



BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

A Guide to Common Garden Birds

By Endymion Beer

We hope this guide will whet your appetite and encourage you to go out bird watching, to learn more about our British bird life. Among these identification pages you will find bird measurements which are taken from beak to tail.

A useful tip, if you want to study birdlife, is to place your bird table in a position in your garden where you can easily observe from indoors. This is a great way to start watching birds, and by varying the types of food that you put out for the birds you will be able to attract particular types of birds. Why not use these pages as a checklist to help identify the species you see in and around the garden.

If we can do our bit to look after bird life then perhaps we can all play a small part in curbing recent declines in populations. This is a time of habitat loss, persecution and pollution. We know through your letters over the years, that many of you feel you can't make a difference. The truth is, you can. If we each do one small thing to help wildlife each year, all those small victories for Nature will add up. It will count. So whether you put water and food out for the birds, put up a nest box, dig a pond, plant a tree or whatever, if it helps wildlife in any way, it counts.

Chaffinch. (*Fringilla coelebs*)

The chaffinch is most common in parks, gardens, deciduous woodlands, orchards and farmland. They love to inhabit scrub, hedgerows and bushes where they will build their cup shaped nests neatly made of grass, lichens and moss which they then line with hair etc. They'll also use tree forks in which to build their nests.

Since it is mainly the female that incubates the eggs during the breeding season, she needs to have a more subdued plumage, so as to be camouflaged whereas the male is brightly coloured, as illustrated. The wing patterns are the same in both species and this makes identification easy. Chaffinches measure about 6 in. (15 cms).

The chaffinch is present all year but is joined by winter migrants when they tend to flock together with other finches. The alarm call is 'pink-pink-pink' but the song is rather pretty. William Allingham in his charming 'The Lover of Birds' poem interprets the song as; "Sweet, sweet, sweet. Pretty lovely, come and meet me here."



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-July

Eggs: 4-7

Incubation Period: 11-13 days

Fledging Period: 13-14 days

Broods: Normally 2

Greenfinch. (*Carduelis chloris*).

The greenfinch loves to inhabit trees and bushes so may be found almost anywhere although it tends not to dwell in dense woodland. The male greenfinch has olive-green plumage with yellow tail and wing flashes whereas the female is similar but duller coloured helping her to be camouflaged. Males tend to have the brighter coloured plumage in order to attract a mate during the breeding season and this rule applies to many bird species. Greenfinches are about 5 ¾ in. (14.5 cms).

It is possible to find several greenfinch nests in one bush. Nests are bulky cups made of twigs, moss and plant stems. They are then lined with all sorts of items such as roots, feathers, hair etc. Greenfinches are present all year, are sedentary and love to bathe. Their alarm call is 'chi-chi-chi-chi' but the actual song is twittering with 'tew-tew-tew-tew' and 'greeeeee'.



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-July

Eggs: 3-7

Incubation Period: 13-14 days

Fledging Period: 13-14 days

Broods: Normally 2

Wren. (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

The Jenny Wren is present all year round in Britain. Sexes are alike. Birds measure only 3 ¾ in. (9.5cms). It has a hugely loud warning call for such a tiny wee bird. Listen for the aggressive and repetitive 'tit-tit-tit' call. Its song is a harsh warble lasting for five seconds and then repeated at intervals. During the winter wrens lose their body heat rapidly and therefore will often roost together to keep warm. Remember an odd nest box left up occasionally during the winter months will often be used for roosting. It is not unusual for several wrens to cuddle up together in one box during cold times.

The male bird builds two or three ball-shaped nests for the female to inspect. She decides which one she likes best and will then proceed to line the chosen nest ready for egg laying. The wren is a mouse-like little bird for it scurries here and there hiding in ivy leaves and picking up insects in all sorts of hideaway places.

Wordsworth writes about the wren's song in Book II of The Prelude. Whilst most people find the wrens song a little harsh, he favoured its song and celebrates it in his writing.



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-August

Eggs: 6-7

Incubation Period: 14-15 days

Fledging Period: 16-18 days

Broods: Normally 2

Great Tit. (*Parus major*)

The great tit is the largest of the tit family. The name 'tit' derives from tittir an Icelandic word meaning small. It also comes from 'Titmouse', 'mouse' deriving from the Old English mase, a word used for a small bird. It is a species seen all year round in the British Isles, though rarely seen in Shetland and Orkney. Readily takes to nest boxes, bird food tables and coconut halves hung for them to peck. In the wild its diet is varied for it will take spiders and other insects, fruits, seeds and berries spring buds, scraps and bird food specially put out for it.

Although the great tit has a variety of calls, probably the best known is 'tee-cher, tee-cher' which is fun for youngsters to learn, and 'pee-too, pee-too' repeated over and over. Its nest is made of moss, grass and lined with hair or down. Since the great tit likes to nest in holes usually, walls, tree holes, even drainpipes etc will be considered as suitable nesting sites which is why they so readily take to nest boxes.

Adult females are slightly duller in colour than the males. The black belly stripe of the female being less extensive. Birds measure 5 ½ in. (14 cms).



Facts.

Breeding Period: May-June

Eggs: 8-14

Incubation Period: 13-14 days

Fledging Period: 18-20 days

Broods: Normally 1

Coal Tit. (*Parus ater*)

Whilst there is a willow tit and a marsh tit, the coal tit is a little brown tit species that has a distinctive white nape. Sexes are alike. Birds measure 4 ½ in. (12 cms). It is in fact the smallest of the seven breeding tit species in Britain, an inch smaller than the long tailed tit! They enjoy picking off insects beneath tree bark and nesting in tree holes. The coal tit will take a variety of insects including larvae and eggs. It will also take beech mast, seeds, nut kernels, suet from bird tables etc.

Both adult birds build the nest of a neat cup consisting of moss, hair and lined with feathers. The male will feed the female whilst she is dealing with the incubation of eggs but both parents feed the nestlings. Coal tits enjoy coniferous woodlands as well as broadleaved woodlands and will be found in suburban gardens, churchyards, parks etc. Thankfully it is one of the bird species that is doing quite well.



Facts.

Breeding Period: May-June

Eggs: 7-12

Incubation Period: 14-16 days

Fledging Period: 16-17 days

Broods: Normally 1

Blue Tit. (*Parus caeruleus*)

The blue tit feeds in the tops of trees and inhabits woodlands although it will visit gardens, bird food tables and eagerly occupy nest boxes since they naturally nest in tree holes and nest boxes provide a good substitute for those. Sexes are alike. Birds measure 4 ½ in. (12 cms).

They are present throughout the year. Blue tits are acrobatic and will happily peck the tops of milk bottles for a tasty treat of creamy milk.

The blue tit is quite noisy and its call consists of two or three notes followed by a rapid trill. 'Tee-tee-tee-tississississisi'. I think it sounds a bit like a bicycle pump on the go.



Facts.

Breeding period: May-June

Eggs: 7-14

Incubation period: 13-15 days

Fledging period: 15-21 days

Broods: Normally 1

House Sparrow. (*Passer domesticus*)

The female house sparrow is a softer brown than the male. She also lacks the black bib and grey crown. Sparrows measure 5 ¾ ins (14.5cms).

House sparrows are present all year in the British Isles but its populations have declined in recent years. One of the causes possibly being modern day house improvements that allow no access for sparrows to nest. By erecting a nest box or two outside ones property we could help to rectify this problem, especially if there are no secluded hedges in ones garden. In the wild, away from human inhabitation house sparrows will nest in ivy-clad trees and in hedgerows. Like a lot of our garden birds, sparrows will take readily to bird baths and in the summer they like to dust bathe.

Whilst sparrows will build nests in holes in trees and buildings, their more natural hedgerow habitat finds them building domed shaped nests of straw and feathers. It has also been noted that sparrows will sometimes use the nests of other birds even to the point of evicting the rightful owners. 'Chee-ip' and 'chissup' are the sparrows more usual calls which tend to be constantly repeated.



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-Aug

Eggs: 4-8

Incubation Period: 12-13 days

Fledging Period: 13-14 days

Broods: Normally 2-3

Dunnock. (*Prunella modularis*)

It was Linnaeus who gave the Dunnock the name Accentor which means 'one who sings with another'.

The Dunnock is no relation whatsoever to sparrows despite it having been known as the 'Hedge Sparrow' over the years. The distribution of the dunnock is widespread all over Britain. It inhabits woodlands, gardens and most places where scrub and bushes can be found. Sexes are alike. Birds measure 5 ¾ in. (14.5 cms).

Both adult birds build the nest which is usually situated in a hedge or bush. The nest is made of twigs, leaves, plant rootlets and moss. It is then lined with feathers, hair, wool etc. The dunnock likes to eat insects mostly but will take plant food during the winter. As it is mainly a ground feeder it will take food from bird tables which has fallen to the floor. Look for the characteristic way in which they hop along the ground with one leg in front of the other and with bent legs.

Chaucer made notes on how the cuckoo uses the dunnock to rear its young. Cuckoos which use dunnocks in this way can imitate the colour of the dunnock eggs whereas other cuckoos which may use another species of bird, say a meadow pipit, will imitate the colour of the meadow pipit eggs. Chaucer refers to the Dunnock as Hegebugge which means 'flutterer in the hedges'. Hegebugge is the Old English name for Dunnock/Hedge Sparrow.



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-September

Eggs: 4-6

Incubation Period: 12-14 days

Fledging Period: 12-13 days

Broods: Normally 3

Starling. (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

The starling is probably best loved for its beautiful aerial displays before winter roosting. Large flocks gather to perform what can be described as a rainstorm cloud dance in flight before settling for the night. Present all year round in the British Isles but its numbers increase in winter when migrants arrive from the Continent for our mild climate.

Starlings prefer to nest in tree holes, especially old woodpecker nest sites, and holes in cliffs or walls are also used. Old chimneys that aren't being used and similar habitats make ideal nesting sites for the starling too. Starlings will take to nest boxes if the hole is big enough. Males usually begin the nest building before taking a mate. Sexes are alike. They measure 8 ½ ins (22cms).

The starling is an opportunist and an extremely clever mimic. It will even imitate a telephone ringing which can have one running about all day! It will copy the calls of other birds and confuse bird watchers too.

Pied Wagtail. (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*.)

The Pied Wagtail can be commonly found running about urban areas, bobbing its tail up and down, hence its rather apt name of 'wagtail'. It loves water and can be found near reservoirs, ponds and streams. Puddles are also favoured. The pied wagtail has a wide distribution across the British Isles and it isn't too difficult to spot them bobbing along. The diet of the Pied Wagtail consists mainly of flies and other insects. It has a wide variety of nesting habitats available as it will nest in creepers, or hidey-holes in stream banks, trees, cliffs and buildings.

The Pied Wagtail is present in Britain all year although some birds may migrate to Europe in the winter. Sexes are alike. Wagtails measure 7 ins (18cms).

Robin. (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Britain's National bird. Probably Britain's favourite bird since it takes pests from the garden and becomes tame to the point of feeding from our hands if encouraged. Sexes are alike. They measure 5 ½ in. (14cm). During the breeding season robins become increasingly aggressive, guarding their territory from other robins. The rest of the time, say during the winter, arguments and aggression seems to occur more when food is short.

It is the female that builds the nest, which may be situated in wall crevices, banks, in thick ivy, a garden shed or strange nooks including items such as a discarded teapot for example. The alarm call is a loud 'tic-tic' and its song is an endearing warbling, which consists of short phases. The robin is present all year round in Britain.

The Anglo-Saxon name for the Robin was Rudduc owing to the Robin's ruddy colouration of its breast. To harm a robin will bring intensely bad luck since it is said the robin acquired its red breast by being scorched as it took water to the suffering souls of purgatory. Another tale is that it was stained with Christ's blood as it tried to pull the thorns from the Holy Crown of Thorns when Jesus was nailed to the cross. This may explain why there are so many robins on Christmas cards.

The ballad 'Who Killed Cock Robin' was first published in 1744 and Drayton in 1604 referred to the robin in his work 'The Owle'.



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-Aug.

Eggs: 4-7

Incubation Period: 11-13 days

Fledging Period: 20-22 days

Broods: Normally 2



Facts.

Breeding Period: March to Sept.

Eggs: 5-6

Incubation: 13-14 days.

Fledging: 14-16 days.

Broods: 2 or 3



Facts.

Breeding Period: April-July

Eggs: 6-7

Incubation Period: 13-14 days

Fledging Period: 12-14 days

Broods: Normally 2

Song Thrush. (*Turdus philomelos*)

The song thrush loves to smash open snails to eat by thrusting them onto a particular stone it has selected as its 'anvil'. Look for broken snail shells around such a stone as signs of song thrush activity. Sexes are alike and measure 9 in. (23 cms). Its alarm call is 'tchuck-tchuck-tchuck' repeated again and again. Its song is delivered from a perch high in tree tops usually and isn't restricted to the breeding season.

Whilst the song thrush is a resident species it is also a partial migrant since, it may move to lower ground for winter, whereas others will fly to southern Europe but some will not move at all choosing to remain with us. The nest is made by the female and consists of dried grass and twigs which is then lined with wood pulp or mud.



Facts.

Breeding Period: March-Sept.

Eggs: 4-6

Incubation Period: 13-14 days

Fledging Period: 12-16 days

Broods: Normally 3

Blackbird. (*Turdus merula*)

Generally speaking female blackbirds are a lovely brown colour whereas males are black. Birds measure 10 in. (25cms) During the breeding season the male acquires a golden bill and eye rings. Youngsters often confuse those who have just begun bird watching for they are brown and very speckled until they acquire adult plumage. Blackbirds have a beautiful melodious warbling song during the breeding season. The alarm call however, is a sharp, 'pink-pink-pink-pink'.

Blackbirds eat worms, insects and various fruits mainly. The female does most of the nest building which consists of a cup of dried grasses, moss, twigs and roots and lined with dried grass and mud. Too big for nest boxes, they build their nests in shrubbery, trees etc. Perhaps blackbirds would take to nest boxes if we made them big enough, since we have them nesting in sheds and hides in our Sanctuary. Could prove a fun experiment for a school project perhaps.

There is some beautiful folklore relating to the blackbird, far too much to include here. One story is about St. Kevin, an Irish 7th century Saint who loved wildlife. In the temple of the rock at Glendalough one day, St. Kevin was praying with his hand outstretched upwards when a blackbird flew down and laid her eggs in his palm. The story goes on to say that the saint remained still for as long as it took for the eggs to hatch and the brood to be fledged!

In The Spectator, Joseph Addison (18th Century) writes; "I value my garden more for being full of blackbirds than of cherries, and very frankly give them fruits for their songs."



Facts.

Breeding Period: March-Sept.

Eggs: 4-6

Incubation Period: 13-14 days

Fledging Period: 12-19 days

Broods: Normally 3

Collared Dove. (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

The collared dove is a lovely gentle bird that will become quite tame if taking up residence in ones garden and encouraged. Like the robin, the collared dove responds to kindness and will soon become a friend. It has been nesting in Britain since 1955. It is present all year round in Britain and is now widespread. Sexes are alike. They are about 12 ½ ins (32cms) not quite as big as the wood pigeon but considerably larger than our song birds. Their distinctive black collar makes them easily recognisable from other doves.

Their call is 'cooo-cooooo-coo', which is repeated frequently and regularly. They have a platform style nest consisting of twigs and roots, which unfortunately makes it easy for magpies and squirrels to steal the eggs. Occasionally eggs will be found smashed on the ground, these are white in colour.



Facts.

Breeding Period: March-October

Eggs: 2

Incubation Period: 14-16 days

Fledging Period: 18-20 days

Broods: Normally 3

Bullfinch. (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)

The bullfinch males are brightly pink fronted, as illustrated but the females have a rich chestnut-buff front. Their black heads and white rumps with wing bars visible during flight make them easily identifiable from a distance. Birds measure 6 in. (15cms). The bullfinch is present all year throughout the British Isles but it is absent from the extreme north and north-west. Whilst all finches tend to be seed eaters mainly with insects taken particularly during the breeding season, the bullfinch does have a tendency to devour buds from fruit trees and bushes. This gives rise to its local Devon name of 'bud picker'. Although many people see bullfinches all the time in their gardens others may never see a bullfinch, it all depends on where you live in terms of the right habitat availability.

The bullfinch has a soft 'dew-dew-dew' call. During hot weather bullfinches will be seen bathing in birdbaths or shallow streams. Its nest varies from a bulky nest to a shallow platform made of fine twigs, moss and lichen. It lines its nest with dark coloured rootlets.

The first record we have of bullfinches is accounted for in Chaucer's 'The Romaunt of the Rose'. Here they were referred to as 'Alpes', the oldest name we know for bullfinches. These along with other birds were included as filling the air of a May morning with 'the sweetness of hir and melodye.' Chaucer's poem describes the many fruit trees growing here and ash trees which would have provided plenty of seeds for 'Alpes' in the Romaunt garden.

Goldfinch. (*Carduelis carduelis*)

The goldfinch is a handsome bird and a favourite of many of us. Goldfinches are chiefly seed eaters but they also supplement their diet with insects. Seen often on plants such as teasel, groundsel and thistles picking off the seeds, they have become the subject of many an artists autumnal paintings.

Goldfinches inhabit open areas with scattered trees such as farmland, waste ground and gardens, depending on where you live, but that is the case with many bird species. A wooded or enclosed garden may never see a goldfinch for they do enjoy the open countryside where their favourite plants grow to provide them with seeds to eat once ripe. Nests are usually built in the upper branches of small trees. The nest will be well hidden and consists of a neatly woven cup of thistle down and plant material made by the female. Sexes are alike and flocks of goldfinches are often seen in winter when they feed together but also in summer time when they like to bathe together. The goldfinch measures 4 ¾ in. (12 cms).

There was once a craze for keeping goldfinches as caged birds because they were so pretty. It was the RSPB, formerly The Society for the Protection of Birds, which did something about this since although there was a Birds Act of 1880, it was actually being ignored!



Facts.

Breeding Period: May-Aug
Eggs: 4-7
Incubation Period: 12-14 days
Fledging Period: 12-16 days
Broods: Normally 2



Facts.

Breeding Period: May-Aug
Eggs: 4-6
Incubation Period: 12-13 days
Fledging Period: 13-14 days
Broods: Normally 2