

Garden Bird Survey

This year's garden bird survey – on behalf of the Bedfordshire Bird Club - makes an interesting contrast with the one undertaken in 2006. We still have a few weeks to run but already there are some significant differences. We are one ahead in the total number of species so far seen, with Crossbill making it 47 species for this year. We had a party of these last year at about the same time, quite possibly juveniles dispersing from their breeding grounds in East Anglia. Other recent 'exotics' have included both Common Whitethroat and a Garden Warbler. Strictly speaking we are well into autumn now and just about anything can turn up. The Whitethroat was trapped under the net protecting the cabbages and the Garden Warbler was with a flurry of Long-tailed Tits which always attract a range of hangers on as they do their rounds. This flock also included a Chiffchaff, a Coal Tit and the ever- faithful Blue Tit. We've also had a Willow Warbler on a couple of occasions, given away by its song or its pale legs. In 2006 the wanderers included a Hawfinch in March and a Kingfisher in July. Not every bird is eligible for a garden survey: there must be at least a suspicion of using the garden for feeding, or attempting to feed, for this to apply. I tend to err on the side of probability. Gulls or a Yellow Wagtail flying over, for example, but not landing, are not counted but most of the birds of prey are. The commonest of these over the Abbey is now the Buzzard, and they have been seen perched in trees in the garden as well as circling with intent! We have plenty of Rabbits for them. Red Kite are also now regular and were not present in 2006. They are often quite high but are constantly scanning the ground, and on occasion come over at roof-top level. Sparrowhawk have been a lot less frequent this year and generally seem to be struggling. Single Kestrels were commoner than most years but largely because I think a pair bred nearby. The general trend for them is also downwards. We did, however, have a Barn Owl on a couple of occasions for the first time, though they have bred nearby for quite a few years now.

As for the general run- of- the- mill residents there does seem to have been fewer around of several species, especially at the height of the season, or should I say, in the depths of the rainy season which now seems to becoming a summer norm. This was in quite a contrast to the much warmer and drier weather of 2006. This applies to the finches especially. Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Goldfinch were all noticeably absent at times. As also were Long-

tailed Tits and Coal Tits. Two species not seen at all this year were Pied Wagtail and Treecreeper. Both, perhaps, hit hard by the cold of last winter. Starlings and House Sparrows are now simply not expected in the Abbey Grounds in contrast to a few years ago when up to ten pairs of Starling nested in and around the buildings, and House Sparrows at least visited more often from the village. Spotted Flycatcher figured in neither survey when formerly one or two pairs were a feature of the Abbey grounds. Insecticides and herbicides may be accounting for the former and habitat loss elsewhere for the latter.

But all is not doom and gloom. We've had a good late run of Swallows and House Martins and, although fewer, the Swifts are now with us longer, four still present in August on 19th and a pair still feeding nearby on 31st.

Br. John