



SECOS WINTER GARDEN BIRD SURVEY FOR OCTOBER 2025 TO MARCH 2026

In this, the 41st season of the SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey (SWGBS), thirty-eight gardens were watched by forty-four participants. Eleven new participants joined the survey, while sadly six were unable to continue taking part, giving an overall net gain of five from last season.

Table 1

SECOS Garden Bird Survey Participants 2025 to 2026

Reg. No.	Name	Reg. No.	Name
8501	Hilary Clowes	2435	Mark Arnold
2103	David Harrison	9636	Geoff Yarwood
8505	Dave Meakin	1537	Heather Smith
1306	Roy Broughton	0639	Chris Parry
2409	Becky and Ged Ryan	0240	Cynthia Cadman
2510	Jeff Keech	2541	Jenny Lea
1612	Anne Davies	2545	Graham Plant
9814	Colin Lythgoe	2046	John Kay
0119	Barbara Fisher	0347	Sylvia Jarvis
0720	Rachel Heath	1348	Graham Bailey
1022	Mike and Christine Brooks	2049	Martin Watson
9923	Peter Roberts	2550	John Pass
1825	Kate Whittles	2552	Jenny Hough
1727	Mike Tonks	0753	David Bromont
2228	Anthea and Dennis Gater	2554	Frank Smith & Kam Kamalvajri
2429	Nick and Jean Harrison	2556	Sophie Lightfoot
2531	Steve King	2557	James Broughton
1533	David Cookson	0758	Brian and Susan Plowright
0334	Bill Bellamy	2559	Barbara Western

It's pleasing to note that the number of gardens watched over the past three seasons has increased from 29 to 33 to 38. The use of personalised survey forms continues to be a great success with once again 84% of the participants using the electronic process introduced last season by Nick Harrison. Of the thirty-eight survey forms returned 24 were from SECOS members and 14 were from non-members. For the non-SECOS members we hope this little bit of citizen science motivates you to join us, either for an indoor meeting, which will start again in September or for one of the Sunday or Tuesday walks. If interested, please contact the Society's Membership Secretary Lydia Taylor who will be pleased to hear from you. Lydia can be contacted by email - lydiaiantaylor@outlook.com.

Table 2					
SECOS Winter Garden Bird Survey					
List of All Species 1985 to 2026					
No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species	No.	Bird Species
1	Barn owl	31	Hawfinch	61	Red-legged partridge
2	Black-headed gull	32	Herring gull	62	Redwing
3	Blackbird	33	House martin	63	Reed bunting
4	Blackcap	34	House sparrow	64	Ring-necked parakeet
5	Blue tit	35	Jackdaw	65	Robin
6	Brambling	36	Jay	66	Rook
7	Bullfinch	37	Kestrel	67	Siskin
8	Buzzard	38	Kingfisher	68	Skylark
9	Canada goose	39	Lapwing	69	Snipe
10	Chaffinch	40	Lesser black-backed gull	70	Song thrush
11	Chiffchaff	41	Lesser redpoll	71	Sparrowhawk
12	Coal tit	42	Lesser spotted woodpecker	72	Starling
13	Collared dove	43	Linnet	73	Stock dove
14	Common gull	44	Little egret	74	Swallow
15	Corn bunting	45	Little owl	75	Tawny owl
16	Carrion crow	46	Long-tailed tit	76	Tree sparrow
17	Dunnock	47	Magpie	77	Treecreeper
18	Feral pigeon	48	Mallard	78	Water rail
19	Fieldfare	49	Marsh/Willow tit	79	Waxwing
20	Garden warbler	50	Meadow pipit	80	White wagtail
21	Goldcrest	51	Mealy (common) redpoll	81	Willow warbler
22	Goldfinch	52	Merlin	82	Woodcock
23	Great black-backed gull	53	Mistle thrush	83	Woodpigeon
24	Great spotted woodpecker	54	Moorhen	84	Wren
25	Great tit	55	Mute swan	85	Yellowhammer
26	Green woodpecker	56	Nuthatch	86	Yellow wagtail
27	Greenfinch	57	Pheasant	87	
28	Grey heron	58	Pied wagtail	88	
29	Grey partridge	59	Raven	89	
30	Grey wagtail	60	Red-headed bunting	90	

Thank you to all who contributed to this season's survey, we look forward to your observations next season. We are happy for you to recruit your friends and family to

collect data for the survey, just contact Nick Harrison, Mike Tonks or myself for more information. Our contact details can be found on the SECOS website.

The Participants

Table 1 (page 1) identifies those who participated in the survey together with their unique registration number. The italics denote non-SECOS members.

The Cumulative All Time Bird Species List

Table 2 (page 2) shows the addition of yellow wagtail, the eighty-sixth bird species added to the SWGBS bird list. This was reported in an Alsager garden not far from Fanny's Croft where this species is regularly seen.

The 2025/26 Survey

This season thirty-eight gardens were surveyed over the twenty-six-week period, which means that a possible 988 garden-week records ($38 \times 26 = 988$) could be produced. This season we achieved an 88% return rate with 874 garden-week records submitted, 114 fewer records than the maximum 988 possible. This result has halted the decline in returns seen over the past few seasons and possibly reflects an increase in the conscientious garden watching from those taking part.

The Listed Species

Table 3 (page 4) shows the species entered on the Listed Bird Species section of the input forms A1 and A2. The bird species are listed in descending order of their garden-week records with the number of gardens they visited together with the highest counts recorded plus the corresponding participants registration number (see Table 1). Presenting the data in this way allows a comparative measure of each species occurrence.

Woodpigeon continues to be the bird at the top of the table with 793 garden-week records (gwr) and it was present at least once in every survey garden. Blackbird dropped from 2nd to 4th in the rankings with 711 gwr, 82 fewer records than woodpigeon. Robin and blue tit moved up the ranking table taking positions 2nd and 3rd respectively. Dunnock maintained 5th position after regaining 5th position last season following a fall to 9th in 2023/24 from 5th in the 2022/23 season. The highest single count for dunnock fell from 9 for the last two seasons, from 14 & 15 respectively for the two seasons before that, to only 4 this last winter. Dunnock is still on the UK amber list and continues to be a bird of conservation concern, perhaps something to monitor in future surveys. Great tit showed a similar pattern, 6th position this season, a recovery from 9th position last season after recovering to 6th from ranking 8th three seasons ago. Coal tit is another species which moves up and down the gwr ranking. This winter, coal tit recorded 400 gwr to rank 10th in Table 3, compared to 18th last season and 11th in 2023/24, from 17th in 2022/23.

Natural food abundance or breeding success may be reasons for this oscillating behaviour. Our well stocked bird tables and feeders attract birds into our gardens which may help survival and spring condition for mating.

The lower part of Table 3 from Starling to the end doesn't show much change in the ranking order based on gwr.

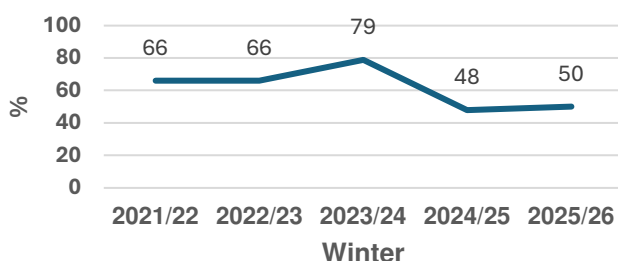
Table 3					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden- Week Records out of 874 (734)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 38 (33)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Registration Number
1 (1)	Woodpigeon	793 (700)	38 (33)	17 (20)	1533
2 (3)	Robin	754 (660)	38 (33)	4 (5)	2550, 2556
3 (4)	Blue tit	750 (658)	37 (33)	28 (28)	2103
4 (2)	Blackbird	711 (690)	38 (33)	11 (16)	2103
5 (5)	Dunnock	629 (551)	38 (33)	4 (9)	2103, 1306, 0720, 0347, 2554, 2556
6 (9)	Great tit	577 (450)	38 (31)	23 (17)	2103
7 (8)	Magpie	555 (479)	38 (33)	19 (19)	2103
8 (6)	House sparrow	529 (509)	32 (21)	39 (24)	0720
9 (7)	Goldfinch	427 (479)	33 (31)	41 (48)	8505
10 (18)	Coal tit	400 (237)	35 (23)	6 (4)	0639
11 (13)	Jackdaw	374 (297)	30 (27)	34 (23)	1306
12 (15)	Long-tailed tit	362 (277)	36 (28)	22 (22)	1825
9 (12)	Greenfinch	345 (315)	29 (25)	14 (13)	8505
14 (11)	Chaffinch	329 (316)	25 (24)	10 (13)	0758
15 (10)	Starling	289 (358)	26 (28)	60 (52)	2228, 0758
16 (17)	Carrion crow	282 (240)	27 (23)	11 (3)	9923
17 (14)	Collared dove	281 (282)	29 (24)	10 (9)	0720
18 (16)	Wren	206 (250)	28 (28)	2 (2)	2103, 2510, 0639, 0753, 0758
19 (20)	Nuthatch	129 (92)	12 (8)	2 (2)	2541, 2049, 2550, 2556, 0758
20 (19)	Great spotted woodpecker	124 (106)	14 (12)	2 (2)	2103, 1727, 2531, 2049, 2550
21 (21)	Sparrowhawk	83 (89)	19 (16)	1 (2)	19 Gardens
22 (22)	Song thrush	43 (61)	14 (11)	2 (3)	1306, 2541, 2556, 0758

Focussing on the number of gardens visited, Table 3 shows six species in the top 10 were observed at least once in every garden.

Following up on last season's comments on sparrowhawk and song thrush presence in the garden. Graph 1 shows sparrowhawks were present in 50% of the gardens and the decline in the number of visits has stabilised. However, no garden was

visited by more than one bird at a time, compared to previous seasons where the highest single count was two birds during the survey period.

Graph 1
% Number of Gardens Visited by a Sparrowhawk



Graph 2 (below) highlights perhaps a better picture for the song thrush, with the graph showing a slight upward trend. The highest single count was only 2 compared to 3 last season, so perhaps it's a little optimistic to think that song thrush is recovering. This bird is still an amber listed species of conservation concern.

Graph 2
% Gardens Visited by Song thrush

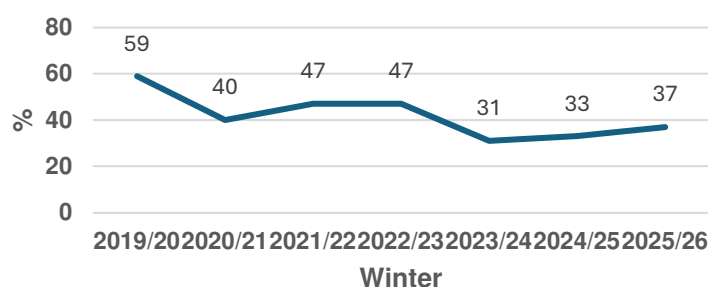


Table 4 (below) shows the highest single count recorded for some of the listed species to see whether any trends over time are developing. Five species show an increase in maximum numbers, four a decrease and three were unchanged compared to the 2024/25 survey. House sparrow, jackdaw and starling showed the largest increase in numbers over last season – 15, 11 and 8 respectively.

Table 4

Species	Year						
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Jackdaw	41	36	45	19	66	23	34
Goldfinch	50	45	24	30	61	48	41
Starling	51	34	100	42	50	52	60
Blue tit	14	18	22	24	26	28	28
Long-tailed tit	15	18	20	21	25	22	22
House sparrow	25	30	35	40	22	24	39
Greenfinch	12	16	20	21	20	13	14
Woodpigeon	19	17	21	25	19	20	17
Great tit	11	11	13	15	15	17	23
Blackbird	12	14	14	22	12	16	11
Magpie	14	9	14	23	8	19	19
Robin	9	7	5	5	6	5	4

Goldfinch showed a decline in maximum counts for the second consecutive season but this is probably because the 2023/24 count was an exceptional result and the normal maximum for this species is closer to forty. Hopefully we are not seeing the

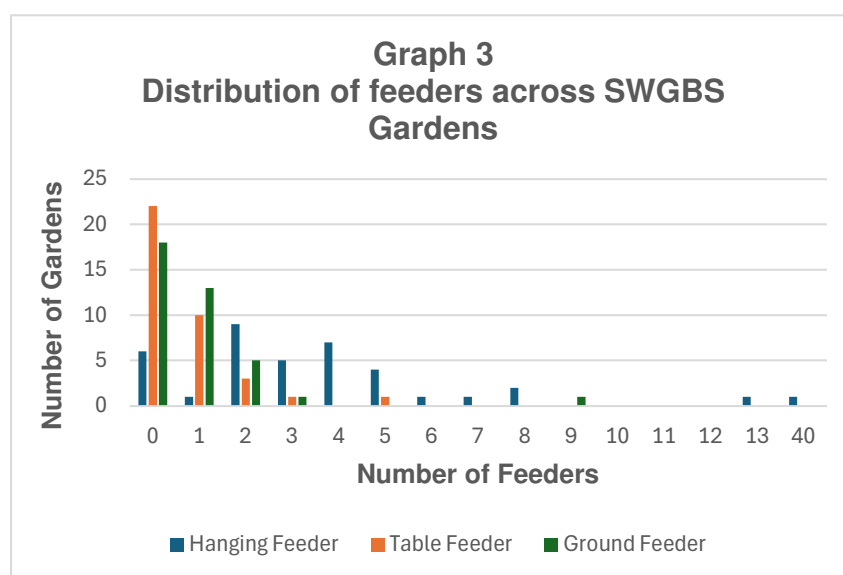
start of something more sinister for goldfinch that is already well known for other finches.

The maximum number of greenfinches increased by one over last season, stabilising to the numbers seen in the 2019/21 figures, perhaps the small uplift to 2020/21 maximum numbers seen over the three seasons 2021/24 is finished for this 'red listed' species. The BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) consider a 'red listed' species is at risk of extinction. Greenfinch moved directly from the 'Green to Red List' following severe decline in numbers as reported in the Breeding Bird Surveys run by the BTO. This was attributed to outbreaks of the disease Trichomonosis which affects the digestive system and is widespread in greenfinch populations across Europe and may also be starting to affect other species such as collared dove and sparrowhawk as well as chaffinch, bullfinch and hawfinch.

As mentioned in last season's report, the RSPB as a precautionary step halted sales of all bird tables and associated products. Now, in collaboration with the BTO and Wildlife Trusts, following a review of the scientific literature they have extended their advice to stop garden bird feeding, especially seeds and peanuts between May and October. The research shows the highest risk of spreading disease comes in summer and autumn, when natural food is readily available and there is no need for additional feeding. Fresh water should continue to be provided, especially during hot dry periods with the water changed daily and the receptacle cleaned. To minimise the risk of disease transfer the advice recommends topping up feeders little and often, so please remember this when you start feeding next winter. Also, when the winter garden bird survey has finished, please take down and clean your feeders for storage until the winter.

Hopefully these small changes will provide the best opportunity to address the significant declines in greenfinch and chaffinch populations that have been linked to garden feeding stations and the disease trichomonosis.

Graph 3 shows that hanging feeders continue to be the feeder of choice. They can be located anywhere in the garden, preferably relatively close to bushes or trees to



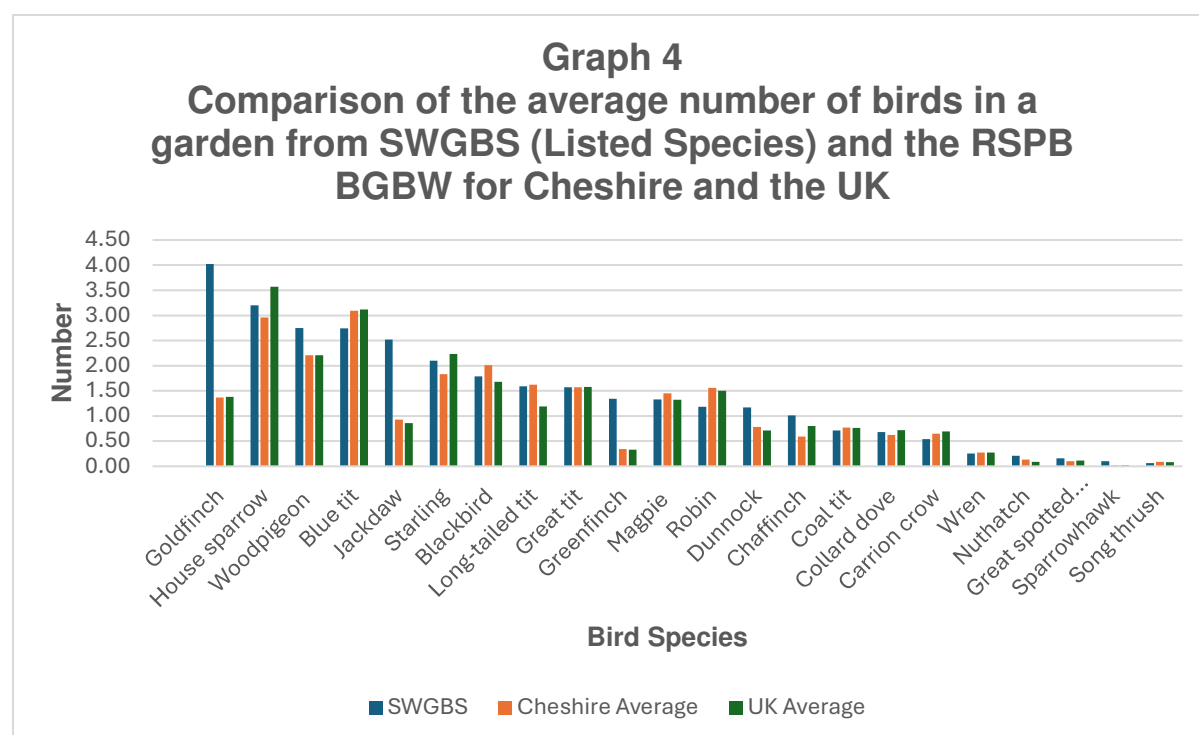
give the birds a quick escape route if a raptor comes hunting. As in previous seasons, some survey participants varied the number of feeders put out according to the weather, increasing capacity in bad weather conditions. Unfortunately one participant had to stop putting out food when a rat became interested

in a free meal. The author has averaged some of the numbers for the hanging feeders because some participants regularly changed the number of feeders used.

During the two thirteen-week survey periods five participants didn't feed the birds at all, compared to four the previous winter. A new contributor to the survey used a maximum of thirty-seven feeders in the first part of the survey and a stunning 51 hanging feeders for one week in the second part. Sixteen participants, the same as last season, used ground feeding in their gardens. Eleven gardens, two more than last season, had one bird table and four, the same number as last season had two bird tables. Feeding the birds is an expensive business but following the RSPB, BTO and Wildlife Trusts advice to not feed between May and October has the potential to save money as well as break the contamination chain and help this season's fledglings achieve a better survival rate.

Comparison with the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch (BGBW) was held over the weekend of 23rd to 25th January 2026. This survey asked participants to count the birds in their garden for a one-hour period during the three-day recording period to give a snapshot of their garden birdlife. The SWGBS collects data over a twenty-six-week period, so comparisons are not strictly comparative, but it's interesting to see how the SWGBS figures compare with the RSPB BGBW. This was the 47th RSPB BGBW and 9.4 million birds were counted by 650,000+ people who participated in the survey.



The 41st SWGBS recorded 27,099 birds by 44 participants across 38 gardens during the twenty-six-week survey period. This was a decline in the number of birds recorded although the number of surveyed gardens increased. In 2024 there were 28,441 birds from 29 gardens and in 2025, 28,255 birds observed from 33 gardens. These two survey figures support the theory that seeing and finding birds is

becoming more difficult, perhaps because of higher mortality due to disease (e.g. avian influenza and Trichomonosis), habitat loss and global warming affecting migration.

Graph 4 (page 7) shows the average number of birds reported in gardens, comparing the SWGBS with the RSPB data for Cheshire and UK.

The goldfinch continues to top the SWGBS for the highest average count in a garden however, this count has decreased from 5.05 to 4.02 but still exceeds the Cheshire and UK figures of 1.37 and 1.38 respectively which are unchanged from 2025. The goldfinch comes 8th in the RSPB BGBW, one place higher than last season.

The house sparrow has topped the BGBW table for the 23rd consecutive season, increasing its average garden count by 0.7% to 3.57. Graph 4 also shows that house sparrow has moved up one place to 2nd in the SWGBS with an average count of 3.2, despite this count being lower than the 2025 count of 3.74. The UK figures for 2025 and 2026 are essentially unchanged at 3.55 and 3.57 respectively. In Cheshire the numbers improved in 2026 up to 2.96 compared to 2.28 in 2025. Despite this modest BGBW increase the house sparrow remains on the UK Red List of conservation concern with nearly 30 million birds lost nationally since 1970 but perhaps these slight increases are an encouraging sign?

The BGBW rankings saw four changes this season compared to two changes in 2025. Starling moved up one place at the expense of woodpigeon but for both species the average bird count decreased by 3 and 12.5% respectively. Robin also fell one place in the BGBW table with an associated 1.5% decrease in numbers with great tit moving one place up the table due to an 11% increase in average count. A 12.5% increase in the blue tit average count helped maintain its second position in the BGBW ranking order.

For the BGBW, the top garden birds in order of average count were 1. House sparrow 2. Blue tit 3. Starling 4. Woodpigeon 5. Blackbird 6. Great tit 7. Robin 8. Goldfinch 9. Magpie 10. Long-tailed tit. In comparison the SWGBS rank order was 1. Goldfinch 2. House sparrow 3. Woodpigeon 4. Blue tit 5 Jackdaw 6. Starling 7. Blackbird 8. Long-tailed tit 9. Great tit 10. Greenfinch. As in the previous two seasons eight species are present in both top 10s, although they appear in a slightly different ranking order with magpie and robin in the BGBW being replaced by jackdaw and greenfinch in SWGBS.

The Other Species

Table 5 (page 9) is the list of species entered under *Other Species* and includes for the first time, as mentioned earlier, a yellow wagtail sighting in Alsager. The results are listed in descending order and they are ranked in their abundance in the garden. Of note is the return of the little egret seen for the first time in the 2024/25 survey with only one visit however compared to five in the previous season. Thirty species were recorded, including yellow wagtail and two returning species - red-legged partridge and kestrel. Ring-necked parakeet and little owl dropped out of this season's list and interestingly none of the birds, grey heron, barn owl, Canada goose

and raven which dropped out in the 2023/24 survey returned this season. This shows the *Other Species* list can be quite fluid.

Table 5					
Rank	Species	Number of Garden- Week Records of 874 (734)	Number of Gardens Visited out of 38 (33)	Highest Single Count	
				Number	Participants Registration Number
1 (8)	Stock dove	93 (32)	10 (14)	12 (23)	1306
2 (2)	Rook	88 (82)	5 (7)	33 (32)	1306
3 (1)	Pied wagtail	59 (95)	12 (14)	3 (4)	1306, 1348
4 (14=)	Goldcrest	57 (18)	11 (10)	3 (2)	2550
5 (11)	Black-headed gull	54 (26)	8 (6)	12 (10)	8501
6= (6=)	Blackcap	42 (34)	11 (8)	4 (2)	9923
6= (9)	Siskin	42 (31)	11 (11)	7 (3)	0753
8 (3)	Pheasant	36 (60)	3 (5)	6 (21)	2556
9 (26=)	Lesser black-backed gull	28 (4)	4 (1)	6 (2)	0720
10 (4)	Jay	27 (56)	5 (10)	3 (5)	0639
11 (14=)	Feral pigeon	25 (18)	2 (2)	8 (5)	1348
12 (12)	Redwing	24 (21)	10 (9)	35 (3)	9923
13= (5)	Bullfinch	19 (41)	5 (6)	3 (4)	2550
13= (13)	Herring gull	19 (19)	4 (3)	3 (4)	1306, 0720
15= (17)	Lesser (common) redpoll	10 (15)	4 (6)	3 (5)	2541
15= (20)	Buzzard	10 (13)	2 (1)	2 (2)	0639
17 (22)	Tawny owl	7 (10)	2 (4)	2 (1)	0639
18= (6=)	Brambling	6 (34)	3 (3)	1 (3)	9923, 0753, 2557
18= (-)	Red-legged partridge	6 (-)	2 (-)	3 (-)	2557
20= (10)	Chiffchaff	5 (29)	4 (6)	1 (2)	2103, 1306, 0639, 2550
20= (18=)	Mistle thrush	5 (14)	3 (2)	8 (2)	0639
20= (26=)	Moorhen	5 (4)	1 (1)	1 (1)	2103
23 (16)	Fieldfare	3 (17)	3 (5)	2 (4)	2103, 1306, 1533
24= (21)	Grey wagtail	2 (11)	2 (3)	1 (1)	1306, 0119
24= (23)	Treereeper	2 (9)	1 (2)	1 (1)	9923
24= (24)	Mallard	2 (7)	2 (2)	2 (3)	2103, 0334
27= (19=)	Reed bunting	1 (14)	1 (4)	1 (3)	2556
27= (25)	Little egret	1 (5)	1 (1)	1 (2)	2103
27= (-)	Kestrel	1 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	2550
27= (-)	Yellow wagtail	1 (-)	1 (-)	1 (-)	0758

Stock dove topped the *Other Species* list with 93 gwr, from 8th position last season, recovering the top spot it held with 120 gwr in 2023/24. However, the 10 gardens visited was down from 14 in the previous survey and the highest single count of 12 was half that seen previously.

Last winter, pheasant gwr fell from 60 to 36 and were seen in fewer gardens (3 from 5) with the highest count falling from 21 to 6, hence pheasant fell from 3rd position to 8th this season. Perhaps fewer pheasants were released in our area or red-legged partridge were favoured as the game bird to release with 6 gwr being recorded compared to none last season.

Looking at Table 5 several birds show movement up the table. Goldcrest moved from 14= to 4th with 57 gwr, whilst visiting approximately the same number of gardens, 11 versus 10 with the highest single count of 3 versus 2. This increase could be explained because 2025 was an excellent breeding season for resident songbirds. The favourable weather conditions allowed for good survival rates and successful second broods as reported by the BTO.

Two of the three gull species also showed movement up the table. Black-headed gull showed a doubling in gwr from 26 to 54 while visiting just two additional gardens, 8 from 6, the highest counts were similar. Lesser black-backed gulls showed the greatest movement from position 26= last season up to 9th with gwr increasing from 4 to 28. This increase is notable in that it applies to just four gardens compared to only one last season and more than likely reflects the gulls responding to the availability of easy food. Historically gulls haven't been considered a garden bird but their omnivorous diet moves them to eat anything available, especially chips when at the seaside or food scraps in an Alsager garden. However, herring gulls, the third gull species are unchanged in their ranking position of 13= with the same gwr and a similar number of gardens visited 4/3 and highest single counts of 3/4 over the two seasons respectively. Perhaps we are now seeing locally the decline in herring gull numbers as they too are a red listed bird of conservation concern due to their numbers dropping by 70% over the last fifty years. This species has also been impacted by devastating outbreaks of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) or Bird Flu in recent seasons.

Reed bunting had one gwr compared to four gwr the previous season, resulting in a fall down the rankings from 19= to 27=. Brambling visited three gardens, as last season but the number of gwr fell significantly from 34 to 6, with its ranking moving down from 6= to 18=. Fieldfare also showed a fall in the ranking table, 16 to 23 but of more concern was the number of gardens that reported fieldfare falling from 5 to 3 with only 3 gwr recorded compared to 17 last time. We know fieldfare numbers are governed by the berry harvest in Scandinavia but we do usually see more birds in our gardens than this. Mistle thrush showed a small decrease in the ranking order 20= from 18= while the number of gardens visited increased from 2 to 3 but the time spent in the garden or gwr was roughly a third of the previous season, 5 compared to 14.

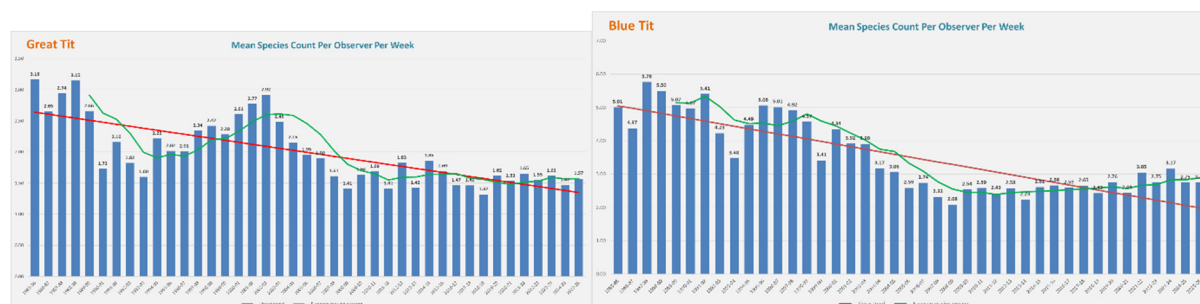
Looking over the last three surveys bullfinch numbers, whilst remaining consistent for the number of gardens visited, the highest single counts have shown a steady decline in the number of gwr, 72 to 41 to 19 in 2026. In contrast gwr for jay over the same period went from 25 up to 56 then back down to 27 this season with the number of gardens visited doubling to 10 for the middle season. This may reflect a

response to the birds finding a good food source, usually acorns for jay or their sixth sense of an approaching hard winter.

Twenty-seven participants, three more than last season, recorded the highest single count for at least one bird species in their garden from the *Listed* or *Other Species* lists. Participant registration number 2103 from Sandbach recorded the highest count for seven *Listed Species* and participant 1306 from Basford once again recorded the highest counts also with seven species from the *Other Species* List.

In conclusion, rankings for the *Other Species* shouldn't be taken too seriously. The number of records is fewer but the number of garden week records that are observed together with the number of gardens visited and highest single counts may show the start of a trend or as in the case of the jay just annual fluctuation. Personally I think the actual numbers of birds that visit our gardens has decreased, whether this is due to poor reproduction success, changing migration patterns, disease or increased predation or something else that requires further research.

The historical SWGBS data dates back to 1985 and Nick Harrison has updated the records with this season's figures. So I encourage you all to visit the SECOS website to see the charts which show trends for all the species. This season I would like to draw your attention to two birds, great and blue tit that we regularly see in our garden. Great tit was present in all 38 gardens and blue tit was present in 37. The two charts below show how their numbers have changed over the last forty-one seasons, both are currently on the Green List which indicates they are the lowest conservation concern, have a healthy population and are common in the UK.



These two charts paint perhaps a different picture and show that numbers although stable are still lower than they were in the eighties. The red line indicates the linear trend and its direction is down – we will watch this space in seasons to come. Is our garden feeding crucial to preventing these two common garden birds from moving to the amber list?

News from the Comments Section

Feeding Habits

Several participants reported fewer birds in their gardens as the survey started. One person considered this a miserable start to the survey as the birds ignored their sunflower hearts which were once so popular. This situation changed as the wetter colder weather brought the birds onto the garden feeders during October.

One participant commented on a magpie learning to perch on a fat ball feeder and another watched a dunnoek on a mixed seed hanging feeder. Dunnock are usually ground feeders, picking up the scraps from the ground under the feeder. A pair of goldfinches spent 15 minutes eating lavender seeds in a Sandbach garden.

It's not only the seaside where gulls eat chips! One participant in Alsager put some left over chip shop chips out on their lawn which attracted one black-headed gull to feed much to their disappointment as previously this unorthodox garden bird food attracted several black-headed gulls. Pastry and food scraps have also attracted herring and black-headed gulls down into other participants' gardens.

A Christmas present for a Haslington resident was a female blackcap on the feeders over a two-day period. It used a very different feeding technique to the tits by staying on the feeder filling its crop. In comparison tits fly in, choose a seed then retire to eat it under cover of a bush or tree. This is probably the better technique for survival!

Both male and female great spotted woodpeckers were reported visiting several gardens to refuel for the winter. A Crewe resident noticed the return of greenfinches to their feeders after a long break. Other birds using feeders during the winter include goldfinch, chaffinch, blue tit, great tit, robin, magpie, house sparrow, collared dove, bullfinch, siskin, lesser redpoll and brambling. Interestingly one participant reported house sparrows bullying goldfinches off a hanging feeder, this behaviour hasn't been reported before, perhaps we can keep a look out for it during the next survey. As usual jackdaws, as well as mastering the hanging feeder for food, help keep the ground clear by coming down for spilt seed. Rooks were also reported picking up scraps under a hanging feeder.

Redwings preferred to feed on holly berries in an Alsager garden while seventeen descended into an oak tree in a Basford garden but there was no mention of any feeding activity, perhaps they were roosting?

One participant noticed that when the weather was poor and blustery, they didn't see many birds coming to their feeders but as soon as the weather improved, the birds returned. This is possibly an energy conservation tactic with the birds hunkering down during the poor weather, waiting for an improvement knowing the food would still be available on their return.

Sadly, one participant reported a puffed-up greenfinch struggling on the feeders. Feeding was stopped immediately and the feeders disinfected. A month later feeding was restarted but another greenfinch with the same symptoms was seen. Again feeding was stopped and the feeders cleaned and disinfected. Their garden was relatively quiet without any feeders to attract the birds but this action is commended to break the cycle of disease.

Garden First and Returning Bird Events

One member expressed concern that species (nuthatch, siskin, reed bunting, and lesser redpolls) previously seen regularly in their garden during the winter months have disappeared, without explanation. A collared dove made a solitary appearance in February to avoid being added to this list.

Ravens were regularly heard passing over a Shavington garden until one decided to drop in to see what was on offer, a welcome first for this garden. The cold weather in November brought in pied wagtails to a Basford garden searching for food around the pond area. A few days later they were joined by a grey wagtail which now seems to be an annual arrival about this time of year.

A buzzard perched on a log pile with a mistle thrush in the treetops is a regular occurrence seen in an Alsager garden. The buzzard occasionally drops down into the garden searching for food, possibly earthworms or beetles. A buzzard was also seen in a Congleton garden but it didn't stay long. These raptors are not now just seen soaring above our residential estates on a warm day, they now come visiting!

In addition to buzzards above our gardens we now also need to keep an eye out for red kites as one was seen over Wrinehill in October. There have been several records published in the WhatsApp Groups for the Sandbach area and I wonder how long it will be before one is attracted to land in a garden and join the SWGBS list?

A Sandbach participant had a visit from a song thrush in January, their first since moving to the area in 2011. A barn owl flew through (not landing so it couldn't count as a garden bird) a Shavington garden in November, surprising the resident.

A couple of participants reported the lack of blackbirds in their gardens during the colder winter months. This could be due to fewer birds needing to migrate to the UK because it was milder in Scandinavia, the Baltic regions and Northern Europe. Blackbird numbers in UK gardens are experiencing a notable decline, particularly in southern England and London since 2020, likely linked to the spread of the mosquito-borne *Usutu virus*. Is this an early warning that this virus may be spreading further North?

Our Haslington participant considers that wren and pied wagtail are visitors to their garden and are no longer resident as in previous seasons. They do see blackcap on a regular basis during the survey period, probably due to feeding, there's nothing like bribery to keep your garden list up!!

During the course of a morning three little egrets flew low over a Sandbach garden, to be followed by another which landed in the stream at the bottom of the garden. This was the same garden that added little egret, our 85th bird to be added to the survey species list. This consolidation of the presence of this species in the area will probably lead to more garden sightings in the future. This species has become common in the Northwest of England since the early to mid-2000s with breeding confirmed in Cheshire since 2004.

An Alsager participant saw a black-headed gull land in their garden, this was the first time in over 45 years they had seen one in their garden – amazing!

Sparrowhawk Events

Nine participants reported seeing sparrowhawks in their gardens. This is five more than the last survey, four were from Alsager and one each from Crewe, Wrinehill, Weston, Sandbach and Nantwich. Four kills (2 pigeons, 1 blackbird and 1 goldfinch) were confirmed and another two pigeons were attributed to a sparrowhawk although

they weren't witnessed. A female sparrowhawk killed one pigeon and was soon joined by the male to strip the carcass. A goldfinch was taken from a hanging feeder and in 5 mins the male had plucked the unfortunate bird and taken it away. Not all attempts to take prey result in success, two unsuccessful attempts were also observed.

Five other sightings were fly throughs or birds taking a time out on a fence post. One lucky Alsager participant watched a male sparrowhawk on a fence just 3 yards from the kitchen window.

Observed Bird Behaviour

Breeding started early in the season with a pair of woodpigeons seen copulating on a garden fence in February and magpies were nest building by breaking twigs off a tree. In comparison, rooks were gathering and squabbling in an oak tree but no nest building was evident in early February as compared to last season. They did start nest building later on the 23rd February, quickly producing four nests. The participant commented that the rooks were quite happy stealing sticks from each other's nests during the construction phase and by March the rookery had grown to eight nests.

In October, tawny owls were heard calling in two gardens; Alsager and Basford on multiple nights, probably establishing their breeding territories for the months to come. Paired tawny owls are largely sedentary, rarely leaving their chosen area for the rest of their lives. Other participants mentioned hearing singing or calling from their gardens, these included blackcap, robin, dunnock, great tit and a song thrush calling at daybreak, luckily that's not too early in November!

In February and March blue and great tits were observed inspecting bird boxes and in one garden a bat box was entered! The finding of a woodpigeon eggshell in February suggests breeding, others have mated, laid and hatched eggs even earlier in the season as there were no signs of predation. Goldcrests were very confiding when one was seen on a discarded Christmas tree close to the back door and another was flitting around the blossom on a tree a mere three metres from a conservatory window. Wrens and chiffchaffs have also been seen at close quarters in ivy, a regular habitat to search for food or roost.

Seen Outside the Garden Observations

A large flock of redwing was seen across the road from a Wistaston participant house, unfortunately they didn't come into their garden. At the same address, a neighbour puts out food scraps which attracts a good number of gulls that use the participant's garden as a waiting area when there are too many to join the feast. A similar thing happens in Shavington where a neighbour puts food scraps on their garage roof, this attracts herring gulls but none venture into the participant's garden for a change of scene. In Basford, a participant watched about 150 starlings sitting on a telegraph cable opposite their garden, sadly none came across the road to make use of their well-stocked feeders. A Haslington participant noted a flock of 30+ starlings in the area but none reached their feeders.

Large numbers of red-legged partridges were seen in a lane alongside a Wrinehill participant's house and on five occasions the partridges ventured into his garden. As mentioned previously, these are released birds for game shoots. Finally, a participant needed to avert their eyes as they witnessed ravens mating in a tree across the road in Woore.

Thank you to everybody who participated in this seasons SWGBS and to Mike Tonks, Nick Harrison and my wife Lydia Taylor for proofreading the report.

Ian Taylor

31st May 2026