

How to: Improve your garden for birds



Photo: Sara Lovejoy



Photo: Caroline Harcourt



Photo: Helen Bostock

Birds are among the most popular garden wildlife groups, probably because they are generally visible and show fascinating behaviour. There are many ways to help them in gardens and we have three other 'How to' guides covering water, feeding and nest boxes. This guide concentrates on the garden itself.

Target species

The most recent BTO [Garden Birdwatch](#) data showed 23 bird species were seen in 10% or more of gardens in 2020 and many other less common visitors from time to time. The mix will vary by time of year and especially by where your garden is in Britain. The commonest species are blue tit, woodpigeon, blackbird and robin, seen in more than 80% of gardens, while great tit, dunnock, house sparrow, goldfinch and magpie were seen in more than half of gardens.

What birds need

Like all animals, birds need food, water, shelter from enemies and a safe place to breed and raise young. They are very large compared with insects, and so need correspondingly more resources, especially of space. Few gardens would be big enough to supply all the needs of a family of birds, but they can gather food over a network of gardens, returning to nest in a chosen one. You should aim to make your garden welcoming in all these respects.

How to do it

- Look at your garden and consider what is already good for birds, and where changes could be made.
- Mature trees with rotten sections which hole-nesting birds can use are hugely valuable for insect food as well as nesting, so look after them if you are lucky enough to have them
- Have plenty of trees and shrubs in which birds can find shelter and build nests. The denser and thornier the foliage the better, and evergreens are valuable through the winter months.

- The most critical food for birds is aphids, caterpillars, other insects and spiders which they feed to their nestlings. It's therefore vital that you don't routinely use pesticides or you will take away their food supply.
- Likewise, have as many juicy green plants as you can to encourage insect prey – and try to tolerate a bit of leaf damage.
- Later in the year, birds benefit from berry producing plants to help them put on reserves for winter.
- Garden birds also make use of large and small seeds. Leave seed heads on flowers into the autumn so birds can benefit
- Many people give birds supplemental food as seeds, nuts and fat balls. See our guide [How to: Feed garden birds](#) for guidance

Dense trees and shrubs for nesting birds (adapted from [BTO list](#)) Natives in **bold**

Barberry	<i>Berberis vulgaris</i>	Laurustinus	<i>Viburnum tinus</i>
Blackthorn	<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	Lawson's cypress	<i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i>
Box	<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	Oleaster	<i>Elaeagnus ebbingei</i>
Firethorn	<i>Pyracantha spp</i>	Sea-buckthorn	<i>Hippophae rhamnoides</i>
Hawthorn	<i>Crataegus species</i>	Wayfaring tree	<i>Viburnum lantana</i>
Holly	<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	Wild privet	<i>Ligustrum vulgare</i>
Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera periclymenum</i>	Yew	<i>Taxus baccata</i>
Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>		

Berry producing plants for birds (adapted from [BTO list](#)) Natives in **bold**

Bird cherry	<i>Prunus padus</i>	Mistletoe	<i>Viscum album</i>
Blackberry	<i>Rubus fruticosus agg.</i>	Oregon grape	<i>Mahonia aquifolium</i>
Blackthorn	<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	Perfoliate honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera caprifolium</i>
Crab apple	<i>Malus sylvestris</i>	Rowan	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>
Dog rose	<i>Rosa canina</i>	Sea-buckthorn	<i>Hippophae rhamnoides</i>
Elder	<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	Stranvaesia	<i>Photinia davidiana</i>
Firethorn	<i>Pyracantha species</i>	Wayfaring tree	<i>Viburnum lantana</i>
Guelder rose	<i>Viburnum opulus</i>	Whitebeam	<i>Sorbus aria</i>
Hawthorn	<i>Crataegus species</i>	Wild cherry	<i>Prunus avium</i>
Holly	<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	Wild privet	<i>Ligustrum vulgare</i>
Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera periclymenon</i>	Wild service tree	<i>Sorbus torminalis</i>
Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Yew	<i>Taxus baccata</i>
Mezereon	<i>Daphne mezereon</i>		

Seed producing plants for birds (adapted from [BTO list](#)) Natives in **bold**

Alder	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	Lavender	<i>Lavandula</i>
Beech	<i>Fagus sylvaticus</i>	Lemon Balm	<i>Melissa officinalis</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	Reedmace	<i>Typha latifolia</i>
Devil's bit Scabious	<i>Succisa pratensis</i>	Silver Birch	<i>Betula pendula</i>
Field Scabious	<i>Knautia arvensis</i>	Sunflower	<i>Helianthus annuus</i>
Greater Knapweed	<i>Centaurea scabiosa</i>	Teasel	<i>Dipsacus fullonum</i>
Hazel	<i>Corylus avellana</i>	Thistles	<i>Carduus/Cirsium species</i>
Hornbeam	<i>Carpinus betulus</i>		

- Leave windfall apples on the ground as food for blackbirds and winter visitors such as redwings and fieldfares
- You should provide water in your garden for birds to drink and bath in. See our guide [How to: Bring water into your garden](#)
- Many people like to provide supplementary food for garden birds, as much so they can attract and see them as for the benefit to the birds. See our guide '[How to: Feed birds](#)'
- It is worth putting up a nest box in a quiet garden corner. See our guide '[How to: make and maintain a bird box](#)'
- If you live in a very built-up area, it might help breeding birds to put out nesting material they can use to build or line their nests. Pet hair and short clippings of human hair are often recommended but shouldn't be used if your pet has had long-term flea or worm treatment or if you use conditioner. Straw and hay are helpful, so are twigs and leaves from garden maintenance. Loose sheep's wool is excellent – but not once it is spun into yarn which can tangle in bird's feet. You can buy suitable wool quite cheaply, often in a simple container that can be hung from a branch.
- Birds need minimal disturbance, so keep your garden space as quiet as you can, and don't have a cat!

How easy is it to do?

Moderate. You may want to plant several trees and shrubs, which is not very difficult, and putting in a nest box and bird bath is quite easy. Take your time, and don't for example suddenly strip out most of the trees and shrubs already there, leaving the garden empty until the new plants grow bigger.

How much will it cost?

Avoiding pesticides is free! If you take a long view, allowing existing suitable trees and shrubs to flourish, helping birds need not be expensive. Large specimen trees from garden centres are very pricey- £50 and more, but bare-root trees are very cheap (£1 or so) and usually out-grow container trees quickly. See the other guides on costs for bird feeders, nest boxes and bird baths.

How effective is it for the target species?

Very effective. Getting the garden as a whole right with plenty of structure and shelter is important, and nest boxes, feeders and bird baths are the icing on top of the cake.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Birds need invertebrate prey for their nestlings, and it is essential that gardens provide this sort of food.
- Many of the birds that bred in our gardens were originally adapted to woodland, including blackbirds, tits, robin, song thrush and wren, which is why the more tree and shrub cover we can provide the better. Others such as greenfinch, woodpigeon, goldfinch and starling are associated with farmland, and benefit more from the seeds in flower beds and feeders.
- The numbers and species of birds in our gardens are changing through time. Song thrush have declined by 78% in gardens since 1979, while woodpigeon numbers have more than doubled. The [BTO Garden BirdWatch](#) and [RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch](#) schemes track annual changes, and you could contribute data to these important surveys.

What to look for

Look (and listen out for) birds in the garden. The dawn chorus starts as it begins to get light – about 4.00am in the peak months May and June. It is well worth getting up early to experience the medley of sound. The other great song time is in the evening, when male blackbirds sing wonderfully from the very top of the tallest tree.

Look out for signs of nesting birds, and if you do find a nest, try to minimise the movement and disturbance around it.

Things to be aware of

- Garden birds are part of the overall ecosystem, so don't be too upset if you find one has been taken by a predator such as a sparrow hawk. Likewise, magpies are native garden predators, and it is sad but to be expected that the occasional brood may be lost to them – it is “in their job description”
- Some garden birds are suffering from [unpleasant diseases](#) at present, notably green finches and chaffinches, and blue and great tits. These are spread through feeders, so you must be stringent with hygiene
- Birds are very territorial, so it won't be worth putting up lots of nest boxes unless your garden is big enough to support several territories.

Further information

How to: [Plan a wildlife-friendly garden](#) www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf

How to: [Bring water into your garden](#) www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf

How to: [Feed birds](#) www.wlgf.org/ht_feed_birds.pdf

How to: Make and maintain a [bird box](#) www.wlgf.org/ht_bird_box.pdf

Websites

Our many [pages on garden birds](#) www.wlgf.org/birds_intro.html

RHS guidance on [birds in gardens](#) www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=497

BTO [Garden Bird Feeding](#) Survey www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbfs

BTO [Garden birdwatch](#) results www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/results/annual-results

BTO recommended [trees for nesting birds](#) www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/wildlife-gardening/plants-nesting-cover

BTO lists of [berry and seed plants](#) www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/wildlife-gardening/plants-fruits-and-seeds

BTO [Garden bird disease](#) guidance www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/gardens-wildlife/garden-birds/disease

BTO Garden [BirdWatch](#) www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/about

RSPB [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/