

SDOS GARDEN BIRDS 2018

There were 27 different gardens where SDOS members were recording for our survey in 2018, though some did not contribute for all four quarters, a few dropped out during the year and a couple joined; those participating were Val Bentley, Tony Benton, Noranne Biddulph, Paula Blake, Reg Bradbury, Brian Clay, Jay Cooper, John Cooper, John Feest, Martin Ford, Clive Hope, Laurie Keen, Cyril & Maureen Leeves, Matt Lemere-Goff, Sheila Marshall, John & Shena Maskell, Janet Paterson, David Potter, Anthony Robinson, John & Jeannette Simpson, Stephen Simpson, Marion Taylor, Gordon & Vera Tickler, Rae Titcomb, David Tomalin, Peter Whitcomb and Martin Wilson. There were 25 forms returned for the first quarter, 21 for the second, 20 for the third, and 22 for the fourth.

As previously, the totals for each week have been put onto a spreadsheet, and averaged out to see which species were our most frequent garden birds. It only takes one sighting of a species in one quarter to “count”! The table below shows the results for 2018, with the previous two years’ positions for comparison.

Species	Average % of gardens used each quarter	2018 overall position	2017 overall position	2016 overall position	Maximum number seen at one time (Observer & week)	Average number seen per week all gardens (2017)
Woodpigeon	100%	1=	1	2	20 (Ford, 14 Oct)	1.91 (2.10)
Blue Tit	100%	1=	2=	4=	28 (Blake, 26 Aug)	2.43 (2.21)
Robin	99%	3	2=	3	8 (Blake, 27 May)	0.91 (0.95)
Blackbird	96%	4	4	1	10 (Potter, 28 Jan & 4 Feb)	1.49 (1.54)
Great Tit	95%	5	5	4=	11 (Blake, 17 Jun & 12 Aug)	1.25 (1.34)
Magpie	91%	6	7	9	13 (Potter, 21 Jan)	0.95 (0.91)
Dunnock	87%	7	6	6	7 (Blake, 27 May)	0.96 (1.04)
Goldfinch	82%	8	8	13	16 (Clay, 28 Jan & Bradbury 4 Nov)	1.81 (1.76)
Carrion Crow	78%	9	10	12	4 (several observers)	0.49 (0.44)
Starling	75%	10	13	11	70 (J & J Simpson, 4 Nov)	3.36 (2.41)
Collared Dove	72%	11	12	7=	8 (Blake, Jan & Feb)	0.64 (0.63)
House Sparrow	70%	12	9	7=	70 (Maskell, 26 Aug)	2.89 (2.50)
Wren	65%	13	11	10	5 (Blake, 1 Apr)	0.41 (0.47)
Long-tailed Tit	62%	14	15	17	20 (Keen, 7 Jan)	1.63 (1.40)
Herring Gull	60%	15	14	15	12 (Whitcomb, 25 Mar)	0.71 (0.75)

The top 15 remained the same in 2018, though with some changes to the order. Woodpigeon maintained the top spot, though Blue Tit managed to rival it this year. Blackbird continued in 4th place having been 1st in 2016, Magpie continued its rise and overhauled Dunnock, House Sparrow was down to 12th this year but Starling crept up a couple of places. Goldfinch maintained its 8th place after a lower year in 2016. The most abundant in terms of individuals seen was Starling, and this species and House Sparrow were seen in somewhat larger numbers than in 2017, both having maxima of 70 birds. However, despite returning forms for all four quarters, Brian and Janet, both in High Salvington, recorded no House Sparrows, and Rae and Martin W had no Starlings.

The “Also Rans”

Regularly recorded, but not in the top 15, were:

Species	Average % of gardens used			
	2018	2017	2016	2015
Greenfinch	51%	58%	64%	69%
Chaffinch	49%	53%	52%	63%
Song Thrush	42%	39%	37%	33%

Great Spotted Woodpecker	41%	48%	38%	36%
Blackcap	38%	32%	40%	41%
Goldcrest	36%	35%	30%	24%
Coal Tit	35%	28%	20%	15%
Jay	34%	31%	27%	31%
Sparrowhawk	28%	22%	18%	13%
Jackdaw	28%	31%	18%	26%
Feral Pigeon	27%	21%	21%	23%
Chiffchaff	24%	36%	26%	25%

Greenfinches and Chaffinches were both less frequently seen, though in my garden Greenfinches are often the most numerous bird seen on my sunflower heart feeders. Song Thrush improved slightly, particularly in the first quarter when they were recorded in $\frac{3}{4}$ of the gardens – a shame that they seem to disappear during the rest of the year. The number of gardens reporting Coal Tits has more than doubled since 2015, though they are never abundant.

Some Garden Highlights

First Quarter

From January to March 49 species were seen, five more than in 2017. During February and March we suffered “the beast from the East” with a run of sub-zero temperatures which must have driven more birds into gardens in their difficult search for food. Blackcaps were seen in 15 of the 25 gardens, and were recorded every week by both Brian and John & Shena, who had a maximum of 8 in the final week of February. Redwings were seen by nine observers, up from just four in 2017, with Matt counting 10 in January and Paula 11 in February. Fieldfares were recorded by Paula and Peter in the same late February week. It’s always nice to have garden “ticks”; Tony had two in one morning on 1st March with a Red-legged Partridge followed by a Blackcap. At the end of March another Red-legged Partridge was fed by Noranne in Hove for three days in a row. As in 2017 the only person to see Siskins was Brian, with 6 in the final week of March. The wintering Lesser Whitethroat which arrived at John & Shena’s in December 2017 stayed around and was seen during the first three weeks of January, then again at the end of February and beginning of March, enjoying buggy nibbles apparently! This is only the fifth winter that the species has been recorded in Sussex, though there were two others seen, in Ringmer and Hove. Looks like the only winter Chiffchaff was seen by Tony in early February,

Gordon & Vera commented that since the final day of 2017 they have had regular visits from a single Goldcrest and 3 Long-tailed Tits, which are their first winter sightings of these in 27 years. Laurie and myself were lucky to see Firecrests, John C recorded Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail, and Martin F was the sole observer to get a Reed Bunting, which had probably nipped in from Ferring Rife, and a Brambling was in Sheila’s garden in mid-March. John C had a flyover from a Red Kite on 26th February.

Second Quarter

There were 40 species seen this quarter, six fewer than in 2017. Laurie’s Firecrest stayed around until the end of May, it was a brilliant male mainly seen at the birdbath, and during the quarter he had some good raptor sightings over or near his garden – Peregrine on 14th April, Buzzard on three occasions, Hobby on 21st and 29th May and Sparrowhawk on 13th June. Another Brambling appeared, this time at Brian’s at the start of April.

Newly fledged Starlings arrived at Tony’s at the end of May, and as Blue Tit numbers were swelled by juveniles Paula had a maximum of 24 at the end of June. Jay was amused by a juvenile Blackbird which pulled out a worm, but then seemed unsure what to do with it! John & Shena noticed House Sparrows using a Swift box and saw Dunnocks behaving badly in April! A Herring Gull at Gordon & Vera’s kept pinching food they’d put out for hedgehogs and Marion was visited by Jays most weeks, with four in late May. Laurie noticed the first young Long-tailed Tits on 28th May, Great Tits on 16th June, Dunnocks on 24th, and Greenfinches on 7th July.

David T reported a very unusual sighting on 12th April; only 12 feet away and with a chestnut crown, facial marking and little black bib, a dead cert for Tree Sparrow. Of course by the time he went to get his phone to photograph it, it had gone! This probably doesn’t “count” as far as official records are concerned, but I know that one turned up in a ringer’s garden in Hardham in October, so there must be a few out there somewhere.

Third Quarter

Only 36 different species from July to September, six fewer than in 2017. Blue Tits must have had another good breeding season; maximum counts were 24 at John & Shena's in the week of 19 August, and 28 at Paula's the following week. Clive was particularly pleased to see a Song Thrush in his garden at the end of July, the first for several years! The top House Sparrow count was at John & Shena's with 70 in the final week of August, though they only managed a maximum of one Starling during the quarter. Reg however had more than 40 Starlings in the first couple of weeks of August, but then none appeared again until mid-September. A male Firecrest was in Laurie's garden again on four occasions in July, and he saw a female on 22 September, so possibly they were breeding in Benfield Valley.

As migration got under way, Laurie noted a Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Warblers in September, Reg also recorded Willow Warblers, as did John & Shena who saw three in late July and early August. A Redstart visited Martin W's little bird bath on 30th and 31st August – only his second garden sighting of the species in 30 years at the house!

Fourth Quarter

And so to the final three months when 42 species were seen, also fewer than in 2017. John F and John & Shena were the House Sparrow champions this quarter, with 32 and 36 being their respective maxima. Collared Doves were only reported in half the gardens, yet during April- June they were in all but one – very strange.

Blackcaps can still be hanging around late into the autumn prior to migration, so I'm assuming that December records are of wintering birds. This year there were weekly sightings by John & Shena throughout December, a single record from Brian in the final week of the year, and 2 males seen on the 11th by Gordon & Vera, apparently feeding on crabapples. Redwings were only recorded in three gardens this quarter; it was a mild autumn and no doubt this and other species were finding enough food without needing to visit our gardens. Other visitors were a Grey Wagtail at Marion's from mid-November until the end of the year, a "first time in 35 years" Great Spotted Woodpecker at Anthony's in October, a couple of Reed Buntings at Paula's in late November, and a Treecreeper at Laurie's in October/November.

In Summary

The gardens participating in the survey were distributed throughout the SDOS area. The locations were Brighton (2), Ferring (2), Findon (1), Goring (3), Henfield (2), High Salvington (2), Hove (2), Lancing (3), Rustington (1), Shoreham (7), Steyning (1) and Worthing (1). The total of 53 different species recorded was the same as the previous year, though the actual species differed slightly. Nine species were seen in only one garden, including Siskin, Bullfinch, Spotted Flycatcher, Lesser Whitethroat and Kingfisher.

Several of us also take part in the BTO national Garden Birdwatch and predictably the national data is generally similar to ours. The first four are identical, with our next four (Great Tit, Dunnock, Goldfinch and Magpie) not too far behind, but nationally House Sparrow comes in 7th, compared to 12th for SDOS, while Herring Gull is 33rd, compared with 15th for SDOS. Chaffinches and Coal Tits were 11th and 12th nationally, but only 17th and 22nd for us.

The BTO reported in their 'Bird Table' magazine that by the autumn "many of the species that took a dramatic plummet due to the harsh conditions seen from the 'Beast from the East' seem to have made a recovery, with their reporting rate only slightly lower than average for the time of year. This might indicate that the dry warm conditions from late April until July favoured many species as they were breeding as they could feed uninterrupted." It will be interesting to see how 2019 turns out!

Many thanks to all those taking part in the SDOS Garden Birdwatch for their observations and comments.

Val Bentley