



**Birds at feeder**

Large numbers of Long-tailed Tits were a feature of tit and finch flocks at garden feeders during last winter's cold snap.

Photo: Oran O'Sullivan



# Garden Bird Survey

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

After a succession of comparatively mild winters, our garden birds were faced with a particularly cold winter in 2008/09, the coldest in eighteen years. There were persistent cold spells at the beginning of each month from December to February, and snowfalls in early January and February were widespread. So how did this seasonal weather affect our birds?

More on that later, but firstly, a big thank you to all who participated in last winter's Garden Bird Survey. It was the 15th season of the survey in its present format, and it is as popular as ever: 692 completed survey forms were returned. For the first time, surveyors were able to submit their data electronically, and over 100 of you took up this challenge, thereby cutting down on our costs and ensuring quick presentation and analysis of the data.

New garden bird surveyors are always welcome. This year, 169 new gardens were added to the extensive list of gardens that have already taken part in the survey, which now numbers almost 3,000!

### Garden bird diversity

The number of different types of birds recorded in Irish gardens last winter was a very respectable 88 species. Diversity remained highest in large and rural gardens. The single highest total, 40 species, was found in a rural County Wicklow garden, although Waterford, Wexford and Tipperary were the counties with the highest diversity overall.

While large, rural gardens continue to attract the most species, your efforts encourage diversity and survival of garden bird populations regardless of the type or size of garden.

### Top 20 garden birds

There was no change in the top three 'pecking' order last winter. The Robin held onto top position and was recorded in all but one of the 692 gardens participating. Blackbird retained its second position, while the diminutive Blue Tit held on to the third position in a season that showed it moving upwards in the rankings from its three other family members.

### Changes in the Top Ten

Many of our surveyors commented on the season being notable for the number and variety of tit species. Great Tit moved up two positions to fourth, while its smaller cousin, the Coal Tit, broke its tradition of remaining static at eighth position and rose to sixth place overall. The Wren moved up three places, to claim eighth position.



Change in relative abundance of Long-tailed Tit over the years of the Garden Bird Survey.



**Siskin**  
Numbers rose steeply over the 13 weeks of the survey.

The losers in the top ten were Magpie, surprisingly down two places to seventh, and Greenfinch, down three positions to tenth, a decline widely reported by surveyors, both in distribution and abundance. Goldfinch remained static at ninth.

A bird of conservation concern, the House Sparrow, slipped one to eleventh, though was present in 82% of our gardens, a consistent pitch over the last five years.

### Changes in the Top Twenty

The big mover in the top twenty was undoubtedly Long-tailed Tit, up five places to nineteenth, attracted to garden nut feeders by the prolonged cold spells. It will be interesting to see if increased occurrence at feeding stations helped them survive the harsh winter.

The Blackcap climbed back up to twentieth position, occurring in 54% of our gardens, which is not bad for a warbler. Their strong and aggressive territorial behaviour, noted by many surveyors last winter, is undoubtedly a positive factor in their continued success.

### Most abundant birds

The Starling and House Sparrow were the most numerous of our garden birds last winter, followed by Fieldfare, Redwing and Rook. Both the Starling and the House Sparrow are of conservation concern in Ireland and Europe, but they maintain stable positions in our garden bird rankings, at eleventh and twelfth place respectively.

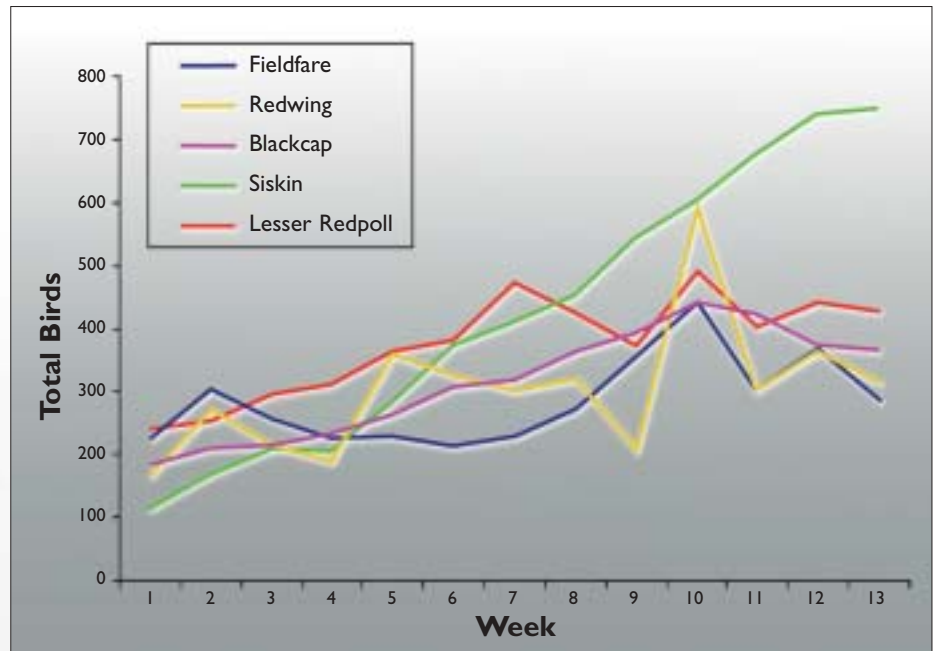
### View from the top

Birds of prey maintain a presence in our gardens, particularly the Sparrowhawk which occurred in 28% of our gardens last winter, followed by the Kestrel, in 7.7%, and Buzzard, in a healthy 3% of gardens.

Merlin, Peregrine, Hen Harrier and even one regular Red Kite completed the array of hawks, together with Long-eared Owl and the very scarce Barn Owl.

### Patterns during cold snap

While some garden birds, such as Robins and Blackbirds, remain fairly constant in number throughout the survey period, other species show a varied pattern of occurrence over the 13-week survey.



Change in numbers of five species over 13 weeks of the survey in 2008/09.

## Ireland's Top 30 Garden Birds in winter 2008/09

The top 30 most frequently occurring or widespread species (not to be confused with abundance).

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2008/09	Difference in rank between 07/08 & 08/09	Rank 2007/08	Rank 2006/07	Rank 2005/06
Robin	99.9	1	same	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.0	2	same	2	3	2
Blue Tit	98.0	3	same	3	2	3
Great Tit	95.1	4	↑ up 2	6	4	5
Chaffinch	94.5	5	↓ down 1	4	6	4
Coal Tit	91.9	6	↑ up 2	8	8	8
Magpie	91.6	7	↓ down 2	5	5	7
Wren	84.1	8	↑ up 3	11	9	9
Goldfinch	83.2	9	same	9	11	10
Greenfinch	83.1	10	↓ down 3	7	7	6
House Sparrow	81.9	11	↓ down 1	10	10	11
Starling	80.9	12	same	12	12	14
Song Thrush	80.1	13	↑ up 1	14	14	13
Dunnock	79.0	14	↓ down 1	13	13	12
Jackdaw	68.8	15	same	15	15	16
Wood Pigeon	67.2	16	↑ up 2	18	16	18
Collared Dove	66.8	17	↓ down 1	16	17	17
Rook	59.8	18	↓ down 1	17	18	19
Long-tailed Tit	55.2	19	↑ up 5	24	21	22
Blackcap	54.3	20	↑ up 2	22	19	20
Siskin	52.6	21	↓ down 2	19	22	15
Pied Wagtail	51.7	22	↓ down 2	20	23	21
Hooded Crow	47.1	23	↓ down 2	21	20	23
Goldcrest	42.3	24	↑ up 2	26	24	25
Mistle Thrush	42.2	25	same	25	25	26
Bullfinch	32.8	26	↓ down 3	23	27	24
Lesser Redpoll	29.5	27	↑ up 1	28	28	28
Sparrowhawk	28.3	28	↓ down 1	27	26	27
Feral pigeon	22.3	29	same	29	29	29
Redwing	18.8	30	↑ up 1	31	-	-

\* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2008/09.



### Some of your comments

It has been an unusual winter, with no Greenfinches. The Coal Tit which started to feed from my hand in 2006 has survived the winter so far. She hovers hopefully in front of me when I go out and usually carries a half-peanut to store in the forestry some 300m away. It is very interesting to watch how her route varies, landing on different vantage trees each time. Presumably this avoids predation by Sparrowhawks, which I see regularly along the woodland edges of my fields. – *Hugh R Shepberd, Wolfhill, via Athy, Co Laois*

The ritual of counting birds has become part of our winter and we never tire of the fun of it. The highlight of this winter was the very relaxed visitation to our feeders by the Sparrowhawk – I saw her three times, and suspect I saw her handiwork another time when we found a considerable amount of blood and feathers on some stone paving. Oh dear! – *Sophia Leonard, Ballycanew, Gorey, Co Wexford*

It was the winter of tit species. Whenever I looked at the feeders there were several varieties of tits eating hungrily. The Long-tailed Tits never used feeders in my garden before and were a complete delight. I have also had a Goldcrest visiting the suet block, and the Song Thrush comes to the window for oats. A Blackbird has a passion for sultanas, the Blackcaps seem to be keeping to apples and ivy berries. I was worried to see such a drop in Greenfinch numbers. Siskins were also scarce, despite the cold weather. – *Anne O'Neill, Ballybooly, Mallow, Co Cork*

I saw what I thought was a Sparrowhawk in my small back garden in the middle of Blackrock yesterday morning, plucking and eating a sparrow! It had a sharp, curved beak and amber eyes, though it had darker underside colouring than the picture on your website. I also saw it in the air in the evening being pursued by a smaller bird. – *Dairine Walsh, Blackrock, Co Dublin*

My Greenfinches are all gone. In past winters I've had to count and recount to make sure I had the right number, and there were regularly six or seven all winter long. This year, I saw one early in the winter and that's it. Only one Siskin so far, too (I'd usually have up to nine), though I'm not giving up on them yet. It's definitely the Year of the Tit. – *Nicki Griffin, Caber, Co Clare*

As always, I found the survey very enjoyable. My garden is medium-sized and close to the North Circular Road in Dublin, and this was the most interesting winter yet. The cold weather had an impact in that we had visits from Redpolls and Siskins. One day, a flock of 30 Waxwings perched in a garden two doors away, but my efforts to lure them into my garden failed!

The addition of thistle seeds and black sunflower seeds boosted the number of Goldfinches to very high levels. Bullfinches were unusual in their absence, but the unprecedented visit of a Trecreeper to our city garden more than made up for this.

Last autumn we added a small wildlife pond to the garden, and we're hoping that next winter it will have matured enough to attract some new species. – *Brian, Cabra, Dublin 7*



### Greenfinches

Oran O'Sullivan

### Disease in Greenfinches

Greenfinches are known to be susceptible to a disease caused by a trichomonad parasite, which has been reported in finch species in gardens since 2005. The trichomonad parasite lives in the upper digestive tract of the bird, and its actions progressively block the bird's throat, making it unable to swallow food, thus killing it by starvation.

Birds with the disease show signs of general illness, for example lethargy and fluffed-up plumage. If trichomoniasis is suspected, it is recommended to temporarily stop putting out food, except in tit feeders, and to leave bird baths dry, for around two weeks, or until sick or dead birds are no longer found in the garden. This is in order to discourage birds from congregating together, which may increase the potential for disease spread between individuals.

No effective treatment can be administered to birds in the wild, because it is impossible to ensure that the infected individuals receive an adequate dose and that healthy birds do not pick up the medicine. It is advisable to reduce feeding and maintain hygiene precautions by making sure feeders are clean. – *(Information courtesy of RSPB)*

This was particularly noticeable last winter when we experienced prolonged harsh weather. Thus, garden bird numbers in general peaked quite late on in the survey, during late January, when Blackcaps, Siskins and other species pushed into gardens during the cold snap.

There was also evidence of hard-weather movements of birds, with Redwings and Fieldfares popping up in gardens after periods of snowfall. Redwings and Fieldfares are migratory thrushes and are winter visitors to Ireland, migrating from Scandinavia and Iceland from October.

Numbers of both these thrush species peaked in our gardens in early February, after the prolonged cold spell, when feeding opportunities in the countryside were restricted due to frozen soil.

Siskins in particular, tend not to show up in gardens until late winter, and often peak in early spring, usually as natural sources of food become depleted.

Unusual incidences in 2008/09 included Goldcrests using peanut and suet feeders and Long-tailed Tits joining the procession of tit species to feeders in greater numbers. This may have been prompted in part by the unusually cold weather, though Long-tailed Tits are also increasing strongly in numbers.

### Trends in garden birds over the last 15 years

The great wealth of data gathered over the last fifteen winters has made it possible to explore the health of our garden bird populations.

Garden bird surveyors widely reported a crash in Greenfinch numbers last winter, but our analysis of the survey results shows the crash actually began earlier, with massive rates of declines since 2005/06.

There has been an annual rate decline of 4% per year since 1994 (see panel, above, for possible reason for the decline).

In contrast, Long-tailed Tit has increased by 11% in the 15-year period – that's a highly significant increase by any standards – while Coal Tit has shown a more modest 2% increase.

### Acknowledgments

Thanks to all our participants and a special thank you to Lorylie Farrar, Kieran Flood, Ruth Gaj-McKeever, Lloyd Johnson-Barker and Sean Windsor who inputted the raw data and Olivia Crowe for analysis.

### Unusual visitors last winter

Some of the more unusual birds recorded by our garden bird surveyors last winter included:

**Little Egret** Featured in three gardens – the only way is up!

**Brent Geese** A feature of Dublin's parks and open spaces, they regularly grazed in one north Dublin garden adjacent to the sea.

**Woodcock** Probably pressed into gardens by cold weather, there were five records.

**Waxwing** Though well documented in reports from the eastern half of the country, they only made it into eight lucky surveyors' gardens.

**Crossbill** An irruptive species and conifer specialist, reported from just two gardens.