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Chaffinch. Photo: Andrew Kelly

# Garden Bird Survey results

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



As we celebrate BirdWatch Ireland's 50<sup>th</sup> year, it is also a big year for the **Irish Garden Bird Survey**. The survey began in winter 1989/90, initially focusing on birds using feeders before changing to

the current format in 1994/95, with a broader focus on all birds using the garden.

This coming winter is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the survey's beginnings. Given the big birthday year that is in it, please help us to make it a landmark year for the Irish Garden Bird Survey by getting your family, relations, friends and work colleagues to participate. I have no doubt they will enjoy taking part and getting to grips with what is going on in their gardens!

Last winter was punctuated by the infamous

'Beast from the East.' December and January were a bit wetter, duller and warmer than normal. February then was cold, sunny and dry for the most part, until a high-pressure system over Scandinavia pushed polar air across to Ireland. In short, it was cold and very, very snowy for a few days.

Amongst all the meteorological mayhem it was heart-warming to see how many people were eagerly seeking advice on how to get their garden birds through the worst of the weather. Our advice during particularly cold conditions, first and foremost, is to provide clean, unfrozen water. Also, a diversity of food sources in your garden will ensure no bird gets left out when it comes to feeding.

Without further ado, let's see how our garden birds fared in the 2017/18 Irish Garden Bird Survey....

## The top ten

There was no change at the top of the table - **Robin, Blackbird** and **Blue Tit** made up the Top 3, as they have done for over 20 years. Robins were recorded in every single one of the 806 gardens that we analysed!

**Chaffinch** came in 4<sup>th</sup> - again no change - followed by **Maggie** and **Great Tit** in a reversal of their 2016/17 rankings.

**Coal Tit** featured at 7<sup>th</sup>, while **Goldfinch** jumped from 11<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>. It will not surprise anyone to see that **House Sparrow** and **Wren** made up the final two of the top 10.

**Starling, Dunnock** and **Song Thrush** deserve honourable mentions too, having made an appearance in over 80% of gardens.

BRIAN BURKE

Coal Tit



## Your comments

Our birds are fat! They love horse food and chicken feed. I have seen Redwings, Fieldfares, Robins, Blackbirds, sparrows, Blue Tits and Chaffinches. Better than TV!" **Tracey Elizabeth Pullein** (via Facebook)

There was only a small number of Goldfinches coming for the sunflower hearts and these were being harassed by a female Blackcap that was like a Spitfire on the attack. The male Blackcap was much less wicked!"

**Anne O'Meara, Santry, Dublin 9**

Record number of species for our garden this year - 29 in total. Only one Greenfinch, but the Great and Coal Tit numbers seemed to be fine. Pied Wagtail and Wren were a lot more visible this year, and Goldcrests were in the garden during a number of weeks. We wonder how they and other insectivorous species coped with the cold weather and the big snowfall in the last week of the survey."

**Nuala and Tom Lynch, Ennis, Clare**

This was the first year with no Greenfinches. I used to have seven or eight at the feeders, then last year it was just one or two, but this winter I never saw any - very sad."

**Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar, Kinvara, Galway**

## 'Beast from the East'

Ninety-one species were recorded in gardens last winter, the joint highest for any year of the survey. Species such as **Meadow Pipit**, **Reed Bunting** and **Yellowhammer** all made their way into a much higher number of gardens than usual on account of the snow, as did several species of **gulls**.

Imagine the surprise, though, of the surveyors who saw birds like **Snipe** (in 51 gardens), **Lapwing** (12), **Golden Plover** (4) and **Woodcock** (3) in their gardens on a snowy February morning! These wader species tend to feed in wet grassland in the wider countryside, but the snowy conditions forced them to seek shelter and food in gardens. A truly bizarre sight, but one that illustrates the pressure that this kind of weather puts on our wildlife.

## Thrushes flock to gardens

As well as those more unusual species, other birds that occasionally visit gardens were present in much higher numbers during those few days of snow than in any of the preceding weeks. Both of our migratory thrush species, **Redwing** and **Fieldfare**, were recorded in five times as many gardens as in any other week of the survey. **Mistle Thrushes** were in twice as many gardens that week and **Song Thrushes** in 50% more. **Blackbird** numbers increased during the snow, too. Since these species feed on the ground, they came to gardens to take advantage of patches of grass under trees and hedgerows where there might not be any snow, as well as the food and water you put out for them.

## Finches fare well

Almost 7% of gardens were lucky enough to have a **Brambling** visit last winter. Bramblings are a finch species that breeds in Scandinavia and Siberia but small numbers spend the winter in Ireland, often joining **Chaffinch** flocks. In some winters they have been recorded in as few as 0.2% of gardens, but last year was the third best winter for them since the survey began. As you would expect, numbers were highest during the snow, when they appeared in 43 gardens compared to a maximum of seven gardens in other weeks.

For other members of the finch family, numbers were largely consistent across the winter, with **Chaffinch** in 93% of gardens, followed by **Goldfinch** (87%) and **Greenfinch** (70%). **Bullfinches** was at their highest level in 20 years (51% of gardens), while **Linnets** were at their second-highest level (11%). When it came to our two smallest finch species, just under half of gardens had **Siskins** and over a third had **Redpolls**.

## Tit family trends

Our tit species were ever-present throughout the winter, so there was no noticeable increase during the snow. Almost every garden had **Blue Tit** (99%), **Great Tit** (92%) and our native



Long-tailed Tit

COLIN RIGNEY

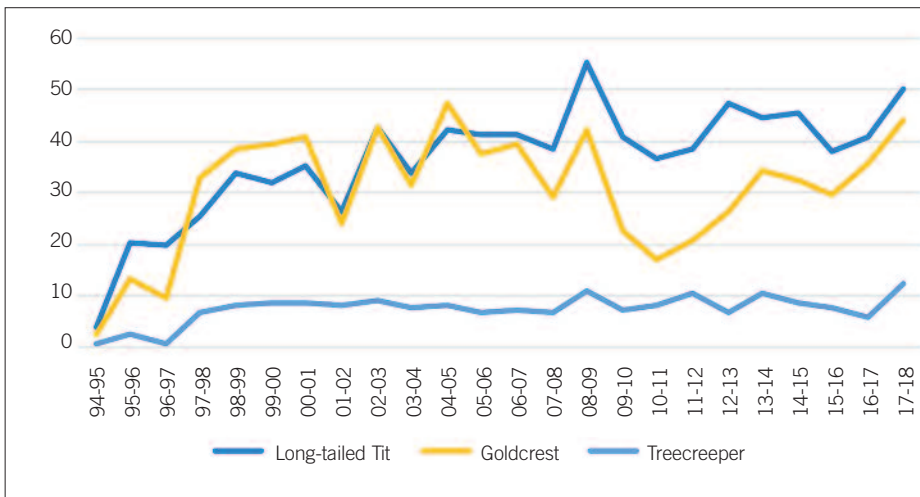
## Ireland's Top 40 Garden Birds in Winter 2017/18

The rankings from last winter compared with the rankings from the three previous winters.

Species	Percentage of gardens*	Rank 2017/18	Difference in rank between 16/17 & 17/18	Rank 2016/17	Rank 2015/16	Rank 2014/15
Robin	100.0	1	no change	1	1	1
Blackbird	99.1	2	no change	2	2	2
Blue Tit	98.8	3	no change	3	3	3
Chaffinch	93.2	4	no change	4	4	5
Magpie	92.6	5	↑ up 1	6	7	4
Great Tit	92.4	6	↓ down 1	5	5	6
Coal Tit	87.1	7	no change	7	6	8
Goldfinch	87.0	8	↑ up 3	11	8	9
House Sparrow	85.2	9	↓ down 1	8	10	7
Wren	83.9	10	↓ down 1	9	12	10
Starling	82.3	11		12	13	11
Dunnock	81.6	12	↓ down 2	10	11	12
Song Thrush	81.0	13	↑ up 3	16	16	15
Woodpigeon	71.7	14	↓ down 1	13	15	14
Greenfinch	70.2	15	no change	15	9	13
Jackdaw	68.5	16	↓ down 2	14	14	16
Rook	65.1	17	↑ up 1	18	17	17
Collared Dove	63.4	18	↓ down 1	17	18	18
Hooded Crow	58.3	19	no change	19	20	20
Pied Wagtail	55.0	20	no change	20	21	19
Bullfinch	51.4	21	no change	21	26	22
Long-tailed Tit	50.2	22	no change	22	25	21
Blackcap	49.3	23	no change	23	22	23
Siskin	46.7	24	↑ up 2	26	19	29
Goldcrest	44.0	25	↓ down 1	24	27	26
Redwing	44.0	26	↑ up 4	30	32	30
Lesser Redpoll	34.6	27	↑ up 1	28	23	25
Mistle Thrush	34.0	28	↓ down 1	27	29	27
Sparrowhawk	31.1	29	↓ down 4	25	24	24
Feral Pigeon	27.8	30	↓ down 1	29	28	28
Fieldfare	23.9	31	↑ up 1	32	36	33
Pheasant	15.4	32	↑ up 2	34	31	31
Grey Wagtail	15.3	33	↓ down 2	31	30	32
Treecreeper	12.5	34	↑ up 6	40	39	36
Linnet	11.3	35	↑ up 2	37	35	34
Buzzard	10.8	36	↓ down 3	33	37	37
Herring Gull	10.5	37	↓ down 1	36	34	35
Jay	9.3	38	↓ down 3	35	33	40
Snipe	7.6	39	↑ up 13	52	56	48
Brambling	6.8	40	↑ up 14	54	44	55

\* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2017/18





Occurrence (the percentage of gardens) of three different species over the years of the Garden Bird Survey from 1994 to present. These species often flock together and their fortunes are closely linked. All three were recorded in a high number of gardens last winter.

Irish subspecies of **Coal Tit** (87%).

**Long-tailed Tits** (a species not closely related to the other tits) in winter form roving flocks that often include **Goldcrests** and **Treecreepers**. All three species were recorded in particularly high numbers last winter. **Long-tailed Tits** were at their most prevalent in nine years (over 50% of gardens), while **Goldcrests** were at their highest in 13 years (44%) and **Treecreepers** at their highest ever levels (13%). Their numbers did not differ much during the snow, so their abundance must have been a result of a particularly good breeding season in 2017. Unfortunately, being small-bodied and largely insectivorous species, the cold spell is likely to have impacted their numbers in advance of the 2018 breeding season. Similarly, species like **Stonechat** and **Wren**, and maybe even **Robin** and **Dunnock**, will have been hit hard by the snow in certain locations, though may have managed to compensate to some extent with a good breeding season.

## Best of the rest

**Jays** were seen in over 9% of gardens, continuing a recent run of very good years.

**Kestrel** numbers dropped slightly from 6.1% to 5.3% of gardens, their lowest figure since the current format of the survey was adopted – a reflection of their continued national decline.

**Great Spotted Woodpeckers** were seen in 14 gardens last winter, compared to just four in 2016/17, and are likely to appear in even more gardens this coming winter on the back of a seemingly good breeding season.

## Conclusion

So there you have it – winter 2017/18 proved to be a very interesting one for many species and it really illustrated the importance of gardens to much of our wildlife during the harshest weather conditions. By planting or maintaining your trees and hedges, and by putting out food and water, you are giving those birds a helping hand when they need it the most.

Of course, last year's results do make us wonder what this winter will bring for our garden birds – so please make sure to take part and help us find out!

Over a thousand people took part in the survey last winter, with 806 gardens sending in

data for more than nine weeks – the crucial cut-off point for our data analysis to ensure that the results are as robust as possible. So if you miss a couple of weeks don't worry about it or give up, but do try and make it to the 10-week mark.

Last winter had the highest survey participation in five years, so a sincere thanks to all of the individuals, couples and families who contributed to this important bit of citizen science. The survey works best when we have a wide variety of garden sizes and locations on which to draw, so please do encourage your friends and family from all around the country to take part this year.

## Special thanks

Our sincere thanks to our **Dublin** and **Wicklow Branch** members who so generously gave of their time to help enter data from paper survey forms – we could not have done it without you!

Special thanks also to our new Garden Bird Survey sponsors, the **Ballymaloe Group** ■

## Your comments

“The 2017/18 survey period showed the highest number of species here for any year to date. The Great Black-backed Gull was a first. Blackcaps, Redwings, Goldcrests, Jackdaws, Starlings and Herring Gulls were up. Grey Wagtail and Linnet were absent, while Greenfinch, Siskin and Redpoll numbers were low.”

**Bob Aldwell, Blackrock, Dublin**

“Doing the garden bird survey each year encourages us to keep a close eye on the birds coming into our garden and I am sure that if it were not for the enjoyable challenge, we would miss a lot. It also encourages us to put out more variety of foods for the birds.”

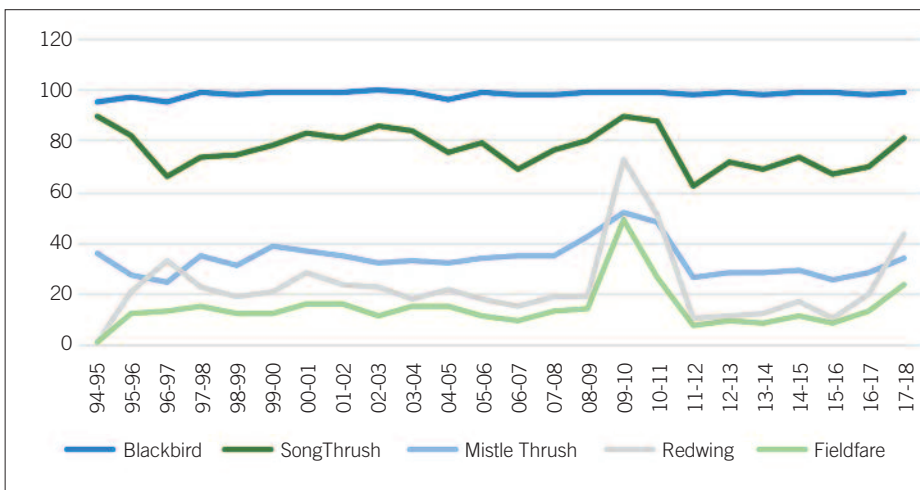
**Paul Cutler, Ballon, Carlow**

“The week of the 26<sup>th</sup> of February was the week we had snow and Storm Emma – so lots of birds arrived to pick under the hedges. Most surprising was a Snipe, which visited twice.”

**Margaret B Murphy, Ballincollig, Cork**

“... Then came the very cold weather and Linnets appeared out of nowhere. A Meadow Pipit made an appearance and as the snow under the apple trees began to thaw, Redwings moved in and turned over leaves in search of food.”

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



Occurrence (the percentage of gardens) of five thrush species over the years of the Garden Bird Survey from 1994 to present. Note the higher occurrence of thrush species in gardens in particularly cold winters.