

## Be one in a million by taking part in the RSPB's big garden birdwatch

The results of the count help us paint a picture of which birds are doing well and which could use a helping hand, writes **Ian McNab**



Our mission at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland is to save nature, but we can't do it alone. We need the support of people from all over the country, which is why we're working hard to help everyone discover the wonders of the natural world. Across everything we do, nothing better encapsulates this crossover between people and nature than the Big Garden Birdwatch.

This annual event is open to everybody across the UK and sees participants count birds in their garden (or other local greenspace) for one hour over a weekend in January, with the results helping to form a nationwide picture of the health of our bird populations. This year, Birdwatch will be running from January 28-30.

From its beginnings as a children's-only event in 1979, Big Garden Birdwatch has grown into the world's largest wildlife survey. In 2021, over 1.5 million birds were counted by almost 80,000 people throughout Scotland, while the UK as a whole saw more than one million participants recording over 17 million birds. To have so many people taking part again this year would be a fantastic result.

As impressive as these numbers are, Big Garden Birdwatch is not just about engagement and having fun (although these are certainly crucial elements) as the results are also vital in our ongoing monitoring and conservation work. They help us paint a picture of which birds are doing well and which could use a helping hand. Even records of our most common garden birds, such as starlings or house sparrows, are incredibly useful, as some of these species have seen long-term declines going back decades.

Participants will need to register for the event ahead of time, which you can do by visiting [rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://rspb.org.uk/birdwatch) or calling 0800 473 0251. After registering, we will provide you with

lots of tips for your count and information on how to identify different birds, so don't worry if you're a complete birding beginner.

But how exactly does one do Big Garden Birdwatch? In short – however you like. Simply find a nice spot such as a garden, local park or even just your window ledge, set aside an hour and count how many birds of each species land in your space in the allotted time. Other steps, such as preparing tea and biscuits, are optional but highly recommended. After that, simply send us your results by February 20 (February 15 for postal submissions) and our counters will get to work.

Once everything has been tallied, we will publish the findings and analyse how they compare to previous years. This is a great opportunity to see how your efforts have contributed to the bigger picture, and how results compare across different parts of the country. There's always an air of excitement to see which species will top the tables. House sparrows have been number one in Scotland for the past few years, with starlings, chaffinches and blue tits battling it out below. Will this be the year one of them knocks house sparrows off their perch?

We are in a nature and climate emergency, with the two issues intrinsically linked, and as we saw during COP26 in Glasgow, joined up action from people across society is crucial in tackling these challenges. Never has this been more evident than on the Global Day of Action, when 100,000 people in Glasgow and many more across the world took to the streets and spoke up for nature and the climate. It is now vital that we build on the momentum of COP26, and as an event which brings people together for nature, Big Garden Birdwatch is our opportunity to do just that. Join us, and be one in a million.

**Ian McNab, Communications Officer, RSPB Scotland**



## Beat the big farmland



The count is means of recording the effect of conservation work by farmers and gamekeepers, says **Dave Parish**

Farmers, gamekeepers and land managers are being urged to get involved in the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) Big Farmland Bird Count from February 4-20 and make a crucial difference for wildlife.

The 2021 GWCT count was record-breaking but the charity is now challenging land managers to do even better and beat that. The latest assessment of the status of the UK's birds, the Birds of Conservation Concern, sadly shows that more than one in four species is in serious trouble but a real, immediate and positive difference can be made by adopting effective conservation measures on farm.

Last year saw the number of Farmland Bird Count returns jump from 1500 to 2500, with counts across a massive 2.5 million acres of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland up from 1.4 million acres in 2020.

In Scotland support for the Big Farmland Bird Count increased by more than 45 per cent in 2021 compared to 2020, and was a massive 125 per cent up from the 2019 count level. Just over 70 per cent of the UK's countryside is looked after by farmers and land managers, many of whom care deeply for the wildlife on their land, so they are in a position to make a real difference. A few small changes, like providing supplementary winter feeding or growing crops specifically to provide seed for birds, can have a significant impact.

For example, the Interreg-funded PARTRIDGE project aims to show how such practices can help biodiversity, and one of the Scottish dem-

onstrations sites, Balgonie, showed an increase in both breeding and wintering birds within a few years of the measures being introduced.

As well as producing climate-friendly food, farmers are also maintaining and protecting the great British countryside, creating habitats for wildlife and feeding farmland birds.

Encouragingly, a total of 25 species from the Red List for Birds of Conservation Concern were recorded in the 2021 survey, with eight appearing on the list of species most frequently seen.

Of these, starlings, fieldfare, lapwing and linnet were the four most often seen red-listed species, with over 112,000 spotted in total, or 22 per cent of all the birds counted. The five most numerous birds counted were woodpigeons, starling, rooks, fieldfare and chaffinch, with 190,000 seen, or over 37 per cent of the total number of birds recorded.

In Scotland the most commonly seen species were blackbirds, recorded by almost 90 per cent of Scottish participants, followed by robins. Pheasant, blue tit and woodpigeon were seen by 70 per cent of the farmers taking part. Blackbirds were also the most commonly seen species in the 2020 count.

The GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count was launched in 2014 and is supported by farming bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to highlight the positive work done by farmers and gamekeepers in helping to reverse the decline in farmland bird numbers.

The count offers a simple means



of recording the effect of any conservation work currently being instigated by farmers and gamekeepers on their land.

The count also gives a vital national snapshot of the health of the UK's birdlife. Those wishing to take part in the Big Farmland Bird Count 2022 will find species guides, including short videos, at [www.bfbc.org.uk](http://www.bfbc.org.uk). To take part: Download your count

## bird count record

sheet from [www.bfbc.org.uk](http://www.bfbc.org.uk) then count your birds! On a day between February 4 and 20, spend about 30 minutes recording the species and number of birds seen on one particular area of the farm. Once you've completed your count, simply submit your results online at [www.bfbc.org.uk](http://www.bfbc.org.uk)

**Dr. Dave Parish, Senior Scientist Scottish Lowland Research, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust**

Blackbirds have ranked top in the Big Farmland Bird Count in Scotland for the past two years. Photo: GWCT



technicians from other universities might be interested in the work we had started. As things turned out, we were overwhelmed with the response. It seemed we had tapped into something and weren't the only ones wishing to make our labs environmentally sustainable. As our journey has evolved, we have shared it with almost 100 different organisations. The virtual world we were forced into by the pandemic ironically helped us reach far greater audiences than would have been possible in person. The obvious appetite for change constantly inspires us to keep going with what can often be a challenging journey. Sharing our story, practices and procedures is so vital if we are to start making a real dent in that figure of 5.5m tonnes.

Although we've been cited as 'pioneers', these issues are of course so

much bigger than one institution. We are always open to considering partnerships with other like-minded lab users. Only together can we overcome the challenges we face which will allow our initiative to be adopted on anything like the scale required. We have also signed up to University College London's 'Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework' tool. This is guiding us in making many other sustainability-linked improvements, including making efficient use of energy, water

and chemicals. Had we known the scale of this we might never have started, but we are so glad we did. Plastic waste volumes here at Edinburgh Napier are relatively small, but having now encouraged many other organisations to consider recycling, who knows how far this journey might take us.

**Lisa McMillan and Jo Brown, from the Technical Team in Edinburgh Napier University's School of Applied Sciences**



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