



Friends of City Gardens

Big Garden Birdwatch in the City 28/29 January 2017

2017 is the 10th year volunteers have counted birds in City gardens as part of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. The number of species observed was 17, up from 14 last year; the number of individual birds was also up from 126 to 191 individuals. Only a small part of the increase in absolute numbers (nine individuals) is explained by the increase in the number of sites where counts took place - up from 16 to 19 different gardens. So why was the 2017 count substantially better than previous years?



The answer may be because the 2016/17 winter has been generally mild, with the exception of a very cold spell in mid-January 2017 that brought avian visitors to the UK from Scandinavia, such as the Redwing observed in St Paul's garden. The weekend of the Birdwatch was mild and sunny which may also explain why there was more bird activity.

Finally, more bird feeders have been kept filled in more gardens this winter, drawing in birds and making them easier to spot.

Results

Blackbirds and Blue tits, always amongst the most frequently observed birds, head the list. The greatest increase was in the number of Dunnocks (17 individuals) compared to two or three in previous years. The number of Goldfinches also increased reflecting the growing success of this species in the urban environment. Although the Summer Breeding Bird Survey 2016 recorded fewer Goldfinches (48 observations between March and July compared with 67 in 2015), it seems the over-wintering population is growing.

No Greenfinches were recorded for the fifth successive year. The Greenfinch was once a common breeding bird in the City but has not been recorded in the RSPB Birdwatches since 2012 and only one sighting was recorded in the 2016 Summer Breeding Birds Survey. This decline in the population may be the result of trichomonosis, a disease caused by a parasite that has reduced Greenfinch populations throughout the UK. This emphasises the importance of maintaining good hygiene by regular disinfection of feeders.

Both Grey and Pied Wagtails were recorded this year and both were observed in the Summer Breeding Birds Survey. There was evidence that the Grey Wagtail is breeding in the City and is becoming quite a common sight around the Barbican Lakes and on Barbican underground station.

Table 1: 2013 - 2017 Birdwatch results

Note: Counts for 2017 include 19 gardens, 2016 16 gardens, 2015 13 gardens, 2014 15 gardens and 2013 13 gardens).

	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
Blackbird	33	17	14	19	19
Blue tit	33	18	23	21	27
Carrion crow	7	7	6	3	7
Chaffinch	3	0	2	3	3
Dunnock	17	3	4	3	3
Goldfinch	29	16	20	6	1
Great tit	14	12	8	13	11
House sparrow	3	2	0	3	1
Jay	2	0	3	0	0
Magpie	7	8	6	1	4
Robin	14	11	5	10	7
Starling	0	0	1	1	0
Wagtail, Grey	3	2	0	0	0
Wagtail, Pied	3	0	0	0	0
Woodpigeon	18	23	25	25	28
Wren	2	4	0	2	1
Others	3	0	0	2	6
Total species	17	14	12	14	13
Total individuals	191	126	117	112	118

Concerns

The decline of the House sparrow has been noted in previous reports and is well documented. Only three individuals were spotted in 2017 all in the Golden Lane estate. The colony in Fortune Park on the border of the City had males guarding nests during the Birdwatch weekend and it is likely the Golden Lane House sparrows belong to this colony. The Fortune Park observations are not included in these results.

It was clear from the 2017 results that in those gardens where there are feeders providing 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 Postman's Park and the feeders in St Dunstan in the East and Fann Street wildlife garden are exemplary. New feeders installed by a volunteer in Smithfield Rotunda have also increased bird numbers here substantially.

In 2017 Friends of City Gardens will review all the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs) in the City and install new feeders where necessary. Volunteers will also help clean and maintain them.



Table 2: Observations from each garden 2015 - 2017

	2017 species	2017 birds	2016 species	2016 birds	2015 species	2015 birds
Barbican - Fann St	8	16	10	17	5	19
Barbican - Speed House	3	6	7	12	0	0
Barbican - Thomas More	7	14	5	20	8	17
Bunhill	9	25	7	16	9	33
Christchurch Greyfriars	1	1	3	4	3	5
Cleary	7	10	4	6	4	7
Finsbury Circus	8	12	3	5	0	0
Golden Lane Estate	9	26	1	2	NA	NA
Noble Street	1	1	0	0	0	0
Portsoken	2	2	0	0	2	3
Postman's Park	7	16	4	8	1	3
Smithfield Rotunda	5	11	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Botolph	4	9	3	4	0	0
St Dunstan in the East	7	11	7	17	3	3
St Mary Aldermanbury	5	7	0	0	2	5
St Mary Staining	2	3	3	3	NA	NA
St Michael Cornhill	2	2	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Olave Silver St	1	2	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Paul's Cathedral	7	17	7	15	8	22
Total	17	191	14	126	12	117

How we can improve

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 will be developed for all the SLINC sites over the next five years. 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.

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 39 species in 2016 from over 600 observations. There was evidence to suggest that 27 of those species nested in the City, compared with the 49 species recorded in 2015, of which 28 were believed to have nested.

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. A Heron can often be observed on the Lakes and can also put in an appearance on the Guildhall pond as seen in this photo.

A pair of Grey Wagtails that breed in the Barbican are also regularly seen catching insects over the Barbican Lakes.

Table 3: Water birds - observed on the Barbican Lakes 2013 - 2017

	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
Blackheaded gull	1	3	2		
Coot	1	3	6	3	5
Egyptian goose					2
Mallard		4	22	6	16
Moorhen	3	7	2	5	6
Total species	5	4	4	3	4
Total individuals	10	17	32	14	29