

Winter Garden Bird Survey

For the first time we have had a go at the Bedfordshire Winter Garden Birds Survey, and it has been a very interesting discipline – with 33 species recorded to date coming into the garden to feed. On the monk's side we have deliberately handicapped ourselves by not running a bird table this year, but putting feed out for the chickens and keeping a compost heap going have done almost just as well. I say 'almost' because two species which have been present almost every day, and have been regular visitors to our bird table in the past, have hardly ever been seen to feed anywhere else in the garden, and these are the Starling and the Collared Dove. A 'rabbit cropped' lawn is evidently insufficient for them. Nor have we had a single sighting of either House Sparrow or Carrion Crow in the garden itself, though there are still a few 'hotspots' in the village for the former and plenty of the latter in the surrounding countryside.

The most regular visitors have been Blue and Great Tits, Wood Pigeon, Magpies, Jackdaws, Blackbirds, Robins, Greenfinches and Dunnocks: all of these occurring in every week of the survey so far. The least common has been the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker with one record only. In between we have the following:

17 weeks Chaffinch	7 weeks Sparrowhawk
16 weeks Long Tailed Tit	7 weeks Pheasant
13 weeks Mistle Thrush	7 weeks Greater Spotted Woodpecker
13 weeks Nuthatch	6 weeks Goldcrest
13 weeks Wren	5 weeks Grey Wagtail
12 weeks Pied Wagtail	4 weeks Green Woodpecker
12 weeks Coal Tit	3 weeks Goldfinch
12 weeks Song Thrush	3 weeks Collared Dove
11 weeks Treecreeper	2 weeks Tawny Owl
9 weeks Redwing	2 weeks Fieldfare
8 weeks Marsh Tit	2 weeks Starling
8 weeks Bullfinch	

If there is a pattern it seems to be that many birds were either more obvious, or more abundant, before Christmas than since. This could be for several reasons. Firstly, as winter progresses fewer birds survive. Secondly, the abundant fruit of autumn concentrates birds in a few particular places where they are easier to observe. And thirdly, woodland species in particular also concentrate in large flocks to not only

find food more easily but also for mutual protection. All three reasons are of course closely related. This meant that thrushes, for example, were often to be seen before Christmas gorging themselves on Yew and Holly berries in particular. At one stage the Yew tree opposite my window was crawling with Redwings and Blackbirds, as well as a flock of Greenfinch, a Song Thrush and a Starling, and a rather demented pair of Mistle Thrush still trying to defend their winter territory. At the bottom of the garden, meanwhile, a large flock of Tits could be heard working their way from tree to tree. This flock was usually led by the Long -Tailed Tits, closely followed by a mix of Blue and Great Tits, with the occasional Coal and Marsh Tit, and often a Tree Creeper or Nuthatch or Great Spotted Woodpecker. Goldcrests were also sometimes present but are becoming easier to record now as they begin to sing. One worrying disappearance has been that of the Wren – almost taken for granted earlier but now, possibly because of the cold December, much harder to find.



Br. John