

Thorndon Birdlife, December 2014 and January 2015

It hardly seems possible that we're nearing the end of the year and in birding terms December, January and February are the winter months, during which our birds have to work really hard just to survive, spending a great deal of their time feeding. Providing food for birds to eat and fresh water for them to drink and bathe in really can mean the difference between life and death. During the winter, especially in very cold weather, birds will use nest boxes to roost in so don't be surprised if you see wrens and other small birds going into nest boxes in the evening or emerging from them early in the morning.



Goldcrest

In the winter many birds form mixed species flocks in order to forage for food more effectively. In our gardens blue tits, great tits, coal tits and long-tailed tits will gather together, often with goldcrests and treecreepers, in roving parties. These birds make their way around a 'circuit' of trees and bushes, searching for food all the time and calling to maintain contact with one another. It is often the calls that let you know that the flock is on its way and they brighten the dank winter days with their colour and movement as they pass through. Then, when they've gone, everything goes quiet for an hour or so until they return.

One of these flocks includes 17 long-tailed tits at a site in the village where birds are caught for ringing and one that was caught recently had been ringed in 2009. We can learn a lot about birds' longevity and movements from bird ringing and five years of age is a good age for a long-tailed tit. It is remarkable to think that this tiny creature is entering its sixth winter.



A group of Long-tailed tits

I'm pleased that having mentioned redwings last month at least 20 were seen along the Thwaite Road in mid-November and then, on 20th November, seven fieldfares were seen there too.

These two birds are really classic winter visitors, both flying here for the winter from their breeding grounds in Scandinavia and Russia (and some redwings originating from Iceland). Both redwings and fieldfares are fond of berry-bearing bushes and fallen fruit and, especially in severe weather, it's possible to see them together, along with blackbirds, song thrushes and mistle thrushes.



Goldfinch

There are good numbers of goldfinches around at the moment and increasing numbers of these birds are spending the winter here as, generally, our winters are becoming milder. In really cold weather, however, they will desert us for warmer conditions further south in Europe. At the ringing site I mentioned, a notable recent record was a single lesser redpoll. These small finches are subject to significant population fluctuations and they're not especially common at the moment so this one was a real surprise. A little smaller than a goldfinch and with a tiny yellow bill, with a narrow black band of feathering around its base,



Lesser redpoll

these small brown, streaky finches have a red forehead (which is where the name 'redpoll' comes from) and in the spring the males have an intense pinkish-red wash across the breast.

If you put out sunflower seed for the finches in the winter look out for goldfinches, chaffinches and greenfinches. It is also possible to get niger seed feeders with smaller holes in and these are popular with redpolls and siskins.

I am always pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those of you who have contacted me with information throughout 2014.

2015 will be the first year of the house martin survey that I mentioned last month and I look forward to their return in April. In the meantime, there are many delights of the natural world to enjoy over the Christmas and New Year period.

Stephen Dean