



Friends of City Gardens

Big Garden Birdwatch in the City 27/28 January 2018



2018 is the 11th year volunteers have counted birds in City gardens as part of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. The number of species observed was 18, up from 17 last year; the number of individual birds was down from 191 individuals to 155, probably as a result of the cold and wet weather over the weekend and also the generally colder winter this year. These numbers include observations from 18 gardens (19 in 2017) but the difference of one less site is not likely to explain the reduction in numbers of individuals this year.

The cold winter weather has brought visitors from Scandinavia including Redwings (one observed in Postman's Park) and Fieldfares (5 observed in Bunhill Fields).

Results

The numbers of Blackbirds and Blue tits, always amongst the most frequently observed birds, were substantially lower this year and the total numbers observed were overtaken for the first time by Goldfinches (37 individual birds). Last year's mild conditions may have boosted 2017 observations of Blackbirds and Blue tits; this year the number of both species returned to their pre-2017 levels.

The growth in the Goldfinch population in the City mirrors that across the country. According to the BTO, the UK population of Goldfinches increased by about 80% between 2002 and 2012. They are regularly seen on peanut, seed and fatball feeders in the City and may be better adapted to take advantage of different types of food. Numbers counted included a flock of 18 individuals on the Thames Path at St Magnus the Martyr.



It was very good to observe the first Greenfinches since 2012. The Greenfinch was once a common breeding bird in the City and the decline in the population may have been the result of trichomonosis, a disease caused by a parasite that reduced Greenfinch populations throughout the UK. Greenfinches nest in colonies in dense shrubbery. It will be important to maintain good shrub cover in City gardens as well as ensuring feeders are kept clean to support breeding success for this species.

It was disappointing that no House sparrows were recorded this year and Starlings remained elusive, although flocks of the latter have been observed in St Paul's Churchyard. House sparrow populations have fallen dramatically - in London, House sparrow numbers declined by 60 % between 1994 and 2004. Research suggests that lack of invertebrates in the breeding season results in high chick mortality. Feeding with meal worms during the breeding season improves chick survival rates, although it does not appear to help these birds regain lost territories. The two remaining colonies are both on the edge of the City - to the north in Fortune Park and in the east around the Tower of London.

Table 1: 2014 - 2018 Birdwatch results

Note: Counts for 2018 include 18 gardens, 2017 19 gardens, 2016 16 gardens, 2015 13 gardens and 2014 15 gardens).

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Blackbird	21	33	17	14	19
Blue tit	16	33	18	23	21
Carrion crow	7	7	7	6	3
Chaffinch	2	3	0	2	3
Dunnock	4	17	3	4	3
Goldfinch	37	29	16	20	6
Great tit	16	14	12	8	13
Greenfinch	4	0	0	0	0
House sparrow	0	3	2	0	3
Jay	1	2	0	3	0
Magpie	3	7	8	6	1
Robin	8	14	11	5	10
Starling	0	0	0	1	1
Wagtail, Grey	0	3	2	0	0
Wagtail, Pied	0	3	0	0	0
Woodpigeon	24	18	23	25	25
Wren	3	2	4	0	2
Others	9	3	0	0	2
Total species	18	17	14	12	14
Total individuals	155	191	126	117	112

Concerns

It was clear that in those gardens where there are feeders to provide a range of bird food more birds were observed. It was good to see feeders being maintained by City gardeners in St Paul's garden and by volunteers in

Barbican Wildlife Garden, Barbican Thomas More garden, Bunhill Fields and Postman's Park. It is important that changes in City gardens personnel do not impact regular bird feeding. For example, in St Dunstan's in the East garden,



where there has been very regular feeding over the last few years, a new member of staff should now be made responsible for keeping the feeders filled to ensure continuity.

Friends of City Gardens will install new feeding cages that are squirrel and pigeon proof and deter rodents in Portsoken garden, Postman's Park and Smithfield Rotunda. Similar cages work well in Fortune Park and in Bunhill Fields.

Table 2: Observations from each garden 2016 - 2018

	2018 species	2018 birds	2017 species	2017 birds	2016 species	2016 birds
Barbican - Fann St	8	17	8	16	10	17
Barbican - Speed House	4	5	3	6	7	12
Barbican - Thomas More	8	15	7	14	5	20
Bunhill	10	26	9	25	7	16
Christchurch Greyfriars	2	3	1	1	3	4
Cleary	3	4	7	10	4	6
Finsbury Circus	5	8	8	12	3	5
Golden Lane Estate	5	7	9	26	1	2
Noble Street	2	2	1	1	0	0
Portsoken	2	2	2	2	0	0
Postman's Park	6	9	7	16	4	8
Smithfield Rotunda	3	3	5	11	NA	NA
St Botolph	3	4	4	9	3	4
St Dunstan in the East	7	10	7	11	7	17
St Magnus	1	18	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Mary Aldermanbury	5	10	5	7	0	0
St Mary Staining	1	1	2	3	3	3
St Michael Cornhill	NA	NA	2	2	NA	NA
St Olave Silver St	NA	NA	1	2	NA	NA
St Paul's Cathedral	4	9	7	17	7	15
Total	18	155	17	191	14	126

How we can improve

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. This should comprise a mix of evergreen shrubs, climbers like ivy, and seed producing or berry bearing plants that provide forage in the winter months.

Regular feeding: consistent feeding throughout the year is essential to supplement natural food.

Water for bathing and drinking: essential for bird health.

Log piles: these boost invertebrate populations and are essential in all SINC's.

Nest boxes: maintaining and increasing 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 recorded 53 species in 2017 from over 600 observations. There was evidence to suggest that 27 of those species nested 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.

Water birds



Every year the water birds on the Barbican Lakes are counted during the Birdwatch weekend.

Moorhens, Coots and Mallards are consistently present on the Lakes and all breed here in the summer.

A Heron is often observed on the Lakes and Blackheaded gulls are also usually present in winter, although neither species was present during the Birdwatch.

Table 3: Water birds - observed on the Barbican Lakes 2014 - 2018

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Blackheaded gull	0	1	3	2	0
Coot	2	1	3	6	3
Mallard	5	0	4	22	6
Moorhen	2	3	7	2	5
Total species	3	5	4	4	3
Total individuals	5	10	17	32	14