

The RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch is vital this year, says Dominic Couzens





Stocktaking isn't usually fun, but next weekend there will be an exception - the RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch. This year more than half a million people are expected to devote a blissful hour sitting by a window watching and counting their garden visitors, and the results that they send to the RSPB are set to be the most significant and intriguing in the survey's 33-year history.

Why? Because things have not been normal this winter. Unless you have been on Mars, you will have noticed that Britain has just suffered its coldest December for more than 100 years. This is the second winter in succession with a serious cold snap. Such extreme conditions have had a major effect on the populations of many of our birds, and the Birdwatch survey will begin to tell us which species have been left standing and how many there are. It might sound peculiar, given all the cold weather, but the chances of seeing an unusual species in your garden over the next few weeks are high.

In a normal winter, Britain is the country of choice for the discerning European avian visitor in need of winter refuge, drawn to our usual weather conditions, which are damp and chilly but only occasionally sub-freezing. Usually birds such as redwings, fieldfares and bramblings from the Continent spread out over fields and woodlands throughout the winter months and don't necessarily visit gardens. This year, however, they have found their usual feeding grounds covered up or frozen out, so they have come to our gardens, looking for cosseted and cultivated berry bushes, as well as fruit or seeds left out for them by kindly humans. Other birds who normally feed on open ground have also been exploring gardens this winter, especially in rural areas; reed buntings and yellowhammers are worth looking out for. You might also spot meadow pipits and pied wagtails wandering over your lawn.

Blackcaps, which usually live in woodlands, especially in the south, are also venturing into gardens, and bullfinches are finding lawns and flower beds more profitable than snowed-out winter hedgerows.

A bird constantly in the news this winter is the waxwing. This silky-plumaged species always looks so well turned-out that it should belong on the high street - and coincidentally it often can be found there, feeding on berries planted to soften the edges of town centres and superstore car parks.

Strictly speaking, it's not the weather per se that is forcing these beauties to change their habits, so much as the impact of the weather on the food supply. Be that as it may; just about now they could be visiting your garden at any time.

Speaking of the unusual, another effect of the exceptional weather is to make birds do strange things.

People have been reporting "flocks" of robins in their gardens during the cold snap, for example, whereas at other times robins are violently opposed to sharing their space with a rival bird.

Other red-blooded birds such as blackbirds and mistle thrushes are also being forced to share berries and lawn space with birds that they would normally chase away. You could say that wherever a food source occurs, including bird tables and feeders, birds are forced to cope with increased competition in harsh conditions.

Unfortunately, along with these guest appearances, those who have done the Big Garden Birdwatch survey for consecutive years will possibly notice that numbers of many species are down. For vast numbers of birds the cold snap in December lasted so long that they did not survive.

Even among familiar and tough characters such as blue tits and great tits, numbers are severely depleted. However, it is the smallest-bodied birds that suffer the most, and in our gardens that means, in particular, the coal tit, long-tailed tit, wren and goldcrest. The problem for these midgets is that they have to spend more or less all day feeding, or they will be unable to build up enough fat to survive the long nights. This

isn't always possible. Groups of these species will huddle together to share heat and reduce the relative surface area over which heat is lost, but the truth is many of them will not make it.

So when you begin your count, don't forget to marvel that any of your garden birds have managed to survive winter at all.



The Big Garden Birdwatch 2011 runs January 29 and 30. To take part, contact the RSPB (www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch)

Unusual birds to look out for Fieldfare, Redwing, Mistle thrush, Brambling, Redpoll, Meadow pipit, Reed bunting, Yellowhammer, Waxwing.

Small birds that are most threatened by harsh weather: Blue tit, Coal tit. Long-tailed tit, Wren, Goldcrest, Treecreeper.

Birds you are likely to see in larger numbers: Blackcap, Chaffinch, Siskin