



Friends of City Gardens

Big Garden Birdwatch in the City 26/27 January 2019



2019 was the 12th year volunteers have counted birds in City gardens as part of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. This adds up to a considerable amount of comparative data and reveals trends in the relative numbers of different species through time. This year 11 species were observed, down from 18 last year; although the number of individual birds recorded was much the same - 150 individuals compared to 155 in 2018. The reduced number of species may be the result of a milder winter this year, with fewer Scandinavian visitors such as Redwings and Fieldfares, both of which were observed last year.

Although the winter as a whole has been quite mild, the weekend of the count was chilly and windy, which also may account for fewer human observers and fewer birds!

Results

The numbers of Blackbirds and Blue tits, always amongst the most frequently observed birds, were back to pre-2018 levels (Table 1). Goldfinch numbers were also maintained and the growth in the Goldfinch population over the last five years mirrors that across the country. According to the BTO, the UK population of Goldfinches increased by about 80% between 2002 and 2012. In the City, the Birdwatch results from 2008 to 2011 record only two Goldfinches, but from 2012 numbers have climbed steadily. The success of this species seems to lie partly in its boldness when visiting feeders - they are regularly seen in flocks of up to 15 individuals on seed and fatball feeders in the City; they also rear two to three clutches a year with breeding extending into late summer so they are less dependent on a single period of good weather in spring.

Greenfinches were recorded in the Birdwatch for the first time last year and it was good to see this species again in 2019, suggesting that numbers are recovering from the decline resulting from trichomonosis, a disease caused by a parasite, that reduced Greenfinch populations throughout the UK.

It was disappointing that again no House sparrows were recorded this year although flocks of up to 20 individuals were sighted in summer 2018 in Beech



*Fledgling Robin Finsbury Circus
January 2019*

gardens, close to the breeding colony in Fortune Park. Starlings also remained elusive, although flocks of the latter have been observed in St Paul's Churchyard.

Robin numbers were up on 2018, perhaps as a result of the mild winter. Amazingly, a pair of Robins were recorded feeding fledglings in Finsbury Circus garden in January.

Table 1: 2015 - 2019 Birdwatch results

Note: Counts for 2019 include 18 gardens, 2018 18 gardens, 2017 19 gardens, 2016 16 gardens and 2015 13 gardens.

	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Blackbird	29	21	33	17	14
Blue tit	32	16	33	18	23
Carrion crow	6	7	7	7	6
Chaffinch	0	2	3	0	2
Dunnock	3	4	17	3	4
Goldfinch	30	37	29	16	20
Great tit	6	16	14	12	8
Greenfinch	4	4	0	0	0
House sparrow	0	0	3	2	0
Jay	0	1	2	0	3
Magpie	7	3	7	8	6
Robin	17	8	14	11	5
Starling	0	0	0	0	1
Wagtail, Grey	0	0	3	2	0
Wagtail, Pied	0	0	3	0	0
Woodpigeon	15	24	18	23	25
Wren	1	3	2	4	0
Others	0	9	3	0	0
Total species	11	18	17	14	12
Total individuals	150	155	191	126	117

Table 2: Observations from each garden 2017 – 2019

* Gardens with feeders

	2019 species	2019 birds	2018 species	2018 birds	2017 species	2017 birds
Barbican – Wildlife garden*	7	15	8	17	8	16
Barbican - Speed House	0	0	4	5	3	6
Barbican - Thomas More*	6	24	8	15	7	14
Bunhill*	8	27	10	26	9	25
Christchurch Greyfriars	4	4	2	3	1	1
Church Entry*	1	1	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cleary	3	3	3	4	7	10
Finsbury Circus	5	12	5	8	8	12
Golden Lane Estate	NA	NA	5	7	9	26
Noble Street	3	3	2	2	1	1
Portsoken*	4	7	2	2	2	2
Postman's Park*	6	17	6	9	7	16
Smithfield Rotunda*	3	5	3	3	5	11
St Botolph	4	6	3	4	4	9
St Dunstan in the East	6	9	7	10	7	11
St Magnus	NA	NA	1	18	NA	NA
St Mary Aldermanbury	5	6	5	10	5	7
St Mary Staining	0	0	1	1	2	3
St Michael Cornhill	2	2	NA	NA	2	2
St Olave Silver St	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	2
St Paul's Cathedral*I	6	9	4	9	7	17
Total	11	150	18	155	17	191

Table 3: Water birds - observed on the Barbican Lakes 2015 - 2019

	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Blackheaded gull	3	0	1	3	2
Coot	1	2	1	3	6
Mallard	3	5	0	4	22
Moorhen	3	2	3	7	2
Total species	4	3	5	4	4
Total individuals	10	5	10	17	32

Recommendations:

Cover: the issue of providing and managing specific habitats to encourage target species, such as the House sparrow and other garden birds, is addressed in the City's Biodiversity Action Plan 2016 - 2020. Specific habitat action plans are being developed for all the SLINC sites.

Dense cover from ground level to shrub layer and tree canopy is essential to enable birds to travel safely through vertical and horizontal spaces without risk of predation. Cover should comprise a mix of evergreen shrubs, climbers like ivy, and seed producing or berry bearing plants that provide forage in the winter months. Herbaceous perennials should not be cut back until late spring to provide forage and cover.

Regular feeding: consistent feeding throughout the year is essential to supplement natural food. More birds were observed in those gardens where there are feeders providing a range of bird food. It was good to see feeders being maintained by City gardeners in St Paul's Churchyard and by volunteers in Barbican Wildlife Garden, Barbican Thomas More garden, Bunhill Fields, Postman's Park, Smithfield Rotunda, Church Entry and Portsoken garden. It was disappointing to note that bird feeders in St Dunstan's in the East garden have been removed and the remaining feeder is not filled. Similarly, the feeders in Cleary garden have been removed. It is important that in those gardens designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) that bird feeders are installed and maintained.

In 2018 Friends of City Gardens installed three predator-proof bird feeding stations in Portsoken, Smithfield and Church Entry gardens resulting in increased bird numbers in these gardens. FoCG will install another three in 2019 in Postman's Park, Cleary and St Botolph Bishopsgate together with rodent-proof feed bins. However, it is very important that City gardeners keep these feeders clean and topped up as part of their regular daily duties and that this is monitored by supervisors. There should also be a designated member of City Gardens staff who will ensure that bird food is delivered to each of these gardens so there are always sufficient supplies available.

Large squirrel-proof hanging feeders are more attractive to small birds than feeding cages, but should be installed over hard standing if possible, to minimise compaction by pigeons on the soil beneath. FoCG will replace the missing bird feeders in St Dunstan's in the East, but City gardeners must fill and clean them as part of their regular duties.

Regular cleaning: this is very important for bird health. FoCG will provide cleaning materials in each feed bin.

The feeders in St Paul's are very old and impossible to clean. FoCG will replace these in 2019.

Water for bathing and drinking: also essential for bird health. FoCG have installed bird baths in Church Entry and Bunhill Fields and will install more in 2019, but it is essential that City gardeners keep them clean and topped up with fresh water as part of their regular daily duties.



Pigeons in St Botolph's Bishopsgate showing the importance of water for birds

Log piles: these boost invertebrate populations and are essential in all SINC's. FoCG plan to install the log piles that were removed in Postman's Park and install new log piles in Portsoken and Smithfield.

Nest boxes: it is important to maintain and increase the number of nest boxes each year.

Other surveys

As well as the annual Big Garden Birdwatch at the end of January, birds in the City are monitored throughout the year. The Summer Breeding Bird Survey that has been carried out each year since 2014 has recorded 53 species with up to 27 nesting in the City.

All the results of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch and the Summer Breeding Birds Survey are recorded on the GiGL (Greenspace Information for Great London) database. Breeding success is also monitored annually when the bird boxes in the City are cleaned.