

## Winter Garden Bird Count 2014/15 and earlier

So far this winter we have recorded 44 species of bird within the garden precincts of Turvey Abbey. This compares favourably with previous years but with some interesting differences.

The top ten (ie most frequently recurring) have largely remained the same since 2002 but with Greenfinch and Chaffinch showing a dramatic decline.

In 2002 Greenfinch occurred in every week of the winter season, and Chaffinch in only one week less. This year, and for the past two years at least, their frequency has halved since 2002, and if we go even further back the number of individuals has also been in steep decline. In 1990, for example, up to a dozen Chaffinch could be found together feeding below the Yew trees at the front, but this winter most records have been of single birds. And as recently as 2005 flocks of 40 or 50 Greenfinch were coming into roost in the Holly trees at the rear of the monastery. This year we were lucky to see two or three birds together anywhere in the grounds.

This decline in both species is most likely the result of the disease trichomonosis which the birds catch when they congregate at dirty bird tables. The birds are caught in a double whammy here as they need the food put out at bird tables to offset the loss of food in the wider and, ironically perhaps, ever 'cleaner' countryside.

Other birds showing signs of long term decline include Starlings and House Sparrows. In 1989 up to a dozen Starling would descend on the bird table en masse and drive off all the other birds, they seemed to be the real thugs of the bird world, but not any more – it's several years since we've seen any at the birdtable at all.

House Sparrow occasionally visited in the past, and we can hear them just across the road, but they too have deserted the bird table. One other notable absentee is the Pied Wagtail. Present in twelve weeks in 2001/2 but only seen in three weeks this winter. It favours the moss covered roofs of the guesthouse and the sunny side of the tower. This too is a bird in general decline.

Goldfinches, in contrast, are doing very well. None were recorded in the early years, as far as I remember, and birds occurred in only four weeks in the winter of 2001/2002. This year the frequency has increased to at least

14 weeks and is part of a general upsurge attributed to the more widespread availability of specialist garden foods. For us it's the Teasels that do it.

One bird we can be particularly proud of is the Marsh Tit. We may well be the last remaining garden in Bedfordshire to feature this as both a summer and a winter bird. It has maintained its regularity of appearance throughout and is particularly fond of Burdock.

In case you are wondering, the top ten birds for this winter period have been: Blue Tit, Blackbird, Robin, Great Tit, Dunnock, Magpie, Wood Pigeon and Jackdaw, all of which were recorded in every week, followed by Wren in 17 weeks and Nuthatch in 16.

Br. John