



## SECOS WINTER GARDEN BIRD SURVEY FOR OCTOBER 2022 TO MARCH 2023

**T**his is the second season I have analysed the SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey (SWGBS) returns and written the report. I must acknowledge the contribution from Nick Harrison for the administration of the survey, sending out the forms etc. and collating the returns into an Access database and Excel spreadsheet format so making my role of analysis and report writing much easier. Whilst losing three participants from last season's survey due to various reasons (e.g. moving away from the area) we welcome back three members who have contributed to the survey in previous years giving a return of thirty-two survey forms from twenty members and twelve non-members, totalling the same overall number of participants as last year.

We hope that by reading the report more members and their friends will be motivated to undertake the survey. The survey started in 1985 and the data collected shows important trends in bird population numbers and species in our local area. We are aware that at least one regular survey participant is moving away from the area and will not take part next winter. Please can I ask SECOS members to consider taking part by talking to either myself, Ian Taylor, Nick Harrison or the SECOS Chairman, Mike Tonks. All observations are important, valuable and welcome even if you cannot complete every week of the survey. I would like to thank all of this season's survey participants and look forward to your observations and bird counts next year.

### The Participants

Table 1 below identifies the people who participated in this survey together with their unique registration number. Please note your number for the next survey.

<b>Table 1</b>			
<b>Reg. No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Reg. No.</b>	<b>Name</b>
8501	Hilary Clowes	1533	David Cookson
8502	Bryan Perkins	0334	Bill Bellamy
2104	Arthur Abbott	9636	Geoff Yarwood
8505	David & Elaine Meakin	0838	Richard Howells
1306	Roy Broughton	0639	Chris Parry
0107	Christine Howarth	0343	John & Wendy Fuller
1010	John Nixon	2046	John Kay
0240	Cynthia Cadman	0347	Sylvia Jarvis
9813	John Thompson	1348	Graham Bailey
9814	Colin Lythgoe	2049	Martin Watson
1215	Louise Adams	1351	Ray Broughton
0316	Paul & Margaret Harvey	1537	Heather Smith
0720	Rachel Heath	0758	Brian & Susan Plowright
1022	Mike & Christine Brooks	2103	David Harrison
9923	Janet & Peter Roberts	0853	David Bromont
1825	Kate Whittles	1727	Mike Tonks

## The Cumulative All Time Bird Species List

This winter added the eighty-third bird species to the SWGBS bird list. Over a four week period in October, one participant reported two barn owls in the garden for three of the weeks and a single bird on the fourth week. This is a tremendous record and suggests as there were two birds they may possibly breed somewhere close by.

Table 2					
SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey					
List of All Species 1985 to 2023					
No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species
1	Barn owl	29	Grey wagtail	57	Red-headed bunting
2	Black-headed gull	30	Hawfinch	58	Red-legged partridge
3	Blackbird	31	Herring gull	59	Redpoll (Lesser)
4	Blackcap	32	House martin	60	Redwing
5	Blue tit	33	House sparrow	61	Reed bunting
6	Brambling	34	Jackdaw	62	Ring-necked parakeet
7	Bullfinch	35	Jay	63	Robin
8	Buzzard	36	Kestrel	64	Rook
9	Chaffinch	37	Kingfisher	65	Siskin
10	Chiffchaff	38	Lapwing	66	Skylark
11	Coal tit	39	Lesser black-backed Gull	67	Snipe
12	Collared dove	40	Lesser spotted woodpecker	68	Song thrush
13	Common gull	41	Linnet	69	Sparrowhawk
14	Corn bunting	42	Little owl	70	Starling
15	Crow	43	Long-tailed tit	71	Stock dove
16	Dunnock	44	Magpie	72	Swallow
17	Feral pigeon	45	Mallard	73	Tawny owl
18	Fieldfare	46	Marsh/ willow tit	74	Tree sparrow
19	Garden warbler	47	Meadow pipit	75	Treecreeper
20	Goldcrest	48	Mealy redpoll	76	Water rail
21	Goldfinch	49	Merlin	77	Waxwing
22	Great black-backed gull	50	Mistle thrush	78	White wagtail
23	Great spotted woodpecker	51	Moorhen	79	Willow warbler
24	Great tit	52	Mute swan	80	Woodcock
25	Green woodpecker	53	Nuthatch	81	Woodpigeon
26	Greenfinch	54	Pheasant	82	Wren
27	Grey heron	55	Pied wagtail	83	Yellowhammer
28	Grey partridge	56	Raven		

## The 2022/2023 Survey

The thirty-two gardens surveyed over the twenty-six week period means that it is possible to produce 832 garden-week records. (32x26=832). With a total of 789 garden-week records submitted, (43 records fewer than the maximum) we achieved a return rate of 95%, just 1% less than the 2021/22 survey. An impressive return rate - thank you.

## The Listed Species

Table 3 shows the species entered on the *Listed Bird Species* section of the input forms A1 and A2. In order to show a comparative measure of species occurrence they are listed in descending order of their garden-week records together with the number of gardens they visited and their highest count plus the corresponding participants registration number (see Table 1). The bracketed numbers show the figures for the 2021/22 survey.

<b>Table 3</b>					
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Number of Garden-Week Records out of 789 (798)</b>	<b>Number of Gardens Visited out of 32 (32)</b>	<b>Highest Single Count</b>	
				<b>Number</b>	<b>Participants Registration Number</b>
1 (1)	Woodpigeon	771 (773)	32	25 (21)	0334
2 (2)	Blackbird	750 (757)	32	22 (14)	2104
3 (3)	Blue tit	732 (743)	32	24 (22)	2103
4 (4)	Robin	722 (696)	32	5 (5)	1351
5 (5)	Dunnock	639 (629)	32	14 (15)	1351
6 (7=)	House sparrow	627 (584)	30	48 (35)	2049
7 (6)	Magpie	608 (598)	32	23 (14)	2103
8 (7=)	Great tit	576 (584)	32	15 (13)	1351
9 (9)	Goldfinch	519 (530)	29	30 (24)	2103, 9814
10 (10)	Starling	455 (444)	29	42 (100)	1306
11 (12)	Chaffinch	427 (382)	29	14 (23)	1351
12 (11)	Collared dove	400 (407)	24	32 (15)	8505
13 (14)	Greenfinch	377 (314)	28	21 (20)	1351
14 (13)	Jackdaw	354 (333)	22	19 (45)	8502
15 (16)	Long-tailed tit	299 (278)	28	21 (20)	1537
16 (17)	Wren	297 (274)	29	2 (3)	#1
17 (15)	Coal tit	285 (290)	28	4 (5)	0240
18 (18)	Crow	245 (255)	25	5 (6)	0347
19 (21)	Sparrowhawk	168 (94)	21	2 (2)	0639, 1351
20 (19)	Nuthatch	155 (146)	16	2 (3)	#2
21 (20)	Great spotted woodpecker	138 (126)	13	3 (3)	2049, 1351
22 (22)	Song thrush	94 (64)	15	3 (2)	1306

#1 Surveyors registration number: 2103, 0720, 0639, 1351

#2 Surveyors registration number: 8501, 0639, 2049, 1351, 0758

There was no change in the top five species from the 2021/2022 survey. Woodpigeon topped the table being recorded on 771 occasions in participants gardens. Blackbird was recorded 21 fewer

times than woodpigeon compared to 16 garden-week records separating the top two in last year's survey. The five top ranked species: woodpigeon; blackbird; blue tit; robin and dunnock together with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> ranked species; magpie and great tit were present in all 32 participant's gardens. Looking at the highest single count figures the top three species: woodpigeon (25/21); blackbird (22/14) and blue tit (24/22) all showed small increases on last year's survey. The largest increases in maximum number counts compared to last year's survey were collared dove 17 (32/15); house sparrow 13 (48/35); magpie 9 (23/14), blackbird 8 (22/14) and goldfinch 6 (30/24). Looking back to the 2019/20 survey (Table 4) shows how the maximum numbers of woodpigeon; blackbird; house sparrow; blue tit; magpie and great tit are trending upwards, while robin numbers have almost halved.

Species	Year			
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Woodpigeon	19	17	21	25
Blackbird	12	14	14	22
Blue tit	14	18	22	24
Robin	9	7	5	5
House sparrow	25	30	35	40
Magpie	14	9	14	23
Great tit	11	11	13	15

These maximum numbers in the 2022/23 survey were achieved in just one garden so cannot be considered statistically sound but taken over time do show a possible trend, which, except for the robin is good news.

Looking further at Table 3, the largest decreases in maximum number counts compared to last year's survey identifies three species whose numbers dropped: starling 58 (42/100);

jackdaw 26 (19/45) and chaffinch 9 (14/23). Table 5 compares the previous three years survey numbers to this year. No obvious trend is present although for all three species the maximum numbers for 2022/23 are about half of those observed in 2021/22. Could this be due to *bird flu*?

Species	Year			
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Starling	51	34	100	42
Jackdaw	41	36	45	19
Chaffinch	18	24	23	14

This is something to be watched in future years.

Observations of the rank order for the listed species see coal tit falling for the third year in a row, from 10<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> and sparrowhawk rising to 19<sup>th</sup> from 21<sup>st</sup> with 168 garden-week

records. While the maximum number of coal tits observed is fairly constant at 4 to 6 over the years perhaps the sparrowhawk has found gardens a good place to hunt, a *marmite* subject for those who feed the birds. Other changes to the ranking order were minor with five species moving up one place: house sparrow; chaffinch; greenfinch; long-tailed tit and wren, whilst magpie; great tit; collared dove; jackdaw; nuthatch and great spotted woodpecker dropped by a place. Nine species: the top five and goldfinch; starling; carrion crow and song thrush were unchanged in their rank order.

The highest or joint highest single count for a species in a garden was spread across seventeen participants, one more than last year's survey. Once again the garden with registration number 1351 recorded the 9 highest *Listed Species* counts.

Bar Graph 1 shows the average distribution of feeders used across all the SWGBS gardens in the two 3-month survey periods. Every participant in the survey, except one, used at least one hanging feeder, two gardens didn't have any ground or table feeders. Some participants only

recorded their number of feeders in one half of the survey and it was assumed the number of feeders used was constant. Several participants varied the number of hanging feeders in their

gardens during the survey period, the same as last season by putting out more in the colder months of December through to late February and reducing numbers in October and late February to March.

Bar Graph 1 also reflects the higher number of hanging feeders preferred for feeding the garden birds with 22 hanging feeders again being the highest.

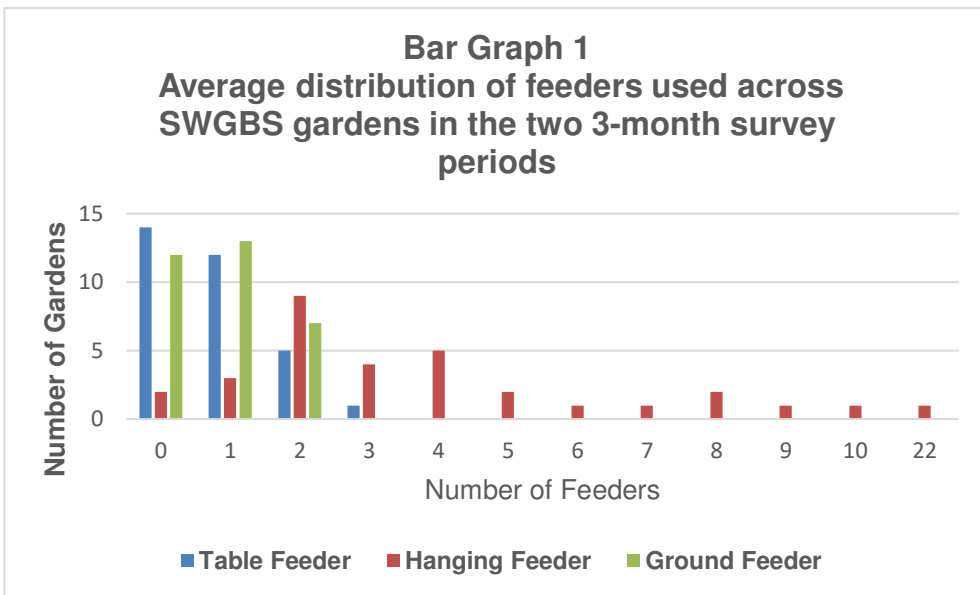
Most participants used two

to four hanging feeders compared to three to five in last years' survey. While there was no real change in the use of table and ground feeders compared to last year.

In comparison to last year's survey, registration number 0838 a Sandbach garden with 22 hanging feeders did achieve a joint highest count for a species, recording a single chiffchaff listed in the *Other Species* list from the A1 and A2 input forms. However five other participants also reported this species in their garden. In contrast registration number 1351 in Shavington, with eight hanging feeders and one each of a table and ground feeder recorded the highest species count of 9 *Listed Species* and 6 *Other Species*. It's possible this high success rate for attracting larger numbers of a range of bird species is not only the presence of food in the feeders but also the location of the garden and diligence of the observer.

### Comparison with the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch (BGBW) was held in 2023, over the weekend of 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> January with 540,000 people taking part in this biggest citizen science wildlife survey. I expect



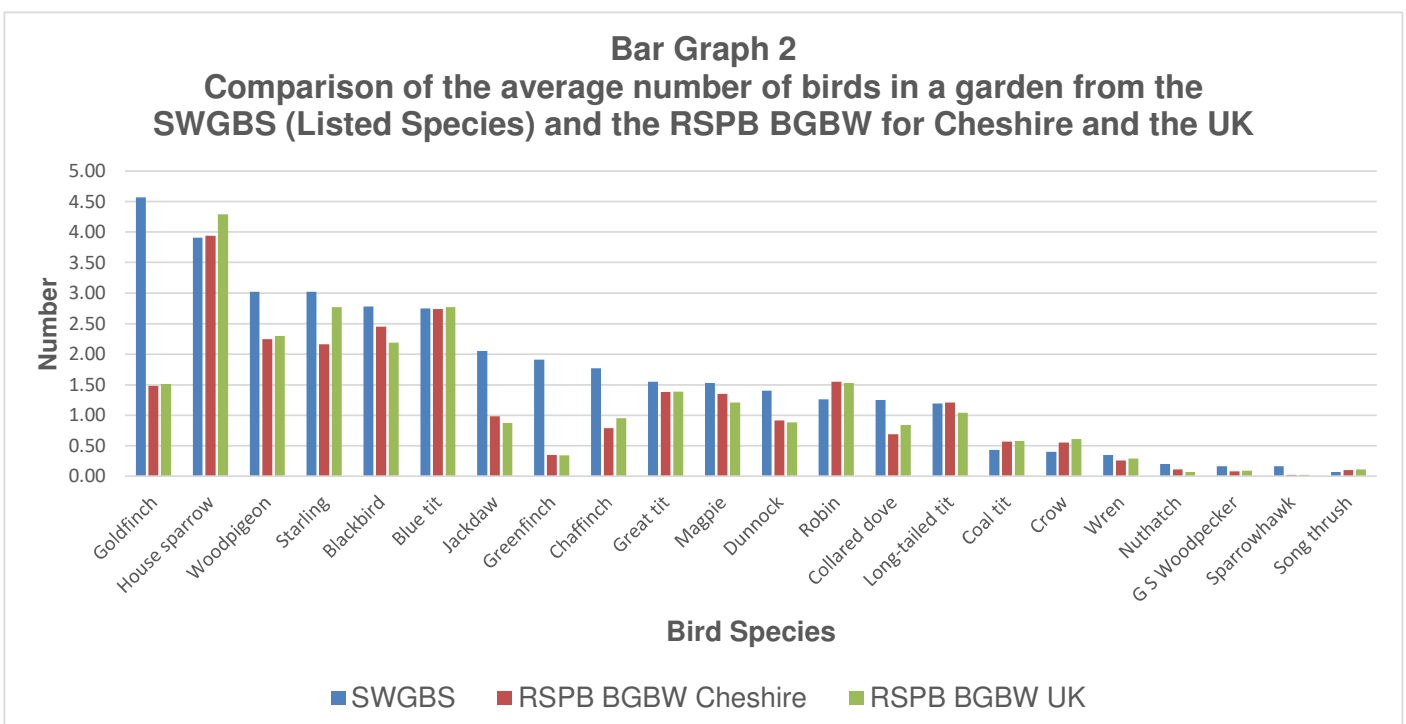
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many of our participants and readers took part in this annual event which like our SWGBS gives an insight to bird life in our back gardens. I plan to compare the results of the two surveys but add a note of caution as data for the SWGBS is collected over a 26 week period compared to the BGBW's one hour snapshot in a 3 day recording period, so that any comparisons are just a guide and shouldn't be taken as absolute.

Bar Graph 2. shows a big surprise when comparing SWGBS counts to the RSPB BGBW as the goldfinch is our number 1 displacing the house sparrow to position 2, with three times more goldfinches as the average count in the garden, not only in Cheshire but the UK. I conclude that the goldfinch is doing very well in our gardens. The average house sparrow numbers have dropped from 4.41 in 2021/22 to 3.91 in 2022/23. The SWGBS figures are about the same as those in Cheshire and are just below the UK average. The RSPB report that about 10 million pairs of house sparrows have disappeared in the UK since the late 1960s but there are signs of recovery in some parts of the country.

Last year's species that showed a higher garden average in the SWGBS: goldfinch; woodpigeon; jackdaw; greenfinch; chaffinch and dunnock compared to the RSPB BGBW, Cheshire and UK figures maintained this status and we can add starling and blackbird to that list. This is good news for the starling because it is still considered in decline but in the SWGBS area compared to the UK it is above the average for numbers.

In the RSPB BGBW survey as previously mentioned the house sparrow maintained its number 1 spot for the 20<sup>th</sup> year in a row. The top RSPB Garden birds were 1. house sparrow; 2. blue tit; 3. starling; 4. woodpigeon; 5. blackbird; 6. robin; 7. goldfinch; 8. great tit; 9. magpie and 10. long-tailed tit. In comparison the SWGBS survey were 1. goldfinch; 2. house sparrow; 3. woodpigeon; 4. starling; 5. blackbird; 6. blue tit; 7. jackdaw; 8. greenfinch; 9. chaffinch and 10. great tit. Seven birds were present in both top 10 albeit with variation in the ranking. The jackdaw, greenfinch and chaffinch stand out as having higher average garden numbers and possibly shows better local recovery for the two finches whose garden numbers have dropped significantly in recent years. I don't have any thoughts on why the jackdaw numbers are higher in the SWGBS area gardens than in Cheshire and Nationally.

## **The Other Species**

Table 6, for the species entered under *Other Species* section of the input forms are listed in descending order of garden-week record occurrences, a measure of their abundance in the garden. Thirty-one species were recorded from 32 gardens, the same number as SWGBS 2021/22. Four species were not observed in gardens this year: red-legged partridge; tree sparrow; kestrel and marsh/willow tit. They were replaced with: willow warbler; raven; common gull and our 83<sup>rd</sup> species to the survey - barn owl. It will be interesting to see if these species can consolidate their position and be reported in 2024.

Looking at the species that were missing, the red-legged partridge were probably birds laid down for shooting so were no great loss but are very tasty. The loss of two red listed birds, the tree sparrow and marsh/willow tit are of more concern as these species are relatively rare. The tree sparrow is a colonial nester and the marsh/willow tit has very specific nesting habitat requirements so what has changed to mean these species no longer visit our participant's gardens?

Pied wagtail has moved to the top of the list from 6<sup>th</sup> position at the expense of stock dove which moved down to 2<sup>nd</sup> place. The number of gardens visited for pied wagtail increased by three to fifteen while the stock dove remained static at nine. Bullfinch which topped the table in 2020/21 maintained 5<sup>th</sup> position, visiting the same number of gardens (7) with the same maximum count

**Table 6**

Rank	Species	Number of Garden-Week Records out of 789 (798)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 32 (32)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (6)	Pied wagtail	111 (57)	15 (12)	4 (4)	0334
2 (1)	Stock dove	108 (104)	9 (9)	17 (14)	1306
3 (3)	Rook	93 (76)	7 (7)	43 (23)	1306
4 (4)	Feral pigeon	70 (70)	3 (5)	5 (6)	0720
5 (5)	Bullfinch	61 (60)	7 (7)	5 (5)	1351
6= (2)	Jay	49 (82)	4 (11)	5 (5)	1351
6= (7)	Black-headed gull	49 (43)	12 (9)	20 (11)	9636
8 (10)	Blackcap	39 (23)	12 (12)	2 (1)	#1
9 (9)	Redwing	36 (17)	13 (8)	16 (15)	9923
10 (8)	Goldcrest	33 (37)	10 (10)	2 (2)	2103, 0639
11 (11)	Siskin	25 (22)	5 (11)	6 (10)	2103
12 (25=)	Herring gull	24 (4)	4 (2)	3 (1)	1306
13 (19)	Common buzzard	23 (11)	4 (4)	2 (1)	2104
14 (15=)	Fieldfare	18 (16)	7 (5)	55 (12)	1306
15 (13)	Mistle thrush	17 (21)	5 (5)	2 (2)	1533, 0639
16 (11=)	Tawny owl	15 (22)	2 (2)	2 (2)	1306
17 (21)	Common pheasant	14 (9)	2 (4)	1 (2)	9923, 1351
18 (25=)	Grey wagtail	13 (4)	3 (3)	1 (2)	0343, 1351, 9814
19 (29=)	Lesser (common) redpoll	12 (1)	3 (1)	2 (1)	0853, 2103
20 (15=)	Mallard	8 (16)	2 (5)	3 (4)	1306
21= (9)	Brambling	7 (30)	3 (8)	2 (4)	1351, 9923
21= (17)	Reed bunting	7 (13)	5 (6)	1 (1)	#2
23 (20)	Chiffchaff	5 (10)	4 (5)	1 (1)	#3
24= (22)	Treecreeper	4 (7)	3 (5)	1 (1)	9923, 1351, 0639
24= (23=)	Moorhen	4 (5)	2 (1)	1 (2)	0759, 1010
24= (-)	Barn owl	4 (-)	1 (-)	2 (-)	1306
27 (23=)	Grey heron	3 (5)	3 (4)	1 (1)	0316, 0639, 0758
27= (25=)	Lesser black-backed gull	3 (4)	3 (2)	1 (2)	0316, 0334, 9636
29 (-)	Common gull	2 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	2046
30= (-)	Raven	1 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	0334
30= (-)	Willow warbler	1 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	8502

#1: 0107, 2046, 2103, 9636

#2: 2103, 1306, 1215, 1727, 0853

#3: 9814, 0639, 0758, 0838



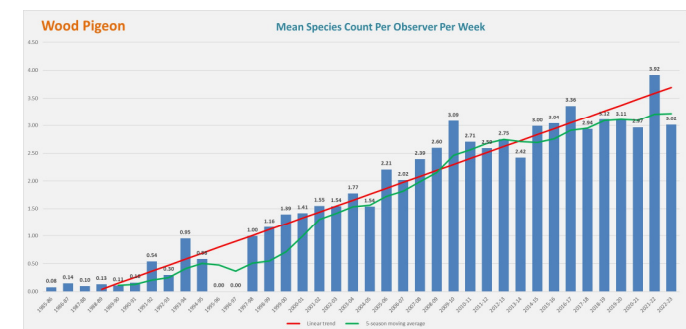
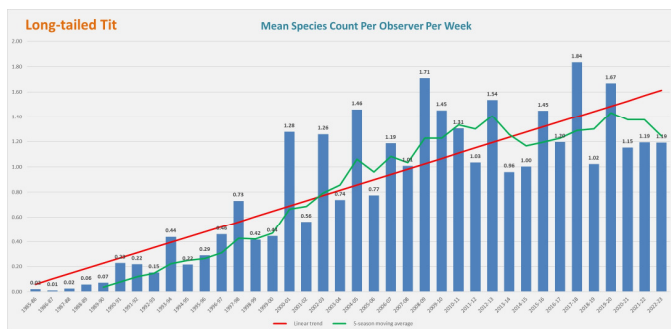
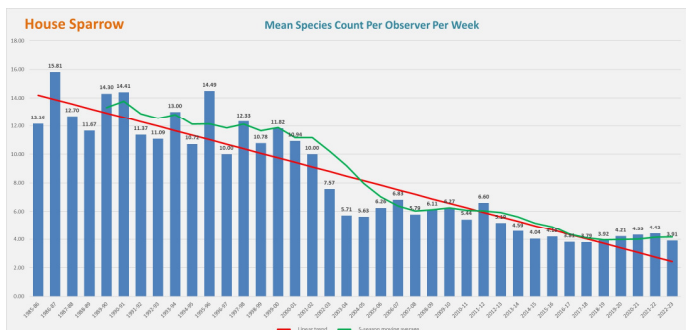
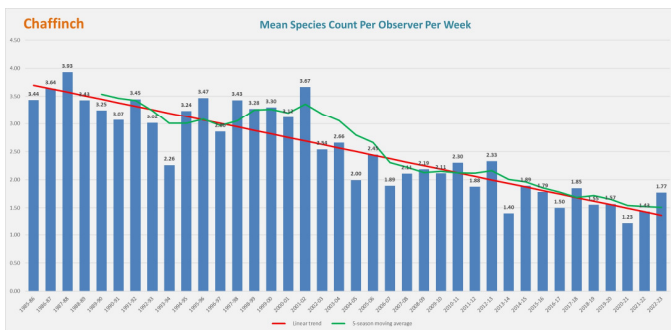
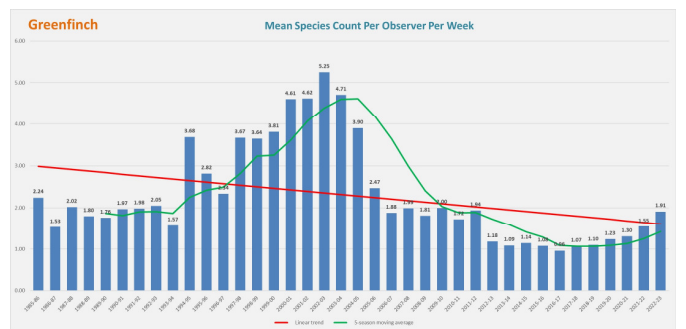
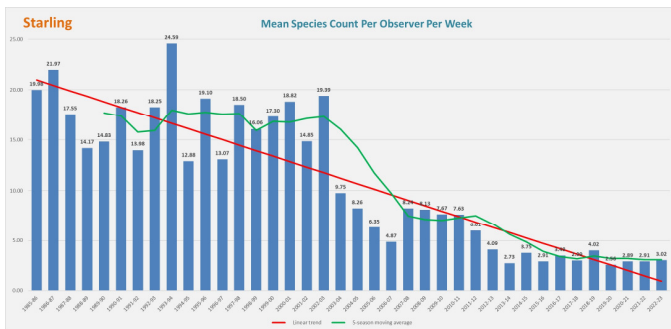
(5) as last year. Other big movers in the ranking were jay dropping from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> and brambling to 21<sup>st</sup> from 9<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps acorns were more plentiful in the woods and there wasn't such a need for jays to raid gardens for food and there wasn't a brambling irruption from Europe last winter so returning brambling numbers to their previous more normal ranking position.

There were three species that had significant increases in their maximum numbers recorded. Rook had another year on year increase from 17 (20/21) to 23 (21/22) and now 43 in 2022/23 with fieldfare moving from 12 (21/22) to 55 in this years survey. Black-headed gull moved from 11 to 20 visiting three more gardens (12/9) than in last year's survey, returning to the maximum number recorded in the 2020/21 survey.

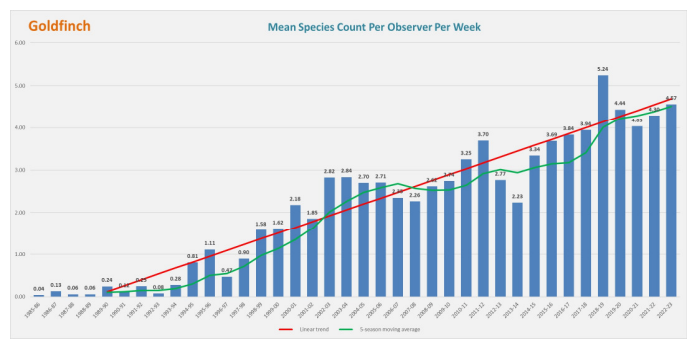
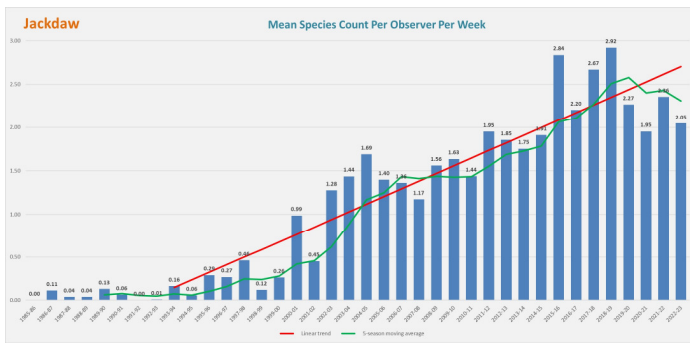
Redwing had 36 garden-week records in this survey, an increase from 17 the previous winter, visiting 13 gardens compared to 8 in the previous survey with an increase of 1 in the highest single count. Last year siskins had a highest single count of 10, up from 6 the previous year but in this year's survey siskins dropped back to a maximum highest single count of 6 and it should be noted they only visited five gardens compared to eleven in the last survey. This suggests siskins had plenty of natural food available and didn't need to visit garden feeders. Other species highest single counts and number of gardens visited were within one or two of the 2021/22 survey.

Twenty-one participants, two less than last year, recorded the highest count for at least one species in their garden. Participant registration number 1306 had the highest or joint highest count of eight species, with participant 1351 coming second with six species, three less than last year when coming first.

Nick Harrison has updated the historical SWGBS data, recorded since 1985 for selected species at an individual level to produce charts showing how their numbers have changed with time. They







can be found on the SECOS website and I've picked out eight of the charts that show how our local bird numbers have changed over the lifetime of the SWGBS. If you want to see the numbers on the charts please look on the website, these images are to give you a general impression of what you will see.

These eight charts clearly show the decline of the starling, chaffinch, house sparrow and greenfinch. The greenfinch is an interesting chart because it shows a decline then a recovery then a further decline in numbers. While this was happening long-tailed tit, woodpigeon, jackdaw and goldfinch numbers increased. SWGBS results reflect the data collected by the RSPB and bird surveys by other organisations (e.g. BTO, WWT).



## News from the Comments Section.

### Feeding Habits

Sunflower hearts continue to be the most popular food in the hanging feeders with many participants commenting they used this high protein food source. There were several comments that robin, chaffinch, siskin, lesser redpoll, dunnock and collared dove used the hanging feeders but no mention of blue, great or coal tits. Perhaps the observers were noting the unusual. Four woodpigeons and four collared doves have mastered the skill to hang onto a hanging feeder in an Alsager garden. A few other observers mention collared doves hanging on feeders, are they learning from one another? A nuthatch visited both nut and seed feeders in an Alsager garden, obviously hedging it's bets! A magpie was seen taking bird cake from a hanging feeder in another Alsager garden.

A male great spotted woodpecker was using a hanging feeder stocked with kibbled peanuts and one observer commented that starlings suddenly showed up when restocking their peanut feeder - it makes you wonder who is watching who!! Other unusual feeding observations were a jay feeding on beech mast in an Alsager garden and black-headed gulls only being attracted into an Alsager garden when Christmas leftovers or bread was thrown out.

Two observers mentioned bird numbers being down when they had stopped feeding while away on holiday. One reported that numbers built up again during the following week when feeding resumed. This shows how important feeding is to keep population numbers up in our gardens.

Redwings, fieldfares and blackbirds were attracted exclusively to fallen apples in a Nantwich garden. Another observer reported a blackbird objecting to redwings moving onto their patch of rowan berries and a fieldfare chased off all comers while it was eating apples on the ground. These thrushes can be very protective of their food stocks and will fight off any intruders. One Shavington observer reported a blackcap feeding on their apple feeder, and saw both male and female birds in the garden at the end of March and hoped they would pair up.

Pied wagtails were reported ground feeding in one Nantwich garden with chaffinches, plus a male reed bunting was seen feeding under a hanging feeder in a Sandbach garden. Also, blackbirds were seen with redwings picking up seed from the ground, showing they don't always fight when feeding together. There were no other ground feeding reports but acrobatics on hanging fat balls was a speciality of jackdaws and starlings in two gardens. A common buzzard was seen worming on the back lawn of an Alsager garden but was soon mobbed by two magpies who didn't appreciate its presence.

### **Garden First and Returning Bird Events**

Carrion crow was reported as a first in an Alsager garden in November and an observer in Sandbach recorded only their second garden carrion crow since February 2018. There were two reports of returning pied wagtails, a Scholar Green garden had three return, one of which was very aggressive to the other two plus an Alsager garden recorded their first pied wagtail since December 2020. Another second for the garden was a blackcap in Sandbach where this species was last seen in January 2019.

A reporter commented that it was nice to see a bullfinch in October and in November our Haslington reporter saw a chiffchaff taking a bath in the garden pond, they commented that one hadn't been seen for a few years. The final returning bird was a November coal tit which hadn't been seen in an Alsager garden since August 2022 and the same garden had a surprise October visit from a chaffinch but no further details were given. In a Crewe garden a chaffinch was reported as a rare garden sighting!

### **Sparrowhawk Events**

Fourteen sparrowhawk events were recorded in the comments section during this survey, one less than in 2021/22. Three different gardens reported goldfinch feathers as evidence of sparrowhawk activity, five were reports of sparrowhawks perching and observing while six participants saw active hunting in their gardens. A Sandbach garden on a single November day had five separate sparrowhawk sightings with one sighting being when the bird bath was used for a *wash and brush up!* One late afternoon in early December an observer saw a male sparrowhawk fly into a lime tree to join a perching female, no comment was made as to whether they have used the tree in the past as a nest site.

### **Observed Bird Behaviour**

Four people reported fewer birds in their gardens during the opening two to three weeks of the survey. This wasn't a local observation as the gardens were in Holmes Chapel, Scholar Green, and Alsager. There were two reports of dead birds in the survey, a whooper swan on a local farm pool and two chaffinches and one long-tailed tit in a Nantwich garden. Could these events be due to the bird flu also known as the avian flu virus HPAI (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza) strain H5N1, although coastal species seem to be bearing the brunt of the disease (e.g. gannets) it can infect garden birds. The message to reduce the risk of infection at your feeders is to keep them clean and disinfected, not forgetting to wash your hands thoroughly after any contact with your bird feeders. The good news is that the risk to you of catching bird flu is low so do please continue to feed your garden birds but remember to wash your hands.

As last year we had several reports of birds inspecting possible nest boxes, singing to establish a territory or attract a mate and collecting nest material. We had two blue and one great tit exploring possible nest sites in January, although this could be looking for roosting sites for protection from the cold weather. Later in March a robin was building a nest in the ivy on a fence panel and a house sparrow was nest building on a drainpipe in a laurel hedge. In an Alsager garden a nuthatch was investigating a hole in the brickwork of the house which has been used as a nesting

site previously but decided to compete with a blue tit at another a potential site - the winner was not declared. A late nester was that of two young woodpigeons who only fledged at the end of October. We also had examples of birds roosting in hedges (robin, house sparrow) ivy (wren and robin) and laurel (blackbirds) to keep out the cold. There was some evidence of nest box selection disputes. In Alsager a house sparrow failed to gain access to a nest box designed for blue tits, a few weeks later blue tits took up residence. In the same garden the observer saw great tits in and out of a nest box that they eventually abandoned in favour of more blue tits.

We had several reports of birds singing or calling from an Alsager garden. In October a juvenile buzzard was calling from the top of a cedar tree, in December a female tawny owl was heard twice during the week in the early hours, in January a song thrush was singing at day break with a tawny owl calling outside a sitting room window and finally in late February a starling was singing from a lime tree - what noisy neighbours! Other birds heard singing were a song thrush and a dunnock from a Crewe garden in January with a blackcap in late March.

Only two observers reported birds carrying nesting material, a blackbird in Crewe and house sparrows collecting feathers in Sandbach. Magpies, collared doves, and great tits were reported nesting in a Sandbach garden,

In a Sandbach garden three robins managed to promote a fight between two of them, presumably two males fighting over a female. The same observer reported at least one if not two blackcaps feeding in their garden for sixteen consecutive weeks (8<sup>th</sup> January to 26<sup>th</sup> March), they were also seen regularly in the first half of the survey so were most likely overwintering.

A party of six male blackbirds dropped into a Haslington garden for about an hour, these birds were probably on winter passage to avoid the cold weather. To quote the observer *they dominated the garden presumably pesky foreigners!*

Unusual bird behaviour included a group of ten greenfinches feeding together on the ground in a Nantwich garden vegetable patch, this surprised the recorder because they usually dined exclusively on sunflower seeds in a hanging feeder! Grey wagtails turned up in unusual places, one in a Haslington garden taking a bath in the garden pond and a second on a flat roof after it had rained. Other bathers included a sparrowhawk in a Sandbach water-bath and a starling in a Haslington garden. The pond in Haslington was frozen but the waterfall was still working - tough birds these starlings.

Finally I would like to thank everybody who contributed to this season's SWGBS. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Nick, Mike and my wife Lydia for their help proof reading and correcting my grammar. All comments and conclusions are entirely down to me and I hope after reading this report you will be motivated to contribute to next season's survey.

Thank you and happy birdwatching.

Ian Taylor  
22<sup>nd</sup> June 2023