

Greenfinch (adult female).
Photograph: Brian Burke

Greenfinch

The Greenfinch population has been assailed by a deadly, infectious disease. **Brian Burke** reports.

With the Greenfinch, it sometimes feels like a case of “you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone,” as Joni Mitchell’s song goes. Unlike the Chaffinch, whose population has been largely stable in recent years, or the Goldfinch, whose numbers have gone from strength to strength, the Greenfinch has undergone rapid and worrying declines and is now on the amber list of birds of conservation concern in Ireland. Indeed, the humble Greenfinch has had a tough time in the last ten years.

It doesn’t have the same eye-catching colours as some of its finch cousins, but the Greenfinch is an impressive bird nonetheless. Males are an olive-green colour, with yellowish-green on the breast, and bright yellow in the wings and tail. The female and juveniles, by comparison, are duller and lack the flashes of yellow of the male.

Within the finch family (the Fringillidae) they’re with the other specialised seed-eaters in the Carduelinae subfamily – separate to the chaffinches (Fringillinae subfamily) and the neotropical Euphoniinae.

In terms of size, they’re a bit bigger than either Chaffinch or Goldfinch, with a longer wingspan too. Their song is a jumble of bubbly notes and trilling rattles, often characterised by a wheezy ‘dzweee’ sound.

The Greenfinch has a thick, conical bill, akin to that of a Bullfinch, a special adaptation for feeding on a variety of seeds, including those from the berries of Hawthorn, Blackberry and Yew, as well as the seeds within rose hips, which are too tough for smaller-billed species.

Historically, Greenfinch would have been a bird of the woodland edge, but as garden-feeding increased in popularity Greenfinches were well-equipped to make short work of peanuts and sunflower seeds.

Factfile

Common name: Greenfinch

Scientific name: *Carduelis chloris*

Irish name: Glasán Darach

Other names: Green Linnet, Green Bull

Occurrence: Resident all year round, with the addition of Scandinavian migrants in winter.

Population size: Estimated around 830,000 up to 2010, though numbers likely to have decreased since to <650,000.

Conservation status: Amber-listed in Ireland owing to scale of recent population decline.

In our **Garden Bird Survey** in the late 1990s and early 2000s Greenfinches held 7th position in the rankings table in a number of years and rose to as high as 5th in 1996/97 and 1997/98, ahead of species such as Great Tit and Magpie.

In Ireland, Greenfinches are largely resident, though some birds do visit us for the winter from Scandinavia. Their natural range covers all of Europe and parts of north Africa and south-west Asia, and they’ve been introduced to some far-flung places, including Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Uruguay.

Greenfinches nest in dense foliage along woodland edges, in hedgerows or in evergreen trees, including Yew and Leyland Cypress. The

Greenfinch at bird feeder. **Photo:** Cólín MacLochláinn



female builds a large, untidy nest from twigs, grass and moss, two to five metres above the ground, and either against the trunk or on a sturdy forked branch.

Greenfinches often nest together in loose colonies of 4-6 pairs. They usually have two, if not three, broods per year, so can be found nesting as late as September. With this in mind, proposed changes to legislation to allow for hedge-cutting in August could prove seriously detrimental to the population.

As with many of our other songbirds, agricultural intensification has been an ongoing threat to the Greenfinch for some decades now, through the removal of nesting and feeding opportunities in the wider countryside. That being said, it's not the main driver of Greenfinch declines in recent years.

Our birds and biodiversity in general face large-scale threats, with various pressures reducing nesting space, or increasing the risks of predation, making it difficult for birds to feed chicks or to put on sufficient weight to migrate or survive a cold winter.

Trichomoniasis

As if that's not enough of a battle, Greenfinches have something else to contend with – the single-celled *Trichomonas gallinae* parasite. Greenfinches aren't the only birds that can be infected – it causes 'canker' in pigeons and doves, and 'frounce' in birds of prey, and is even thought to have been a problem for the dinosaurs. The symptoms vary in severity depending on the age and health of the bird and the strain of the parasite, and many pigeons, gamebirds and raptors will survive infection.

In 2005, there were large and sudden die-offs of Greenfinches and Chaffinches as a result of a specific strain of *Trichomonas gallinae*. It is thought that increasing numbers of pigeons and finches in UK gardens since the early 1990s increased the opportunity for the parasite to move into new host species as they fed side-by-side on feeders or drank from the same water dishes. The end result was widespread infection of finch flocks with trichomoniasis, which almost always results in death. Greenfinches and Chaffinches are the species that have been most frequently affected, but

the disease has also been documented in other garden bird species, including House Sparrow, Dunnock, Great Tit and Siskin.

The parasite is transmitted between finches via their saliva at shared food and water sources, when feeding chicks or when feeding their mate during courtship. The parasite colonises the back of the throat in an infected bird, progressively narrowing the digestive tract and making it increasingly difficult for it to swallow food or water; this eventually results in starvation.

In the UK, the breeding population of Greenfinches dropped by 1.5 million (to 2.8 million) in a few years and numbers visiting gardens dropped by half. Chaffinches were also impacted at regional level, but their numbers subsequently recovered.

Within a couple of years finch trichomoniasis was recorded in Ireland, Sweden, Germany and Finland, having been spread by migrating birds in autumn and spring. The Irish breeding Greenfinch population is now half of what it was 12 years ago, before the impact of trichomoniasis. Before 2007, Greenfinches were present in around 90% of gardens in the Garden Bird Survey each winter; but this has since dropped to 75-80% of gardens in recent years.

Winter flocks in gardens used to number 5-7 birds, but now they only come to feeders in twos or threes, if at all. Indeed, much of the correspondence we get from Garden Bird Survey participants centres on the long-term absence of Greenfinches or their very welcome return after several months or years of absence.



Greenfinch afflicted by trichomoniasis. Photo: C  il  n MacLochlainn

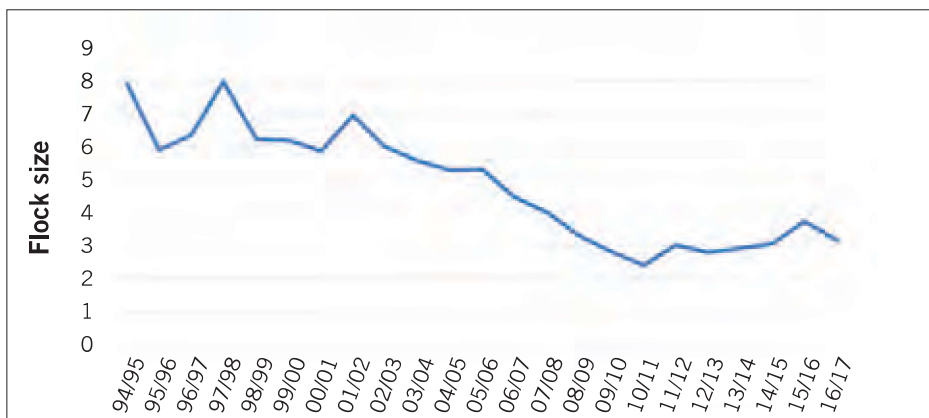
Though there is no treatment for infected birds, you can do your bit to minimise the risk of the infection spreading. If you see any birds in your garden with fluffed-up feathers, that appear to be having difficulty eating or swallowing, or that are generally slower and more lethargic than they should be, you probably have an infected bird.

Garden hygiene

The best thing to do is to remove all feeders and water baths from the garden and clean them in a mild bleach solution. The *Trichomonas* parasite doesn't survive well outside the host, particularly in dry conditions, so leave your feeders and water dishes to air-dry after cleaning. We recommend that you hold off from feeding birds in your garden for at least two weeks afterwards. This will encourage them to seek food elsewhere and give the healthy birds a chance to separate from any infected individuals. Many people are reluctant to stop feeding their garden birds, but in this case it is unfortunately necessary.

Let's not get too pessimistic, it should be noted that Greenfinch trends in the summer (Countryside Bird Survey) and winter (Garden Bird Survey) have stabilised in the last few years. Looking to the future, it is likely that localised outbreaks of trichomoniasis will become an unfortunate but regular feature of Greenfinch ecology – numbers and densities of birds in an area will increase, which will in turn increase the risk of infection, causing numbers to drop until a few birds are left and the cycle repeats itself.

So, while numbers in your area may be down from one year to the next, rest assured that numbers somewhere else are likely to be on the increase, and with a bit of luck numbers at national level will remain somewhat constant into the future ■



Average Greenfinch flock size in gardens has fallen over the years of the winter Garden Bird Survey.