



## SECOS WINTER GARDEN BIRD SURVEY FOR OCTOBER 2023 TO MARCH 2024

**A**nother year has passed as I sit at my desk to analyse the thirty-ninth set of Garden Bird Survey (GBS) data provided by survey participants. This is the third report I have written and it is only possible because of the unseen work by Nick Harrison undertaking all the administration e.g. sending out the forms, collating all the data into an Access database and Excel spreadsheet which makes my analysis and writing the report role so much easier. This season twenty-nine gardens were watched and although this is three less than last year we welcome back two observers to reduce the effect of five people not participating this time. Of the twenty-nine survey forms returned, twenty were from SECOS members and nine from non-members. While we appreciate the observations from non-members, SECOS does offer more than just a WGBS and becoming a member of the Group would offer opportunities to join with like-minded colleagues on walks and at indoor presentations to enable greater enjoyment of birds and wildlife.

I would like to say thank you to all who have contributed to this season's survey and we look forward to your observations and bird counts next year. Our hope is that more members and their friends or relatives will be encouraged to undertake the survey. It is a piece of citizen science and all data is welcome even if you cannot complete every week of the survey due to holidays, etc. Please speak or send an email to either myself, Nick Harrison or the SECOS Chair Mike Tonks and we will answer any questions or concerns you may have and provide you with the necessary forms to help you collect the data.

### The Participants

Table 1 below identifies the people who participated in this survey together with their unique registration number. *Italics* denote non SECOS members, please note your number for the next survey.

Table 1					
SECOS Garden Bird Survey Contributors 2023 to 2024					
<u>Reg. No.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Reg. No.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Reg. No.</u>	<u>Name</u>
8501	Hilary Clowes	1351	<i>Ray Broughton</i>	9813	John Thompson
8502	Bryan Perkins	1537	Heather Smith	9814	Colin Lythgoe
8505	David & Elaine Meakin	0107	Christine Howarth	1306	<i>Roy Broughton</i>
0758	Brian & Susan Plowright	2103	David Harrison	0720	<i>Rachel Heath</i>
9923	Janet & Peter Roberts	0853	David Bromont	1010	<i>John Nixon</i>
1022	<i>Mike &amp; Christine Brooks</i>	1727	Mike Tonks	1825	Kate Whittles
240	Cynthia Cadman	1912	Anthea Gater	1533	David Cookson
9636	Geoff Yarwood	2228	Anne Davies	0334	<i>Bill Bellamy</i>
0639	Chris Parry	0347	Sylvia Jarvis	2049	<i>Martin Watson</i>
2046	<i>John Kay</i>	1348	<i>Graham Bailey</i>		

**Table 2****SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey****List of All Species 1985 to 2024**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Bird Species</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Bird Species</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Bird Species</b>
1	Barn owl	29	Grey partridge	57	Raven
2	Black-headed gull	30	Grey wagtail	58	Red-headed bunting
3	Blackbird	31	Hawfinch	59	Red-legged partridge
4	Blackcap	32	Herring gull	60	Redpoll (Lesser)
5	Blue tit	33	House martin	61	Redwing
6	Brambling	34	House sparrow	62	Reed bunting
7	Bullfinch	35	Jackdaw	63	Ring-necked parakeet
8	Buzzard	36	Jay	64	Robin
9	Canada goose	37	Kestrel	65	Rook
10	Chaffinch	38	Kingfisher	66	Siskin
11	Chiffchaff	39	Lapwing	67	Skylark
12	Coal tit	40	Lesser black-backed gull	68	Snipe
13	Collared dove	41	Lesser spotted woodpecker	69	Song thrush
14	Common gull	42	Linnet	70	Sparrowhawk
15	Corn bunting	43	Little owl	71	Starling
16	Carrion crow	44	Long-tailed tit	72	Stock dove
17	Dunnock	45	Magpie	73	Swallow
18	Feral pigeon	46	Mallard	74	Tawny owl
19	Fieldfare	47	Marsh/willow tit	75	Tree sparrow
20	Garden warbler	48	Meadow pipit	76	Treecreeper
21	Goldcrest	49	Mealy redpoll	77	Water rail
22	Goldfinch	50	Merlin	78	Waxwing
23	Great black-backed gull	51	Mistle thrush	79	White wagtail
24	Great spotted woodpecker	52	Moorhen	80	Willow warbler
25	Great tit	53	Mute swan	81	Woodcock
26	Green woodpecker	54	Nuthatch	82	Woodpigeon
27	Greenfinch	55	Pheasant	83	Wren
28	Grey heron	56	Pied wagtail	84	Yellowhammer

## The Cumulative All Time Bird Species List

Table 2 (previous page) shows the addition of Canada goose, the eighty-fourth bird species added to the SWGBS bird list. Over a two week period at the beginning of October, one participant in Winterley reported two Canada geese in the garden. Canada geese are regularly seen in good numbers in the GBS area and one respondent in Scholar Green noted 80+ birds in a flooded field in December, so perhaps we should be asking why it has taken thirty-nine years for a Canada goose to be seen in a garden.

## The 2023/2024 Survey

The twenty-nine gardens surveyed over the twenty-six week period means that it is possible to produce 754 garden-week records. (29x26=754). With a total of 696 garden-week records submitted, (58 records fewer than the maximum) we achieved a return rate of 92%, 3% less than the 2022/23 survey. While the return rate has fallen each year from 96% recorded in the 2021/22 survey this probably reflects more time away from home on holiday following the pandemic. Thank you for your time making observations and recording your bird count numbers, this is still an impressive return rate.

## 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).

Table 3					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden-Week Records out of 696 (789)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 29 (32)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (1)	Woodpigeon	631 (771)	28 (32)	19 (21)	0639
2 (3)	Blue tit	627 (732)	29 (32)	26 (24)	2103
3 (2)	Blackbird	620 (750)	29 (32)	12 (22)	1351
4 (4)	Robin	581 (722)	29 (32)	6 (5)	1351
5 (6)	House sparrow	497 (627)	27 (30)	22 (48)	8502
6 (8)	Great tit	490 (576)	27 (32)	15 (15)	2103
7 (7)	Magpie	481 (608)	29 (32)	8 (23)	2103
8 (9)	Goldfinch	479 (519)	26 (29)	61 (30)	1010
9 (5)	Dunnock	471 (639)	28 (32)	9 (14)	1351
10 (10)	Starling	317 (455)	26 (29)	50 (42)	0758
11 (17)	Coal tit	311 (285)	26 (28)	5 (4)	0758
12 (11)	Chaffinch	310 (427)	24 (29)	14 (14)	2103
13 (13)	Greenfinch	302 (377)	23 (28)	20 (21)	1351

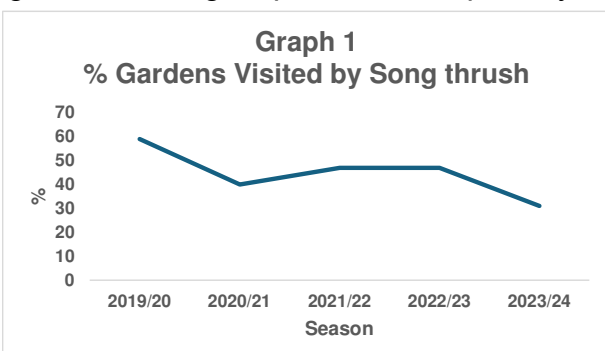
Table 3 continued					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden- Week Records out of 696 (789)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 29 (32)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
14 (14)	Jackdaw	294 (354)	21 (22)	66 (19)	0334
15 (12)	Collared dove	286 (400)	24 (24)	11 (32)	1351
16 (15)	Long-tailed tit	233 (299)	25 (28)	25 (21)	9639
17 (16)	Wren	197 (297)	22 (29)	2 (2)	# 1
18 (18)	Carrion crow	187 (245)	22 (25)	4 (5)	1025
19 (21)	Great spotted woodpecker	124 (138)	12 (13)	3 (3)	1351
20 (19)	Sparrowhawk	105 (168)	23 (21)	2 (2)	1351
21 (20)	Nuthatch	103 (155)	12 (16)	3 (2)	1351
22 (22)	Song thrush	43 (94)	9 (15)	1 (3)	# 2

bracketed numbers show the figures for the 2022/23 survey.

#1 Surveyors registration number: 1351, 0758, 0853, 1537, 9814

#2 Surveyors registration number: 1351, 0758, 1306, 0107, 0334, 0347, 9636, 9923, 0639.

Woodpigeon topped the table again with 631 garden week records (gwr) but it was only seen in 28 of the 29 participants gardens, no woodpigeons were seen in a Scholar Green garden. Blackbird dropped a position to third in the rankings with just 11 fewer gwr, displaced by blue tit who was just 4 gwr behind the woodpigeon. In the 2022/23 season blue tit was 39 gwr behind the woodpigeon, while blackbird was 21 gwr behind woodpigeon. This season only four species, blue tit, blackbird, robin and magpie were present in all 29 participants gardens, compared to seven last year, woodpigeon and dunnock were present in 28 with house sparrow and great tit in 27 gardens. Looking at the rank order of gwr for the listed species, in general little has changed but there are some movers. Dunnock has dropped to 9<sup>th</sup> from 5<sup>th</sup> where it has been consistently ranked since the 2020/21 survey, the maximum numbers reported also fell from 14 to 9. Dunnock numbers fell sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps due to low winter food availability but this trend stabilised, possibly helped by us feeding the garden birds. Sadly the BTO report that there is evidence of another downturn and the dunnock has been added to the UK Amber list. We will keep an eye on this situation in future years. Coal tit has risen to 11<sup>th</sup> in the rankings from 17<sup>th</sup> and this species rank position does fluctuate which the BTO attribute to the Sitka spruce seed crop, when it is good the need to raid the garden feeders is reduced but when it's a poor year garden feeding helps survival especially if it is a bad winter.



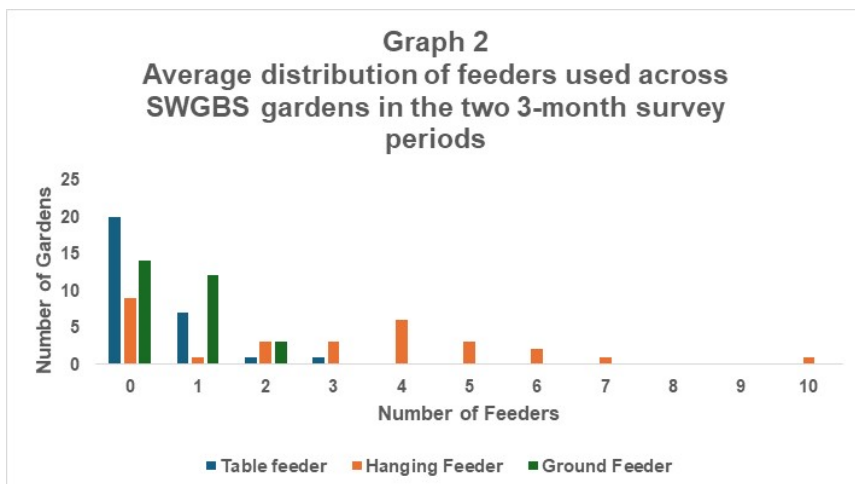
Only nine gardens were visited by a song thrush in this year's survey compared to 15 last year. When taking into account that there were three fewer gardens in the 2023/24 survey this represents 31% of gardens were visited compared to 47% last year. Graph 1 shows the decline of the song thrush over the past five seasons. The highest single count recorded across all SWGBS submissions was 1, down from 3

last year. The song thrush is on the red danger list and has been in decline since 1979 and our records support this observation. Why is this happening? The bigger picture suggests the use of pesticides and removal of hedgerows is taking away food sources and habitat which I suggest reduces the number of song thrushes that can visit our gardens. Song thrushes generally do not visit hanging feeders and are shy to visit bird tables. They prefer to eat berries and worms from leaf litter or grass, so bear this in mind when tidying your garden and leave some leaf litter on your flower beds for the song thrush and other garden species (e.g. wren, blackbird) for them to forage through and hopefully we can contribute to seeing or hearing more than one song thrush at a time.

Species	Year				
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Jackdaw	41	36	45	19	66
Goldfinch	50	45	24	30	61
Starling	51	34	100	42	50
Blue tit	14	18	22	24	26
Long-tailed tit	15	18	20	21	25
House sparrow	25	30	35	40	22
Greenfinch	12	16	20	21	20
Woodpigeon	19	17	21	25	19
Great tit	11	11	13	15	15
Blackbird	12	14	14	22	12
Magpie	14	9	14	23	8
Robin	9	7	5	5	6

Table 4 shows the maximum numbers recorded for some species, here we are looking for trends because these numbers are predominately from a single garden so cannot be considered statistically sound. The top three species for the highest single count in a garden were, jackdaw 66 (19), goldfinch 61 (30) and starling 50 (42). These

three species showed a 247%, 103% and 19% increase over last years maximum recorded numbers, while in the 2022/23 season starling and jackdaw showed big % reductions (58% and 136%), could the 2023/24 increases be due to recovery from bird flu, weather conditions or food availability? House sparrow 22 (40), blackbird 12 (22) and magpie 8 (23) have seen large reductions in their maximum counts this year, 45%, 45% and 65% respectively. This could reflect local migration patterns, next years numbers will be interesting to see. It is good to see that the robin numbers have stabilised at a maximum of 5 or 6 over the past three years. Other birds listed in Table 4 show little change in maximum counts over the past year. Again, the garden with registration number 1351 recorded the 11 highest *Listed Species* counts, 2 more than last year.



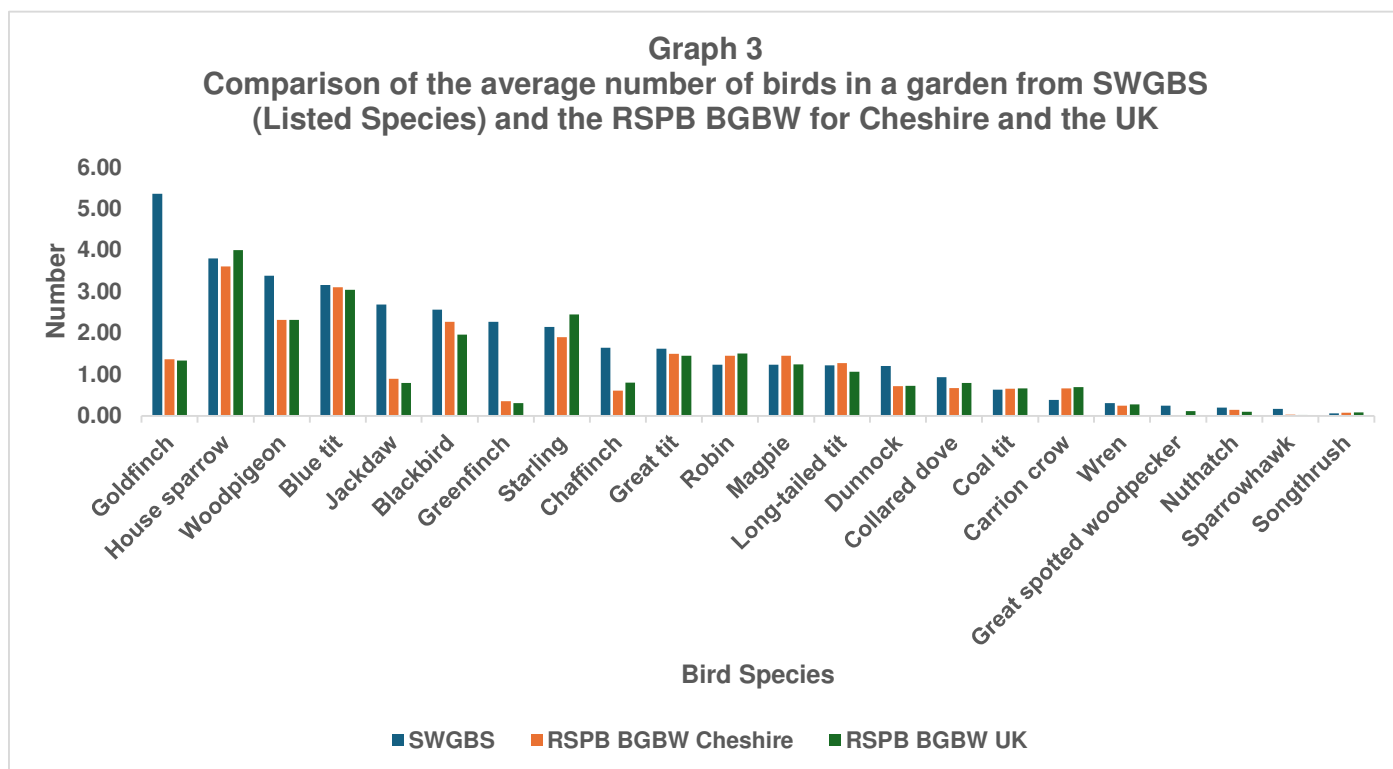
Graph 2 is a bar chart showing the average distribution of feeders across all the SWBGS gardens during the two 3-month survey periods. Hanging feeders were the most popular with 84 distributed across the survey area with a maximum of 10 feeders being used in a Sandbach garden This is well short of the 22 used by another Sandbach resident who didn't participate in this year's survey. As

previously some participants varied the number of feeders used during the reporting periods, increasing during the colder months and reducing as the weather turned milder. The figures used

in Graph 2 reflect the maximum number of hanging feeders put out in the six month period. Eight participants didn't feed the birds at all during the two survey periods, they relied on natural food supplies. Three to five hanging feeders was the most popular number of hanging feeders to use, an increase over last year when we saw a decrease to two to four feeders. There was also a reduction in the number of table feeders, nine compared to seventeen last year. There was a small decrease in the use of ground feeders compared to last year. Is this a reflection of the cost of bird food to sustain these feeders?

### Comparison with the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch

During the weekend of 26-28<sup>th</sup> January 2024, 9.7 million birds were counted in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch (BGBW) by the 610,000 people participating in the survey. By comparison the SWGBS recorded 28,441 birds over a twenty-six week period in twenty-nine gardens. Looking at the data from the two surveys I hope to show similarities and differences between our local SWGBS and bird numbers in Cheshire and the UK as whole. Please note that the RSPB BGBW is a one hour snapshot of the garden during a three day recording period and the SWBGS data is collected from observations made over a twenty six week period, so these comparisons are a guide and shouldn't be taken as absolute.



The surprise result last year when comparing SWGBS average species counts to the RSPB BGBW was goldfinch as our number 1, displacing the house sparrow to position 2. The first set of bars in Graph 3 above shows this was no fluke as the mean number of goldfinches seen was 5.36, compared to 1.36 in Cheshire and 1.33 in the UK and is ranked first. Last year the goldfinch mean was 4.5 in the SWGBS and 1.5 for Cheshire and the UK, so numbers have increased locally and fallen slightly in Cheshire and the UK as a whole. This is reflected in the BGBW with goldfinch falling one ranking place to 8<sup>th</sup> and rising one place higher than last year in the SWGBS also to 8<sup>th</sup> place. Goldfinch continues to do very well in our gardens, one may ask what is the secret — perhaps good nutritious feeding?

The house sparrow still tops the BGBW chart with an average of four birds per garden but ranks at number 2 locally. Sadly numbers for the house sparrow continue to decline, see Table 5, as

Table 5			
Mean House Sparrow Counts			
Survey	Year		
	2022	2023	2024
SWGBS	4.41	3.91	3.8
RSPB BGBW	4.42	4.29	4.00

this once regular visitor to our gardens continues to be on the UK Red List of Birds since 2002. The house sparrow has maintained the top spot for the 21<sup>st</sup> year in a row. In the BGBW the top garden birds were 1. house sparrow; 2 blue tit; 3 starling; 4 woodpigeon; 5 blackbird; 6 robin; 7 great tit; 8 goldfinch; 9 magpie and 10 long-tailed tit. The only change in rank order from 2023 was goldfinch and great tit swapping places. In comparison the SWGBS rank order were 1 goldfinch; 2 house sparrow; 3 blue tit;

4 jackdaw; 5 blackbird; 6 greenfinch; 7 starling; 8 chaffinch; 9 great tit and 10 robin. Eight birds were present in both top 10 albeit with slightly different rank order compared to seven in 2023, magpie and long-tailed tit were replaced in the SWGBS by greenfinch and chaffinch. These two finches have significantly higher average garden numbers in the SWGBS than the BGBW and suggests they are making progress in recovering from the Trichomoniasis infection that devastated numbers between 2008 and 2018 by 67% for greenfinches and 29% for chaffinches (BTO data). The reason for this may be that as a birdwatching society we are aware of this debilitating disease and we keep our feeders clean or stop feeding when we see infected birds in the garden. Data from the BTO shows the prevalence of Trichomoniasis is highest in human associated habitats - feeding garden birds.

Graph 3 also shows jackdaw, woodpigeon and blackbird have higher mean garden numbers locally than in Cheshire or the UK. The BTO reported in 2022 a population increase of 146% for jackdaws and 153% for woodpigeons over the past 53 years. While I expect we have all commented that there appears to be more woodpigeons and jackdaws about than when we were younger, it doesn't explain why we see this in just the SWGBS and not both surveys. Perhaps this is a weakness of the two recording methods? The higher blackbird numbers could be due to changes in migration patterns from Scandinavia favouring the Northwest over other parts of the country. For the remaining birds not mentioned, Graph 3 shows the mean number of birds seen is similar for the SWGBS and the BGBW figures for Cheshire and the UK.

### 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. This is a measure of their abundance in the garden. Thirty species were recorded across the 29 gardens, a decrease of 1 from 2022/23. Canada goose joined the survey with willow warbler and common gull not being recorded. It is good to see that the barn owl, a new addition last year continued to be seen albeit with two not four garden week records. The sudden rise of common pheasant from ranking position 17 to 8 probably reflects birds being released for shooting, possibly replacing the red-legged partridges that were last seen in a garden in the 2021/22 survey. The willow warbler was probably an early or possibly an overwintering migrant in the 2022/23 survey so this change isn't too significant.

The return of siskin to the top 10 *other species* list is interesting as in 2019/20 survey it was at position 21 in the rankings to rise to position 11 for the next three surveys before breaking into the top 10 in this seasons survey at position 3=. The highest single count was from a Shavington garden with 40 birds, significantly higher than the 6 recorded last year in a Sandbach garden. Does this reflect a poor season for pine cone seeds driving siskins to find alternative sources of food or poor weather conditions. Twelve years ago (latest information I could find) the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) reported a long term increase in siskin numbers nationally with birds benefitting from the extensive areas of conifer plantations reaching maturity and producing seed. Siskins feed and nest in conifer plantations, their population having increased by 77% since 2004.

Table 6

Rank	Species	Number of Garden-Week Records out of 696 (789)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 29 (32)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (2)	Stock dove	120 (108)	10 (9)	23 (23)	1306
2 (3)	Rook	87 (93)	7 (7)	32 (43)	1306
3= (5)	Bullfinch	72 (61)	5 (7)	5 (5)	1351
3= (11)	Siskin	72 (25)	14 (5)	40 (6)	1351
5 (1)	Pied wagtail	50 (111)	10 (15)	3 (4)	0334, 0240
6 (4)	Feral pigeon	47 (70)	3 (3)	17 (5)	0720
7 (10)	Goldcrest	43 (33)	9 (10)	3 (2)	2103
8 (17)	Common pheasant	35 (14)	3 (2)	13 (1)	1306
9 (8)	Blackcap	32 (39)	8 (12)	3 (2)	9923
10 (6=)	Jay	25 (49)	4 (4)	6 (5)	1351
11= (6=)	Black-headed gull	24 (49)	2 (12)	3 (20)	0639
11= (19)	Lesser (common) redpoll	24 (12)	6 (3)	5 (2)	1351, 2103
13 (12)	Herring gull	18 (24)	3 (4)	3 (3)	1351
14 (16)	Tawny owl	17 (15)	3 (2)	2 (2)	0639
15 (9)	Redwing	15 (36)	3 (13)	8 (16)	9923
16 (14)	Fieldfare	14 (18)	2 (7)	5 (55)	0334
17= (13)	Buzzard	13 (23)	4 (4)	2 (2)	0334, 0758, 0639
17= (15)	Mistle thrush	13 (17)	4 (5)	1 (2)	0639, 1351, 0334, 1533
17= (23)	Chiffchaff	13 (5)	4 (4)	2 (1)	1351
20 (27=)	Lesser black-backed gull	11 (3)	5 (3)	2 (1)	0334
21 (18)	Grey wagtail	9 (13)	3 (3)	2 (1)	1306, 0758
22 (21=)	Brambling	8 (7)	2 (3)	1 (2)	1351, 9923
23 (24=)	Moorhen	7 (4)	2 (2)	3 (1)	0758
24 (24=)	Treecreeper	6 (4)	1 (3)	1 (1)	1351
25= (20)	Mallard	4 (8)	2 (2)	3 (3)	0334
25= (27)	Grey heron	4 (3)	2 (3)	1 (1)	1306, 0639
27= (24=)	Barn owl	2 (4)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1306
27= (-)	Canada goose	2 (-)	1 (-)	2 (-)	0334
29= (21=)	Reed bunting	1 (7)	1 (5)	1 (1)	1306
29= (30=)	Raven	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	0334

Stock dove returned to the top of the *Other Species* as shown in Table 6, replacing pied wagtail which dropped to position 5. Stock dove was recorded in 10 of the 29 gardens with a maximum count of 23 recorded in Basford. The pied wagtail gwr fell by over half from 111 to 50 and its presence was noted in 10 compared to 15 gardens last year. I've no explanation for this change but this years statistics are more in line with previous years and last year was probably an anomaly.

The feral pigeon rose two places in the rankings with a significant rise in the highest single count from 5 last year to 17 in this survey, while the number of gwr fell from 70 to 47 while only visiting 3 gardens both years. The 2020/21 table topper bullfinch showed a small rise to position 3= with the number of gwr recorded rising from 61 to 72 while visiting two fewer gardens (5 compared to 7 last year), the highest single count was static at five.

The highest single count for rook at 32 was a fall from 43 last year but the number of gwr was similar and the number of gardens visited was unchanged. Jay, another corvid fell to position 10 from =6 with half the gwr in this survey (25 from 49) while visiting just 4 gardens.

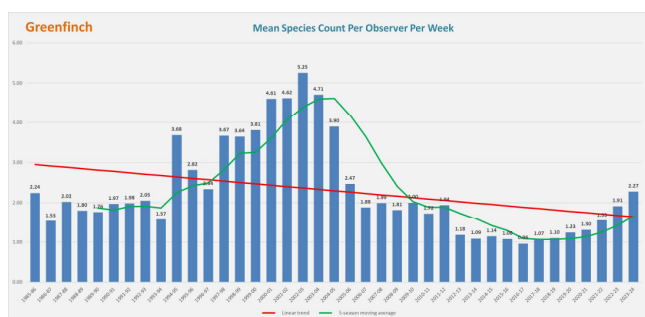
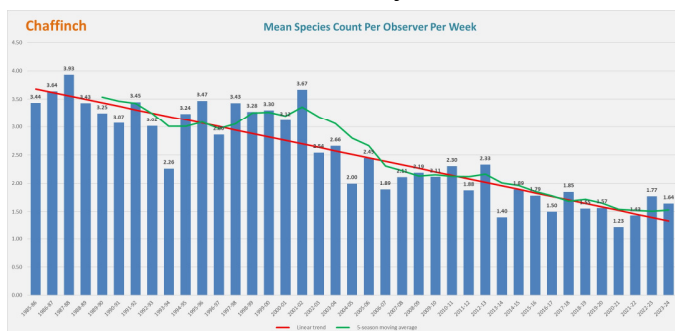
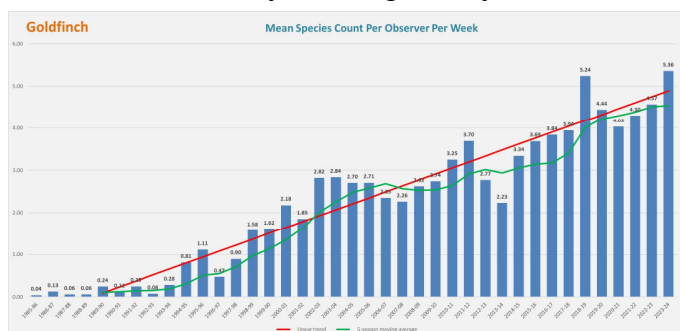


Lesser or common redpoll doubled the number of gardens it was seen in from 3 to 6, moving it to rank position 11= from 19. Looking back to 2020 figures, where comparison is difficult due to changes in the number of gardens participating, we do see redpolls moving their rank position up and down the table (21 to 14 to 29= to the present position 11=). These significant movements are probably due to the weather and natural food availability as the redpoll population fluctuates.

This year the winter thrushes, redwing and fieldfare both recorded decreases in their highest single counts. Redwing figures halved from 16 to 8 this year with fieldfare numbers crashing from 55 in 2022/23 to only 5 in 2023/24. The number of gardens they were recorded in also decreased to redwing 3 and fieldfare 2 compared to 13 and 7 respectively the previous year, reflecting their overall ranking positions of 15 and 16. These figures are surprising as central Norway saw temperatures fall to below -20°C in November 2023 and Sweden experienced the coldest winter for 25 years with a village in Kvikkjokk recording temperatures of -43.6°C in January 2024. Perhaps the berry harvest was good and the thrushes overwintered in the towns and cities or they just bypassed Cheshire and continued further south in the UK?

Twenty participants, one less than last year, recorded the highest count for at least one bird species from the *Listed* or *Other Species* in their garden. Participant registration number 1351 recorded the highest or joint highest count with nineteen species.

Nick Harrison has once again updated the historical SWGBS data, recorded since 1985 for selected species at an individual level to produce charts showing how species numbers have changed with time. These charts can be found on the SECOS website and I've chosen three finch species to give you a general impression of what you will see. Please do look at the charts on the website where they are larger so you can read the actual numbers more easily.



The three finches show three different patterns.

The goldfinch is doing well and numbers continue to have an upward trend in the SWGBS. Did you know that in winter UK goldfinches can migrate as far south as Spain? Perhaps the milder winters in the SECOS recording area together with the garden bird seed choices encourages them to stay locally.

In comparison, the chaffinch numbers are in decline although the last two years they show signs of recovery. We should continue to be vigilant to keep our bird feeders and tables clean to help minimise the cross contamination of the parasite *Trichomonosis* which as said previously has been the cause of decimating chaffinch numbers in the UK.

The greenfinch shows some good news as the chart shows they are recovering although numbers are still significantly lower than in 2002 when numbers peaked in the SWGBS.

## News from the Comments Section

### Feeding Habits

A general comment from several participants was the lack of birds in the garden compared to

previous years. Is this the impact of bird flu or perhaps global warming. In addition, squirrels or rats were reported in four gardens and feeders were temporarily withdrawn from use until the intruders realised there was no free lunch available. As a result some participants went to great expense to purchase squirrel-proof feeders, one Alsager observer used the Henry Bell 3 in 1 Squirrel Proof Feeder.

Black sunflower seed, sunflower hearts and fat balls are the favoured food for the hanging feeders. Peanuts are not very popular probably because if they get damp there is a threat of aflatoxin from the resulting mould growth. Only one garden reported using niger seed and another mixed seed presumably on a bird table. These figures are from observers notes from the weekly comments and are probably well under reported. Perhaps next season it would be good to identify what observers fill their feeders with.

Robin, nuthatch, chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch, bullfinch and siskin were the most regular attendees taking seed from the hanging feeders. Great spotted woodpeckers fed mostly from the hanging fat balls. One Sandbach observer noticed a magpie trying to hover while feeding on a fat ball feeder, while also feeding on sunflower hearts from a hanging feeder.

Planting the right shrubs and flowers in our gardens can produce natural food sources for the birds as a woodpigeon found in a Sandbach garden in late November when it fed on pyracantha berries. Some naturalists think we shouldn't feed artificial foods to birds in our gardens but cultivate plants to enable birds to forage for natural food sources. Personally I think supplementing food sources in the garden for birds, especially in cold winter snaps helps support population numbers and perhaps reduces the need for birds to migrate south with all the dangers that can entail.

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

The first ever lesser black-backed gull was seen on the wall of an Alsager garden eating chips!! Somebody had dropped some chips on the pavement outside the house and this gull took advantage of the free feed. This observation could be in the *Observed Bird Behaviour* section because this behaviour is more associated with the seaside promenade. What is interesting to think, is this learned behaviour in Alsager, an opportunistic find for a bird that's never eaten chips before (does the bird like salt and vinegar?) or a bird that has come inland from the coast and stalked the person who purchased the chips waiting for some to be dropped?

The highest number of siskins ever seen in an Alsager garden was fourteen with many more in trees and the adjoining garden. As mentioned earlier this was a very good year for siskin numbers and this Alsager observer has some way to go to surpass the 40 observed in a Shavington garden.

A Crewe observer remarked that there were fewer brambling but siskins were plentiful with a record for his garden of eight. A chiffchaff was recorded a little earlier than previous years, this could have been an overwintering bird or a fresh migrant from the continent.

### **Sparrowhawk Events**

The survey comments section recorded fourteen sparrowhawk events compared to fifteen last year. The sparrowhawk sightings were five fly throughs, three sitting on a fence or tree and four definite kills with feather evidence for two presumed kills of starling, goldfinch, woodpigeon blue tit and two blackbirds. Two Alsager gardens report the most sparrowhawk sightings with three each, both male and female birds were reported so I wonder if they are a breeding pair?

### **Observed Bird Behaviour**

A group of eight house sparrows came prospecting nest boxes in a Haslington garden, they were

the first sparrows seen for several weeks but by the end of the day they were all gone. Perhaps they didn't like the neighbours? A pair of blue tits were very active around nest boxes at the front and rear of an Alsager garden in early February. At the same garden a robin started nest building in the third week of February only for the bird to desert the nest in mid March. On inspection one egg with a hole in it was found, had they started nesting too early or was it just predated?

A house in Alsager had a wonderful dawn chorus with siskins, collared dove, song and mistle thrush singing accompanied by a tawny owl hooting. This garden produced the only pair of tawny owls calling in mid January probably in preparation for nesting in March. This observer also reported a long-tailed tit tapping on a bay window three times during a week in February. They also had a chiffchaff join their morning chorus in mid March - what a great wildlife garden this Alsager resident has!

The Haslington garden once again had a grey wagtail taking a wash and brush up in their garden waterfall. A grey wagtail did the same thing last year at this address, could it be the same bird?

In early October an observer from Weston saw three blackbirds in their garden with bad feather mite, one male was particularly infected, they probably did not make it through the winter or even October as the weather turned cold that week.

One Nantwich observer reported generally less birds in their garden than previous years which they attribute to the arrival of several squirrels which dominated the feeders. Other observers in Scholar Green, Crewe and Haslington also commented about the reduction of garden bird numbers, one suggesting it could be cat predation, another to a neighbour felling three conifers at the back of their garden which took away a safety zone.

In early October a nuthatch was watched for an hour taking food approximately three times a minute from the feeder and caching it in various places around the garden.

Many corvid species have adapted feeding from hanging feeders with observations of a jay hanging on a fat ball feeder and dislodging food which was then eaten from the ground. Rooks and jackdaws regularly raid a mixed seed hanging feeder in a Weston garden and an Alsager respondent watched a rook trying to work out how they could get into a hanging seed feeder. This inquisitive rook was thought to be the first rook in that garden in forty years. These large birds have developed the dexterity to hang onto these feeders and take the food available.

### **Seen Outside the Garden Observations**

On a flooded field across the road from an observer in Scholar Green, 80+ Canada geese were seen in late December, to be joined a week or so later by six greylag geese, eight teal, three lapwings and two jack snipe. If they could persuade the jack snipe to come across to their garden we would have another species to add to the SWGBS.

A large flock of circa twenty five greenfinch were observed on an open green space and in the trees beyond a garden in Willaston. I speculate that a flock of greenfinch as large as this hasn't been seen in a long time and is possible further evidence of their increasing numbers.

May I thank everybody who participated in this season's SWGBS and in particular Nick Harrison for collating all the information into the Access database. May I also thank Nick, Mike Tonks and my wife Lydia for their help proof reading the report. We hope that reading this report will encourage and motivate you into contributing to the 2024/25 survey which starts in October 2024. If you are not already on Nick's list please contact him to be added.

Thank you

Ian Taylor  
28<sup>th</sup> June 2024