

FRIENDS OF CITY GARDENS

Nest box cleaning report January 2014

1. Observations

1.1 All the nest boxes in City gardens were cleaned 16/17th January 2014. In total for the 2013 nesting season:

- There were 43 nest boxes in 13 gardens.
- 12 of the boxes had been occupied (28%) in comparison to 29% in the 2012 nesting season.
- The majority of nests were those of blue tits (58%) with the remainder great tits. No nests had been built in sparrow or open-type 'robin' boxes. Full results are given below.

1.2 Annual nest box cleaning is important not only for maintaining the health of birds but also, together with the annual spring bird count; it provides evidence to evaluate the success of the City's biodiversity strategy.

1.3 Both cleaning and counting exercises provide a useful snapshot of the condition of a number of the City's gardens, including five out of the seven Sites of Local Importance for Nature Conservation (SLINCs) and two of the three Sites of Borough Importance for Nature Conservation (SBINCs).

1.4 These observations by volunteers are the basis of the recommendations set out below.

2. Key recommendations

The nest box cleaning results and those of the annual spring bird count should be taken together. Volunteers recognised the substantial steps the City is taking to enhance biodiversity. The bird box cleaning and bird count is a means of evaluating the success of these measures and to suggest ways in which money and effort could be more focussed to achieving specific goals.

There are three key recommendations:

2.1 Developing a targeted and co-ordinated approach to biodiversity

We consider that biodiversity should be at the heart of how City gardens are designed and managed. That does not mean that every garden should become a wildlife garden but at the least, those gardens designated as SLINCs or SBINCs or SMINCs should each have a coherent plan for enhancing a specific key target species. This plan would include designing and maintaining the habitat that this target species requires. Having general targets without tying them to specific gardens makes it much more difficult to achieve the goals and to evaluate outcomes.

2.2 Identifying new target species - such as the starling

When the Biodiversity Action Plan is refreshed in 2015, consideration should be given to identifying new key target species. Two of the existing target bird species - the peregrine falcon and the black redstart require very specific habitats that are not really possible to create in ground level public City gardens.

However, it is within the control of City Gardens to do much more to provide suitable habitats for house sparrows and starlings and these should be given more emphasis in future planning. Both are iconic birds of London, both have suffered declines of over 60% in their populations since the 1970s. The sparrow is already a target species; there is a strong case for making the starling one as well.

3. The following are detailed suggestions

3.1 Expert advice - the City should seek expert advice from organisations such as the RSPB or BTO when designing habitats for target species or relocating nest boxes.

3.2 Increasing the number of nest boxes - there is scope to increase the number of boxes. Currently 13 gardens have nest boxes. The location of more sparrow terraces and open boxes needs to be carefully considered - and it is suggested that the existing sparrow terraces in Christchurch Greyfriars be moved to another location.

3.3 Sponsorship - the City is considering sponsorship of nest boxes, which would enable a step-change in the numbers of boxes. This initiative is definitely worth pursuing and volunteers are happy to help identify potential sponsors and help with this initiative.

3.4 Webcam - consideration should be given to setting up a webcam in a couple of boxes. A sponsor might also be found for this.

3.5 Educational opportunities - selection of recovered nests could be displayed for educational purposes. Some recovered nests have already been used for a learning session in Bunhill with the Lyceum school children but the nests need to be stored and exhibited more accessibly.

3.6 National Nest Box Week (14-21 February) although a little late for early nesting birds in the City, this week could be used as a focus for activities such as making nest boxes - or if sponsorship of boxes is forthcoming - celebrating the installation of more boxes.

3.7 Interpretation boards - consideration should be given to placing interpretation boards in some City gardens showing the type of birds that nest and feed. In Bunhill a whiteboard could be placed in the window of the hut and daily sightings written up.

3.8 Bird feeders and birdbaths - the positive benefits of bird feeding have been seen in the improvement in the results of the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch over time - and it is good to see that all the feeders are kept filled. In view of the declining number of sightings of green finches, gardeners should be reminded that feeders must be cleaned regularly and ideally the location moved from time to time to reduce the risk of trichomonosis.

There are many gardens that would benefit from feeders and baths - provided that they are kept filled and clean. Again it is important that the feeders are easy to clean and squirrel and pigeon proof. A cage, such as the one in

Fortune Park, could be trialled in gardens where feral pigeons are a particular nuisance.

Table 1: No of nest boxes and number of nests for 2013 season

	2013		2012		2011	
	No. boxes	No. nests	No. boxes	No. nests	No. boxes	No. nests
Finsbury Circus	2	1	2	2	3	2
Cleary Garden	2	2	2	1	2	1
St Botolph without Bishopsgate	1	0	2	1	2	1
St Mary Aldermanbury	1	0	2	2	2	2
St Paul's Cathedral	5	0	6	1	6	1
Bunhill Fields	5	1	5	2	7	4
Fann Street, Barbican	3	1	5	0	5	1
Bernard Morgan House	1	1	1	0	1	1
Postman's Park	3	2	3	1	3	1
Christchurch Greyfriars	13	0	13	0	13	0
St Dunstan's in the East	3	0	2	0	3	2
Byward Street	0	0	1	0	1	0
Thomas More, Barbican	3	3	3	3	1	1
Speed House, Barbican	1	1	1	1	2	1
Total	43	12	48	14	51	18
Occupancy	28%		29%		35%	

- Two nest boxes (in St Mary Aldermanbury and St Botolph's Bishopsgate) were located above the 3 metre limit and were not examined. These boxes should be cleaned and repositioned in 2014.
- Two nest boxes were removed for repair (St Mary Aldermanbury, Finsbury Circus) and should be replaced in 2014. Three further nest boxes (all in Bunhill) were in poor condition and although were left in situ they should be replaced in 2014.
- Seven additional boxes and two replacement boxes were installed in December 2013 - all in Barbican gardens
- Cleaning took 20 man-hours of gardener time spread over 2 days plus 20 hours of volunteer time to take notes and photographs.