

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch – 2021

Maidenhead and Cookham records

Introduction

This year's RSPB weekend Birdwatch occurred on January 29th – 31st and the organisers hopes were that more than last year's 250,000 participants would be exceeded. It seems possible that was achieved as many people had difficulty entering their data because the site crashed half-way through the weekend!

In due course, the analysis of these records will be produced and we will be able to compare the top ten or so species with previous years. However, RSPB do not share the actual data received so normally it is not possible to draw any local conclusions from the event. So, we invited members of Wild Cookham and Wild Maidenhead to repeat their sightings on our Facebook page so we can see at least some of the results and assess what trends there may be locally.

Information Received

Altogether, we received counts from 43 gardens across the SL6 area. The 1-hour counts were done over all three days of the event and as the weather varied a little over that period, that may have had an (unknown) affect on some counts.

Some just listed species, but most submissions also included the highest number of each species seen.

There were no major surprises, apart from the report of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in one garden. This is not impossible of course, but the species is now so rare in Berkshire, the possibility of mis-identification cannot be ruled out (sorry, dear neighbour!) There was only 1 record in the entire county last year, and only 7 sightings in all Berkshire over the previous 5 years.

Unless it was clearly stated as being perched in the garden, some species reported have not been included in this analysis (such as Cormorant, gulls, and some of the Kite counts).

The Results

Here is a table of the results in most numerous species order:-

Species	No of Gardens	Max No of Birds	Species	No of Gardens	Max No of Birds
Robin	37	6	Chaffinch	7	4
Blue Tit	34	8	Jackdaw	6	4
Blackbird	33	12	Redwing	6	11
Woodpigeon	32	17	Great Spotted Woodpecker	5	1
Dunnock	28	5	Ring-necked Parakeet	4	7
Great Tit	24	3	Green Woodpecker	4	1
Magpie	17	4	Wren	2	1
Starling	17	9	Feral Pigeon	2	7
House Sparrow	16	32	Pied Wagtail	2	1
Goldfinch	16	7	Song Thrush	1	1
Long-tailed Tit	12	3	Carrion Crow	1	1
Collared Dove	11	5	Jay	1	1
Coal Tit	10	5	Sparrowhawk	1	1
Greenfinch	10	7	Buzzard	1	1
Blackcap	7	2	Fieldfare	1	1
Nuthatch	7	1	Goldcrest	1	1
Red Kite	7	2	Grey Heron	1	1

One might have guessed the top four or five even before the count as, for most of us, these are species most referred to in our conversations and photographs. Robin has been the 'national favourite' for many years, and in an 'unofficial' poll by the Urban Birder, David Lindo, a few years back, the Robin was 'adopted' as our National Bird and consequently featured on the cover of the next British Birds book that was published, (by WildGuides).

Blue Tit in second place would also not be a surprise, as it has been there or thereabouts for a while (tho a 10% drop in records in recent times). And Blackbirds, their numbers swelled at this time of year with continental migrants, are always likely to feature high up such a winter list as this. (Third in our results, 5th in RSPB's event of 2020) It would be interesting to see where this species would feature during a summer-time equivalent count.

And of course, Woodpigeon has been climbing this list for some time; 4th on our small exercise, and once scarce in gardens. But following an 800% (!) increase in UK populations of late, is now a top-5 regular.

A significant number of Dunnocks were recorded, giving it 5th place, somewhat higher than on the national event. Potentially, a relatively high percentage of records for the national event come from city dwellers, where the bird probably features less, as it prefers reasonably-sized gardens.

'Our' number 6 was Great Tit, followed by a bit of a gap to Magpies, of which the less said the better! But what a disappointment to see House Sparrow languishing in 9th slot here! It featured in less than half the participating gardens locally. Nationally, it still tends to be top or second in such counts, but clearly our local populations do not reflect the national picture. It is fitting therefore that

Wild Maidenhead is championing the 'spug' as one of the 4 birds on their Biodiversity Action species list, with offers of free nest terraces to local gardens.

Starling at No 8 matches the national trend (generally downwards for this species), but Goldfinch coming in at No 10 reflects a UK-wide picture of a bird generally regarded as a farmland species suddenly incorporating gardens in their preferred territories. Having rarely featured in the RSPB programme in years gone by, it was up in 4th spot nationally last year, a function no doubt of the more ingenious feeding regimes nowadays employed, which can include niger and sun-flower seeds, the main preferences of the species.

An encouraging inclusion at No 15 was Blackcap. This species was always traditionally a summer visitor from Africa, but returning autumn birds from northern Europe that traversed UK on their southern journey to Spain and beyond, started to stay over here for Christmas some good many years back. Now it is believed that number is as many as 100,000 across UK, with increasing evidence that a good percentage stay on to breed here and have in effect become a resident species.

Among the lower order representatives, what a shame to see Chaffinch so far down the order. This once-common garden visitor has suffered in numbers for a few years now, and has fallen way behind Greenfinch. And given how obvious the raucous Ring-necked Parakeets can be, only being found in 10% of our local gardens that weekend is perhaps surprising. Equally so is how few winter thrushes were noted. It has been recognised that Fieldfares in particular seem to be in very low numbers this winter, and our small census appears to confirm that.

Song Thrushes have been in full voice since before Christmas, and one can hear up to three at a time in a typical setting once they start up their orchestra of song, but the duller weekend of the count might explain why only a single bird was recorded. And finally, our Wrens might appear to be suffering as far as our results indicate, but this is a skulking little individual and I'd warrant there were a few more about, avoiding detection by their habit of creeping around low in dense vegetation much of the time – its Latin name does not mean 'cave dweller' for nothing!

So, in very general terms, there is a reasonable match between this small-scale local assessment and the national picture derived by some 250,000 records. Later in the year we can look again at our findings when the 2021 totals are published by RSPB.

In the meanwhile, we have been fortunate to obtain data from yet another national garden bird count scheme, organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). They have sent us no fewer than 16,000 lines of data from counts taken in our post-code area over the last 15 years – an enormous amount of information for us to trawl through. A team will be looking at this in the weeks/months ahead to see what conclusions we can draw from this much larger dataset, and details will be circulated at that time.

In the meantime, thank you to our participating gardeners, and let us all be encouraged to do all we can to support our local birds in our personal little nature reserves, against the well-known backdrop of declines and losses across the wider countryside.

Brian Clews

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