



Waxwings feeding on berries of ornamental Chinese Rowan. Photograph: Shay Connolly

# Garden Bird Survey



Birds, berries...and fun! **Oran O'Sullivan** reports on the results of last winter's Garden Bird Survey and seeks an explanation for the Blackcap's affinity for suburban gardens in the winter season.

## Survey weather

Last winter was a relatively mild one but was followed by an unusually cold spring. Mean temperatures for the survey period December 2012 to February 2013 were above average in the south, southwest and northwest. The highest air temperatures were recorded on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, with 15°C recorded in Kilkenny. The lowest air temperature of -7°C was recorded on February 25<sup>th</sup>.

The winter season got off to a great start with the widespread appearance of an exciting, irruptive species: **Waxwing**.

Waxwings poured into the country from Scandinavia, prompted no doubt by a failure of the Rowan berry crop on their home ground. This movement began in the

second week of November and lasted right through the winter and into the spring.

Flocks of 100 or more Waxwings were recorded in east coast counties, but the invasion was widespread, with good numbers seen in the west and northwest as well. However, the big numbers were not really reflected in garden bird surveyors' returns, with Waxwing only making it to 43<sup>rd</sup> place overall (see table, page 22). Waxwings often frequent car parks and public spaces in housing estates, where Rowan and other berries are found in abundance. These flocks are highly mobile, stripping a food source and moving on in search of fresh supplies.

## Regulars

Of the more regular cast of birds in winter gardens, **Coal Tit** continued to move upwards in the table: it occurred in over 93% of gardens, putting it at 6<sup>th</sup> position overall. This was the most widespread that Coal Tit has been since the survey began in its current format in 1994/95.



Long-tailed Tit. Photo: Ken Billington

**"Another enjoyable year completing the survey. Was visited briefly, for the first time, by a group of Long-tailed Tits, but no sign of Blackcap this year."** – May Gurrie, Ballyboden, Dublin 16





Jay. Photo: Shay Connolly

**“It was great to see the Jays back on an almost daily basis – usually one or two but on two days I counted three. Seven Waxwings visited a neighbour’s garden on January 19<sup>th</sup>.” – Bob Aldwell, Blackrock, Co Dublin**

Some of the species that lost ground in previous, cold winters, or had poor breeding seasons, recovered somewhat: **Wren** was up two positions to 12<sup>th</sup> and **Song Thrush** up four positions to 14<sup>th</sup> – it was observed in 72% of gardens.

A big mover (but a noted ‘yo-yo’ species, showing major fluctuations from year to year), **Siskin** was at 18<sup>th</sup> (up five places) and

## 2012/13 survey: the numbers

**Number of gardens in survey:** 892

### Most common garden types:

Suburban Gardens, followed by Rural

### Gardens by size:

Large:	352
Medium-sized:	219
Small:	211
Very Large:	95

### Bird diversity by garden type:

Given the greater variety of habitats that large gardens provide with their trees and ponds, etc, it is not surprising that **Very Large Rural Gardens** topped the list for bird diversity. The top total of 44 species was recorded in a rural garden in Co Cork, while a similar type of garden in Co Kilkenny had 40 species. Suburban gardens in Wicklow and Dublin peaked at 34 species, a great result for relatively small spaces in a largely built environment.

## ANALYSIS

### Wintering Blackcaps: town or country birds?

Historically, Blackcaps were summer visitors to Ireland with small but variable numbers wintering. However, over the last thirty years or so, they have become regular winter visitors and, over the years of the Garden Bird Survey, they have shown remarkable consistency in their use of gardens.

Well known for their feisty behaviour and territoriality around the feeders, our winter Blackcaps breed in central Europe and migrate west-northwest to spend the winter with us. Meanwhile, our summer breeding population of Blackcaps winters to the south in Africa. These facts have been confirmed by ringing returns.

Our breeding Blackcaps frequent woodland habitats, where they nest. They will visit large, well-vegetated rural gardens in summer as well, but generally not suburban or urban ones.

For our wintering Blackcaps, hailing from central Europe, the opposite seems to be the case. From the Garden Bird Survey results, we have found that these Blackcaps are more attracted to smaller suburban gardens than to larger rural ones.

Could the suburban gardens be offering more feeding opportunities? They often have a mixture of berry-bearing shrubs, both native and exotic, and the seeds of Cordyline palm trees, a favourite food. Apples, nuts and fatty scraps are often provided and Blackcaps are very catholic feeders. But many rural gardens offer these very same foods too.

The rural garden, however, is likely to be more isolated and may, in fact, be colder. Gardens in cities and towns are slightly warmer than their rural counterparts because of the ‘urban heat island’ effect. There are also more suburban gardens per square mile, so they provide a more concentrated, more reliable supply of food.



Blackcap (male)

The GBS results show that Blackcaps occur in approximately 50% of Irish gardens in winter but have a clear preference for town over country: they occur in 62% of urban and 75% of suburban gardens as compared to just 28% of rural gardens.

What this means, in practical terms, is that a great garden in the country might see no Blackcaps all winter while a small, unremarkable garden in a town or suburb might have Blackcaps visiting every day.

The regional breakdown also reflects this finding, showing a preference for the more built-up east and south. Blackcaps were recorded in 57% of Leinster gardens, 46% of Munster, 22% of Ulster and 21% of Connacht gardens.

The garden sizes favoured are also revealing. Blackcaps show a preference for small and medium-sized gardens, occurring in 60% and 63% of these respectively, while occurring in only 41% of large, and 28% of very large gardens, the types most prevalent in rural areas.



Brambling. More than usual visited Ireland last winter. Photo: Eric Dempsey

## Ireland's Top 43 Garden Birds in Winter 2012/13

The top 43 most widespread species recorded in the Garden Bird Survey in winter 2012/13

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2012/13	Difference in rank between 11/12 & 12/13	Rank 2011/12	Rank 2010/11	Rank 2009/10
Robin	99.4	1	no change	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.3	2	no change	2	2	2
Blue Tit	98.4	3	no change	3	3	3
Great Tit	96.0	4	↑ up 1	5	5	5
Chaffinch	95.3	5	↓ down 1	4	4	4
Coal Tit	93.7	6	↑ up 1	7	10	9
Magpie	91.4	7	↓ down 1	6	6	6
Goldfinch	85.2	8	no change	8	9	10
House Sparrow	81.9	9	no change	9	11	11
Greenfinch	81.1	10	no change	10	12	13
Dunnock	79.4	11	↑ up 1	12	13	13
Wren	78.4	12	↑ up 2	14	14	12
Starling	77.0	13	↓ down 2	11	7	8
Song Thrush	71.9	14	↑ up 4	18	8	7
Woodpigeon	71.1	15	↓ down 2	13	18	18
Jackdaw	70.4	16	↓ down 1	15	15	16
Collared Dove	67.4	17	↑ up 1	16	19	17
Siskin	64.5	18	↑ up 5	23	24	26
Rook	64.1	19	↓ down 2	17	16	19
Hooded Crow	53.3	20	↓ down 1	19	20	24
Blackcap	49.3	21	no change	21	21	21
Pied Wagtail	49.2	22	↓ down 2	20	20	17
Long-tailed Tit	47.1	23	↑ up 3	26	25	27
Bullfinch	43.0	24	↓ down 2	22	27	25
Lesser Redpoll	42.3	25	↓ down 1	24	26	28
Mistle Thrush	28.4	26	↑ up 1	27	23	22
Goldcrest	26.1	27	↑ up 2	29	31	30
Feral Pigeon	25.8	28	no change	28	30	31
Sparrowhawk	16.9	29	↓ down 4	25	28	29
Pheasant	13.4	30	no change	30	33	34
Redwing	11.3	31	↑ up 2	33	22	15
Linnet	11.0	32	↓ down 1	31	36	35
Grey Wagtail	10.8	33	-	-	-	-
Brambling	10.4	34	-	-	32	-
Jay	9.7	35	↑ up 3	38	-	-
Fieldfare	9.3	36	-	-	-	-
Kestrel	7.5	37	↓ down 3	34	41	40
Treecreeper	6.8	38	↓ down 6	32	38	37
Yellowhammer	6.2	39	no change	39	-	-
Tree Sparrow	6.0	40	↓ down 3	37	-	-
Blk-hdd Gull	5.4	41	-	-	-	-
Buzzard	4.7	42	↓ down 2	40	-	-
Waxwing	4.3	43	-	-	-	-

\* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2012/13

was seen in 65% of gardens, above **Blackcap** and **Pied Wagtail**.

However, **Pied Wagtail** is much more prominent than these two in school gardens, as we learned from the first winter of our new initiative to expand the survey into schools: the **Schools Garden Bird Survey** (for more information, visit the BirdWatch Ireland website).

**Long-tailed Tit** made it to 23<sup>rd</sup> place, up three places, continuing its upward trend of recent years.

Our most common garden predator, **Sparrowhawk**, was down four places and seen in just under 17% of gardens.

**Jay** continued to make progress in gardens, up three places to 35<sup>th</sup> position; it now occurs in 10% of survey gardens. This is a notable high for the species and an expansion which is consistent with the findings of the recently completed Bird Atlas (2007-2011) survey.

## Special thanks

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Redwing. Photo: Dick Coombes

**“The children in my class really enjoy participating in the Schools Garden Bird Survey. Lots of opportunities to link with Literacy and Numeracy as well as other curricular areas. We struck it lucky on the last day when fifteen Redwings landed nearby to search for food in a sunlit grassy area. Lovely views, then lots of Geography and Art related activity.”** – Tom Lynch, Ennis CBS, Co Clare