

Thorndon Birdlife February 2021

It is surprisingly easy to do something to help wildlife in the lean and cold months of winter. You can support wildlife through the winter and make a difference by putting out additional food, gardeners can also make a significant contribution to supporting wildlife over winter. It is also a great way to watch wildlife even in the smallest of gardens, often at very close quarters.

These tasks will help turn your garden into a wildlife haven increasing the diversity of creatures that can not only survive but thrive.

Garden birds, in particular, benefit from feeding year-round, but winter is a time to provide foodstuffs with a high fat content to help keep them warm. Feed regularly so that birds will not waste vital energy visiting your garden when there is no food and aim to carry out these tasks as soon as hard frosts arrive from late autumn until mid-spring.

Alternate different recipes to entice a range of birds; peanut cakes for starlings, insect cakes for tits and berry cakes for finches.

Put out finely chopped bacon rind and grated cheese for small birds such as wrens. Although fat is important, do also provide a grain mix or nuts to maintain a balanced diet. Sparrows, finches and nuthatches will enjoy prising the seeds out of sunflower heads if you have them. No-mess mixes are more expensive but the inclusion of de-husked sunflower hearts means there is less waste.

Use wire mesh feeders for peanuts and seed feeders for other seed. Specially designed feeders are needed for the tiny Niger seed, loved by goldfinches and feed placed on a wire mesh held just off the ground will entice ground-feeding birds such as robins and dunnocks. Thrushes and blackbirds favour fruit. Scatter over-ripe apples, raisins and song-bird mixes on the ground for them, just a warning...pheasants also like them.

It is difficult to exclude bigger visitors such as pigeons and grey squirrels from a bird table. Feeders give more control over what you attract and most designs can be fitted with squirrel guards.

Keep moving feeding stations around the garden to reduce a build-up of spilt food and only put out enough food that is likely to be eaten within a few days. You don't want to attract rats.

Check bonfires before they are lit for sheltering and hibernating animals, such as hedgehogs, toads and frogs.

Cleaning out your Nest boxes; National Nest Box Week is an annual event that takes place every year from the 14th to 21st February. It has been running for over 20 years and is now an important part of the ornithological calendar. St Valentine's Day was chosen for the start of National Nest Box Week as this is the traditional date when birds pair up for the new breeding season.

I was ringing birds in the garden on the 14th December and processed fifty birds,

There is a new CES winter garden ringing project run by the British Trust for Ornithology,

The second session is due from the 19th December.

Birds processed were Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Blue, Great, Coal, Marsh and Long-tailed tits, a Blackbird and a couple of Robins. I did notice a Chiffchaff on the feeders and a male Bullfinch in the blackthorn,

I have also seen two Mistle thrushes (*Turdus viscivorus*) in the garden today, it is a pale black spotted thrush – large, aggressive and powerful. It is much larger than the Song thrush

and stands boldly upright and bounds across the ground. In flight, it has long wings and its tail has whitish edges. It is most likely to be noticed perched high at the top of a tree, singing its fluty song or giving its rattling call-in flight. The colloquial name for mistle thrush is 'stormcock'. This comes from their tendency to defend territories from the top of the tallest tree, even if it is windy and raining.

They are one of the earliest breeders of the year, they will lay eggs as early as the end of February. This doesn't mean that they stop early though, as each pair rears up to three broods of chicks, and may continue through to the end of June.

Where do mistle thrushes build their nests? Usually in the fork of a branch, or up against the trunk of a tree, mistle thrush nests are made out of loosely woven grasses, moss and roots, held together with mud, leaves and rotten wood. Inside they are lined with fine grasses and occasionally pine needles, which are thought to reduce nest parasites.

And why is the Mistle thrush so called? Well, back in 1661, when the first attempt to come up with a comprehensive list of all British birds was made, this bird was then known as the mistletoe thrush, because it has a particular liking for mistletoe berries. The Mistle thrush also eats berries, seeds and fruit, as well as worms and insects.

Happy Christmas to you all

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