

GO WILD

January 2010

Newsletter

Welcome to the second electronic version of the Go Wild Newsletter, I hope that you enjoy this edition of the bulletin and find the articles useful. Happy wildlife gardening!

Go Wild in the Garden Winter 2009 Ring-necked parakeet census



<http://www.charliesbirdblog.com/~charlie/rnparakeetUK/ringneck03.jpg>

The ring-necked parakeet (*psittacula krameri*) is the UK's only naturalised parrot. Originally a native of India and the Himalayas, it is now a familiar sight in the gardens and parks of Bexley and Sevenoaks.

Introduced from escaped pets, the numbers of this noisy bird in Britain is said to be growing dramatically.

As a consequence of this increase in the population size, researchers from the Biology Department of Imperial College London have recently begun a four-year study into the effects of the ring-necked parakeet on native bird species in the UK.

As part of this work it is essential that the researchers have accurate estimates of the current population size of the parrot in the UK, and its growth rate.

The last census was carried out in 2001/2, and current estimates of population size are based on this data and the growth rates that they estimated at the time.

This gives a current estimate of 20,000–50,000 individuals.

In order to estimate the current population size, a large-scale roost count will be carried out.

The first count will take place on Sunday 3rd January 2010, and will be simultaneous across as many known roosts as possible, using the same methods at all sites.

If the count is successful the count will be repeated every three months to enable researchers to estimate the population growth rate and any changes in roost usage.

Imperial College are now seeking volunteers who would be willing to assist with two elements of this project:

1. Compiling a list of all known roost sites

Assisting with the first roost count on Sunday 3rd January 2010

Counts will begin two hours before sunset (14:04 on Jan 3rd) and will continue for half an hour after sunset (16:34) to allow for any individuals arriving in the residual light of dusk.

The intention is to have several people counting at each site in order to control for individual error and allow cover for all entry routes into the roost.

No experience is necessary to assist with the count—a full and clear protocol, along with data collection sheets, will be provided.

The data collected during these counts will be prepared for publication in relevant journals and will be widely publicised.

If you can help, then please email parakeet@imperial.ac.uk.

Tiger moth uses sonar weapon to evade bats

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Jesse Barber

Photo:

Moth vs. bat arms race

Bats are often attracted to our gardens because of the wealth of insects that are found flying around our flower beds and ponds. Bats locate insects by using echo location, but have you ever thought that the insects themselves may have a strategy to avoid being eaten.

A species of tiger moth has developed a way of avoiding being eaten by the bat by playing a trick with sound. The moth does this by creating 450 ultrasonic clicks in a tenth of a second to jam the hungry bat's sonar and escape death.

This discovery was made by Aaron Corcoran, a Wake Forest University graduate student, and William Conner, professor of biology at Wake Forest. "This is the first example we have encountered of prey that jams biological sonar," says Conner.

Experiments in the bat cave

In a series of experiments, Corcoran and Conner observed free-flying big brown bats hunting moths in a "bat cave" set up in the basement of the biology building. High-speed infrared video cameras recorded the interactions between predator and prey. The researchers also recorded the high-frequency sounds made by both the bats and the moths during each interaction.

Tymbals

When a tiger moth hears the sonar pings of a bat in search of prey, it clicks back using a paired set of structures called "tymbals," Corcoran says. The high-speed, high-frequency clicks disrupt the bat's echolocation cycle.

Although the researchers have yet to discover exactly how the jamming works, the sounds could mask the echoes that the bat uses to locate the moth. Or, it might blur the bat's acoustic image of the moth so the bat can't determine its exact location. "Sonar jamming illustrates a new level of escalation in a 50-million-year-old arms race," Corcoran says.

Now, Corcoran is doing field research to learn more about how the sonar-jamming defence works in the wild. He has found the perfect place to study the ultrasonic battle of bats and moths, in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona. One in every three moths is a *Bertholdia trigona*, the species of moth that uses ultrasonic clicks as a sonar-jamming defence. Many species of bats, including the one they studied in the lab, are also prevalent. Corcoran is trying to figure out if these moths are using evasive manoeuvring combined with sound to evade predation by bats. "Are they combining defences or does sonar jamming work so well that they go along their way without making elaborate loops and spirals to avoid being eaten," Corcoran says.

He would also like to know if the defence that works so well against big brown bats in the lab, will work against other species of bats in the wild.

The research documenting the bat vs. moth evolutionary arms race was published in *Science*. Corcoran will also present his findings at the North American Symposium on Bat Research in November and travelled to Japan to address the Animal Sonar Symposium this summer.

Farmland bird decline continues; but woodland and wetland birds improve

03/11/2009 23:05:23 Published by RSPB and Wildlife Extra in November 2009



Common whitethroat - Sylvia communis:

Farmland bird figures confirm urgent need for action, say RSPB

Over the years the Go Wild in the Garden Newsletter has featured a considerable amount of information on birds that visit our gardens, however newly released UK government figures provide a mixed picture of the fortunes of farmland birds in England with a continued downward trend in populations, but some tentative signs of recovery. Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) has unveiled its annual population figures on the 19 officially recognised farmland bird species - the Farmland Bird Index (FBI).

England FBI at lowest ever point

The official Government FBI indicator for England - which is calculated by taking current and previous years' survey results into account - declined for the sixth year running in 2008. This means the current FBI indicator is at its lowest ever and farmland birds populations last year were 52% lower than when records began back in 1970.

"These precious birds have been an important part of the English countryside for generations but in recent decades they have suffered huge declines," said Mark Avery, RSPB director of conservation. "The RSPB is backing a major new initiative from the farming industry, the Campaign for the Farmed Environment, which is being launched next month in a concerted effort to bring wildlife back to our rural landscape.

These new figures show how vitally important it is that this campaign succeeds - if these birds disappear then we will have lost one of the unique and defining features of the English countryside."

12 species in decline

The FBI figure dropped by 2.26 per cent between 2007 and 2008, almost as steep as the drop between 2006 and 2007 of 2.37 per cent.

Twelve of the 19 species on the FBI list declined between 2007 and 2008 and of those 10 have been in continual decline for the past four years.



Linnet; Carduelis cannabina; male; perched on gorse. Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com).

As is often the case with statistical analysis of large amounts of data the story behind the figures is complex. Although the official FBI indicator figure signals a continued decline in farmland birds, the raw year on year data does show a small increase in the numbers of birds seen.

Glimmer of hope

Dr Avery explains: "Statistics on bird populations rarely create graphs with perfectly straight lines as all kinds of unpredictable influences can cause fluctuations. So while this small one year increase is unlikely to indicate anything more than a blip in the figures, it does give us a glimmer of hope for the future of our farmland birds and should provide encouragement for farmers'

future efforts to help wildlife." **Bird diseases - Clean water essential**

Woodland and wetland indices - Faring better

November also saw the release of similar survey figures for woodland and wetland birds, both of which are faring better than farmland birds. The English woodland bird index of 35 species has declined by 20% since 1970, while the wetland bird index of 26 species has increased by 12 % since 1975.

41% increase in birds on RSPB farm

The RSPB's own Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire, meanwhile, has seen a record year for birds.

The latest survey results show that the FBI species at Hope Farm - which features the latest wildlife friendly farming measures - have risen 177% since the charity bought the land in 2000.

The figures show there were 234 breeding pairs of FBI list birds on the farm this year compared with 165 last year - an increase of 41%. And once again the farm's wheat and oilseed rape yields are above the national average.

The 19 bird species on the Farmland Bird Index are: kestrel, grey partridge, lapwing, stock dove, woodpigeon, turtle dove, skylark, yellow wagtail, whitethroat, jackdaw, starling, greenfinch, goldfinch, linnet, yellow hammer, reed bunting, corn bunting, rook and tree sparrow.

Bird table hygiene is vital – What to do



04/11/2009 08:33:19

Greenfinches are particularly susceptible to disease. Picture: RSPB

The RSPB is urging good hygiene around bird feeders, tables and water baths to help garden birds stay healthy this winter.

Cold weather can trigger outbreaks of diseases that seriously affect garden birds, and the wildlife charity has released advice on how to help reduce the risk of virulent infections spreading.

Wild birds in gardens are susceptible to a variety of diseases, such as certain strains of salmonella in winter, and trichomoniasis in late summer and autumn. And as the weather gets colder, larger numbers of birds visit gardens for our food supplies and fresh, unfrozen water, making it easier for disease to spread.

Resistance to disease is low in winter

Diseases can spread especially quickly if droppings are allowed to mix with uneaten food. In cold weather, birds' resistance to illness becomes even lower making them particularly vulnerable, and disease can easily kill them.

Wash your hands

But the RSPB believes that taking steps to keep feeding stations clean and healthy can be very effective in protecting garden birds. It's extremely rare for any bird diseases to pass to people or to pets like cats and dogs. Nevertheless, the RSPB recommends careful hand washing after cleaning feeders and water baths.

RSPB says that choosing feeders and water baths that can be thoroughly cleaned in the first instance is vital.

Here are some tips:

- Choose smooth feeders and water baths with no corners that could trap food or dirt
- Make sure that your feeders have drainage holes to avoid moisture building up
- Using more than one feeding site to reduce the number of birds in one place
- Rotate feeders around several locations to 'rest' each spot to prevent build up of infection on the ground underneath.
- Clean and disinfect feeders and water baths regularly
- Rinse bird feeders thoroughly and allow them to air dry completely - this itself will kill some diseases
- Keep the bucket and brush you clean feeders with outside and use them just for this purpose
- Sweeping up droppings and spilt or old food and dispose of it carefully in an outside bin
- Change the water in baths frequently - ideally daily
- The drip water system prevents diseases

spreading through bird populations.

- Wash hands carefully afterwards

Sick birds

Sick birds can be very obvious. Typical signs include lethargy and fluffed up plumage. In some diseases, there are additional symptoms like drooling saliva, regurgitating food, difficulty swallowing and laboured breathing. Some may have matted wet plumage around the face and beak or swelling in the neck.

The best thing people can do is to prevent outbreaks in the first place with good garden hygiene. The RSPB's Kirsti Peck says: "As the weather gets colder, and our birds come into our gardens in bigger numbers, it is no surprise they can become vulnerable to diseases. It can be very distressing to find sick or dead birds, but there are things you can do to avoid it happening. We all think good hygiene is important in our homes and it need be no great effort to do the same in our garden. We'd urge everyone to clean their baths and feeders regularly to help keep garden bird infections to a minimum."

What to do?



For more information and advice on sick and injured birds visit www.rspb.org.uk/advice. If you are worried about sick or dead birds in your garden email the RSPB's wildlife enquiries team at wildlife@rspb.org.uk or call 01767 693690

Gardens can be wildlife havens, or deadly traps

Gardens not always rosy for wildlife - Common hazards can be easily removed and nasty injuries can be avoided, say RSPB officers.

Even the smallest gardens can be wildlife havens, but birds and other creatures are sustaining injuries from hazards that could easily be prevented.

Over a quarter of all calls to the RSPB's wildlife enquiries line at the moment are from gardeners reporting injuries to birds and other wildlife.

Reports include birds crashing into windows, getting feet and beaks trapped and drowning in water butts to baby birds being abandoned because of hedge cutting and hedgehogs being injured when piles of leaves are swept away.



Poorly designed bird feeders can be deadly. Photo RSPB.com 04/09/2009 09:23:01

This is the RSPB's guide to the main garden hazards at this time of year and how to avoid them:

Window strikes & garden mirrors

Thousands of birds fly into windows at this time of year with the sun lower in the sky and clumsy late youngsters flying around. Window strikes are often fatal. They can be prevented with window stickers that have a scarecrow effect. Garden mirrors can be equally hazardous.

Loose netting

Loose fruit netting and mesh bags containing fat balls can easily trap birds feet and beaks. Pull netting over fruit or ponds taught and remove fat balls from bags.

Hedge cutting - Wait until October

Some late nesting birds go long into September and hedge cutting and maintenance can disturb the adults so they abandon their chicks. Worse still, power tools can injure the birds or destroy the nest. Hedge cutting is best left until the end of September/early October.

Leaf and log piles

Many hedgehogs sustain horrific injuries when people clear log piles with rakes and power tools. Some have literally been sliced in half and others have lost legs and noses. Always clear log piles towards hibernation periods with extra care and avoid using sharp tools.

Drowning - Cover water butts

Many birds drown in water butts and steep sided ponds at this time of year as they overstretch and fall in. Put a lid on butts if possible and if building a pond try to create gentle slopes so birds can drink easier and mammals like hedgehogs can get out.

Feeders - Can be deadly

Poor quality bird feeders are responsible for hundreds of birds getting trapped and being unable to escape, as well as squirrels. Feet get caught in cheap wire netting round the outside and some birds can even get their heads caught in the hole the food comes out. Make sure you check for any loose bits of wire and choose a feeder made from sturdy materials. Always opt for a feeder with a lid so birds don't try and access food from the top and get stuck that way.

Slug pellets

Some slug pellets can pose a threat to wildlife if used excessively. If birds or hedgehogs eat the slugs and snails that have been tempted by Metaldehyde pellets, this chemical can accumulate inside the unfortunate animal making them very poorly. It is best to use non-toxic control such as beer traps, barriers and hand picking.

Easily avoidable

Val Osborne from the RSPB's Wildlife Enquiries team says: "Many reports of injuries or discomfort to wildlife at this time of year could easily be avoided. With the sun lower in the sky and wildlife slightly less frantic after the breeding season they seem to become almost a bit more laid back and flying into windows and falling into water butts is common.

"It's extremely distressing for the wildlife and upsetting for the gardener and there are countless simple and inexpensive things we can do to prevent

any further accidents happening."

For more information about looking after the wildlife in your garden and avoiding the pitfalls visit www.rspb.org.uk

Don't cut hedges yet – Birds need the berries



13/11/2009 12:12:21
Blue tit. Credit Ben Hall (rspb-images.com)

Early hedge cutting could starve birds of berries. Cutting back hedges and bushes too early this year could starve birds of late autumn berries, says the RSPB. The mild weather has meant birds are feasting on insects later this year. They have not had to turn to autumn fruits yet, so many hedgerows are still bursting with berries. These sources of food are what birds rely on to set them up for the whole winter.

More important than ever

Traditionally, people start trimming their bushes at this time of year once the breeding season is over and before birds start scoping out roost sites. The RSPB always suggests waiting until later in the winter, but this year it's even more important than recent years.

Please don't cut hedges yet

RSPB says that cutting hedges back now would deprive birds of a vital natural food source, especially as berries become a more edible and important food source after early frosts when they become softer. RSPB is appealing to gardeners, farmers and councils not to cut hedges until later in the winter or early spring when all the berries and fruit have been eaten.

Rotate hedge cutting

They are also suggesting cutting hedges on rotation as cutting some hedgerow species every year will prevent the plants from producing large amounts of berries. Many bird species will benefit from this including residents like bullfinches and song thrushes and winter migrants such as redwings and fieldfares.



*Frosted berries in the garden of the RSPB HQ.
Credit Andy Hay (rspb-images.com).*

Richard James, RSPB Wildlife Adviser says: 'The autumn berry and fruit crop is an important food source for many birds. If cutting can be put off until later in the year it can help provide our birds with an additional food supply.'

"Usually, once any late nesters have flown the nest we would say it was a good time to start tidying hedgerows and trimming bushes and shrubs. They can get straggly and when they are stripped bare of berries they are of less use to birds. But this year, the weather only started to get really chilly in the last few days, and there are still plenty of berries on many hedges, in gardens and across the countryside. We'd urge anyone thinking of a tidy up to wait just a few more weeks until the natural food has been eaten."

Contact Us

If you wish to contact us about anything in this newsletter or wildlife gardening in general, please contact us at:

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