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Front cover image: Robin on blackthorn blossom.  
Dave and Brian Bevan

# Birds and your garden

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# Birds and your garden

You probably enjoy watching the birds that visit your garden. You may already be making efforts to entice them there. The money spent on food for garden birds has increased by 500 per cent in the last 15 years while recent sales of bird nest boxes and bird tables have soared. But have you ever thought seriously about what

brings birds to gardens or tried to look at your garden through their eyes? This leaflet is not a field guide but will help you see your garden from a bird's perspective. We hope it will inspire you to do what you can to make your garden, whatever its size, even more attractive to birdlife.



Blue tits on window feeders can be watched at close quarters. Chris Gomersall

Birds come to gardens to feed, breed, nest and rest. If water is provided, they will also visit to drink, bathe and preen their feathers. For a relatively small number of birds, gardens may supply most of their requirements for most of the year. More commonly, however, gardens offer a stopping-off point – somewhere to spend part of the day or night, or part of the year. Having a greater appreciation of what birds need from gardens (and when) will enable you to provide for them to a greater degree.

**Test the suggestions in this leaflet and let us know what success you have!**

Make a note of all the bird species that come to your garden and a separate list of those that nest.

Put as many of the recommendations here as you can into practice and repeat the survey at yearly intervals.

Let us know what seems to have worked and what has made no difference. See page 37 for contact details.

## Food

Although garden birds can be grouped artificially into broad categories such as insect-eaters and seed-eaters, the reality is less simple. Insectivores such

as tits and woodpeckers also include vegetable food in their diet and blackcaps are also very partial to winter fruits and berries. Correspondingly, in the first week or so of their lives, the nestlings of most seed-eating birds need the protein provided by insects and other



Like many birds, chaffinches switch from eating mainly seeds to a diet of insects in the spring and summer. Chris Gomersall

invertebrates, such as spiders. The ideal garden for birds should therefore be able to supply both animal and vegetable food matter throughout the year. This has a number of practical implications.



The use of pesticides should be kept to a minimum or, better still, stopped altogether. Almost all invertebrates provide food for some bird or other and very few constitute much of a threat to garden plants. Some of those that can cause damage, such as aphids, are actually among the most valuable food sources for young birds. If you stop spraying blackfly, greenfly and other pest species, you will find that, eventually, natural predators will keep their numbers in check. Cutting out pesticides saves you time and money and you have the added bonus of being able to enjoy the sight of lacewings and ladybirds, as well as house sparrows and blue tits, feasting on aphids.

The following is a list of other tried and tested ways of ensuring a plentiful supply of invertebrate food for your birds:

- Maintain one or more compost heaps.
- Keep dead wood, perhaps in a log pile.
- Allow leaves to rot down naturally rather than bagging and removing them in the autumn.
- Plant a wide variety of trees and shrubs, especially native species such as willow, oak and birch which support many caterpillars.
- Choose annual and perennial plants attractive to nectar-feeding insects.
- Don't be obsessive about tidying

away dead and dying perennials in the winter – these can shelter many useful hibernating creatures and can be left until the weather warms up again.

- Try developing at least part of your lawn as a wildflower meadow – these areas will be attractive to many small insects.

Most birds eat some vegetable matter and much is known about the preferred foods of individual species.

Goldfinches love the seeds of teasel, lavender and sunflower. Alder and silver birch trees may attract common redpolls if they are in the vicinity.

Starlings are fond of rowan berries and cherries, but will also eat the small black berries of Virginia creeper when really hungry. Bullfinches like the buds of forsythia and the seeds of forget-me-not.

Mistle thrushes don't just go for the berries of mistletoe from which they take their name: they will try and take possession of any fruiting holly or rowan tree and defend it fiercely from competitors.

Robins eat the attractive dual-coloured berries of the spindle tree, while ivy berries are a vital food source for blackcaps, blackbirds and wood pigeons, especially late in the year when there may be little else available. Every gardener should try and make room for some apple trees: members of the thrush family, including winter

visitors like redwing and fieldfare, will make short work of any windfalls, and blackcaps like them too. If you are lucky enough to have a garden suitable for large trees, then many birds may be drawn in by species such as oaks (jays, nuthatches, woodpeckers and wood pigeons) Scots pine (coal tits and



Members of the thrush family enjoy apples, especially in harsh weather. Top: blackbird. Mike Lane/Natural Image  
Above: Fieldfare. Robert Dickson/Natural Image

goldcrests) and beech (chaffinches). If you live near a beech wood you may even see bramblings visiting your garden. Smaller gardens can still be made appealing to birds by planting shrubs, for example exotics like cotoneasters



Top: Redwings are among the many birds that eat hawthorn berries. Chris Gomersall  
Centre: Woodpigeons go to great lengths to get at ivy berries! Chris Gomersall  
Above: Up to two million bramblings may overwinter in Britain. In gardens, they go for premium seed and peanut granules. Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

(but not cotoneaster *Conspicuax conspicus* 'Decorus' – birds ignore the berries for some reason), pyracantha and berberis, or natives like wild privet, guelder rose and dogwood. The berries of some ornamental plants like amelanchier and leycosteria are so attractive to thrushes that they may be stripped as soon as they are ripe. Lawns, whether traditionally close-mown and weedfree or those in which clovers, dandelions and other 'weeds' are more tolerated, are ideal hunting grounds for blackbirds, robins and starlings. You might also see song thrushes in search of earthworms and leatherjackets; pied wagtails looking for small flies and, in more rural areas, green woodpeckers seeking ants (their favourite food).



A flat stone on a lawn makes an ideal anvil for a song thrush. Mike Lane/Natural Image

### Cats

Many gardens are visited by cats and it is important to help guard your birds against their unwelcome attention. Position bird feeders and tables away from the low cover in which cats may hide and also provide perches nearby – vantage points from where birds can detect an approaching cat. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the more birds that visit a garden, the lower the chances of a cat being able to catch any one individual – probably because there are more pairs of eyes looking out for potential threats. Sonic cat deterrents can work well but should be moved around the garden on a regular basis so that the cats don't learn how to avoid the triggers. If you are a cat owner, consider attaching a bell or sonic bleeper to your cat to warn the local wildlife of its approach.



Lawns are perfect hunting areas for blackbirds. Mike Lane/Natural Image

Song thrushes are great garden allies as they eat large numbers of snails, first smashing their shells to get at the animal inside. To help them, make sure your garden has a suitable 'anvil' in a place where thrushes have a reasonable chance of seeing an approaching cat. A paving slab or rock placed in the centre of a lawn is ideal.



Cats look innocent but kill around 50 million garden birds each year. Those with bells or sonic devices kill 40% fewer birds than those without. Dave and Brian Bevan

### How many species?

Even very small gardens may be visited by 10 to 20 different species of bird during a year. In an ordinary suburban garden, 40 or 50 species would not be uncommon and even this number can include a few surprises, especially in hard weather when birds like kingfishers may turn up in search of unfrozen water, or perhaps woodcock or snipe looking for soft ground for foraging. For gardens near a coast or a prime bird habitat or those on a migration route, sightings of 80 species or more are possible, although many of these will simply be passing over and you

would have to be fairly knowledgeable to identify them all. The exciting thing is that almost any species may turn up in a garden sometime, somewhere. The red kite has been reintroduced in some parts of the country and is now regularly seen in gardens along the M4 corridor and the Thames Valley; here some birds have been known to steal clothes from washing lines to decorate their nests! In January 2006, one was seen in a garden in inner London, a sight certain to become more common if the expansion of the red kite population continues.





## Food supplements

However you manage your garden and whatever its size, there will be times when the naturally available food it normally provides is scarce or absent. Under these circumstances, birds will move on to feed elsewhere if they can. Small birds, especially, need to spend most of their waking lives either in search of food or actually feeding (90 per cent of the time in the case of the coal tit and effectively 100 per cent in the case of goldcrest). Weakness caused by hunger comes upon small birds very rapidly and prolonged food shortages, particularly those in hard weather, can often prove fatal.

You can increase the survival chances of birds by feeding them. If you choose to do this, try to ensure that you provide food regularly and reliably. 'Your' birds may come to depend on your generosity and may suffer if this is only intermittent. It is also important to provide appropriate food. Some leftovers can be very nutritious, including cooked potatoes (other than chips), pastry, suet and even brown bread.

From top: Red kites are now seen over some gardens in the Chilterns and elsewhere and are steadily extending their range. Chris Gomersall

Redstarts may visit some gardens on migration. Mike Lane/Natural Image

Coots can turn up in gardens if there is water nearby. Paul Lacey/Natural England

The chiffchaff makes its presence known in the spring by its persistent and repetitive song. Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

Other household foods like dried fruits, cheese (preferably grated) porridge, apples, half coconuts and crushed unsalted nuts will also be welcomed.



Top: Chaffinches, greenfinches and coal tits are among the species that will come readily to bird tables. Dave and Brian Bevan  
Above: Goldfinches love nyjer seeds. Chris Gomersall



Top: Great tits are fond of coconuts. Dave and Brian Bevan  
Above: Long-tailed tits have now started coming to peanut feeders. Chris Gomersall

A huge range of bird seed mixtures is commercially available these days, all of which have some value. However, many consist largely of grains of barley or wheat and are not very suitable for small birds like finches or tits.

Generally speaking, the more expensive foods are the best. Many companies will deliver bulk supplies by mail order and buying this way can help keep down the cost. If you have goldfinches in your area, then a special seed feeder filled with nyjer seed (tiny, but rich in oil) will bring them to your garden eventually, although they may



sometimes take a while to find this treat. Sunflower hearts and black sunflower seeds are favoured by many seed-eating birds and can be fed to them year-round.

### Keep it clean!

Bird tables need to be cleaned regularly. Uneaten food should not be left to go mouldy or rot. One of the best ways to avoid this happening is to provide no more than the birds will eat in one day, brushing your bird table down each evening and putting out new food the next morning. Special leaflets on feeding garden birds and hygiene and disease are available free from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), see Contacts, page 37.



Left top: If you live near woodland, nuthatches are much more likely to visit your garden.

Paul Keene/Avico

Left: Bird tables can be turned into attractive features by imaginative planting.

Dave and Brian Bevan

Above: Remove uneaten food from bird tables each evening and keep them clean.

Dave and Brian Bevan

## Food and feeding preferences of 50 of the species most commonly seen in gardens

Species	Food	Feeding method
<b>Blackbird</b>	Berries, apples, raisins, mealworms, peanut granules, breadcrumbs, grated cheese, etc. Earthworms; other invertebrates.	Ground feeder
<b>Blackcap</b>	Apples, bread, cheese. Invertebrates, berries.	Ground feeder
<b>Black-headed gull</b>	Scraps. Invertebrates, plant material.	Ground feeder
<b>Bullfinch</b>	Sunflower hearts, black sunflower seed, seed blends. Ash, elm and other tree seeds; flower buds of fruit trees; seeds of nettle, dock, dog's mercury, fleshy fruits; insects.	Hanging feeder
<b>Blue tit</b>	Peanuts, fatty treats, blue tit seed mix, sunflower hearts, black sunflower seed. Caterpillars, aphids.	Hanging feeder
<b>Brambling</b>	Peanut granules, seed mixes. Tree seeds, esp. beech mast and conifer seed; fruit.	Ground/hanging feeder
<b>Chaffinch</b>	Seed blends, sunflower hearts, peanut granules. Caterpillars, flies, a wide variety of seeds.	Bird table/ground feeder
<b>Carrion crow</b>	Scraps. Grain, carrion, eggs and young birds, invertebrates.	Ground feeder
<b>Chiffchaff</b>	Mainly insects, some fruit.	Trees, ground feeder
<b>Coal tit</b>	Peanuts, fatty treats, seed blends, sunflower hearts, black sunflower seed. Tree seeds, caterpillars.	Hanging feeder
<b>Collared dove</b>	Seeds, bread, fruit. Cereal grain, insects.	Bird table/ground feeder



Species	Food	Feeding method
<b>Dunnock</b>	Nyjer seeds, peanut granules and seed blends, grated cheese. Invertebrates, small seeds.	Ground feeder
<b>Feral pigeon</b>	Omnivorous; grains.	Ground feeder/bird table
<b>Fieldfare</b>	Apples, berries, earthworms, insects.	Tree and ground feeder
<b>Goldfinch</b>	Nyjer seeds, sunflower hearts, peanuts. Small seeds, eg those of alder, birch, dandelion, ragwort, groundsel.	Hanging feeder
<b>Goldcrest</b>	Cheese, bread, peanut cake. Tree seeds, invertebrates.	Bird tables
<b>Great spotted woodpecker</b>	Peanuts, meaty scraps. Moth larvae and other invertebrates, seeds, eggs and young birds.	Hanging feeder, trees
<b>Great tit</b>	Peanuts, fatty treats, seed blends, sunflower hearts. Caterpillars, acorns, beech mast.	Hanging feeder
<b>Green woodpecker</b>	Mealworms, fruit, ants.	Ground feeder
<b>Greenfinch</b>	Sunflower hearts, black sunflower seed. Large seeds, eg those of rosehips, elm. Also, seeds of dog's mercury and those of crucifers, daisy family.	Hanging feeder
<b>House martin</b>	Small flying insects including aphids.	Aerial feeder
<b>House sparrow</b>	Sunflower hearts, mealworms. Seeds, invertebrates.	Bird table
<b>Jackdaw</b>	Scraps, fruit. Moth larvae, flies, carrion, seeds.	Bird table/ground
<b>Jay</b>	Peanuts, scraps, bread. Invertebrates, acorns and other seeds, nestlings and eggs.	Bird table/ground/ hanging feeder

Species	Food	Feeding method
<b>Kingfisher</b>	Scraps (when desperate!). Small fish, amphibians, aquatic invertebrates.	Bird tables; normally feeds in shallow water
<b>Long-tailed tit</b>	Peanuts and peanut cake, grated cheese, fat balls. Spiders and other small invertebrates.	Hanging feeder/ bird table
<b>Magpie</b>	Scraps. Invertebrates, young birds and eggs, small mammals, fruit, seeds, berries, carrion.	Ground feeder
<b>Marsh tit</b>	Nuts. Insects, spiders, seeds, berries and fruit.	Hanging feeder/ bird table
<b>Mistle thrush</b>	Berries, eg those of holly, mistletoe, cotoneaster etc. Insects.	Tree and ground feeder
<b>Nuthatch</b>	Peanuts. Insects, spiders, acorns, beech mast, hazel nuts.	Hanging feeder/trees
<b>Pheasant</b>	Seed mixes with cereals. Berries, seeds, insects.	Ground feeder/bird table
<b>Pied wagtail</b>	Fat, seeds, bread, nyjer seed. Midges and other flying insects.	Bird tables/ground feeder/aerial feeder
<b>Redwing</b>	Apples, fresh or dried fruit, berries, insects.	Tree and ground feeder
<b>Reed bunting</b>	Seeds, insects.	Ground feeder
<b>Ring-necked parakeet</b>	Seeds, peanuts. Fruit and other plant material.	Bird table/hanging feeder
<b>Robin</b>	Mealworms, peanut granules, sunflower hearts, grated cheese, breadcrumbs, fat balls. Earthworms, larvae, other invertebrates.	Ground feeder/bird table
<b>Rook</b>	Scraps. Earthworms, larvae, beetles, grain.	Ground feeder
<b>Siskin</b>	Peanuts. Seeds of alder, birch, evergreen conifers.	Hanging feeder

Species	Food	Feeding method
<b>Song thrush</b>	Fruit, raisins, mealworms. Caterpillars, earthworms, snails, slugs.	Ground feeder
<b>Sparrowhawk</b>	Birds up to the size of wood pigeons.	Bird table (!), ground
<b>Spotted flycatcher</b>	Insects, woodlice, snails, fruit.	Aerial feeder, trees
<b>Starling</b>	Seed blends, fatty treats, peanut cake. Earthworms, leatherjackets, seeds.	Bird table/ground feeder/hanging feeder
<b>Swallow</b>	Flying insects.	Aerial feeder
<b>Swift</b>	Flying insects, airborne spiders.	Aerial feeder
<b>Tawny owl</b>	Small mammals, earthworms, frogs, beetles.	Ground feeder
<b>Treecreeper</b>	Fat balls, suet. Insects, spiders, tree seeds.	Trees; bird tables
<b>Tree sparrow</b>	Millet seed, fat, peanuts. Wide variety of seeds, insects.	Ground feeder/bird table/hanging feeder
<b>Whitethroat</b>	Insects, fruits.	Shrubs and trees
<b>Willow tit</b>	Invertebrates, seeds.	Hanging feeder/ bird table
<b>Woodpigeon</b>	Bread, seed mixes with cereal grains. Wide range of plant material including seeds and berries.	Ground feeder
<b>Yellowhammer</b>	Seeds of grasses and cereals.	Ground feeder
<b>Wren</b>	Grated cheese, mealworms, peanut granules, fatty treats. Small beetles, spiders, moth larvae and other invertebrates.	Ground feeder



Bird feeders may attract sparrowhawks as well as song birds. Dave and Brian Bevan

### Breeding and nesting

Not all the birds visiting your garden during the year will view it as a possible nesting place. Many species may nest in gardens, however, and in the case of some birds, gardens now support a significant percentage of their total population.

Some species are far more fussy about where they nest than others. Blue tits and great tits are the most likely to use nest boxes. The increasingly scarce spotted flycatcher may also adopt an open-fronted nest box as home, as may robins and pied wagtails. There are now specialist boxes available for species like tawny owls but don't

spend money on them if such species are unlikely to come to your garden. Be especially wary of nest boxes advertised as being suitable for treecreepers as current designs seem ineffective. Avoid nest boxes attached to bird feeders. These are normally useless as birds will not nest anywhere subject to constant disturbance. The safest course of action is to buy only those nest boxes approved by a bird conservation organisation like the BTO or the RSPB (see Contacts, page 37). Boxes should not face strong sunlight and should also be positioned away from the prevailing wind. North-facing entrances may be best.



Nest boxes need to be cleaned. Do this only between 1 August and 31 January to keep strictly within the law. Cleaning old nests out of nest boxes encourages birds to use them again the following year. As well as removing old nesting material it will also be helpful to douse the inside of boxes with boiling water to kill bird parasites and their eggs. Virtually all British house martins now



Home-made nest boxes are perfectly fine if they are well designed. Top left: Box for nuthatch with mud entrance. Dave and Brian Bevan  
Top right: Open-fronted box for robins and spotted flycatchers. Dave and Brian Bevan  
Above: Boxes for hole-nesting species like tits. Dave and Brian Bevan

nest on houses, the only exceptions being a few colonies on cliffs and under some bridges. Artificial nests may attract them but a local source of mud, their essential nesting material, may be more important. Like house martins and swallows,



House martins need mud to make their own nests (top) but may sometimes be attracted by a prefabricated version (above). Bob Gibbons/Natural Image

swifts eat only flying insects and have come to depend on humans for nest sites. Whereas house martins build their cup-shaped structures of dried mud under the eaves of houses, swifts need access to roof spaces for their very basic nests. The design of many modern houses, however, often excludes swifts and the numbers of these astonishing and most aerial of all birds are falling in many areas. It's been estimated that UK population of swifts has fallen by a third in the last 12 years! You can help reverse this process by erecting special swift nest boxes or, if you have an older house,



Swallows also appreciate our help with nest construction. Dave and Brian Bevan

making sure that in the course of modernising it, you don't deprive swifts of access. For information about swift nest boxes contact 'Concern for Swifts' or 'London's Swifts' (see Contacts, page 37).

Many species appreciate dense cover for nesting since this provides shelter and some protection from predators.



Ivy provides nest sites as well as late-season food for birds and insects. Dave and Brian Bevan

Among native shrubs not previously mentioned, hawthorn, blackthorn, gorse and juniper offer both. Thick ivy is especially favoured by wrens for their small, domed nests and is also suitable for treecreepers.

From time to time, some birds will choose to nest in apparently very unsuitable places which are subject to continuous, if accidental, harassment by humans. Despite this, a few will occasionally succeed in rearing at least some of their brood. However, far more frequently, a lack of disturbance is the critical factor in nesting success. If you can manage your garden with at least one quiet corner, perhaps overgrown with elder or nettles, then you may be rewarded by a nesting dunnock, chaffinch or even one of the warblers such as a blackcap, whitethroat or chiffchaff.



If you have no room for trees or bushy shrubs, but have a garden wall or a fence, then try combining this with a trellis to provide nesting opportunities. Erect a trellis – supported by thick stakes on either side – about 20 cm (8 inches) away from the wall. Plant fast-growing, vigorous climbers like honeysuckle, clematis or wild rose and these will soon form a structure thick enough to support nests of species like goldfinch or blackbird. Cut them back



Top: Wren's nest in garlic.  
Howard Lacey/Avico Ltd  
Above: Wren's nest in coat pocket.  
Howard Lacey/Avico Ltd



Spotted flycatcher. Howard Lacey/Avico Ltd and wren (below) Dave Bevan/Avico. Both are species that may nest in dense ivy. Wrens can also choose very unconventional nesting sites!



hard each year to encourage renewed sturdy growth. The addition of ivy *Hedera helix* will benefit a whole range of invertebrates and provide extra cover and shelter for birds.

To form an even denser garden boundary, with still better nesting potential, plant a hedge. Hawthorn should be the main species but mix this with other berry-bearing shrubs and climbers. Very young plants – whips – can be cheaply obtained and will establish themselves quickly.

Ideally, plant them out in the autumn allowing at least half a metre between each shrub. Plan for the hedge to be at least one metre thick although if you have the space, a wider hedge will be even more valuable. The following spring, cut them back severely to encourage growth near the base. It may be hard to bring yourself to do this, but when you see the results you will be glad you had the courage! In two to three years, your originally spindly plants will be bushing out nicely. In five years you will have a thick hedge and in six or seven you may need an electric trimmer to keep its growth



Gardens can offer a huge range of feeding and nesting opportunities for birds.  
Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

within reasonable bounds! Cut the hedge back each year in early February before birds have started to nest.

Much maligned evergreen species, including the notorious leylandii, make excellent roosting places and may also be used as nest sites for greenfinches, robins, dunnocks, wrens

and goldfinches. Examine your garden with a critical eye and use reference books (see Further information, page 38) to decide which species may be most likely to nest in your garden – then try to create conditions suitable for them. It's best to be very realistic. Only the birds that you commonly see in your garden, or neighbouring ones, are likely to nest.

Have you ever wondered what goes on in your nest boxes? It's now possible to find out, with boxes fitted with cameras. Although relatively expensive (basic black and white camera kits start at around £90) they can give you a fascinating insight into the comings and goings of parent birds and the growth of their chicks, all relayed into your front room.

## Rest and shelter

Although advice traditionally concentrates on the provision of nesting sites for birds, good roosting sites are just as important for a bird's survival. Few birds actually build themselves a structure for the night but nest boxes are often used as nocturnal shelters. Boxes will give life-saving protection from the weather to small birds like wrens and great tits but cannot accommodate larger species. In really cold weather, many small birds may squeeze into nest boxes together





mesh around the hedge, providing a safe retreat for house sparrows when they are threatened by the local sparrowhawk.

Many birds roost communally, including sparrows, pied wagtails, starlings, blackbirds and even pigeons, crows and, in a few parts of southern England, ring-necked parakeets. Long-tailed tits (normally part of an extended family) actually huddle together closely on one perch.

While other species don't generally do this, mere close proximity in a bush or hedge may help to reduce heat loss, especially for those at the centre of the roost. Roosts may also act as centres for information exchange in ways that we do not fully understand.

Trees are important as observation and song posts, too, so try and provide at least one somewhere in the garden.

Small birds may use nest boxes like this for shelter in cold weather. Dave and Brian Bevan

to keep warm. One box is recorded as having held no fewer than 61 wrens!

Climbing plants growing on garden walls or houses are very useful roosting and nesting sites. Walls often offer protection from prevailing winds and may retain heat from the sun. If you have an established hedge, why not encourage wild hops to scramble over it? When the hop leaves die back in winter, the bare stems will form a

Dunnocks feed on the ground but sing from a prominent perch. Mike Lane/Natural Image



## Drinking and bathing

All birds need to drink. They also need water to help keep their feathers in good condition. Relatively few gardens offer birds safe drinking and bathing facilities so whatever you can do will help. If you can, dig a pond. Even very small water bodies can be excellent for wildlife but the pond should have shallow edges so that birds can get to the water easily. For details, consult the Natural England booklet *Garden ponds and boggy areas: havens for wildlife* (see Further information, page 38).

Bird baths are the next best thing. They can be small or large, but a shallow dish shape is what's required – with a thin layer of gravel at the bottom if the material is liable to be slippery. The water needs to be at least 2.5 cm (1 inch) deep but ideally the container should be large enough to offer a range of depths up to 10 cm (4 inches) to meet the needs of differently sized birds. Place the bath in the open, away from cover where a cat might hide. Clean the bath regularly to remove any algae or bird droppings. Keep it unfrozen in cold weather. There are various ways of doing this including solar-powered water heaters (see the RSPB website [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk) for suggestions) but never use salt or anti-freeze.



Top: Ponds are a magnet for birds and even a sparrowhawk may turn up for a dip. Chris Gomersall  
Middle: Juvenile greenfinch drinking. Dave and Brian Bevan  
Even a simple elevated bird bath (above left) can bring in visitors like this jay and also add interest to a garden. Dave and Brian Bevan

## Predators and prey

The number of young produced by songbirds takes account of the fact that most will not last long. A pair of blue tits, for example, might rear as many as 10 chicks in a season. If all these were to survive and breed the next year and if all their offspring did the same, the original two birds would be the great-grandparents of more than 1,000!



These eggs could in theory give rise to 1,000 blue tits in a few seasons! Dave and Brian Bevan



Blackbirds can lose eggs or whole broods to predation from birds such as magpies but their overall numbers are unaffected. Dave and Brian Bevan

Clearly, this does not happen. The harsh reality is that most young birds will die within their first year, falling victim either to hunger, cold or to a predator, whether cat or bird. Surprisingly, none of this predation seems to have an effect on overall bird populations despite the fact that cats take an estimated 50 million birds a year in British gardens.



Structures like this can help to protect bird tables from cats. Bob Gibbons/Natural Image

## Baby birds

If you find young birds anywhere in your garden calling for food, the best advice is to leave them alone. Their parents are likely to be close by and will take care of them far better than you can.

## Ten ways to help birds in your garden

- Grow more trees and shrubs to provide food, nesting areas and shelter; develop a meadow area in the lawn.
- Provide water – ideally a pond – and ensure there is mud for nesting material in spring.
- Put up nest boxes – but of the right kind and in the right places. These may also be used for shelter in hard weather.
- Keep a corner of your garden undisturbed if possible.
- Consider the needs of nesting birds like swifts, starlings and house sparrows before installing uPVC bargeboards and soffits.
- Fit your cat with a bell or sonic collar.
- Allow plants to go to seed to provide food for finches and sparrows.
- Install a variety of hanging bird feeders and a bird table, safe from cats and squirrels; ensure they are regularly filled and cleaned.

- Don't forget the needs of ground-feeding birds like dunnocks, robins and wrens.
- Put up trellises next to walls and fences, or plant a hedge for shelter and food.



Young birds like this juvenile great tit should be left alone if found in your garden. Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

## Six of the best

Six species frequently seen in gardens are blue tit, collared dove, house sparrow, robin, starling and blackbird.

## Blue tit

The acrobatic blue tit is a favourite with many people. There are around 3.3 million pairs in Britain. Like many other garden species, its original home was woodland and that is where most blue tits still live. They need holes to nest in and in the absence of natural cavities will use whatever artificial ones they can find, in walls, pipes, old flowerpots or even letter boxes. The



nest is lined with hair, down or moss. Up to 16 eggs can be laid, although blue tit pairs in gardens rarely produce clutches of more than eight. The peak feeding activity is in May when these birds have to search almost ceaselessly for insect food for their young. Caterpillars are preferred but spiders, aphids and other invertebrates will also be taken, including butterflies.

Young blue tits eat vast numbers of caterpillars.  
Dave and Brian Bevan



### Collared dove

The now very familiar collared dove is primarily a seed-eater and comes readily to bird tables. Like many other members of the pigeon family, it makes only a very flimsy nest, consisting of a platform of sticks, sometimes grass-lined. Nests are made in trees or buildings, usually four metres or more above the ground.

Originating in India, collared doves have been extending their range for centuries. They were no further west than Hungary in the 1930s and unseen in Britain before 1952. The very first pair to nest here did so in a Norfolk garden in 1955. Now, there are about 250,000 pairs in Britain. Breeding has been recorded in almost every month of the year but is most common in spring.

The collared dove has gone from rare vagrant to familiar garden bird in 50 years.  
Bob Gibbons/Natural Image



A house sparrow living up to its name. Chris Gomersall

### House sparrow

No single factor is likely to be responsible for the dramatic decline in house sparrow numbers but the stark facts are undeniable. In 30 years, the breeding population has plummeted from 12 million to around half of that number, and the bird is now altogether absent from some of its former urban strongholds, even including parts of London. Happily, house sparrows are still familiar garden birds in many parts of the country but we can't assume they will be so for ever. Although they are natural seed-eaters, house sparrows will take all sorts of food including kitchen scraps. Insects are vital food for young sparrows. Unlike many small birds which are quite promiscuous, established sparrow pairs may remain together for life – although it has to be said that the life of any bird this size tends to be rather short! All sorts of dense vegetation

including hedges and climbers may be used as communal roosting sites.

### Robin

The robin is consistently voted Britain's most popular bird, perhaps because we enjoy its oddly endearing habit of nesting in strange places like discarded cans or abandoned cars. There is even a record of a robin starting a nest in an unmade bed, while its recent occupant was having breakfast! More conventionally, nests are made in banks or depressions, from ground-level up to three metres high. Robins lay clutches of around five eggs but may rear three broods during the course of a long breeding season that can stretch from March to July or later still. They are fiercely territorial birds and will even attack other species they see as competitors, including dunnocks. Very occasionally a fight between robins will result in





Above: Robins may nest in very odd places.

Howard Lacey/Avico Ltd

Right: Although young birds lack the red breast of the adults, they are still somehow recognisable as robins. Jill Pakenham/Avico

the death of one of the combatants. Robins love mealworms and will eat them from your hand if you are sufficiently patient.

### Starling

Like house sparrows, starlings are faring rather badly, with numbers having fallen by 75 per cent since the late 1960s. Those who can still watch large parties descend on their lawn or bird table and clean up all the available food in seconds may find this surprising, but the collapse in the population is now causing concern among conservation bodies. In complete contrast to the solitary and aggressive robin, starlings are very sociable birds throughout the year, nesting in colonies and sometimes roosting in huge concentrations. They

nest in holes in trees or in gaps and spaces in manmade structures.

### Blackbird

Like robins, blackbirds can be fearless close to people and may take dried fruit from your hand. If you can feed them at the same time each day, they



The male starling in breeding plumage is a very handsome bird. Mike Hammett/Natural England

will come to expect – and even demand! – their ration. Blackbirds can be very intolerant of the presence of other species in gardens when they are feeding, sometimes being so intent on depriving others of the chance to eat that they miss out themselves. Gardens are hugely important for blackbirds, with perhaps one quarter of the population living close to human settlements. The cup-shaped nest can be made in a bush, in ivy against a wall, on buildings or in trees. Its grass lining normally distinguishes it from the mud-lined nest of a song thrush.



Female blackbird with cherries. Mike Lane/Natural Image

### Ups and downs

The population and distribution of birds is changing constantly, with some species flourishing and others showing steep declines. While some of these fluctuations are perfectly natural, many can be linked, in one way or another, to environmental changes caused by human activity.

### Going up...

#### Greatspotted woodpecker

This handsome starling-sized bird is one of those currently enjoying a big expansion in range and numbers across Britain. It now breeds even in the heart of London. It is fond of seeds and peanuts and has begun to visit bird tables far more frequently than before. Its taste for the eggs and chicks of smaller species, like blue tit, is perhaps less well-known but all birds have to eat! More usually, young woodpeckers are fed on moth larvae and other invertebrates.

#### Blackcap

Easily-recognised, the blackcap is another recent arrival in many gardens where it searches out winter berries,



Great spotted woodpeckers are flourishing in Britain at the moment. Chris Gomersall



especially the red ones of firethorn, cotoneaster and berberis. Like other warblers, blackcaps migrate here in the spring from Africa, returning from September onwards. At the same time, however, ringing studies have shown that other blackcaps from central Europe are arriving in Britain to take advantage of our milder winters – as well as the generous hand-outs of householders. When the berry supply has gone, blackcaps show a fondness for cheese and other fatty foods. They

Blackcaps may nest in mature gardens with enough cover. Peter Wilson/Natural Image



will also feed on apples left on trees, especially those damaged by insects, and on windfalls.

### Magpie

If magpies were rare, we would probably prize them for their great beauty. As it is, they are unpopular with many householders because of their nest-robbing habits. Magpies have adapted very successfully to urban environments and, following a reduction in persecution, have in the



Magpies are another current garden success story. Dave Bevan/Avico Ltd

last 50 years colonised even the centres of large cities. They will eat almost anything including invertebrates, grain, fruits and carrion – as well as small mammals and the eggs and chicks of songbirds. However, there is no evidence that they have contributed to the declines in the numbers of other species. Together with species such as coal tit, nuthatch and jay, magpies share the habit of hoarding food, in their case burying items in the ground in a hole excavated for the purpose.

### In the balance...

#### Sparrowhawk

Sparrowhawks were almost extinct in

southern and eastern England before scientists discovered that pesticides such as DDT were responsible for their decline. Persistent toxic chemicals caused adult birds to die and also resulted in breeding failure through eggshell thinning. These poisons were then banned and the subsequent recovery of sparrowhawk numbers is one of the great success stories for post-war nature conservation. In recent years, however, numbers have begun to decline again – a worrying trend. Sparrowhawks predate on many small birds but their absence from gardens for 20 or so years did not lead to an increase in songbirds; in fact in some cases they actually declined markedly over this period. The current

population of sparrowhawks cannot, therefore, be affecting songbird numbers. Female sparrowhawks are twice the size of males and can take birds as large as wood pigeons.



Male sparrowhawk on the roof of a bird table. Vic Parsons/Avico Ltd

### Going down...

#### Song thrush

Although song thrushes are still found in many gardens, their numbers have dropped by nearly 60 per cent in some



The decline of the song thrush may be linked with the use of slug pellets. Chris Gomersall

30 years. The reason for their decline on farmland is fairly clear: a reduced food supply linked to the intensification of agriculture. There has been a similar decline in gardens but it is not clear whether this may be indirectly linked to the use of slug pellets and lawn treatments which reduce the supply of molluscs and worms available for young birds.

#### Bullfinch



More bullfinches are now coming to gardens. The male is shown top. Jill Pakenham/Avico Ltd

Bullfinches once had a price on their heads, with a penny awarded for every one killed, because of the damage they were alleged to cause to fruit crops. Now, however, they have become scarce in some parts of the country, probably because of the huge loss of hedgerows. However, numbers coming to gardens seem to be increasing and they are showing a newly-developed taste for sunflower seeds.

#### Tree sparrow

The number of tree sparrows has been unstable for a very long time. It's not yet clear whether the current crash in the population – down 87 per cent in the 24 years to 1996 – is part of a normal cycle or, as is thought more likely, an anomaly that should be a cause of great concern. Tree sparrows, close relatives of the more familiar house sparrow, still come to some rural gardens and may nest in roof cavities or other holes, but in many parts of the country they have become great rarities.



Tree sparrows are now a rarity in many areas. Tommy Holden/BTO



Everyone hopes to get a waxwing in their garden one day! Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

### Waxwing – a regular exotic visitor to look out for

Every few years, there is a huge autumn or winter influx of these beautiful birds from the conifer forests of northern Europe. When this happens, waxwings are as likely to turn up in gardens as anywhere else in their search for berries. In the south of England at least, they sometimes prefer those of the guelder rose but rowan are also favoured. Early in 2005, waxwings arrived in thousands on the north and northwest coasts and filtered south. This was unusual as they normally reach the east coast first and then move west. Birds were still present as late as May in some areas.



## Watching and recording garden birds

Britain's birds are as well studied as those of anywhere in the world but new discoveries are being made regularly. Birds are extremely adaptable creatures and their behaviour changes to meet new challenges or take advantage of new opportunities. All this means there is always something to look out for. Blue tits learned how to drill holes in milk bottles to reach the cream in the 1950s. Siskins had never been recorded feeding in gardens until 1963, but 40 years later were visiting one garden in every 10, favouring peanuts in orange-coloured string bags.



Blue tits (left) were the first species to be seen feeding from milk bottles but the habit was later acquired by the great tit (above).  
Dave and Brian Bevan



Ring-necked parakeets escaped from aviaries to breed in tiny numbers in the 1970s. Now, their numbers are counted in thousands and they have become regular visitors to gardens in parts of south-east England. Chiffchaffs were once rarities in gardens but now, like blackcaps, are frequently seen there in winter. For whatever reason (the most likely is food shortages in the countryside caused by intensive farming) even more species are now being seen at feeders, including long-tailed tit and brambling, while others like willow tit and reed bunting are turning up in gardens in greater numbers or on a more regular basis.

Right: This male siskin may be about to ward off competitors! Dave and Brian Bevan







Ring-necked parakeets may become a threat to native hole-nesting species. Mike Lane/Natural Image

Observations of garden birds by tens of thousands of people give organisations like the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) invaluable information on trends in bird populations. Only with this knowledge can we work out plans to conserve our birds for the future. If you can recognise the common garden birds you can help too.

### Start recording birds and help with their conservation

**The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch.** This year-round survey (sponsored by C J WildBird Foods) involves more than 16,000 garden birdwatchers, all collecting simple information on birds and how they use gardens on a weekly basis. This information has allowed researchers at the BTO to find out how birds use gardens and how this use changes over time. Garden BirdWatch results have already

highlighted the increasing use made of gardens by some species and have helped researchers to understand the reasons behind the declines of others. A free enquiry pack is available by writing to GBW (NE), BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU, or by visiting [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw).

**The RSPB Big Garden BirdWatch.** The Big Garden BirdWatch takes place once a year during late winter. It involves many thousands of observers recording the birds seen in their gardens over the course of one hour. Although it does not give the same level of detail as the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch, it provides a very useful snapshot of the regional variation in garden bird populations. For details go to [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch), or contact the RSPB (see Contacts, page 37).

Let us know whether you have found this leaflet useful or how we can improve it. If you have adopted any of the suggestions here, have more birds

come to your garden as a result? We'd like to know what you think. Call 01273 407956 or e-mail [steve.berry@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:steve.berry@naturalengland.org.uk)



Top: Green woodpeckers often visit garden lawns in search of ants. Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

Above: The nest of the long-tailed tit is an amazingly elaborate structure and may contain 2,000 feathers! Dave and Brian Bevan

Right: There are few finer sights in the garden than a goldfinch in flight. Dave and Brian Bevan





Heron are always grateful for an easy meal. Dave and Brian Bevan

## Contacts

### Natural England

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Sheffield, S1 2ET  
Enquiry Service: 0845 600 3078  
enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk  
www.naturalengland.org.uk

### British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)

The Nunnery  
Thetford  
Norfolk, IP24 2PU  
Tel: 01842 750050  
www.bto.org

### Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

The Lodge  
Sandy, SG19 2DL  
Tel: 01767 680551  
www.rspb.org.uk

### Concern for Swifts

5 Bury Lane  
Haddenham  
Ely  
Cambs, CB6 3PR  
www.concernforswifts.com

### London's Swifts

www.londons-swifts.org.uk

### The Wildlife Trusts

The Kiln  
Waterside  
Mather Road  
Newark, NG24 1WT  
Tel: 01636 677711  
www.wildlifetrusts.org

## Bird food, nest boxes and other bird products

There are now dozens of suppliers. The companies on this list also supply catalogues with helpful information about feeding birds.

C J WildBird Foods Ltd  
The Rea  
Upton Magna  
Shrewsbury, SY4 4UR  
Tel: 0800 731 2820  
www.birdfood.co.uk

Jacobi Jayne & Co  
Living with Birds  
Freepost 1155  
Herne Bay, CT6 7BR  
Tel: 0800 0720130  
www.livingwithbirds.com

Ernest Charles  
Freepost  
Copplestone  
Devon, EX17 2YZ  
Tel: 0800 7316 770  
www.ernest-charles.com

Jamie Wood Products  
1 Green Street Old Town  
Eastbourne, BN21 1QN  
Tel: 01323 727291  
www.birdtables.com

## Further information

This is one of a range of wildlife gardening booklets published by Natural England. For more details, contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0845 600 3078 or e-mail [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk)

Natural England also produces *Gardening with wildlife in mind*, an illustrated wildlife reference. Originally on CD but now also available online, *Gardening with wildlife in mind* has detailed information on 800 plants and animal species often found in our gardens, and shows how they are ecologically linked. See [www.plantpress.com](http://www.plantpress.com)

## Other titles

There is a huge selection of literature on the subject of garden birds. The following list is therefore extremely selective:

Baines, C. *How to make a wildlife garden*. Frances Lincoln Ltd. 2000.

Couzens, D., & Partington, P. *The secret lives of garden birds*. Christopher Helm. 2004.

Du Feu, C. *The BTO nestbox guide*. British Trust for Ornithology. 2003.

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Moss, S. *The bird-friendly garden*. Harper Collins. 2004.

Oddie, B. *Bill Oddie's introduction to birdwatching*. New Holland. 2001.

Soper, T. *The bird table book*. David & Charles. 2006.

Spedding, S., & G. *The natural history of a garden*. Timber Press. 2003.

Stocker, L. *The complete garden bird*. Leopard Books. 1995.

Toms, M. *The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch book*. Thetford: British Trust for Ornithology. 2003.