

RAVEN AND BUZZARD AMONG STARS AT MIDWINTER BIRDTABLES

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, reports on findings from Winter 2000/2001, the 31st winter in the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey, and reflects on changes in faces, status and aspects of behaviour at UK birdtables.

CUERVOS Y RATONEROS ENTRE LOS PROTAGONISTAS DE LOS COMEDEROS INVERNALES

El investigador del BTO *David Glue* informa sobre los resultados del invierno 2000-2001, el invierno número 31 del Programa de Aves en Comederos de Jardín, y examina los cambios en las caras, el estatus y la conducta de las aves en los comederos del Reino Unido.

LE CORBEAU ET LA BUSE VARIABLE PARMIS LES STARS DES MANGEOIRES EN MILIEU D'HIVER

Le biologiste chercheur *David Glue* expose les découvertes de l'hiver 2000/2001, le 31ème de la Garden Bird Feeding Survey du BTO, et discute des modifications de comportement sur les mangeoires au Royaume-Uni.

KOLKRABEN UND MÄUSEBUSSARD ALS HÖHEPUNKTE AN DEN FUTTERSTELLEN IM MITTWINTER

BTO-Wissenschaftler *David Glue* beschreibt die Ergebnisse aus dem Winter 2000/01, dem 31. Jahr des Gartenvogel-Monitoringprogramms des BTO, und betrachtet die Veränderungen in Arten, Status und Verhaltensweisen an britischen Futterstellen.

In Britain, the concept of deliberately providing scraps for garden birds may seem to be a modern idea but it extends back at least to Elizabethan times. In response to the debate over the "pros" and "cons" of providing supplementary food for garden birds, the BTO launched the Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS) during the winter of 1970/71. It is now in its 31st year.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Today, the garden bird care facility is a multi-

million pound business. Year on year, an estimated 15,000 tons of peanuts and over 20,000 tons of wild bird seed are fed to birds in gardens in Britain. Viewed against the background of a sanitized farm landscape with depleted populations of many bird species, and declining bird communities in some of our woodlands, Britain's 16 million homes provide an enormous resource for wildlife.

In winter 2000/2001 (October to March), 278 house-holders recorded weekly peak counts and observations on feeding antics of all species exploiting food-stuffs or water provided in their

gardens. The current gardens included 122 in rural villages, farmsteads and crofts and 156 in town houses, flats and maisonettes, spread widely across the UK.

Overall, a modest 74 species were recorded visiting gardens for food and water. As in each winter, species richness varied widely, reflecting primarily the size and location of the garden. The top rural garden, manned by G H Gush of Ottery St Mary (East Devon), supported 46 species, including Snipe and Water Rail. Sites attracting fewest species (eight) were in built-up areas.

Blue Tit was the only species to patronize all gardens. The top 12 species (Table 1) matched closely those of the previous winter 1999/2000 (*BTO News* 221) and the same dozen species comprised the feeding frequency ratings averaged across the 1990s winters (Table 1), the most striking difference being the decline in the proportion of gardens supporting House Sparrows and Starlings.

As in the previous three winters, which were also mild and wet, gardens in open country settings in winter 2000/2001 were visited by fractionally more species than their counterparts in towns and cities: 20.4 compared with 19.1 species respectively (*BTO News* 231). This contrasts with winter 1995/96, when prolonged spells of severe cold weather, combined with low fruiting yields in the countryside, saw more species turning to birdtables for survival, especially in suburbia (*BTO News* 212).

WINTER COLD SNAPS LIVEN
BIRDTABLES

Four major factors strongly influenced the range of species and flock-sizes seen at GBFS sites in winter 2000/2001:

- Another modest breeding season in 2000 for certain single-brooded tits, multiple-brooded doves, thrushes and finches.
- Record-breaking amounts of late autumn and winter rainfall, flooding gardens, property and feeding stations.
- Very high seed crops among many deciduous trees and some conifers.
- Four severe cold spells, from Christmas to late March, often with snow covering and penetrating frosts.

During October, with its unsettled and frost-free weather, Collared Doves, Blackbirds and Greenfinches, brought families from late broods to relatively busy birdtables. Foraging at feeders, though, among seed specialists, such as Coal Tits, Marsh Tits, Nuthatches and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, remained low key (Table 2). An intense Atlantic depression, crossing central Britain from 28th October caused damage to birdtables, feeders, fencing and flattened some trees. Heavy downpours in November, with up to double the normal rainfall, severely saturated gardens. There were garden firsts for some participants of feeding Grey Herons, Mallard and Moorhens together with other more exotic waterfowl. Winter thrushes, Starlings and gulls,

TABLE 1. GBFS Top 12 garden feeding species, Winter 2000/2001 and average for 1990s.

Rank (2000/01)	Species	% of gardens (2000/01)	% of gardens 1990s*
1	Blue Tit	100.0	100
= 2	Blackbird	99.6	99
= 2	Robin	99.6	99
4	Great Tit	98.2	97
5	Dunnock	97.1	95
6	Greenfinch	96.0	96
7	Chaffinch	95.0	96
8	Collared Dove	88.7	86
9	House Sparrow	88.5	93
10	Starling	88.1	93
11	Coal Tit	86.3	85
12	Magpie	73.0	71

* Figures are the average of 10 winters from 1990/91 to 1999/2000.

TABLE 2. GBFS 12 selected garden feeding species, Winters 1999/2000 and 2000/2001.

Winter Weather No. of gardens Species	1999/2000 Very mild and wet 279 % of gardens	2000/2001 Cold spells, very wet 278 % of gardens
Goldfinch	62	66
Woodpigeon	60	63
Long-tailed Tit	56	64
Siskin	55	42
Song Thrush	55	63
Gr Sp Woodpecker	46	40
Brambling	26	4
Nuthatch	26	23
Blackcap	24	32
Pheasant	20	23
Bullfinch	15	17
Fieldfare	9	8

were largely happy to feed on damp farmland pasture, leys, ploughed land and playing fields, as in the previous winter with few venturing into gardens.

A blast of cold "Arctic" air crossing northern Scotland on Christmas Eve, eventually brought snow and severe frosts to most parts of the UK. Many recorded their first Rooks, Jays, Blackcaps, Pied Wagtails and Bullfinches for the winter at this time. Goldcrests, Treecreepers and Chiffchaffs turned to fatty foods. With damp weather persisting into the New Year, stocks of peanuts were often ignored, or only exploited at low rates.

Freezing blasts of Siberian and Arctic air in the New Year, the coldest spell for four years, resulted in greater numbers of tits, Woodpigeons, thrushes and some finches in gardens. There were reports of birds with wing and tail feathers damaged by snow, and feet affected by ice-balls. Similarly, Chaffinches with leg warts caused by Papillomas virus were widely reported.

Snow blizzards and sharp frosts in early March, the coolest such month for five years, further stimulated birdtable use. There was an upsurge in feeding Blackbirds, Greenfinches, Long-tailed Tits and Yellowhammers. With heavy crops of natural seeds, few Siskins and Redpolls visited gardens for food. Bramblings, frequent visitors in winter 1999/2000, were noticeably scarce. A bumper beech mast crop

resulted in their lowest level of garden recording (4% — Table 2) since winter 1976/77 (*BTO News* 202) when just 2% of gardens were patronized. Southerly winds from 27 March brought a welcome, if false, hint of spring and quieter gardens.

GOLDFINCH AND GOLDCREST ADD SPARKLE TO EXTRA UK BIRDTABLES

Composition of the birdtable community has continued to develop. Among regular visitors, five species matched (Pheasant 23%), or exceeded — Goldfinch (66%), Long-tailed Tit (64%), Woodpigeon (63%) and Goldcrest (18%) — all-time high levels of attendance. The striking upsurge in Goldfinches saw new garden feeder use as far afield as Aberystwyth and Perth. Feeding flocks exceeding 50 birds were noted in a number of counties.

Encouragingly, regular feeding flocks of Tree Sparrows were widely recorded. Bullfinches and Yellowhammers continued to display an upturn in feeding numbers. Could improved blends of seed-mixes attract other granivorous birds such as Skylark, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and Corn Bunting to the winter garden environment?

Intriguingly, Buzzards, Ravens and Green Woodpeckers, each currently extending their breeding ranges, are venturing into a thin scatter

CONTRASTING PATTERNS AMONG BIRDS FEEDING AT UK BIRDTABLES. GBFS PEAK COUNT INDEX 1970-2001

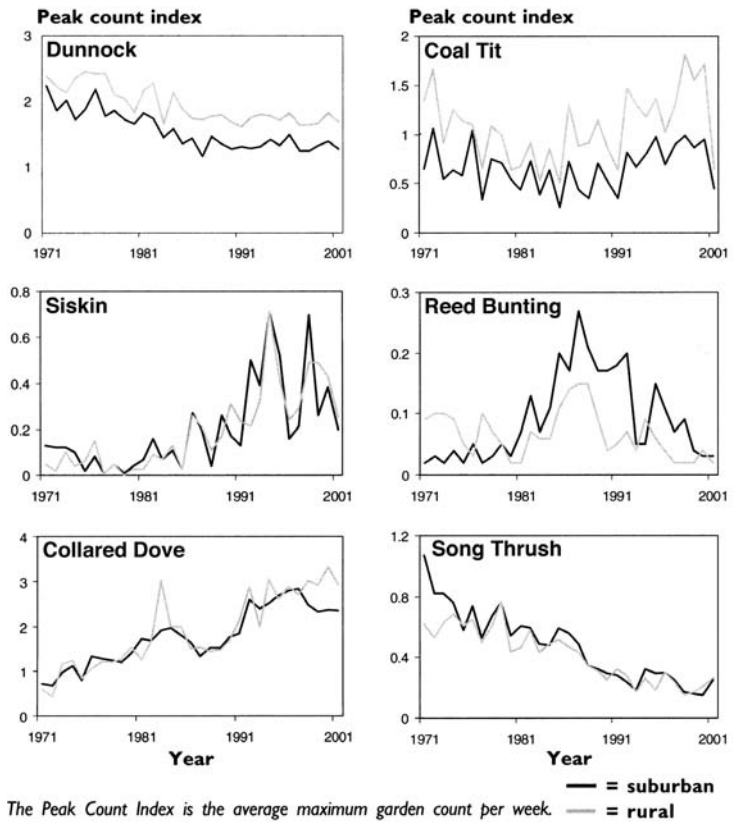
GBFS Peak Count Indices continued to reveal intriguing trends in winter 2000/2001.

The severe decline in House Sparrow and Starling flock sizes continued, reaching all-time lows.

The decline exhibited by Dunnocks in the 1970s has slowed, but this must be treated with caution. This was one of a number of species considered to have benefited from increased human habitation. Song Thrush populations have declined markedly on farmland and woodland and this is reflected in the GBFS feeding numbers over the last 25 years. There are some signs that this decline could be stabilising, at least at present.

Since first breeding in Norfolk in 1955, Collared Dove populations have risen five-fold between 1972 and 1996. Their flock-sizes have plateaued, having seemingly reached saturation in all but western parts and on higher ground. Reed Buntings were formerly regular winter garden visitors, present in good numbers during colder periods in the mid 1980s but today are rarely seen.

Coal Tit feeding numbers are inversely related to the size of beech mast and allied forest seed crops, the heavy crop in autumn 2000 resulting in far fewer feeding and hoarding birds at UK birdtables. Similarly, the recent marked upturn in the numbers of Siskins frequenting nut feeders in the 1990s is severely checked during autumn when conifer seeds are prolific. At such times, many birds stay close to their prime nesting grounds in N Wales, S Scotland, the Highlands and northern forests on the nearby Continent, reducing the numbers visiting gardens.



of gardens in mainly rural locations, exploiting supplementary foods. Buzzards took scraps at feeding stations in the Chilterns, Dartmoor, the Welsh Marches and Highland. Ravens were recorded at sites on Anglesey, Isle of Man, the

Pennines and South Wales, displaying a greater tolerance of man. Green Woodpeckers were often drawn initially to ant colonies, exposed by saturated lawns, before turning to windfall apples, fat and grain.

On a less optimistic note, three species dipped to equal or fall below all-time low GBFS levels — House Sparrow (88%), Black-headed Gull (18%) and Reed Bunting (8%) — reflecting recent declines in their breeding status.

WATERFOWL AND WOODPECKERS AMONG SURPRISE GARDEN FEEDERS

Suitably, in a record-breaking wet winter, waterfowl figured among the more exotic garden feeders. Shelduck (Amersham, Bucks), was a new GBFS bird, bringing the 31-year tally to 161 species. Further gardens recorded visiting Mute Swan, Coot, Water Rail and Woodcock. Other lucky home-owners attracted Chough (Pwllleli, Gwynedd), Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Glossop, Derbys and Ring-necked Parakeet (Bristol and Burnham, Bucks). Several gardens reported visiting Waxwings on *cotoneaster* and *pyracantha*, rose hips and crab apple. These were part of a second successive large winter influx, some 4,000 strong, chiefly to NE Britain.

Some fortunate home-owners noted Hen

Harrier (Isle of Man), Merlin (Isles of Scilly, Powys), Peregrine (Gwynedd, Ross-shire) and Little Owl (Gwynedd) chasing or killing prey near feeding stations, adding extra spice to their observations.

We await with great interest to see what the fresh season of recording that beckons will bring.

THANK YOU

CONTINUITY OF RECORDING COUNTS

Frances Bowman, Carol Povey and Jacky Prior kindly helped with production, distribution and collation of forms. The BTO is extremely grateful to the team of GBFS counters for supporting so enthusiastically and faithfully this small but valuable Trust project. Your letters reveal how much you enjoy garden bird recording. Fresh recruits to Garden BirdWatch are always welcome. Contact: Jacky Prior at BTO, Thetford HQ, e-mail jacky.prior@bto.org.