

Friends of City Gardens

Big Garden Birdwatch in the City 24th/25th January 2015



This was the 8th year volunteers have counted birds in City gardens as part of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. The number of species counted was 12, the lowest recorded, although the number of individual birds remained much the same as the last couple of years with 117 counted in a total of 12 different gardens.

Results

Woodpigeons headed the list as the most common species, followed by Blue tits. The number of Goldfinches recorded this year was no surprise as previous Birdwatch observations and the Roof top Bird Survey¹ in April/May last year suggest that this bird is now well established and breeding in the City. In contrast, the Greenfinch that was once a common breeding bird in the City has not been recorded in Birdwatches since 2012. This may be the result of trichomonosis, a disease caused by a parasite that has reduced Green finch populations throughout the UK. This emphasises the importance of maintaining good hygiene by regular disinfection of feeders.



Concerns

The decline of the House sparrow is well documented but it was disappointing not to observe any individuals this year - and this was also reflected in the results of the 2014 Roof top bird survey which also failed to record any House sparrows.

The 24th/25th January were cold and windy which may explain why the count was lower this year and why small birds like the wren were not observed. However, garden birds do need both cover and food to survive and breed successfully. In a number of gardens neither adequate cover nor feeders nor plants that are berry or seed bearing are present. Where these conditions are met the number of species and individuals was much higher. For example in

¹ Breeding birds were surveyed from 7 rooftop sites across the City in April/May 2015
<http://www.friendsofcitygardens.org.uk/RoofBirdReportWebVersion.pdf>

three of the 12 gardens included in this year's count, namely Bunhill Fields, Thomas More in the Barbican and St Paul's, eight or nine different species were present. These gardens are amongst the largest green spaces in the City, but more importantly they all have feeders and ground and shrub cover which is essential for small birds. In several of the other gardens where counting took place no birds or only one or two individuals were recorded. These were gardens where there were no feeders or suitable forage plants and little cover. This is disappointing to see in gardens designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation.

How we can improve

The issue of providing and managing specific habitats to encourage target species such as the House sparrow and other garden birds will be addressed in the City's new Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) that will be launched in 2015. Specific habitat action plans will be developed for all the SLINC sites over the next five years. Dense cover from ground level to shrub layer is essential, including evergreen shrubs, climbers like ivy and seed producing or berry bearing plants that provide forage in the winter months.

Other surveys

As well as the annual Big Garden Birdwatch at the end of January, birds are monitored throughout the year. The early summer Roof top Bird Survey of breeding birds will be repeated every two years and in 2015 a breeding bird survey at ground level sites will take place in May. Breeding success is also monitored annually when the bird boxes in the City are cleaned. The results of the Nest Box survey are given below.

Nest box survey November 2014

All the nest boxes in City gardens were cleaned 20th/21st November 2014. In total for the 2014 nesting season:

- 47 nest boxes were checked and cleaned in 12 gardens.
- 12 of the boxes had been occupied (26%) in comparison to 29% in the 2013 nesting season.
- The majority of nests were those of blue tits (58%) with the remainder great tits. No nests had been built in sparrow or open-type 'robin' boxes.

Robin, blackbird, green finch and wren nests were recorded in shrubs and trees in a number of gardens.

Table 1: 2011 - 2015 Birdwatch results

	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011
Woodpigeon	25	25	28	23	10
Blue tit	23	21	27	26	33
Goldfinch	20	6	1	12	1
Blackbird	14	19	19	29	12
Great tit	8	13	11	5	9
Carrion crow	6	3	7	8	1
Magpie	6	1	4	8	2
Robin	5	10	7	12	9
Dunnock	4	3	3	5	3
Chaffinch	2	3	3	2	
Starling	1	1			3
Greenfinch				6	12
House sparrow		3	1	3	3
Wren		2	1	3	1
Others	3	2	6	6	4
Total species	12	14	13	14	14
Total individuals	117	112	118	148	103

Note: 2015 includes counts for 12 gardens (2014 14 gardens). The figures for 2014 based on the 12 gardens counted this year are 13 species and 106 individuals.

Table 2: Nest boxes and number of nests for 2014 season

	2014		2013		2012	
	No. boxes	No. nests	No. boxes	No. nests	No. boxes	No. nests
Barbican - Fann Street	4	1	3	1	5	
Barbican - Speed	1	1	1	1	1	1
Barbican - St Giles	2	1				
Barbican - Thomas More	7	2	3	3	3	3
Bernard Morgan	1	1	1	1	1	
Bunhill Fields	5	1	5	1	5	2
Byward Street					1	
Christchurch Greyfriars	13	1	13		13	
Cleary Garden	2	1	2	2	2	1
Finsbury Circus	1		2	1	2	2
Postman's Park	3	1	3	2	3	1
St Botolph without Bishopsgate	1	Not checked	1	Not checked	2	1
St Dunstan's in the East	3	1	3		2	
St Mary Aldermanbury	1	Not checked	1	Not checked	2	2
St Paul's Cathedral	5	1	5	0	6	1
Total	49	12	43	12	48	14
Occupancy of checked boxes	26%		29%		29%	