

Watching birds

Part I – Getting started (or ‘The Starling Safari’)

Now here’s a challenge – where would you go to find dozens of bird species, including some of the most colourful or strange birds around? A rainforest? The African bush? Your back garden?

Why spend a fortune and travel for days to see spectacular wildlife, when you can curl up on a windowsill at home for free and have a parade of birds to gaze at. You’ll find the highly territorial robin, the snail-smashing thrush and the gilt-flecked starling almost everywhere, along with many others. Take a look at the safari on your doorstep - from the comfort of your kitchen!

Feed, house and bathe the birds

The first thing to do is to make sure you have an area that birds can come to in order to feed. This doesn’t have to be a garden; a flat roof or even balcony can do just as well, providing it is not so enclosed that your feathered visitors can’t see danger and escape!

Birds will visit gardens to find natural food such as insects, snails, fruit and worms. However, you will attract a wider range of bird species if you can offer them other food as well, especially in winter when natural food is scarce, or during spring, when adult birds have nests full of hungry mouths to feed. You can do this in two ways – either by improving the natural environment you have to offer, or by offering the birds substitute foods. We’ll go into more detail – including recipes and gardening tips – in the next part of this series.

One thing that all birds will appreciate is a supply of fresh water to drink and bathe in. This needn’t be a huge pond – in fact, a shallow wide dish of water that you can clean and fill up every day is probably the best thing to use. In this way the water will be fresh enough to drink and shallow enough for birds to bathe in without drowning. Put the water in an open area so that bathing birds can see any danger (such as cats) approaching and get airborne to escape. If the dish is more than 2 cm deep, you could put a small piece of tile or a rock in the middle of the dish for birds to sit on while drinking. All birds, but especially seed-eaters, need to drink at least twice a day and their antics at bath time will keep you amused for ages!

Nest boxes can also be attractive to some of the smaller birds such as robins and sparrows. Make sure you make or buy a good, water-tight box without toxic preservatives painted onto it. For small birds, a one inch hole is big enough to make them feel secure and prevent larger birds and animals getting in. Where the box is placed can also help encourage birds to use it; many of the smaller birds prefer to be secluded while they have young in the nest, so put the box amongst creepers or high in a tree. Try to make sure the box is not easily reachable by neighbourhood cats either! If in doubt about the safety of the box, you can enclose it in another box made of wire mesh, which the small adult birds will be able to get in and out of.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has plenty of advice about feeding, water and nest boxes on their site – it is well worth a visit. They also publish a booklet summarising the things you can do to turn your back garden, flat roof or even balcony into a bird paradise. Follow this link to order the FREE booklet.

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/gardens/booklet/>

However, no matter what you offer the local bird population, don't forget that it will take some time for your potential visitors to become used to the changes. Some of the more rowdy species such as house sparrows and starlings will begin to use your feeding stations – and the bath – almost immediately, but other species can be shy and might take a bit longer to feel at home. Don't despair. Keep on putting out food, topping up your water dishes and gradually the local birds will accept that this is not a trap and begin to visit more regularly. Then you can get spotting!

Find a good observation point

This is the easy part. Most of the birds that will visit your garden are day birds with good eyesight. They rely on this to keep them safe, and any movement that they spot will normally send a flock of birds scurrying for the nearest tree. So you will need to choose a spot to watch your birds from that gives you a good field of view, but isn't going to scare off the birds you are trying to watch!

If you go to a nature reserve to watch birds, you would normally sit in something called a hide. This is something between a small tent and a hut that bird watchers can sit in while nearby birds continue with their normal lives undisturbed. Holes in the sides of the hide allow you to see the birds and use cameras, binoculars and other equipment.

If you have only just begun to feed birds in your garden, then they will be a bit suspicious for a while. They will appreciate the food, but the new surroundings will make them wary as each unfamiliar bush or open door could contain a predator. During this familiarisation period, loud noises or sudden movements will scare the birds into flying away and may make them reluctant to come back. On the other hand, over time the birds will become used to the normal sounds of running water, voices, hovering and so on that they can hear as they feed. It can help if you stick to a routine that the birds can become used to – always feed at roughly the same time and hang feeders in more or less the same places for example. If you can avoid making loud noises or running into the garden while birds are feeding, they will soon relax and reward your patience by displaying their normal behaviour of feeding, socialising, fighting and displaying to each other.

Getting ready for action

In order to watch birds, you will need no special equipment at all – once you have put the food out that is! However, once you begin to get into it, you might want to keep an eye out for birds flying overhead or take a closer look at those landing in your garden. You might want to take notes or even photographs to provide a record of your visitors. You might need to get hold of identification guides as you attract more unusual species of birds to your garden feast. If you are really keen, you might even want to record the noises each bird makes.

Although you can start with no equipment at all, even getting the equipment to watch, identify and record the birds in your garden need not be expensive.

Binoculars

- Before you buy, why not borrow a pair of binoculars from a friend. It can take a bit of time to get used to using them, so practice before you buy.
- The first binoculars you buy don't need to be expensive – even cheap binoculars are better than the human eye. If you are hooked on birding and going to go out to reserves, looking over long distances – then it is time to buy better binoculars or even a telescope. If you are just looking at the end of the garden, cheap ones will do fine

- Make sure the binoculars you buy are not too heavy for you to use for extended periods. My first pair were ex-Russian Army binoculars and were so heavy that I found it hard to do more than glance through them every now and then. Many modern pairs are small and lightweight.
- When you are looking to buy a pair of binoculars, try them out in the shop first. Can you focus on the floor? Can you focus on the end of the street through the shop window? Do your hands shake when holding them up? If you wear glasses, can you still wear them and look through the eyepieces? Do they fit into your hand nicely, or are they hard to hold?
- Depending on the price, binoculars may come with a variety of filters, adjustments, degrees of magnification and attachments. Cheaper binoculars may be heavier than modern top-end pairs. Decide what you can afford to spend and then research the binoculars in that price bracket to see which pair suits *you*.

Bird books

- There are many books of birds on the market, some with photographic plates, others with old paintings, maps of where the birds breed or spend their time, identifying features and even descriptions of the sounds made by each species. How much of this information you need in a book is up to you – why not borrow some from a library or friends before you go and make a purchase yourself?
- My personal favourite at the moment is the Collins Bird Guide in a large hardback format. It is a bit unwieldy for taking into the wilds, but as a beautifully illustrated kitchen window identification book, I haven't seen anything better. However, the books you buy to help you will depend on your personal preference. Just make sure that you are buying a guide to British birds (UK, Northern Europe, Western Palaearctic may be other terms used). Good colour pictures will help you make sure of your identification, and any other data such as behaviours, times of most activity, food types, distribution and so on will just help to make things easier.

The Collins Bird Guide (Large hardback) December 2000

ISBN: 0007100825

Price: approx £25.00

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0007100825/shopgenie-books-21/026-6120823-8195607>

The RSPB Guide to British Birds (May 2002)

ISBN: 0333907515

Price: approx £10.00

http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0333907515/ref=pd_ecc_rvi_f/026-6120823-8195607

Notebooks

- If you are going to make notes about the birds that you see, then a notebook and pencil or pen are a good thing to have to hand! Spiral-bound notebooks lie flatter on a table or windowsill than many others, but of course the pages do come loose if you are not careful.
- Perhaps you could have two notebooks - one for writing up notes about behaviour and so on, and another for making drawings of what you see.
- If you have regular garden visitors, why not begin a bird diary for each species? Note down when they come to feed and what they eat, and throughout the year you will begin

to notice other things too – changes in colours as breeding feathers grow, altered behaviour, the appearance of young birds begging for food and much more.

Cameras

- Perhaps the ultimate luxury for garden bird spotting is the ability to use a camera and take photographs of your visitors. I'm not going to say much about them here as technology is not my strong point, but digital cameras have suddenly made it easy to take good photos of garden birds and make your own identification guide to wildlife in your garden.
- Combine pictures with your notes to make a comprehensive guide to local wildlife!
- Use the photos of your birds to make cards for family, a bird mobile or computer screen backgrounds. Any other ideas? Why not get in touch with us and let us know!
- Don't forget – you can take a picture of a bird *through* the eyepieces of your binoculars for a really close-up portrait.

Recording equipment

- For the real fanatic, a recording of the songs and calls of their garden visitors is a must-have addition to their notebooks.
- Many bird books attempt to describe the noises made by common birds, but to be honest, unless you already know what a bird sounds like, you are unlikely to recognise a new bird by reading a description of its song! This is why some people like to record the songs for a fuller record.
- Many bird species have regional variation in their songs, or change them according to the season, the purpose of the song (warning, mating display, territorial etc) or from generation to generation. Songs seems to be partly instinctive and partly learnt – certainly there is a slight variation from one individual to another.
- There are CDs and DVDs available to help you identify bird song. If you are tracking a shy bird that is hard to see, it sometimes helps to know what it might sound like instead!
- Again, I'm not even going to try and talk to you about equipment – I suggest that if you are getting that interested in bird watching, you speak to the experts such as the RSPB or the British Trust for Ornithology.

And that is probably the extent of the equipment you will need to start your bird-watching career! Obviously, as you get into it and begin to visit reserves or go off tracking birds in remote places, you will need to carry more and to wear waterproof clothing, camouflage and so on. But for garden spotting, a guidebook, binoculars and notebook is plenty enough.

What to spot

When you begin to identify birds, there are some things that it will help you to notice and that are usually listed in bird guides as identifying features:

Beak shape

- Birds do not have arms to manipulate their food, build nests or preen themselves and so their beak has to do all of the jobs that hands and fingers would normally do. The size and shape of a bird's beak can tell you a lot about its lifestyle, and is an important feature in helping you to identify it.
- Birds with short, chunky beaks are usually seed eaters. The strong beak helps them to crush seeds before they swallow them. This is the sort of beak that sparrows and many finches have.

- Birds of prey have hooked beaks to help them rip and tear flesh from their prey. Look at any picture of a hawk or kestrel to see what a hooked beak looks like.
- Birds with longer, more needle-like beaks are usually insect eaters that spend their time rooting through leaves and vegetation or digging into the lawn to find insects, worms and grubs to eat. A blackbird or a starling is a good example.
- Some birds have a beak that has become specialised for a particular type of food. If you live near a conifer forest, you might be lucky enough to see crossbills. These birds have scissor-like beaks where the tips of the bottom and upper bill cross over each other. This helps them to prise open pine cones and reach the seeds that they live on.
- Ducks and many other water fowl have long flat beaks with serrated edges. They use these to grab slippery water weeds from underwater, and to sift food out of shallow waters.
- Always make a note – maybe even a drawing – of the beak of any bird that you want to identify. Some species look very similar and can be confused for each other unless you look at the beaks (for example, dunnocks and sparrows look almost identical except that sparrows have the short seed-eating beak while dunnocks have a long thin insect-eating beak).

Relative size

- Another good feature to spot is the relative size of a bird. Once you can easily identify some common birds – blackbird, pigeon and sparrow for example – then you can use them as a tool to work out what size an unknown bird is.
- Is the bird you are looking at smaller or a similar size to a sparrow? If so, then you might be looking at a finch, a dunnock, a wren or some other small bird. Most of the garden birds you will see are about this size.
- Is the bird you are looking at larger than a pigeon? There are few large birds that visit gardens, so this will help to make it easier to identify!

Colours

- Birds come in all shapes and sizes – and in a huge variety of colours. Making a note of the main colour of a bird and any patches of different colours is essential to identification.
- Many birds change colour throughout their lifetime and from season to season. Most birds are also different colours depending on whether they are male or female. A good guide will show you the different colours and patterns of each lifestage, season and gender.
- Many female birds are plain brown or dull in colour to help them blend into the background when incubating eggs. However, in close-up there can be very subtle patterns that help you to identify them – the back of the neck might be grey, the breast might have black flecks in it, the head might have a stripe of black running through the eye and so on.
- Wing feathers are not all the same length, and some of them might be different colours as well. The feathers underneath the wing – that show up only when the bird takes off or is flying – might also be different colours, so make a note of whatever you can see.

Behaviour

- How a bird behaves can also tell you a lot about it and what it is. It is also a good idea to make note of the interactions the bird has with any other similar birds or birds in general.
- Did the bird turn up on its own? Does it attack or chase off any similar bird that appears? This might mean that your garden has been claimed as part of the bird's territory and it is making sure that no one else is stealing its food!

- Did the bird turn up on its own and then additional similar birds turn up? This might be a family group. The first bird is probably the top male or female and is checking the garden out to make sure it is safe and there is plenty of food. It might then fly a short distance away to inform the others in the group, or stay in the garden and call them to the feast. Many finches live in small family flocks.
- Did the bird arrive in a small group? This is common in the late spring and early summer when adult birds are showing their offspring good places to feed. Some birds also travel in small flocks – long-tailed tits flit from branch to branch and tree to tree, calling to each other as they go, and small flocks of starlings will arrive en masse, eat and then noisily socialise before going onto the next feeding station.
- Does this bird sneak around under bushes, trying to stay hidden? Does it confine itself to bushes and trees, hopping from one branch to another? Or does it arrive, fly down to an open patch of ground and then hop or walk around looking for food? Birds used to living in woodland often keep to the edges of the garden and stay hidden, while those used to living in open areas seem to be more confident and are happy in the open.
- As you become more familiar with your garden visitors, make notes on their behaviour through the year. You will be able to spot courtship behaviours as the male displays to attract a female or finds tempting food to offer her. Later in the year, you might find collared doves rooting through the vegetation to find twigs to add to their nests, or sparrows trying to pull twigs off trees by grabbing them and flying away. Baby birds shiver their wings and make special calls to encourage their parents to feed them and teenage starlings appear to love playing in bird baths!

Unusual features

- Lastly – but by no means least – make a note of anything unusual about each bird that you see. This might be something about that individual that is different from other birds of that type, or it might be a useful clue to discovering a new species in your back garden. Does the bird walk instead of hopping from one place to another? Are the legs an unusual shade of red? Does it hang upside down from your feeders? Sometimes even the smallest thing can be a big clue to the identity of a bird – or be a feature that helps you recognise an individual when it comes back again!
- Occasionally, you may spot a bird that appears to be either strangely pale or even totally white (albino). Albino birds are rare because the colouration is caused by the inheritance of two recessive genes from the parents – as well as the fact that predators find these birds easier to spot! However, partial albinos (birds with white patches) and ‘washed-out’ birds (where the plumage is a lot paler than is normal) are quite common. Keep an eye out for these birds – you won’t confuse them with anything else!
- Eye stripes, beards, crests. The colour and pattern of a bird’s plumage is made up of many individual feathers, and so very subtle variations and patterns can be made just with a few feathers. A good example is the eye stripe – some birds have a fine line that stretches backwards from the mouth, over the eye and towards the back of the head. This can make it hard to spot the eye – which is probably the point! Little marks like this are often used to identify hard-to-distinguish birds. The number of such tiny patterns is huge and each has a specific name. As you get to know some of the more common birds, you will discover moustaches, beards, crests and more – don’t forget to add these to your notes.
- Another subtle way of making sure of an identification is to look out for tiny patches of a different colour. A good example is the jay, which has a patch of brilliant blue on the edges of its wings – when it opens the wings to fly, this flashes and becomes very obvious. Female mallards have a similar bright blue patch on their wings – check out

- your local duck pond to confirm this for yourself. As you get better at noticing these tiny details, you will suddenly find even common birds like starlings to be a riot of colour.
- Snail hammers. You don't always have to see a bird to know that it has been in your garden. Keep your eyes peeled for signs of bird activity such as holes in the flowerbeds or plant pots (maybe a blackbird has been digging for worms?), purple bird droppings left behind by flocks of birds that have eaten blackberries and more specific clues such as snail shells scattered around a rock. This last sign is a dead-cert clue that a thrush has visited your garden to smash open snail shells on the rock and eat the gooey contents!
 - Bird rings. Very occasionally, you might be lucky enough to spot a bird ring around the leg of a visitor to your garden. Bird rings are permanently fixed around the legs of birds that professional bird scientists (ornithologists) have caught as part of a study. Each ring has a unique identifier and allows them to collect data about the movement, age, gender and so on of an individual bird. If you can, try to note the number on the ring using your binoculars, and then contact the RSPB with the details of what the bird was and when and where you saw it. You might be able to contribute to an international scientific investigation!

The Top Ten

The latest list of the Top Ten typical wild garden birds is:

Starling
House sparrow
Blue tit
Blackbird
Chaffinch
Green finch
Collared dove
Great tit
Robin
Wood pigeon

How many species do you have in your garden? Write and let us know!

More information about the league tables and how to identify the birds themselves can be found here:

<http://blx1.bto.org/gbw-dailyresults/results/gbwrt2003-39-20.html>

What on Earth is *that*?

In addition to the birds living in your local area, you might find unusual birds visiting your garden feeding station at certain times of the year. Some of these birds will be local birds who normally would find their own food, but have been driven into your garden by hunger or even curiosity. Others will be migrant birds looking for a quick top-up before continuing their journey. And of course, you may see individuals from a common species that are not quite the same as their relatives either through regional variation or because of albinism, genetic fluke, odd colouring and so on.

Most good bird guides will have a section illustrating these less common visitors, but just in case you spot something that isn't listed, why not try these sites to see what you've spotted?

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/index.asp>

The RSPB's comprehensive A-Z index of British birds, including migrants and rarer species

<http://www.birdsofbritain.co.uk/bird-guide/index.htm>

The Birds of Britain magazine index to birds that you might spot in this country – including those that are summer or winter migrants, resident all year round or just stop over in the UK to breed

There is a breed of bird watcher called a 'twitcher' who travels the country – and sometimes the world – to catch a glimpse of a rare bird. There are phone lines and websites dedicated to keeping the global network of twitchers in contact with each other and publicising the latest unusual find – you can use these sites yourself to see what oddities might be in your area at the moment! If you do find something unusual, why not get in touch with local twitchers and give them the chance to take a few photos for their collection?

Some on-line birding and twitching groups

<http://www.birddiary.co.uk/>

<http://www.surfbirds.com/>

Further advice

We will be back soon with part II of this series, looking at what you can do to make your garden more wildlife friendly, how to make your own bird food and what birds you might commonly expect to find in your garden. Until then, here are some links for you to explore in order to find out more about our British birds.

<http://www.bto.org/>

The British Trust for Ornithology

<http://www.bto.org/gbw/index.htm>

The BTO Garden Bird Survey – you can help to catalogue the garden bird population and discover how each species is doing

<http://blx1.bto.org/gbw-dailyresults/results/gbwrt2003-39-20.html> - the current ranking of bird species in the gardens of people who have joined the Garden Bird Watch scheme

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/>

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/gardens/advice/index.asp>

Plenty of advice about attracting birds to your garden, what to feed them and how to set it all up

<http://www.birdsofbritain.co.uk/>

Birds of Britain, the monthly web magazine of British birds