

Thorndon Birdlife, February 2013

Well, as I write (21st January), we've had a week of sub-zero temperatures and snow cover and it's looking likely to last for a few more days yet. Much as these 'winter wonderland' scenes are very beautiful they do make it very difficult for our birds to find food and so putting out food for your garden birds can really help them to make it through each night.



After an autumn with fewer berries in the hedgerows than last year, some birds that can normally find enough to eat in the early part of the winter have been coming into gardens and one such bird is one of our most beautiful, the bullfinch. Bullfinches are bigger than a greenfinch, smaller-headed, fatter-bodied, longer-tailed and smaller-billed and so are quite differently proportioned. Their most striking feature, however, is their plumage. Both males

and females have a black cap, a grey back, black wings with a white wingbar, a black tail, a white rump, a white undertail, black bill, legs and feet. However, where the females have a subtle pinkish-grey colour on the face, throat, breast and belly the males are vivid reddish-pink. Whilst it is not unusual to see single bullfinches, they are often found in small parties and so if you see one - perhaps flying away from you, showing its square white rump and black tail - do look to see if there are others with it.

Generally, bullfinches like to eat seeds and fruit and so if you see one or more in your garden it is most likely to be on a seed feeder. In very cold weather, however, they will feed on a wider variety of items such as fat snacks; in the bitterly cold winter of 1978-79 bullfinches were even seen feeding on a chicken carcass and a ham bone!



Another bird with a black cap that was seen in a garden on The Street on 14th January was as much of a surprise as a male bullfinch would be a delight: a blackcap. We tend to think of blackcaps as summer visitors and they are one of the earlier summer migrants to arrive, usually turning up in March from their southern European and North African wintering grounds. In recent decades, however, blackcaps have been increasingly encountered in the winter. These birds are not

British breeders that have not migrated south for the winter, they are northern European individuals that have taken to migrating west to Britain from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium to escape the colder continental winters.

The individual that was seen in the village was a male and, surprisingly for a bird that normally eats insects, it was on a seed feeder. Blackcaps will eat berries and soft fruit during the winter if they can't find invertebrates, but their slim, pointed, robin-like bill is not really adapted to cracking open seeds in the same way that finches and buntings do.

Blackcaps have the shape of a slender robin and are essentially shades of grey, with a whiter chin, throat and undertail. Their most striking feature is their neatly demarcated cap, which is

black in males and reddish brown in females. The British Trust for Ornithology is studying the distribution of these winter blackcaps so if you see one please let me know so that I can get it on the map.



I was very pleased to receive a report of a barn owl frequenting a different area from where the pair bred last year. This bird was in an area where there is also a nest box and I hope that it will remain and find a mate. Barn owls are quite often to be seen during the day and I've seen one a couple of times in the last month perched on a fence alongside some rough grassland, listening and looking for mice and voles.

Although February can be the harshest month of the winter, the appearance of the snowdrops and the first spring flowers, along with the subtle warmth of the sun on sunny, still days, tells us that spring is on the way. As well as the robins, that sing right through the winter, I've already heard a mistle thrush and these early breeders will be singing their wistful, blackbird-like phrases from tree tops, especially in breezy weather.

Thank you to those of you who have supported the Foraging Farmland Birds Project by buying your Waveney Bird Club 2013 calendar from Thorndon Village Stores. January's photograph is of a waxwing and February's is of a brambling and I'd be delighted to see either of these birds in the village before the end of the winter.

I am always pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in and around Thorndon, Braiseworth, Hestley Green and Rishangles.

Stephen Dean