

In Your Garden

Birds in the late Autumn Garden

By Robert Blake

November 2017

Steve Oakes, a RSPB volunteer for the past 31 years, gave an interesting talk to the Gardeners' Club on the types of birds to be found in the late autumn garden. He started by emphasising the importance of providing layers of cover for roosting in the form of trees, large and small shrubs, hedges and flowering plants. A few small piles of wood tucked underneath large shrubs will also help to encourage insects. If you have a bird bath then try and change the water daily to avoid the spread of viruses.

Many birds remain in the south of England throughout the year. Robins lose their sexuality in August and the females sing in autumn to hold their territory, leading in some instances to killing their challengers. Wrens are exclusively insect eaters so do have difficulty surviving a really cold winter. House sparrow numbers in the UK dropped by some 70% between 1977 and 2008 due to loss of habitat but are slowly rising again in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The goldfinch – number 7 in the top 20 - is doing very well due to climate change, although some still migrate to Spain for the winter. However, there has been a recent decline in the colourful greenfinch due to an outbreak of trichomonosis, a parasite-induced disease which prevents the birds from feeding properly. Wood-pigeons and collared doves can breed continuously if the winter is mild and there is a plentiful supply of food.

Many birds migrate, some 40% of the world's total. In far northern regions, such as Canada, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, most species migrate south in autumn. Fieldfares, redwings, Bewick and Whooper swans, and many kinds of ducks spend the winter here, where the weather is milder and food is easier to find. European migrants include the mistle thrush, chiffchaff, pied wagtail and goldcrest, which is the smallest wild bird found in the UK and yet manages to cross the North Sea. The blackcap is primarily a summer visitor from Germany but is increasingly found winter feeding in our gardens. The Waxwing also comes over from Scandinavia when the Rowan berry crop fails.

Other bird species undertake partial migration, dependent upon the weather, so it is never the same from one year to the next. For example, birds that hardly move at all in Britain - great tits, coal tits, blue tits, jays and woodpigeons – have been observed migrating in large numbers from Estonia. More information on all types of birds can be found at www.rspb.org.uk.