

# Withington Wildlife

Although Withington and the surrounding districts are suburban and mainly a built-environment, there is a rich diversity of wildlife in the area. Private gardens are one of the main refuges for wildlife in the suburbs. Here is an account of a year in the birdlife of a Withington garden by Diana Hutchinson.

## WILDLIFE IN WITHINGTON : A YEAR'S CYCLE

Right here in Withington, I have been enthralled by the beauty and variety of the birds outside my house on Heaton Road. To attract wildlife, I have taken to feeding the birds in my garden, buying seed in a sack by mail order. I keep a pair of binoculars in the kitchen - they make all the difference: good x8 binoculars multiply the pleasure of bird watching ten-fold. This is my account of a twelve-month natural cycle.



In January, it's time to join half a million people, surveying for the RSPB's annual Big Garden Bird Watch. Almost immediately came a glossy male blackbird, this omnivore eating seeds and then a worm. Next, an assortment of tits: a great tit, a blue tit and a little coal tit. Then, a flock of six collared doves, perhaps the most beautiful garden bird, so elegant and dainty. Collared doves have gradually spread across Europe, not reaching Britain until 1955. Inevitably, a flock of house sparrows arrived in the garden, the males distinguished from other LBJs ("little brown jobs") by their conspicuous white wing bars. Unlike collared doves, the population of house sparrows has been declining across Britain, but in Withington we have lots of these chattering little birds. Three magpies curved down, a species gloriously graceful in the sky. But a cat took its favourite spot between the bird-feeder and the mouse-hole, to end my bird watching.

When it snowed in February, the birds' silhouettes became very obvious. A robin, not seen for weeks, appeared under the seed dispenser, its characteristic stance clear against the white snow. I put out bread, but only the blackbirds and a squirrel chose to eat, all the other creatures ignored it. On a warmer February morning, many birds were singing. A blue tit was busy, taking seed to a dense bush, over and over again. I glimpsed a flash of red in the hedge, not a piece of litter as I first thought, but the tubby red belly of a male bullfinch.

We are lucky with our trees in Withington. A fine old larch tree shades our garden. Larches are unusual trees, being deciduous conifers. A tree creeper scuttled up the trunk – until a squirrel chased it away. From time to time, our family see greenfinches on the larch, but more often we see splendid little goldfinches, as exotic in their colours as tropical birds. I sometimes buy them niger seeds for a treat, they like these even more than larch seeds.

One day in March, I saw a lesser redpoll moving fast through the larch; sometimes one needs a field guide as well as binoculars in Withington! Also in that tree, we have seen a flock of siskins and, for two years running, a dinky little goldcrest, the smallest of all British birds.

With summer comes evidence of breeding. I was suspicious when I saw nine magpies in the garden and a broken white egg lying near a tree. These birds are predators. By May, two adult swallows were feeding four fledglings, which fluttered clumsily round the feeder. I guess they are the family which nests in our bathroom wall, clearly audible behind the mirror. A blue tit carries a beakful of nesting material into a hole in the building next door. Long tailed tits ("flying teaspoons") have become abundant on our street.

We have mammals too in Withington. In early summer, a young squirrel wobbles on the fence. Two fox-cubs play on the lawn, trying to cuff a butterfly above their heads. At dusk, the bats are out.

For two days in June, I hear a new, exquisite song, ringing across the garden. Then I spot it - a handsome blackcap, singing for its mate. High above, two crows are mobbing a sparrow-hawk, perhaps to protect their young. A pied wagtail runs on the grass: I usually see these birds on supermarket tarmac.

From our bedroom window, we have a beautiful view, into the crown of a flowering cherry. As the pink flowers died back, we saw a woodpigeon's nest. In June, the two scruffy-looking squabs would open their beaks wide and we could watch as the parents regurgitated pigeon milk down the throats of their offspring.

It's hot in July. The swifts are no longer flying quietly, they are high up and screaming. A perky little wren stands on the fence. A thrush on the lawn carries two slugs at once. There is no shortage of slugs in Withington! I have not seen a goldfinch for weeks, but one day in August, I replace the mouldy niger seed. Next day, we have a goldfinch.

Autumn begins and a nuthatch takes seeds from the feeder. I hear tapping noises behind the Scout Hut, so I put out peanuts and get my reward; a great spotted woodpecker, in all its glory. Winter sets in, but no matter how hard the frost, an orange-legged dunnock appears under the same ornamental shrub, every day. I watch it often, as it drives its thin bill into the hard earth.

So far, I have counted 34 species of birds in my urban garden. Humans are a minority species in Withington, but we are a powerful minority, able to protect the precious green spaces around us. Next time you see your neighbour peering round the curtains with a pair of binoculars, you will understand.

Diana Hutchinson