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Blackbird. Photo: Brian Burke

Garden Bird Survey results

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



Last year was the 30th year of the **Irish Garden Bird Survey**, and it proved to be a record-breaking year! Over 1,600 households took part across the country, the highest number in the survey's history. For

some of you, taking part in the survey has become a firm winter tradition in your house, and, for others, last year was your first year taking part.

Feedback, as ever, was enthusiastic and the main question from new participants was "Why didn't I do this before?!" If you're thinking of taking part for the first time, the survey is very straightforward and gets a little addictive as the winter goes on. If you have taken part before, why not take the chance to introduce a family member, friend, neighbour or co-worker to get involved this year? I promise they'll thank you for it!

The reason long-term surveys like this are so important is because every year is different. Last year, I reported on the results from winter 2017/18, which was punctuated by the 'Beast from the East' that had a noticeable effect on the numbers and species of birds visiting Irish gardens.

Last winter, 2018/19, couldn't have been more different. It was the warmest winter on record in many parts of the country and drier than average in most areas too. There were some stormy periods, but conditions were fairly

Special thanks

The fantastic response to last winter's survey meant there were stacks of garden bird counts to get into our database, so a sincere thanks to all of the following for their help with data entry:

B Hamilton, C Cullen, D Long, E Green, E Keane, E McGillion, K Harding, M McLoughlin Beck, M Daly, MJ O'Farrell, S Doyle, T Morgan, P Craven, J Lennon

mild overall. Some snow touched down in parts in early February, but nothing comparable to the previous winter. Just as the unseasonably mild weather will have influenced your activities on a daily basis last winter, it did the same for our feathered friends.

Top of the list

The bird that appeared in most Irish gardens last year was the **Robin**, closely followed by **Blackbird** and **Blue Tit**. There are many ups and downs in the rankings table from year to year, but for the last nine years the top three have remained remarkably consistent.

Will Robin make it a record ten years at the top this winter? Only time will tell, but if anyone is going to beat them then my money is on the Blackbird. In the last 25 years Blackbird has been the only species to beat Robin to top spot – four times, most recently in 2009/10.

Robin, Blackbird and **Blue Tit** were seen in over 96% of Irish gardens last winter, though

Your comments

“This was the best year ever for birds. I have been doing the survey for many years but never had such an interesting variety.”

Valerie McGrath, Dublin

“Once again I enjoyed taking part in the garden bird survey. This year was the year of the Rook in my garden, visiting to feed in large numbers.”

Gemma Donovan, Tipperary

“I saw my first ever Yellowhammer when one visited my garden recently. A truly beautiful bird.”

Pat Doyle, Carlow

“This year, no Blackcaps, Redwings, Greenfinches or Siskins, but it was a very mild winter. The Goldfinches are multiplying as you look at them. But I do put down a pint of nyjer seed and a pint of sunflower hearts every morning.”

Robert Salter-Townshend, Cork

“In twenty years of participating, we recorded two firsts this year in our urban garden: our first Brambling and a failure to record any Great Tits.”

John & Miriam Brennan, Dublin

Your comments

“We noticed there were not as many small birds feeding here as in other years. Perhaps the weather was milder.”

Eilís, Sisters of Charity, Cork

“A mild winter meant no major surprises. It’s sad to see so few Greenfinches again. Now sparrows have taken over, but we love their chatter!”

Sophia Leonard, Wexford

“Greenfinches totally vanished fairly suddenly over the last eight years.”

Paul W Eustace, Mayo

“I had 27 species this year, one up on previous years, a lonely Pheasant.”

Anne O’Meara, Dublin

each occurred in a lower proportion of gardens on average, due to the mild weather.

The rest of the top 10 looks very familiar, with **Chaffinch** (4th) and **Magpie** (5th) in over 90% of gardens, followed closely by **Great Tit** (6th). **House Sparrow** moved up two places, reaching 7th place for only the third time. The upward movement of the House Sparrow is largely at the expense of the **Coal Tit**, which fell to its lowest placing (9th) in eight years. Sandwiched between them is the **Goldfinch**, holding firmly on to 8th place. It’s remarkable to think that, in the mid-1990s, less than 20% of gardens were lucky enough to get one each winter, but now over 80% of us are treated to a ‘charm’ of Goldfinches on our feeders.

Rounding off the top 10 Irish garden birds for 2018/19 is the **Starling**, relegating the humble **Wren** to 11th place. It would be easy to take Starlings for granted, but Ireland is one of the few countries in north-west Europe where their numbers are doing well. Each winter evening your garden Starlings join up with hundreds and thousands of Starlings from tens of kilometres around and head to a local roost (often a reedbed or woodland) where they perform the mesmerising ‘murmurations’ that they are famous for – well worth seeking one out this winter!

Putting it mildly

Though there was minimal change in the top 10, each of the above species (except Starling) was present in a lower percentage of gardens than usual. The calm and mild winter had a more noticeable effect, though, further down the table.

Gaining ground were many of the bigger species – the pigeons and crows. **Woodpigeon** moved up one place to 13th, **Collared Dove** up two to 16th, and **feral pigeon** moved up three to 27th.

Similarly, both **Jackdaw** and **Rook** moved up



Sparrowhawk feeding on pigeon prey

two places to 14th and 15th, respectively, occurring in two-thirds of gardens each.

Hooded Crows, too, appeared in more than half of gardens, remaining in 19th place.

Outside the top 30, the most striking, colourful and arguably unexpected member of the crow family – the **Jay** – moved up a whopping six places to 32nd in the rankings.

The Jay is one of only four birds that have a

distinct **Irish subspecies**, and it has undergone a predominantly increasing trend (with some fluctuation) in Irish gardens over the last 25 years.

Fluctuating finches

Worryingly, **Greenfinch** dropped three places to 18th – its lowest ever ranking. It’s not clear if this was predominantly due to weather

Ireland’s Top 30 Garden Birds in Winter 2018/19

The rankings from last winter compared with the rankings from previous years.

Species	Occurrence in gardens*	Rank in 2018/19	Change from 2017/18 rank	5-year average (14/15-18/19)
Robin	99.6%	1	No change	99.8%
Blackbird	97.8%	2	No change	98.9%
Blue Tit	96.8%	3	No change	97.8%
Chaffinch	91.2%	4	No change	93.5%
Magpie	90.6%	5	No change	92.1%
Great Tit	89.4%	6	No change	92.5%
House Sparrow	83.7%	7	↑ Up 2	84.7%
Goldfinch	83.4%	8	No change	84.6%
Coal Tit	80.9%	9	↓ Down 2	86.7%
Starling	79.7%	10	↑ Up 1	79.5%
Wren	75.8%	11	↓ Down 1	80.8%
Dunnock	70.9%	12	No change	78.6%
Woodpigeon	70.8%	13	↑ Up 1	72.2%
Jackdaw	69.4%	14	↑ Up 2	71.1%
Rook	64.0%	15	↑ Up 2	65.4%
Collared Dove	63.4%	16	↑ Up 2	64.7%
Song Thrush	61.8%	17	↓ Down 4	70.8%
Greenfinch	59.6%	18	↓ Down 3	72.2%
Hooded Crow	54.7%	19	No change	56.5%
Pied Wagtail	48.9%	20	No change	52.1%
Blackcap	42.9%	21	↑ Up 2	44.0%
Siskin	40.8%	22	↑ Up 2	40.7%
Bullfinch	32.9%	23	↓ Down 2	41.4%
Lesser Redpoll	32.6%	24	↑ Up 3	34.0%
Long-tailed Tit	32.4%	25	↓ Down 3	41.4%
Sparrowhawk	31.7%	26	↑ Up 3	34.0%
Feral Pigeon	25.0%	27	↑ Up 3	27.1%
Mistle Thrush	23.1%	28	No change	28.1%
Goldcrest	20.0%	29	↓ Down 4	32.3%
Pheasant	15.4%	30	↑ Up 2	13.7%

* Percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded in 2018/19

Identification tips

Most of the birds in your garden will be easily identifiable with the help of a bird book, but if you ever get stuck just get in touch with us and we'll be happy to help you figure out what bird it is. A good rule of thumb is that the more common a bird is, the more likely it is to turn up in a garden. Some species look similar but not all are likely to turn up in gardens.

For example:

- Twites rarely ever visit gardens but they look very like Linnets and Redpolls, both of which are garden regulars.
- The most likely gull species to visit gardens are Herring Gulls (large) and Black-headed Gulls (medium-sized, red bill).

- Pied Wagtails (black, white and grey) are common across the country, whereas Grey Wagtails (yellow and grey) are river specialists that rarely visit gardens.
- The Garden Warbler, which spends the winter in Africa, looks very similar to the female Blackcap, which turns up in many Irish gardens each winter.
- House Sparrows are one of our most common garden birds, but very few gardens get the much less common Tree Sparrow.
- Goldcrests are native to Ireland and males have some orange in their crest, making them appear similar to Firecrests, which don't really occur in Ireland.

Likely	Unlikely
Linnet, Redpoll	Twite
Pied Wagtail (black & white & grey)	Grey Wagtail (yellow & grey)
Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull	Common Gull
Blackcap	Garden Warbler
House Sparrow	Tree Sparrow
Goldcrest	Firecrest

factors or the continued prevalence of the disease **trichomoniasis** that has decimated their numbers in recent years. The fact that many of the other finch species fared well in 2018/19 would suggest the latter; and you'll see on your survey form that we're asking for additional information about sick finches in your garden this winter.

Siskin (22nd) and **Redpoll** (24th) moved up two and three places, respectively. The latter two small finches are present in very few gardens early in the winter; but numbers build into January and February as their natural food sources become depleted and they turn to peanuts and seeds in gardens to see them through the spring.

Linnet, too, showed a positive trend (up two to 33rd), while **Bullfinch** dropped two places to 23rd.

Thrushes, raptors and gulls

The mild weather meant our thrush species weren't under the same pressure as the previous winter; and numbers in gardens actually dropped below the five-year average for **Song Thrush** (down four to 17th), **Mistle Thrush** (28th), **Redwing** (down five to 31st) and **Fieldfare** (down six to 37th).

Sparrowhawks (26th) were recorded in just under a third of gardens, **Buzzards** (35th) in almost 10% and **Kestrels** (42nd) in nearly 5% – each ranking higher in 2018/19 than the year before.

Last year, **Herring Gulls** (38th) were recorded in 7.5% of gardens and **Black-headed Gulls** (44th) in 3.9%, both down a bit from the previous year. These are the two gull species most likely to visit gardens, so if you think you have a different species of gull, please do double-check to be absolutely sure.

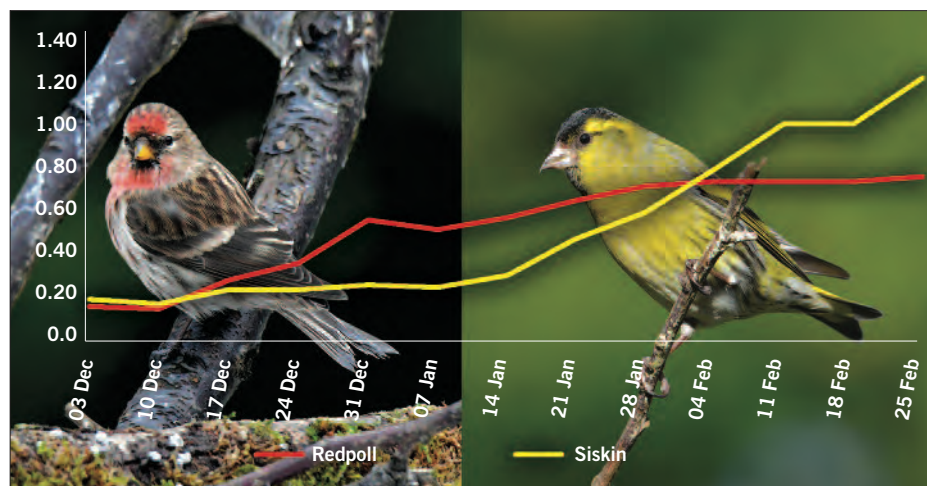
This coming winter

So there you have it – the positively pleasant winter of 2018/19 resulted in a lot of changes to the birds visiting Irish gardens. Overwinter survival is one of the key factors limiting many bird populations, which is why making your garden and local area suitable for wildlife by providing food and shelter (i.e., trees and shrubs) can make all the difference to the birds and wildlife in your locality.

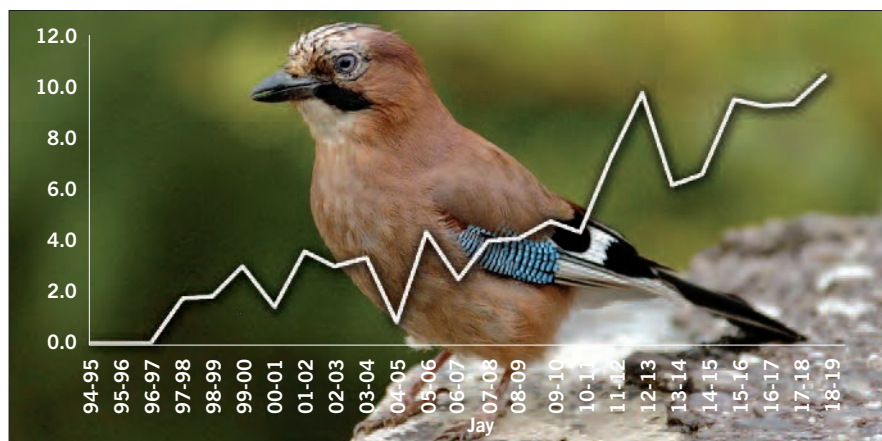
To date, we have over 2.8 million garden bird records in our database through this survey, including over 200,000 from last year alone. The more people that take part the more robust our conclusions can be, so do encourage a family member, neighbour, friend or co-worker who enjoys nature as much as you do to take part this year.

I hope you're looking forward to taking part again this winter – I know I am!

SPONSOR Our thanks to the **Ballymaloe Group** for their continued sponsorship of the **Irish Garden Bird Survey** ■



Weekly occurrence (average number per garden per week) of Siskin and Redpoll during the 2018/19 Irish Garden Bird Survey. Numbers remain low throughout December but increase significantly through January and into February each winter. These small finches often avail of nyjer and sunflower seeds in feeders.



Annual occurrence (percentage of gardens) of Jays over the last 25 years of the Irish Garden Bird Survey. This colourful member of the corvid (crow) family has shown an increasing trend since the survey began.