynn Mitchell, Malahide, Co Dublin

☺ Delighted with the two Choughs just outside our dining-room window, eating woodlice; they turned fairly large stones to do so.

Clodagh Studdert, Goleen, Co Cork

☺ It was not an eventful winter. Coal Tits were scarce, no sign of a Blackcap and only one Siskin in late February. No sign of a Fieldfare since 2010.

A O'Neill, Mallow, Co Cork

☺ My garden is a delight. Spring flowers out and birds singing from morning until night. Sparrows and Starlings flying everywhere.

Carol Kinch, Wexford

☺ I haven't seen any of the usual winter visitors this year – no Blackcaps, Redwings or Fieldfares. Maybe the winter has been too mild. However, I have a fox which I feed every night. Between the birds, the fox, my dog and the wife, I'm broke!

Robert Salter Townshend, Castletownshend, Co Cork

