



Friends of City Gardens

Big Garden Birdwatch in the City 25/26 January 2020



2020 was the 13th 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 18 species were observed, up from 11 in 2019. The individual bird count was also up from 150 in 2019 to 214 this year.

The increase in the number of birds is partly the result of counting in 23 gardens this year compared with 18 last year and the mild winter is also likely to have positively affected numbers.

Highlights include:

- A kestrel in Bunhill Fields and it has become a regular visitor this winter.
- House sparrows were recorded in Barbican Wildlife garden and Golden Lane Estate and have also been spotted in Bunhill Fields, although they did not appear for the Birdwatch. This suggests there may be an expansion of numbers and territory.
- A juvenile Blackbird was seen begging food from its parents in Postman's Park, suggesting that some species started breeding around Christmas.
- Increase in birds at gardens where feeders have been installed. This confirms the importance of regular year-round feeding.
- Unexpected fox in St Paul's Churchyard!



Results

The numbers of Blackbirds and Blue tits, always amongst the most frequently observed birds, were top of the table with 40 individuals of each species observed across all the City gardens. Goldfinch numbers were also maintained. 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.

It was disappointing not to see any Greenfinches as they are regularly seen on feeders during the summer and appear to be recovering from the decline caused by trichomonosis that reduced Greenfinch populations throughout the UK.

It was encouraging to see House sparrows in two gardens close to the Fortune park colony. Their recent appearance for the first time in Bunhill Fields and in good numbers in Beech gardens in late summer suggests the population is growing and may be spreading slowly. Starlings also remained elusive, although large flocks of mixed adults and juveniles have been observed in late summer in St Paul's Churchyard.

The 2019/20 winter has been very mild, and this may explain the absence of foreign migrants such as the Redwing or Fieldfare, which have been seen in previous years.

Table 1: 2016 - 2020 Birdwatch results

Note: Counts for 2020 include 23 gardens, 2019 18 gardens, 2018 18 gardens, 2017 19 gardens, 2016 16 gardens and 2015 13 gardens.

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Blackbird	40	29	21	33	17
Blue tit	40	32	16	33	18
Carrion crow	9	6	7	7	7
Chaffinch	1	0	2	3	0
Dunnock	3	3	4	17	3
Goldfinch	29	30	37	29	16
Great tit	20	6	16	14	12
Greenfinch	0	4	4	0	0
House sparrow	8	0	0	3	2
Jay	0	0	1	2	0
Magpie	7	7	3	7	8
Robin	13	17	8	14	11
Starling	0	0	0	0	0
Wagtail, Grey	0	0	0	3	2
Wagtail, Pied	0	0	0	3	0
Woodpigeon	28	15	24	18	23
Wren	6	1	3	2	4
Others (6 species)	10	0	9	3	0
Total species	18	11	18	17	14
Total individuals	214	150	155	191	126

Table 2: Observations from each garden 2018 – 2020** Gardens with feeders*

	2020 species	2020 birds	2019 species	2019 birds	2018 species	2018 birds
Barbican – Wildlife garden*	9	24	7	15	8	17
Barbican - Speed House	7	10	0	0	4	5
Barbican - Thomas More*	7	18	6	24	8	15
Bunhill*	9	14	8	27	10	26
Christchurch Greyfriars	2	2	4	4	2	3
Church Entry*	5	12	1	1	NA	NA
Cleary*	5	10	3	3	3	4
Finsbury Circus	4	9	5	12	5	8
Golden Lane Estate	8	18	NA	NA	5	7
Noble Street	5	6	3	3	2	2
Portsoken	3	5	4	7	2	2
Postman's Park*	6	14	6	17	6	9
Smithfield Rotunda*	4	9	3	5	3	3
St Andrew Holborn	3	7	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Bartholomew the Great	2	2	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Botolph Bishopsgate*	5	14	4	6	3	4
St Dunstan in the East	4	7	6	9	7	10
St Magnus	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	18
St Mary Aldermanbury	4	8	5	6	5	10
St Mary Staining	1	1	0	0	1	1
St Michael Cornhill	0	0	2	2	NA	NA
Seething lane/St Olave's	2	3	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Paul's Cathedral*	7	17	6	9	4	9
25 Cannon St	2	4	NA	NA	NA	NA
Total	18	214	11	150	18	155

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

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Blackheaded gull	1	3	0	1	3
Coot	1	1	2	1	3
Mallard	2	3	5	0	4
Moorhen	2	3	2	3	7
Total species	4	4	3	5	4
Total individuals	6	10	5	10	17

Recommendations:

Regular year-round 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. The increase in the number of species observed in Church Entry, Cleary and Portsoken was marked. In all these gardens regular feeding was either begun late in 2018 or during 2019 and the difference this has made to bird numbers is significant.

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, St Botolph's Bishopsgate and Cleary gardens. It was disappointing to note that bird feeders in St Dunstan's in the East 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 (temporarily decommissioned because of building works), Smithfield and Church Entry gardens. FoCG installed another three feeding cages in 2019 in Postman's Park, Cleary and St Botolph's Bishopsgate together with rodent-proof feed bins and replaced the bird feeders in St Paul's Churchyard. This has resulted in increased bird numbers in these gardens. FoCG has taken over cleaning and maintaining feeding stations from City Gardens staff in all gardens other than St Paul's.

In 2020 FoCG will install a feeding cage at St Dunstan's but it is hoped that this will be maintained by City Gardens staff.

Cover: 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.

The objective 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. The new BAP is in preparation and it is hoped that specific habitat action plans will be developed for all the SLINCs and included in Management Plans for these sites.

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

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 2020, but it is essential that City gardeners keep them clean and topped up with fresh water as part of their regular daily duties.

Log piles: these boost invertebrate populations and are essential in all SINC's and as many other gardens as possible. In 2020 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.