

Brent Birders Garden Bird Survey (BBGBS)

2019/20 REPORT

Brent Birders



*Two rare birds in South Brent gardens only one of which was captured by the BBGBS. **Common Rosefinch** (left), Avon Close, November 2019 (John Day) and **'Italian' Sparrow**, Hillside, January 2020 (Steve Hopper).*

The BBGBS was launched in October 2018 as a supplement to the on-going Parish Bird Survey (SBPBS), which covers the whole of South Brent parish, but now just in January and May each year. The Garden Bird Survey has two aims:

1. To encourage more people to become involved in recording birds, and then perhaps other wildlife groups in the parish.
2. To find out more about the birds using houses and gardens in the parish.

A total of 20 people participated in the 2019/20 winter, mostly for all seven months of the October–April period. This compares to 30 in the 2018/19 winter. Most of those participating in 2019/20 also participated in the previous winter, but there were three newcomers, and almost half of those participating in 2018/19 did not continue for a second winter – for reasons unknown. Nevertheless, the survey has again added to our knowledge of garden birds in the parish, and this brief report summarises the main findings. Results for each garden are given in Appendix 1.

The survey

All those on the Brent Birders mailing list were invited to participate in the survey, and others were persuaded through personal contact, but there was no attempt to publicise the survey more widely through the Parish and Sustainable South Brent newsletters, as this approach produced virtually no new recruits when used in the previous winter. Thus the gardens surveyed are just those belonging to people willing to participate in the survey, and it is not known how representative they are of all South Brent parish gardens.

Participation in the survey involved recording the species seen or heard within each garden (generally excluding birds flying over) each month from October to April inclusive. Recording involved either noting presence or providing a count of the maximum number of individuals seen together at any one time during the month.

The gardens

A garden was defined as the area of land adjacent to, and including, a dwelling. All but one of the 20 gardens were within the South Brent Parish Bird Survey area and located in 10 different 1-km squares. Information was provided by recorders on most of the gardens, including comments on factors likely to be favourable or

unfavourable to birds, but this has not been incorporated into the present analysis. Eleven of the gardens were within the four 1-km squares comprising South Brent village, the remaining nine being scattered in more rural situations, the hamlets.

The species

Table 1. The percentage of gardens in which each species was recorded during the 2019/20 and 2018/19 winters. Species are ranked in terms of occurrence in 2019/20. Those in red are on the national Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern <https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/psob>.

	2019/20	2018/19		2019/20	2018/19
Blackbird	100	100	Marsh Tit	40	20
Blue Tit	100	97	Tawny Owl	40	40
Chaffinch	100	93	Chiffchaff	35	30
Coal Tit	100	90	Grey Wagtail	35	10
Great Tit	100	90	Herring Gull	35	30
Magpie	100	97	Swallow	35	17
Jackdaw	96	97	Treecreeper	35	30
Dunnock	95	87	Mistle Thrush	30	30
Goldfinch	95	83	Redwing	30	23
Robin	95	97	Siskin	30	37
Woodpigeon	95	93	Green Woodpecker	25	27
Wren	95	97	Pheasant	25	23
Long-tailed Tit	90	87	Grey Heron	15	20
Collared Dove	85	87	Reed Bunting	15	7
House Sparrow	85	90	Yellowhammer	15	17
Nuthatch	85	80	Stock Dove	15	7
Jay	80	57	Firecrest	15	0
Bullfinch	75	70	Fieldfare	10	10
G S Woodpecker	75	80	Raven	10	7
Greenfinch	70	70	Mallard	10	7
Song Thrush	65	70	Brambling	5	13
Pied Wagtail	60	77	House Martin	5	7
Rook	60	57	Little Owl	5	7
Starling	60	63	Black Redstart	5	0
Carrion Crow	50	47	Willow Warbler	5	0
Sparrowhawk	50	47	Meadow Pipit	5	3
Blackcap	40	53	'Italian' Sparrow	5	0
Buzzard	40	20			
Goldcrest	40	20			

The total number of species recorded during the whole period was 63. The maximum number of species recorded from any one garden was 58, and the average (mean) per garden was 29. The equivalent figures for 2018/19 were 61, 52 and 26. Most of the species recorded are listed in Table 1, ranked in terms of the percentage of gardens in which they occurred overall in 2019/20. Other species, occurring in only a single garden and not typical garden species, were **Barn Owl**, **Canada Goose**, **Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, **Kestrel**, **Peregrine** and **Red Kite**. Some of these were just passing through, but the **Peregrine** took a swipe at a flock of

domestic pigeons on more than one occasion, and **Barn Owl** and **Kestrel** were recorded in the vicinity of the garden over several months.

Among those listed in Table 1, six species were recorded on at least one occasion in all 20 gardens, and 26 occurred in at least half of the gardens. Only **Blue Tit** occurred in every garden in every month (scoring 130 in the ‘number of records’ column in Appendix 1), but **Blackbird** was a close second with 128. Species found in the most gardens, tended to have the most records, but there is some variation. For example, **Wren** was found in almost all gardens, but the number of records was only 92, indicated that it was not recorded in some months in at least some gardens. At the other extreme, there were several species with a score of only one, often resulting from occurrence in one garden on a single day – the survey rarities. (Ironically, the rarest bird recorded in South Brent parish during the winter was seen on a garden feeder, but not in a garden included in the survey. The bird was a **Common Rosefinch** (though far from common in Britain), a new species for the parish and only the third Dartmoor record. It was seen for just a few minutes on 19 November near Sanderspool.).

Among the other more unusual species, pride of place must go to the male **‘Italian’ Sparrow** which turned up in Steve Hopper’s Hillside garden and remained there until at least early May, with a brief appearance in one other nearby garden (not in the survey). True Italian Sparrows are considered to be hybrids between House and Spanish Sparrows and have not officially been recorded in the British Isles. It is possible that the Brent bird, and a similar one in East Devon a few years ago, are aberrant House Sparrows, but they look exactly like Italian Sparrows. Other species of note included: **Black Redstart** in a Clobells garden on 3 November; **Brambling** at Aish in November; **Firecrest** at Moorland Park in October and March, Clobells in November and Avonwick in March; **Reed Bunting**, one or two in three Village gardens all during January–March; **Willow Warbler** at Didworthy in April; and **Yellowhammer** from December to February at Didworthy with a max of eight, and also singles at Hillside in February and Lower Green in March.

Comparison with the previous winter

Data for the 2018/19 winter are also included in Table 1. At least 12 gardens were surveyed in both years, and any comparative analysis should ideally be based just on these, but this would reduce the small sample size still further. Essentially the two winters have much in common. In general, and not surprisingly, the same species are at the top and bottom and for most species there are only a few % points differences in their occurrence. However, several species were recorded in 2019/20 but not in 2018/19 (**Black Redstart**, **Firecrest**, **‘Italian’ Sparrow** and **Willow Warbler**) and **Lesser Redpoll** was recorded in 2018/19 but not in 2019/20. Among the species occurring in both winters, the largest differences were:

- Higher in 2019/20: **Grey Wagtail**, **Jay**, **Buzzard**, **Goldcrest**, **Marsh Tit**, **Swallow** and **Goldfinch**.
- Higher in 2018/19: **Brambling**, **Blackcap** and **Pied Wagtail**.

However, care is needed when comparing % occurrence when sample size differs in two sets of data. The largest increase was for **Grey Wagtail**, which occurred in seven out of 20 gardens compared to only three out of 30, and this looks like a real increase, but **Goldfinch** actually occurred in more gardens in 2018/19 (25) than in 2019/20 (19) even though % occurrence was lower. The largest decrease in occurrence was for **Pied Wagtail** dropped from 77% (23 gardens) to 60% (12). None of the red-listed species showed more than a slight decrease.

Maximum counts

Table 2. Maximum counts of five flocking species in those gardens where counted, with average (mean) count for each species. Recorders identified by surname abbreviations. Max count for each species in bold. P = present but not counted.

Recorder	Ck	Fe	Go	Hp	Pl	Cy	De	Ga	Ha	He	Ma	Pa	Re	Ro	Se	Wi	MEAN
Chaffinch	2	4	6	37	1	16	10	14	4	1	16	6	5	10	2	24	9.4
Goldfinch	2	15	7	42	2	6	4	10		4	6	8	2	14	3	30	9.2
House Sparrow	10	6	10	28	10	7		7		P	8	10	3	30	2	P	8.3
Long-tailed Tit	4	6	6	11	8	9	11	5	9		7	6	11	4	6	P	6.4
Greenfinch	2	1	3	9				3	2	P	6	6	8	3		12	3.3

The maximum counts recorded for each species are shown in Appendix 1. The highest counts were of gatherings of roosting birds, including **Starling** (80 in Clobells) and **Jackdaw** (100 at Avonwick), or of migrants, notably **Redwing** (100 at Hillside). Feeding birds, usually on feeders, occurred in lower numbers, but double-figure counts occurred in several gardens though in most gardens the counts were lower and the mean counts <10 (Table 2). The main species involved were **Goldfinch**, **Chaffinch** and **House Sparrow**.

Differences between gardens

Although there were broad similarities between the gardens in terms of the species recorded, Appendix 1 shows that no two gardens were the same. Some clearly attract more species, and in larger numbers than others, and clearly most species only appear to visit certain gardens (or are only *seen or heard* in those gardens!). In terms of what makes a garden attractive, recorders mentioned the importance of feeders (number, and quantity and variety of food), trees and shrubs providing cover and sources of natural food, availability of water, the presence of adjacent woodland and overall variety of habitats. Unfavourable features are the opposite of the above, including loss of adjacent good habitat, plus the presence of (neighbours') cats, grey squirrels and brown rats (the latter having an influence on whether or not food is put out).

Because of the limited amount of information available for each garden and the small sample size, the only analysis carried out in 2018/19 was to compare the species occurring in village and hamlet gardens. The nine Hamlet gardens comprised those at Aish, Avonwick, Didworthy, Glaze Valley and White Oxen, the remaining 11 being scattered around the village. (Note that Avonwick is hardly a hamlet, and that a garden on the edge of the village may be more rural than one in the centre of Avonwick!) While there was little difference for most species, some occurred much more frequently in village gardens, and others in hamlet gardens. The results are reproduced in Table 3 along with data from 2019/20 to see if the differences persisted. The differences identified in the previous winter have mostly persisted, but not for four of the species listed. For **Blackcap** there was no difference in 2019/20, probably reflecting a lower occurrence of wintering birds in village gardens. For **Chiffchaff**, **Sparrowhawk** and **Yellowhammer**, the differences found in 2018/19 are reversed, but numbers are very small, and if data from the two winters are added together, the original differences still hold. It still seems that some species are either more, or less, likely to occur in village gardens than in those in more rural situations.

Table 3. Occurrence of the species showing largest differences between Village and Hamlets in 2018/19.

Number of gardens in bold for 2019/20 and in parentheses for 2018/19.

	VILLAGE	HAMLETS
<i>Number of gardens</i>	11 (16)	9 (14)
Species occurring more in Village in 2018/19		
Blackcap	4 (11)	4 (5)
Bullfinch	10 (14)	5 (7)
Chiffchaff	3 (7)	4 (2)
Goldcrest	5 (5)	3 (1)
Greenfinch	9 (14)	5 (7)
Herring Gull	5 (8)	2 (1)
House Sparrow	11 (16)	6 (11)
Reed Bunting	3 (2)	0 (0)
Rook	8 (12)	4 (5)
Sparrowhawk	4 (10)	6 (4)
Starling	9 (14)	3 (5)
Species occurring more in Hamlets in 2018/19		
Brambling	0 (1)	1 (3)
Green Woodpecker	2 (2)	3 (6)
Marsh Tit	3 (1)	5 (5)
Pheasant	1 (1)	4 (6)
Yellowhammer	2 (1)	1 (4)

Discussion

The 2019/20 BBGBS has not resulted in a large increase in participation. We have failed in our first aim. However, the survey has added to our knowledge of the distribution and occurrence of garden birds in the parish, even though most conclusions are tentative because of a) the small number of gardens involved, b) the fact that they were not randomly selected and c) the absence of statistical analysis. Although differences were found in the occurrence of some species between the two years, most showed no obvious changes. It may be worth trying to repeat the survey, perhaps every five years, but especially with the low level of participation, it is not recommended that the survey becomes an annual event. However, anyone keen to continue recording birds in their garden may be interested in joining the BTO Garden BirdWatch <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw>

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Rita Pay, May 2020

Appendix 1. The occurrence of species in South Brent gardens October–April 2019/20, given by the number of months each species was recorded in each garden. Also shown are the abbreviated surnames of recorders, locations of gardens, total numbers of species in each garden, number of gardens and records and maximum count for each species. Species in **blue** are additional to those included on the recording form.

Recorder	Go	Pa	St	Wi	Hi	Pl	Ro	Ga	Re	Fe	Hp	Ma	Ck	He	Se	Br	Cy	De	Ha	An	Number of records	Number of gardens	Maximum count
Location	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Aish	Village	Village	Village	Village	Avonwick	Avonwick	Avonwick	Didworthy	Didworthy	Glaze Valley	Glaze Valley	White Oxen			
1-km square	6959	6959	6959	6959	7059	7059	7059	6960	6960	7060	7060	7060	7158	7158	7157	6861	6862	6859	6859	7261			
Number of months	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	4	7	130	20	
Blackbird	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	4	7	6	7	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	4	7	128	20	18
Blackcap	1	4		1							1					1	1	2		2	13	8	1
Blue Tit	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	4	7	130	20	15
Brambling								1													1	1	1
Bullfinch	4		2	3	4	1	5	3	3	3	7	5	4					2	2	7	55	15	7
Buzzard		1									7	1			4	7	3	2		7	32	8	8
Carrion Crow				2	3	1	1				7					2	3	7	4	7	37	10	6
Chaffinch	6	7	5	7	4	4	7	5	7	3	7	7	4	6	2	7	7	7	4	7	113	20	37
Chiffchaff	1					1					3			1			1	2		1	10	7	2
Coal Tit	4	7	6	5	2	3	7	4	7	4	7	3	4	5	7	7	7	7	4	7	107	20	6
Collared Dove	6	7	7	7	4	7	7	4	6	5	7	6	3	3		3	7			2	91	17	5
Dunnock	7	7	4	3	3	7	7	5	7		7	4	4	5	7	7	7	7	4	7	109	19	5

Continued/

Appendix 1. (continued)

Recorder	Go	Pa	St	Wi	Hi	Pl	Ro	Ga	Re	Fe	Hp	Ma	Ck	He	Se	Br	Cy	De	Ha	An			
Location	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Aish	Village	Village	Village	Village	Avonwick	Avonwick	Avonwick	Didworthy	Didworthy	Glaze Valley	Glaze Valley	White Oxen	Number of records	Number of gardens	Maximum count
1-km square	6959	6959	6959	6959	7059	7059	7059	6960	6960	7060	7060	7060	7158	7158	7157	6861	6862	6859	6859	7261			
Fieldfare									1		3										4	2	25
Goldcrest	4	1				1			2		1				1	2		1			13	8	2
Goldfinch	7	7	2	7	2	3	7	5	3	7	7	7	3	5	1	2	7	5		7	94	19	42
Great Tit	7	7	7	5	2	7	7	5	6	5	7	4	4	5	7	7	7	7	4	7	117	20	11
G S Woodpecker		1	4	4				6	4	3		6	4	3		7	7	7	7	4	74	15	3
Greenfinch	6	7	3	7				5	3	5	2	7	6	2	2				2	1	58	14	12
Green Woodpecker					1							7		2				3			16	5	2
Grey Heron		1										4				3					8	3	1
Grey Wagtail				2					1		3	2			1			3		7	19	7	1
Herring Gull	2					1			4	1	7				1		3				19	7	58
House Martin											1										1	1	1
House Sparrow	7	7	7	2	5	7	7	5	7	7	7	6	4	7	1		7			3	96	17	30
Jackdaw	7	7	7	7		7	2	5	7	1	7	7	4	2	5	7	5	7	4	7	105	19	100
Jay		3	1	3	2		2	2	2		7	3	1		6	7	7	7	2	7	62	16	5
Little Owl											1										1	1	1
Long-tailed Tit	6	7	7	7		2	4	3	7	3	7	7	3		6	7	7	7	4	7	101	18	11
Magpie	1	7	7	7	1	3	4	5	6	4	7	5	4	7	5	7	7	7	4	7	105	20	6
Marsh Tit				1	1				1								7	5	7	4	27	8	2
Mistle Thrush											6		1			7	4	2	1		21	6	2
Nuthatch		7	1	5			7	4	5	4	7	4	4	2	2	7	7	7	4	7	84	17	4
Pheasant											1		2		6	1				2	12	5	4
Pied Wagtail	5			2		3			1	3	7	6	2	1		1	3	5			39	12	15
Redwing		1			3				1		7					1		4			17	6	100
Reed Bunting										1	3	2									6	3	2
Robin	7	3	7	7		7	7	5	7	5	7	6	4	7	7	7	7	7	4	7	118	19	9
Rook	2	3		7	5	3			3		7	4	4	1		6	7				52	12	12
Siskin		2									5	1				1	1			5	15	6	10
Song Thrush	4		2	2		1			5	1	6	1	2			7	4	4		1	40	13	3
Sparrowhawk		3	2			1					7		1			1	5	5	1	7	33	10	2
Starling	6	7	7	1		7	7	2		1	6	3	1	7							55	12	80
Swallow		1		1	3			1			1						1			1	9	7	13
Tawny Owl	1	1				1					7					7	1	7	2		27	8	4
Treecreeper											1	1	2			3	6	4	3		20	7	2
Woodpigeon	4	7	3	7	4	7	4	5	7	5	7	6	4		4	7	5	7	4	7	104	19	24
Wren	6	7	5	3	3	5		4	5	2	7	5	4	4	3	7	6	7	2	7	92	19	3
Yellowhammer							1				1					3					5	3	3
Black Redstart					1																1	1	1
Firecrest	1								2						1						4	3	1
'Italian' Sparrow											4										4	1	1
Mallard											3						1				4	2	4
Meadow Pipit											2										2	1	5
Raven											7							7			14	2	4
Stock Dove											6					3	2				11	3	8
Willow Warbler																	1				1	1	1
TOTAL SPECIES	27	30	23	29	21	26	22	23	30	22	58	29	29	19	25	34	35	34	23	31			