



Adult male Goldfinch (left) and juvenile Blue Tit (right) during ringing in Brian Burke's garden in Wicklow. **Photographs:** Brian Burke

Ringing tales: garden birds

In the fourth in our series about bird ringing, BirdWatch Ireland's **Brian Burke** discusses his own ringing efforts in his Wicklow garden

My personal passion is for visiting busy tern and gull colonies with a view to learning more about them through ringing. However, I actually spend much more time each year ringing passerines in my garden. Having moved to a new house in August 2019, I recently completed a year of ringing in my new garden. Here's how that first year went...

■ Why ring garden birds?

It's easy to appreciate the value in ringing rare or endangered birds, but why would we bother ringing common species? Surely we know everything there is to know about them? Well, that's not the case! Our bird populations are constantly in flux – distributions are changing at small and large scales, numbers increase and decrease based on habitat changes and weather conditions, new species arrive (e.g. **Great Spotted Woodpecker**), common species begin to thrive (e.g. **Goldfinch** increases) and well-established species face new problems (e.g. **Greenfinch** declines).

So, we need to be paying attention to our common species, because they arguably provide a greater insight into environmental change than the rare species. Much of the data we have from ringing comes from Britain and other countries, but the Irish populations of many species behave differently to their counterparts elsewhere, so it's important to have data from Ireland to know exactly what's going on here specifically.

■ What is my garden like?

I live in north Wicklow, between the mountains and the coast. The garden itself is small but surrounded by organic farmland and large areas of mixed woodland, both of which support a huge range of biodiversity throughout the year. The abundance of birds visiting my garden therefore reflects the very high quality of the habitat around it. Every garden is different, and ringers in other parts of the country will get very different results to mine.

Birds ringed in Wicklow garden, October 2019-September 2020

Rank	Species	Individuals ringed	Re-caught	Peak daily catch
1	Blue Tit	119	121	29
2	Goldfinch	82	21	21
3	Great Tit	69	67	17
4	Chaffinch	66	13	11
5	Greenfinch	39	7	9
6	Coal Tit	34	53	16
7	Robin	17	12	4
8	Dunnock	13	14	3
9	Blackbird	10	1	2
10	Siskin	8	0	3
All	26 species*	507	315	

* Also ringed: Blackcap (7 new, 0 recaptures), Jackdaw (6,0), Bullfinch (6,3), Wren (5,0), Long-tailed Tit (4,0), Goldcrest (4,1), Song Thrush (3,0), Willow Warbler (3,0), Jay (2,0), Long-eared Owl (2,0), Great Spotted Woodpecker (2,2), Rook (2,0), Mistle Thrush (1,0), Chiffchaff (1,0), Treecreeper (1,0), Sparrowhawk (1,0).

■ What birds did I ring?

See the table above for the species ringed in my garden in the twelve months to September 2020. You might assume that the handful of **Blue Tits** on your feeders is the same handful you see in your garden all year; but by ringing them we can see that often that is not the case.

Bird numbers in my garden were lowest during the summer months, as the only birds present were those nesting in the immediate



Steve Newton (left) and Brian Burke with two Long-eared Owls that were rehabilitated by Kildare Animal Foundation: they are about to ring and release them. **Photo:** Brian Burke Collection



From left: mist net slung between poles; Brian extracting bird from net; ringing and measuring equipment; taking Blue Tit measurements. **Photos:** Brian Burke

area, but from August onwards numbers increased, as fledglings wandered further from their nest sites and adults stopped thinking about guarding a territory and prioritised finding a reliable food source for the winter.

Peak numbers for most species are in the coldest months, November to March, when there's very little food left in the countryside, and the numbers here show that you're helping a lot more birds than you realise when putting out food over the winter.

■ Why catch them again?

A lot of data is collected when a bird is ringed, but really the aim is to catch or see that bird again to provide further data on known individuals – on how long they live, or whether they return to the same areas each year, and so on.

Birds that stay in the vicinity of the garden are more likely to be caught again, so those with higher recapture rates are more likely to be local birds (e.g. tits) and those that might only be passing through have fewer recaptures (e.g. finches).

Within the tit family, some of the same individuals were re-caught again in most months and so must have been nesting within a few hundred metres of the garden. Others, though, were caught twelve months after first being ringed, so were obviously just winter visitors.

Some of the finches ringed in winter 2019 have only re-appeared in the garden again in the last few weeks, begging the question: where have they been since? (see more, page 26).

There is the hope that the birds I've ringed will be caught by another ringer elsewhere, thus providing yet more data on their movements and migrations. Sometimes it happens that a member of

the public finds a dead bird, notices it has a leg ring on it and reports it. Two **Goldfinches** ringed in my garden in June 2020 were found by members of the public in autumn and winter – one in Kent, England (538 km away) and the other in Monmouthshire in Wales (258 km away).

Most Irish-breeding **Goldfinches** stay here throughout their lives, but the above record proves that some cross the Irish Sea. Perhaps those on the east coast are more likely to make that journey than those in the midlands or west? We need to do more ringing to find out!



Female Great Spotted Woodpecker ringed in the garden. **Photo:** Brian Burke

■ What next for garden ringing?

As I do more ringing, I'll be able to compare data between years. Already it's clear that there are significantly more tits this year, particularly **Coal Tits**, so it seems that the 2020 breeding season was better than 2019.

The 2020/2021 winter has been quite cold, so I'll be interested to see if smaller species I've ringed – including **Wren**, **Goldcrest** and **Long-tailed Tit** – are caught again (i.e. did they survive the cold?).

Really, though, bird ringing is a 'big data' exercise. The results from my garden are interesting, but it's only when we pool data from all Irish gardens over many years, and compare and contrast with results from the UK and further afield, that we really get an insight into how their populations differ by habitat, region, annual weather and by longer-term climate change.

For over a hundred years, ringing has provided a deep insight into the lives of our common and rare bird species, and we still have plenty more to learn!

Bird ringing is a science that has been developed and honed over the last hundred years and requires years of training and licenses from the **BTO** and **NPWS** to carry out. If you're interested in learning more, see: www.bit.ly/BTOinfo ■



From left: Siskin, Tree Creeper and Jay. Ringers can tell the age of a bird (adult or born last summer) for most species by looking at the wing and tail feathers. **Photos:** Brian Burke