



Thorndon Birdlife

March 2025

One of Britain & Ireland's most common birds, the Eurasian chaffinch, common chaffinch, or simply the chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) is a common and wide-spread small passerine bird in the finch family. It was recorded across 94% of the UK during the Bird Atlas 2007-11. The chaffinch breeds in much of Europe, across the Palearctic to Siberia.

Chaffinches are present all year in Britain & Ireland. The male's pink, chestnut and blue-grey crown and nape and bright white wing bars make this species an attractive finch. The female is more subdued in colouring, but both sexes have two contrasting white wing bars and white sides to the tail. The male bird has a strong voice and sings from exposed perches to attract a mate.

Chaffinches are often seen at garden bird feeders and the species distinctive song, descending the scale and ending with a flourish, can be heard in any suitable habitat throughout the breeding season. UK Chaffinch breeding numbers increased by about a third between about 1970 and 2010, before falling sharply. BTO research has linked this decline to the disease Trichomonosis. They can also develop tumours on their feet and legs caused by the *Fringilla coelebs* virus, an abnormal growth of tissue.

In the last two years they have become harder to find in my garden. In winter, the population swells with large numbers of migrants arriving from Fennoscandia. Chaffinches can form mixed flocks with other finches, exploiting the wild bird seed field-strips created by environmentally sensitive farming.



Male Chaffinch



Female Chaffinch

The female chaffinch builds a nest with a deep cup in the forks of trees, shrubs and hedges, usually in concealed locations. The clutch is typically four or five eggs, which hatch in about 13 days. The chicks fledge in around 14 days, but are fed by both adults for several weeks after leaving the nest. Outside the breeding season, chaffinches form flocks in open countryside and forage for seeds on the ground. During the breeding season, they forage on trees for invertebrates, especially caterpillars, and feed these to their young. The eggs and nestlings of the chaffinch are taken by a variety of mammalian and avian predators namely crows, Eurasian and eastern grey squirrels, domestic cats and probably also by stoats and weasels. Clutches from later in the spring suffer less predation, an effect that is believed to be due to the increased vegetation making nests more difficult to find. Unlike the case for the closely related brambling, the common chaffinch is not parasitised by the common cuckoo. Its large numbers and huge range mean that chaffinches are classed as of least concern.

The Eurasian chaffinch was once popular as a caged songbird and large numbers of wild birds were trapped and sold. At the end of the 19th century, trapping even depleted the number of birds in London parks. In 1882, the English publisher Samuel Orchart Beeton issued a guide on the care of caged birds and included the recommendation: "To parents and guardians plagued with a morose and sulky boy, my advice is, buy him a chaffinch." Competitions were held where bets were placed on which caged common chaffinch would repeat its song the greatest number of times. In the UK, the practice of keeping Eurasian chaffinches as pets declined after the trapping of wild birds was outlawed by the Wild Bird Protection Acts of 1880 to 1896.

Feeding garden birds is a great way to interact with wildlife but having so many birds in a small space can be the perfect recipe for diseases to spread. Many garden birds die each year through the transmission of diseases, so it's important to clean all water containers daily and feeders weekly, drying them before refilling. Rotating feeding and drinking areas will help reduce the transmission of disease.

Garden sightings; Mistle thrush, Song thrush x 2, Goldcrest, Great spotted and Green woodpeckers, Treecreeper, Greenfinches on the increase.

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