



SECOS WINTER GARDEN BIRD SURVEY FOR OCTOBER 2024 TO MARCH 2025

This year, thirty-three gardens were watched in the fortieth year of the SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey (SWGBS), four more gardens than last year. Nick Harrison has undertaken the administrative work behind the scenes to collate all the data which enables me to write this report. This season Nick introduced a new way to enter your garden bird counts online using Google Docs into your personalised survey form. This was a great success with about 84% of the contributors using this new process for at least one of the forms. Please don't worry if you were part of the 16% who preferred to use email or handwritten survey sheets for part of the returns, all ways of getting the data to us are welcome and if you fancy giving the online route a go please contact Nick and he will be more than happy to help you through the process. Our goal is for happy contributors who submit garden bird survey data and an 80 plus % return exceeded our expectations, thank you.

We extend a warm welcome to one returning and five new contributors to the survey. The new contributors increased the number of gardens watched from twenty-nine to thirty-three. Of the thirty-three survey forms returned 20 were from SECOS members and 13 were from non-members. We appreciate all garden observations but if participating in this little bit of citizen science motivates you to want to join SECOS for the indoor speaker programme or the birdwatching trips please do contact the Group's Membership Secretary Lydia Taylor, she will be pleased to hear from you and a warm welcome is guaranteed.

Thank you to all who contributed to this season's survey, we look forward to your observations next year. Please recruit your friends and family to collect data for the survey, just contact Nick Harrison, Mike Tonks or myself for more information.

The Participants

Table 1 (page 2) identifies the people who participated in this survey together with their unique registration number. *Italics* denote non-SECOS members.

The Cumulative All Time Bird Species List

Table 2 (page 3) shows the addition of little egret, the eighty-fifth bird species added to the SWGBS bird list. Over a four week period from the end of January to end of February, one participant in Sandbach reported garden visits of little egret with a maximum count of two in one week. The garden is in a suburban housing estate so what did attract a little egret to this garden, perhaps a pond in this or a nearby garden for food? The first authenticated record for little egret in Cheshire was in 1982 and it took until 2001 for confirmed breeding at Frodsham Marsh. In 2022 the RSPB reported 23 confirmed breeding pairs of little egret at Burton Mere Wetlands. As grey herons are occasionally seen in gardens, none this year but four garden week records last season you may wonder why it has taken over twenty years for little egret to be recorded in the SWGBS?

The 2024/2025 Survey

The thirty-three gardens surveyed over the twenty-six week period means that it is possible to produce 858 garden-week records. ($33 \times 26 = 858$). This season we achieved an 86% return rate

Table 1			
SECOS Garden Bird Survey Contributors 2024 to 2025			
Reg. No.	Name	Reg. No.	Name
8501	Hilary Clowes	1533	David Cookson
8505	David & Elaine Meakin	0334	<i>Bill Bellamy</i>
1306	<i>Roy Broughton</i>	9636	Geoff Yarwood
0107	<i>Michael & Christine Howarth</i>	0639	Chris Parry
8511	<i>Alan Soper</i>	2046	<i>John Kay</i>
9814	Colin Lythgoe	0347	Sylvia Jarvis
0720	<i>Rachel Heath</i>	1348	<i>Graham Bailey</i>
1022	<i>Mike & Christine Brooks</i>	2049	<i>Martin Watson</i>
9923	Janet & Peter Roberts	1351	<i>Ray Broughton</i>
1025	Kate Whittles	0758	Brian & Susan Plowright
0240	Cynthia Cadman	2103	<i>David Harrison</i>
2421	<i>Darren Roberts</i>	1727	Mike Tonks
2228	Anthea & Dennis Gater	0753	David Bromont
2409	Becky & Ged Ryan	1612	Anne Davies
9813	John Thompson	2429	Nick & Jean Harrison
2504	Chrissy Higgs	1537	Heather Smith
2435	<i>Mark Arnold</i>		

giving 734 garden-week records submitted, 124 records fewer than the maximum 858 possible and 6% less than the 2023/24 survey. While this return rate continues the downward trend since the 2021/22 record high of 96%, we did have one new member join for the second part of the season and three others only managed to make observations up until Christmas for various reasons.

The Listed Species

Table 3 (page 4) 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).

Woodpigeon maintained its position at the top of the table with 700 garden-week records (gwr) and was present at least once in every survey garden. Blue tit dropped from 2nd to 4th in the table with 658 gwr, with 42 fewer gwr than woodpigeon. Blackbird and robin moved one place up the table to 2nd and 3rd respectively. Dunnock recovered its position in the rankings to 5th after falling to 9th last season, it's too early to comment whether this is a recovery by the dunnock because it is still on the UK Amber list and a bird of conservation concern. The maximum number of dunnocks recorded in a garden hasn't changed from last year's figure of 9, which is still below the

Table 2					
SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey					
List of All Species 1985 to 2025					
No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species
1	Barn owl	31	Hawfinch	61	Redwing
2	Black-headed gull	32	Herring gull	62	Reed bunting
3	Blackbird	33	House martin	63	Ring-necked parakeet
4	Blackcap	34	House sparrow	64	Robin
5	Blue tit	35	Jackdaw	65	Rook
6	Brambling	36	Jay	66	Siskin
7	Bullfinch	37	Kestrel	67	Skylark
8	Buzzard	38	Kingfisher	68	Snipe
9	Canada goose	39	Lapwing	69	Song thrush
10	Chaffinch	40	Lesser black-backed Gull	70	Sparrowhawk
11	Chiffchaff	41	Lesser spotted woodpecker	71	Starling
12	Coal tit	42	Linnet	72	Stock dove
13	Collared dove	43	Little owl	73	Swallow
14	Common gull	44	Long-tailed tit	74	Tawny owl
15	Corn bunting	45	Magpie	75	Tree sparrow
16	Carrion crow	46	Mallard	76	Treecreeper
17	Dunnock	47	Marsh/ willow tit	77	Water rail
18	Feral pigeon	48	Meadow pipit	78	Waxwing
19	Fieldfare	49	Mealy redpoll	79	White wagtail
20	Garden warbler	50	Merlin	80	Willow warbler
21	Goldcrest	51	Mistle thrush	81	Woodcock
22	Goldfinch	52	Moorhen	82	Woodpigeon
23	Great black-backed gull	53	Mute swan	83	Wren
24	Great spotted woodpecker	54	Nuthatch	84	Yellowhammer
25	Great tit	55	Pheasant	85	Little egret
26	Green woodpecker	56	Pied wagtail		
27	Greenfinch	57	Raven		
28	Grey heron	58	Red-headed bunting		
29	Grey partridge	59	Red-legged partridge		
30	Grey wagtail	60	Redpoll (Lesser)		

peak of 14/15 in previous years. This season six species, woodpigeon, blackbird, robin, blue tit, dunnock and magpie were present in all 33 participants gardens, compared to four species (blackbird, robin, blue tit and magpie) last year. The only other species that moved significantly in the garden presence ranking order was the coal tit, which dropped from 11th to 18th. Coal tit has moved up and down the gwr rankings since 2021, when it reached the highest position of 10th and this winter it has dropped to its lowest position at 18th. The highest single count was 6 in 2021 and since then it has either been 5 or 4. As mentioned last year this fluctuation could be due to the Sitka spruce crop, which according to an internet search showed Congleton had a moderate seed crop last winter which I'm not sure can be extrapolated to all Cheshire? Looking

at

Table 3					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden-Week Records out of 734 (696)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 33 (29)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (1)	Woodpigeon	700 (631)	33 (28)	20 (19)	9636
2 (3)	Blackbird	690 (620)	33 (29)	16 (12)	0334
3 (4)	Robin	660 (581)	33 (29)	5 (6)	1351
4 (2)	Blue tit	658 (627)	33 (29)	28 (26)	2103
5 (9)	Dunnock	551 (471)	33 (28)	9 (9)	1351
6 (5)	House sparrow	509 (497)	21 (27)	24 (22)	0720
7 (8)	Goldfinch	489 (479)	31 (26)	48 (61)	1025
8 (7)	Magpie	479 (481)	33 (29)	19 (8)	2103
9 (6)	Great tit	450 (490)	31 (27)	17 (15)	2103
10 (10)	Starling	358 (317)	28 (26)	52 (50)	1306
11(12)	Chaffinch	316 (310)	24 (24)	13 (14)	1306
12 (13)	Greenfinch	315 (302)	25 (23)	13 (20)	9923 & 1351
13 (14)	Jackdaw	297 (294)	27 (21)	23 (66)	1306
14 (15)	Collard dove	282 (286)	24 (24)	9 (11)	1351
15 (16)	Long-tailed tit	277 (233)	28 (25)	22 (25)	1025
16 (17)	Wren	250 (197)	28 (22)	2 (2)	#1
17 (18)	Carrion crow	240 (187)	23 (22)	3 (4)	#2
18 (11)	Coal tit	237 (311)	23 (26)	4 (5)	0639
19 (19)	Great spotted woodpecker	106 (124)	12 (12)	2 (3)	1351, 0639 & 2049
20 (21)	Nuthatch	92 (103)	8 (12)	2 (3)	#3
21 (20)	Sparrowhawk	89 (105)	16 (23)	2 (2)	1306 & 1351
22 (22)	Song thrush	61 (43)	11 (9)	3 (1)	1306

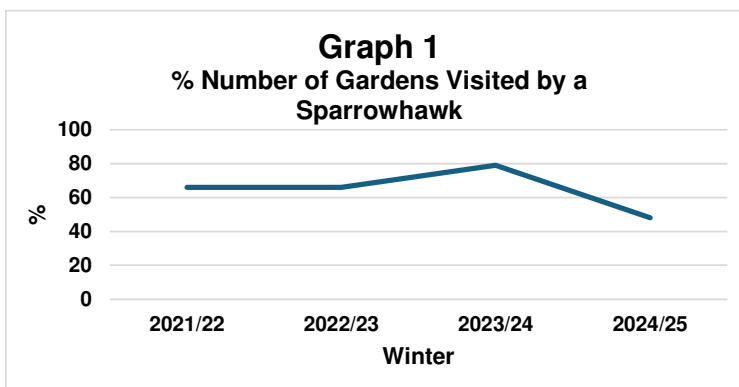
#1 1351; 0753; 0347; 9923; 0720; 9813; 1306 & 8505

#2 9923; 0720; 9813; 8511 & 1306.

#3 2504; 0639; 2046; 2049; 1351 & 0758

the gwr rank order apart from the comments above very little seems to have changed.

Focusing on the number of gardens visited, two species at the bottom of Table 3 should be mentioned. Sparrowhawk (Graph 1) was seen in only 48% of gardens compared to 79% last winter (16 and 23 gardens respectively), a decrease of 31%. I don't know a reason for this decrease but it is one to watch in the future. While song thrush visited 11 gardens producing 61 gwr, when expressed as a % to take into



account the different number of gardens in the survey the song thrush has made a small recovery on last year's figures (Graph 2 on page 5) 31% to 33% of gardens visited. In addition, the highest single garden count was up from 1 to 3, which is good news for this amber listed species of conservation concern.

Table 4 (page 5) shows the highest single count recorded for some species where we

are looking for trends over time. Only one species, the magpie shows a significant increase in numbers over last year up to 19 from 8. The table highlights that magpie highest single number counts do vary.

Three species showed significant drops in the highest single count, jackdaw 23 from 66, goldfinch 48 from 61 and greenfinch 13 from 20. Jackdaw and goldfinch single number counts do fluctuate and they are both classified as “green” species - meaning they are not of conservation concern, so perhaps we don’t need to worry. However, greenfinch numbers are

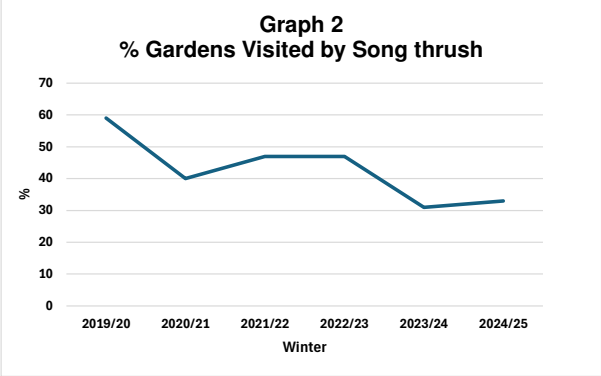


Table 4						
Species	Year					
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Jackdaw	41	36	45	19	66	23
Goldfinch	50	45	24	30	61	48
Starling	51	34	100	42	50	52
Blue tit	14	18	22	24	26	28
Long-tailed tit	15	18	20	21	25	22
House sparrow	25	30	35	40	22	24
Greenfinch	12	16	20	21	20	13
Woodpigeon	19	17	21	25	19	20
Great tit	11	11	13	15	15	17
Blackbird	12	14	14	22	12	16
Magpie	14	9	14	23	8	19
Robin	9	7	5	5	6	5

concerning because they do come to feeders and it was thought their population numbers were improving as shown in Table 4 to now dropping back to 13 in 2024/25. Greenfinch was classified as a “red list” bird in

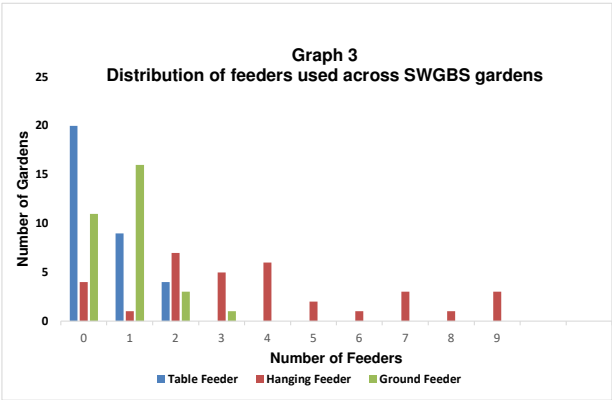
2021 mainly due to the catastrophic effect on numbers (77% decline between 2008 and 2018) by the protozoan parasite *Trichomonas gallinae*, talked about in previous years reports. In January 2004, the RSPB announced “As a precautionary step, while we await the results of an ongoing review, we have halted the sale of all bird tables and related products , including table mix and table mix extra, window feeders and feeder guardians with trays. This decision is based on evidence suggesting that some birds, especially finches, may be at a higher risk of disease when fed from flat surfaces,” Could we be experiencing another outbreak, it’s time for my annual reminder to keep your feeders clean and regularly disinfected to keep this parasite under control.

For another year the garden with registration number 1351 recorded the 8 highest *Listed Species* counts, 3 less than last year.

While writing this report I was told that Ray Broughton, registration number 1351, had passed away suddenly. A keen garden birdwatcher, Ray was a regular contributor to the SWGBS and frequently reported both the highest Listed & Other Species Counts for the year as detailed

above and on page 9 for this survey. SECOS sends sincere condolences to his family, we will greatly miss his contribution.

Graph 3 shows how hanging feeders remain the most popular method to feed birds. This method keeps birds safe from ground predators e.g. cats while birds are vulnerable during feeding. Several participants varied the number of hanging feeders used throughout the two thirteen week survey periods. Some didn’t feed

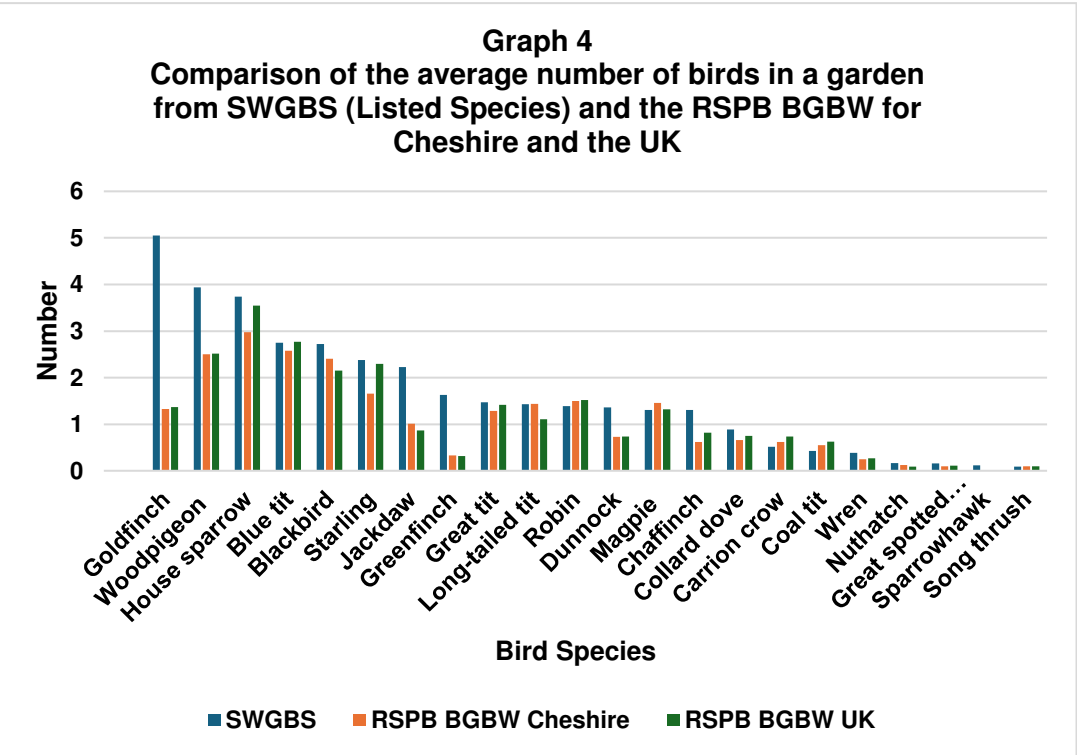


during October and early November presumably because they consider it better for birds to forage for natural food while it is available. Increases in hanging feeders were seen during the colder months of December through to February when the ground could be frozen or covered with snow that reduced the ability to access food. Feeding during these periods is important for bird survival. When analysing the data some observers only completed the feeder records for the first half of the survey or some just the first week of the survey. In these cases it was assumed that the number of feeders recorded was the same throughout the survey period.

During the two thirteen week feeding periods only four recorders didn't feed the birds at all, compared to eight in last seasons survey. This survey we had three observers who used nine hanging feeders, while two to four hanging feeders were the most popular choice compared to three to five last season. Nine gardens had one and four gardens had two bird tables whereas twenty gardens didn't have a bird table at all. Single ground feeding stations were used in sixteen gardens compared to eleven last year, a welcome increase. The number of gardens using one or two ground feeding stations was the same as last year with three using two and one having three. Feeding the birds is a costly exercise in the present economic times and making this commitment to feed specially during inclement weather should be commended.

Comparison with the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch

This year the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch (BGBW) was held over the weekend of 24th to 26th January 2025. This was the 46th year the BGBW took place and 9.1 million birds were counted by over 590,000 participants. These numbers are down on the 2024 BGBW when 9.7 million birds were counted by 610,000 participants. In comparison, SWGBS in its 40th year recorded 28,255 birds during the twenty-six week recording period by 41 participants in 33 gardens. The SWGBS numbers are also lower this year, 28,441 birds were recorded last year across 29 gardens. Do



these numbers reflect the continued decline of birds in the skies above us?

Please note the RSPB BGBW is a one hour snapshot of a garden during a three day recording period and the SWGBS data is collected over a twenty-six week period, so any comparisons are a guide and should not be taken as absolute.

Graph 4 shows the average number of birds reported in gardens. Last year we were surprised to see that the average goldfinch count was higher than the house sparrow which has topped the BGBW for twenty-one years. This year the goldfinch has maintained its position as number one and the woodpigeon has moved up one place to push the house sparrow down to ranking position three. While the average number of goldfinches has decreased from 5.36 to 5.05 it is significantly higher than the house sparrow average at 3.74, down from 4.0 in 2024.

Table 5				
Mean House Sparrow Counts				
Survey	Year			
	2022	2023	2024	2025
SWGBS	4.41	3.91	3.80	3.74
% Decrease since 2022	—	11.3	13.8	15.2
RSPB BGBW	4.42	4.29	4.00	3.55
% Decrease since 2022	—	2.9	9.5	19.7

In the RSPB BGBW results, the woodpigeon moved up one place to 3rd position while the goldfinch was unchanged from 2024 at 8th position. The same was seen with woodpigeon topping the number of gwr (Table 3) with goldfinch moving up just one place in the rankings to 7th.

The house sparrow still tops the RSPB BGBW but the average number seen in a garden continues to fall (Table 5 page 7). Although there have been some local recoveries in some areas of the UK this hasn't been enough to remove the house sparrow from the UK Red

List of birds with high conservation concern. In the BGBW the top garden birds were 1. house sparrow; 2. blue tit; 3. woodpigeon; 4. starling; 5. blackbird; 6. robin; 7. great tit; 8. goldfinch; 9. magpie and 10. long-tailed tit. The only change this year from the 2024 BGBW was woodpigeon moving up one place to 3rd and starling dropping to 4th position, all the other positions in the rank order were the same. In comparison the SWGBS rank order were 1. goldfinch; 2. woodpigeon; 3. house sparrow; 4. blue tit; 5. blackbird; 6. starling; 7. jackdaw; 8. greenfinch; 9. great tit and 10. long-tailed tit. As was noted last year eight birds were present in both top 10 lists, albeit with slightly different rank order, robin and magpie were replaced in the SWGBS by jackdaw and greenfinch.

The Other Species

Table 6 (page 8) is the list of species entered under *Other Species* and includes for the first time the little egret garden sighting in Sandbach. The results are listed in descending order and they are ranked in order of their abundance in the garden. Twenty eight species were recorded, two less than last year. One garden did have a peacock visit but this wasn't included in the survey because it is not on the BOU (British Ornithologists Union) British list and is probably an escaped or released bird from a domestic collection.



Several birds recorded last year did not make a reappearance this year: grey heron, barn owl, Canada goose and raven. They were replaced on the list by little owl, ring-necked parakeet and little egret.

Pied wagtail moved back to the top of the gwr for *Other Species*, from 5th, a position it held in the winter of 2022/23. Interestingly in the 2021/22 survey pied wagtail was ranked 6th, I've no explanation as to why the pied wagtail moves from 5/6th to 1st in the rank order. Pheasant continues to move up the ranking order to 3rd from 8th, as

mentioned last year when pheasant moved from 17th to 8th reflecting, I think, birds being released for shooting and the twenty-one maximum count in a Shavington garden possibly reflects this hypothesis.

Siskin maintained its position in the top 10 dropping from =3rd to 9th this survey. The highest single count was 3, well down on the peak of 40 last year and in line with previous surveys. This probably reflects natural food availability in the conifer plantations.

Stock dove presence in the garden fell significantly from 120 gwr to 32 this year. Consequently stock dove moved from top of the rankings down to 8th position. However, it did visit the most

Table 6					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden-Week Records out of 734 (696)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 33 (29)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (5)	Pied wagtail	95 (50)	14 (10)	4 (3)	0240
2 (2)	Rook	82 (87)	7 (7)	32 (32)	1537
3 (8)	Pheasant	60 (35)	5 (3)	21 (13)	1351
4(10)	Jay	56 (25)	10 (4)	5 (6)	1351
5 (3=)	Bullfinch	41 (72)	6 (5)	4 (5)	1351
6= (9)	Blackcap	34 (32)	8 (8)	2 (3)	1351
6= (22)	Brambling	34 (8)	3 (2)	3 (1)	1306
8 (1)	Stock dove	32 (120)	14 (10)	23 (23)	9923
9 (3=)	Siskin	31 (72)	11 (14)	3 (40)	9636, 0753
10 (17)	Chiffchaff	29 (13)	6 (4)	2 (2)	0639
11 (11=)	Black-headed gull	26 (24)	6 (2)	10 (3)	0720
12 (15)	Redwing	21 (15)	9 (3)	3 (8)	1306, 9923, 1351
13 (13)	Herring gull	19 (18)	3 (3)	4 (3)	1306
14= (6)	Feral pigeon	18 (47)	2 (3)	5 (17)	1348
14= (7)	Goldcrest	18 (43)	10 (9)	2 (3)	0720, 0639
16 (16)	Fieldfare	17 (14)	5 (2)	4 (5)	0334
17 (11=)	Lesser (common) redpoll	15 (24)	6 (6)	5 (5)	8511
18= (17=)	Mistle thrush	14 (13)	2 (4)	2 (1)	0639, 0758
18= (29=)	Reed bunting	14 (1)	4 (1)	3 (1)	1306
20 (17=)	Buzzard	13 (13)	1 (4)	2 (2)	0639
21 (21)	Grey wagtail	11 (9)	3 (3)	1 (2)	1306, 1351, 2504
22 (14)	Tawny owl	10 (17)	4 (3)	1 (2)	1306, 8511, 0334, 0639
23 (24)	Treecreeper	9 (6)	2 (1)	1 (1)	9923, 1351
24 (25=)	Mallard	7 (4)	2(2)	2 (3)	2103, 0334
25 (-)	Little egret	5 (-)	1 (-)	2 (-)	2103
26= (20)	Lesser black-backed gull	4 (11)	1 (5)	2 (2)	8501
26= (23)	Moorhen	4 (7)	1(2)	1 (3)	2504
28 (-)	Ring-necked parakeet	3 (-)	2 (-)	3 (-)	0753
29 (-)	Little owl	2 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	1306

gardens, 14 together with pied wagtail which replaced stock dove at the top, see Table 6. Rook maintained the number 2 ranking order (82 gwr from 7 gardens) and returned a highest single count of 32 the same as last year but in a different garden at Weston, South East of Crewe. Last year's highest rook count was in Basford, Crewe, not very far away. Jay moved up the rankings from 10th to 4th with 56 gwr from 10 gardens visited compared to 25 gwr from 4 gardens visited last year. Does this reflect the poor weather during the winter forcing jays into gardens to look for food? A bigger rise up the rankings was brambling from 22nd to equal 6th. Interestingly only three gardens were visited, up from two last year but they kept returning as the number of gwr increased from 8 to 34 presumably because of food put out to attract them.

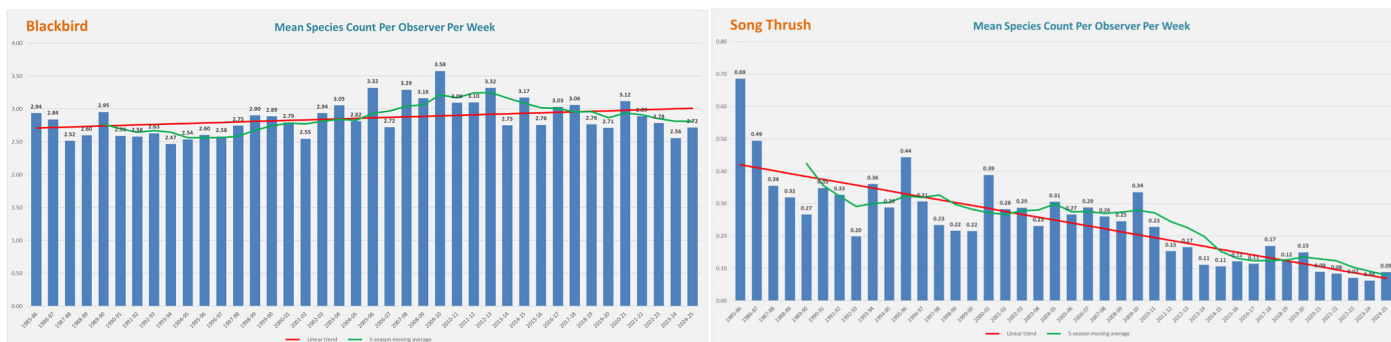
Feral pigeon dropped down the rank order from 6th to equal 14th, visiting 2 gardens producing 18 gwr compared to 3 gardens and 47 gwr last winter, with the highest single count falling from 17 birds last year to 5 this year. Similarly with an added garden this year, goldcrest managed to drop from 7th to equal 14th with 18 compared to 43 gwr last year and the highest single count dropped by one to two. Bullfinch continued to fall in the rankings, 5th now from 3rd with 41 compared to 72 gwr even with one additional garden visited this year.

The winter thrushes increased their gwr this survey, redwing moving up from 15 to 21 and fieldfare from 14 to 17. While these gwr increased the highest single counts for both birds

dropped to 3 for redwing and 4 for fieldfare, suggesting that last winter wasn't a thrush invasion year from Scandinavia and Russia.

Twenty-four participants, four more than last year, recorded the highest single count for at least one bird species from the *Listed* or *Other Species* lists in their garden. Participant registration number 1351 again recorded the highest or joint highest count for fifteen species although this was four less than last year.

Nick Harrison has 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 this year, I have chosen two garden birds that exemplify the differences. The blackbird chart shows a fairly level and consistent presence in our gardens since records began. In contrast the song thrush has taken a steady decline albeit with occasional good years throughout the survey period. I encourage you to look at the website <https://www.secos.org.uk/secos-winter-garden-bird-survey/gbs-charts/> where you can see the charts more clearly.

News from the Comments Section

Feeding Habits

Similar to last years comments, several observers noted the lack of birds in their gardens and that numbers were down. One respondent thought the cause was the presence of two grey squirrels in regular attendance whereas another member reduced the number of garden feeders because the food wasn't being eaten.

Two observers reported great spotted woodpeckers, both male and female, feeding on sunflower hearts and fat balls from hanging feeders. Sunflower hearts seem to be the most popular food for hanging feeders with greenfinch, goldfinch, chaffinch, lesser redpoll, nuthatch, bullfinch being the most regular and expected visitors. Unexpected hanging feeder visitors, who are usually ground feeders included collared dove, jackdaw, dunnoek, magpie and robin. There were more reports of these usual ground feeders being seen on hanging feeders this season than in previous years. Does this reflect adaptation in feeding habits to ensure survival, particularly during inclement weather?

One observer in Nantwich noticed that feeders near a Whitebeam tree were visited more frequently than other feeders on stands in the garden. In addition, all feeders had lots of birds on them after a cold night compared to when the weather was milder. The Whitebeam tree produced lots of red berries which became visible when the leaves started to drop and attracted the blackbirds and woodpigeons. A general observation from this Nantwich garden was that fat ball feeders were more popular than seed feeders and birds numbers were down compared to previous years. However, they did comment that their hawthorn hedge, adjacent to the Whitebeam tree, had been reduced in height by 2 feet. This exemplifies how important hedges are for providing cover and protection for birds accessing feeders and may have contributed to the decrease in bird numbers seen in this garden.

It took until late January for a garden in Alsager to see goldfinches visiting the feeders, whereas in previous years they had visited much earlier in the survey period. Whilst a Holmes Chapel member commented that goldfinch was by far the most numerous bird on their hanging feeder. All our gardens are unique habitats and you never know what or how many birds are going to turn up.

A Crewe observer put an apple out in November to attract thrushes to his garden and was very pleased to see blackbirds find it and proceed to eat it. Perhaps we don't think of using apples to attract thrushes to the garden as I haven't received many such comments. So the next time an apple looks past its best in your fruit bowl please consider putting it out for the birds, you may add a redwing or a fieldfare to your garden list.

Some respondents stopped ground feeding due to rats. When one observer returned to ground feeding after the rat moved on they found an immediate increase in the number of magpies and woodpigeons attracted to the garden. Attracting rats and other rodents is a perennial problem when feeding birds but if you stop feeding, clear any debris and clean the area, the rodents will move away and the birds will return when feeding recommences.

Garden First and Returning Bird Events

A Shavington observer commented that common redpolls didn't visit their garden last winter, when they have been a regular visitor in previous years. This observer also uses the Merlin App to identify bird calls and identified a long eared owl on three separate occasions. While they quite rightly said this couldn't be claimed for this survey it is an interesting observation and as we have other members in the Shavington area, please listen out next year.

Ring-necked parakeets were recorded in two gardens. This bird was once only seen in London and Kent is considered an invasive species in the UK and some consider a nuisance. Locally, I know of populations in Fog Lane Park and Fletcher Moss in Didsbury so recording them in Alsager is not a surprise, it will be interesting to see if more are reported in future years.

An Alsager reporter saw their first goldcrest in their garden holly tree in March. A beautiful little bird that weighs about the same as a 20 pence coin and is the UK's smallest bird. In Eaton a new member saw a grey wagtail and coot for the first time in their garden. Another Alsager resident commented that reed bunting is now a rarity in their garden and were pleased to see one in January after about a ten year absence. When they first started surveys, from the end of November to the end March there would only be two weeks when they were not seen in the garden. The highest count, in one December was 10!!, so where have they all gone - a housing development nearby is maybe an example of habitat loss and so fewer birds seen.

In contrast a Shavington observer reports a pair of reed buntings in the garden each spring which disappear after three to four weeks. I have no explanation for this behaviour, they could be prospecting for a nest site or feeding up as they prepare to nest elsewhere. Finally, a carrion crow made a brief visit to a Sandbach garden, the second garden record for this species since 2011.

Sparrowhawk Events

Four observers, three from Alsager & one from Sandbach, reported sparrowhawks in their gardens to give fourteen sparrowhawk events, the same as last year. The sightings were three flythroughs, four sitting on a fence post or in a tree and twelve kills (more than one in a week/event). The favourite prey was goldfinch with two of the kills taken off a hanging feeder, the other eleven were presumed kills from feather evidence on the lawn, with eight goldfinches, three woodpigeons and a chaffinch. The Sandbach garden reported the most sparrowhawk sightings with six kills. Last year two Alsager gardens reported the most sightings with three each. So with six kills in one garden it looks like a sparrowhawk has found a good hunting ground.

Observed Bird Behaviour

A lower number of birds in a Sandbach garden has been attributed to the regular presence of a sparrowhawk. Whereas in an Alsager garden numbers of goldfinch and greenfinch increased through October and November particularly when it started snowing. Increased numbers of house sparrow, coal tits and siskins were also noted. Another Alsager respondent recorded the lowest ever number of birds visiting their garden, when strong winds and rain persisted for a few days in December. In October a mixed tit flock with a goldcrest was roving through trees and bushes in an Alsager garden looking for food in the shortend daylight hours.

It's amazing, despite the cold weather when some species start their breeding cycle. In October, two adult male blackbirds were seen with juveniles in Crewe, it's possible they were late breeders from the summer. A battle for territory between a robin and a dunnoek happened in a Scholar Green garden in November, I don't know who won. In January dunnoek were showing signs of pairing and tawny owls were hooting in Alsager, starlings and magpies were collecting nesting material in Holmes Chapel and Crewe respectively with a greenfinch singing for territory in the same Crewe garden. As the year moved into February more bird song was evident with blackbird and song thrush claiming territories in Alsager and Crewe gardens.

March was a busy time in Alsager and Crewe gardens as blue and great tits inspected prospective homes before removing debris in preparation for egg laying. Marking territory with song was in full flow, in addition to those already noted we added bullfinch, chiffchaff and mistle thrush to the list of songsters. A rookery in Basford, Crewe was well under construction in late March with nine nests, three more than the week before but still some way to go before reaching last years total of fourteen. Some birds though chance their arm with a wren taking nesting material into a terrace of house sparrow boxes in Crewe, I don't know if they were evicted later?

All this nest building means birds need a wash and brush-up before looking for a mate - this was evident in a Crewe garden whose owner thoughtfully put a bird bath out that a starling and blackbird took advantage of. In Haslington a wren took a wrong turn into the kitchen through an open back door, it took a look around and quickly made a retreat to safety. In March battles for food still happened with a blackbird chasing a redwing out of the shrubbery in Alsager.

Finally, a scruffy looking great tit was observed in a Basford garden over a two week period. On closer inspection the bill of the bird was deformed stopping it from preening effectively. The beak was about 2 cm long and curved downwards but it was still able to feed preferring the fat balls as its meal of choice.

Seen Outside the Garden Observations

In the second week of January a respondent watched a grey heron drop into a neighbours garden and in late February a mistle thrush was heard singing next door in Haslington. In week 24 (March 16th) a first local chiffchaff was heard in a hedgerow opposite an observer's house in Wistaston, was this an overwintering bird or newly arrived migrant?

An Alsager observer reported a flock of up to 50 goldfinches in trees 30 yards away, I'm presuming this wasn't in their garden. This number of birds would challenge the highest single count recorded for goldfinch from a garden in Weston, where 48 were recorded.

A big thankyou to everybody who participated in this season's SWGBS. Also thanks to Mike Tonks, Nick Harrison and my wife Lydia for proof reading the report. If you would like to join next year's survey please contact Nick Harrison.

Thank you

Ian Taylor