

BIRDING UNDER LOCKDOWN IN LONDON: A HOME AND GARDEN BIRD SURVEY

by Czech Conroy on behalf of CLLG

1. Introduction

RSPB Central London Local Group (CLLG) carried out a survey of the bird species seen or heard by its members during the Covid-19 lockdown. The survey was launched on 29 May, and was limited to members living in the Greater London area. This report covers records submitted up to and including 10 June 2020.

2. Methodology

CLLG has a Facebook group for its members, and the survey was conducted through this group (of 62 people at the time), using Facebook's 'poll' function. Members were asked to indicate (through a tick against relevant species) those bird species that they "have seen (or heard) *in or above your garden, or from your home (e.g. looking out of the window)*" during the lockdown period. It was not necessary to have a garden in order to be able to participate in the survey.

Twenty common species were included in the initial list on Facebook, but members were free to add more species to the list. Species recorded could have been seen or heard on any day(s) during the period 23 March to 10 June. Thus, they could be residents, summer visitors or passage migrants.

3. Survey Findings

Thirty one members of the group (50%) participated in the survey. Altogether, 51 species were recorded. The species have been ranked; and divided into four categories on the basis of the number of people who recorded them:

1. species recorded by at least two-thirds of survey participants
2. other species recorded by one-third or more of participants
3. species recorded by 3-10 participants
4. seldom recorded species.

3.1 Most Widely Observed Species

Four species tied for first place, having been seen (or heard) by all 31 survey participants - Blue tit, Great tit, Magpie and Blackbird. Robin (30) and Wood pigeon (29) were recorded by almost everyone, and a further six species were observed by over two-thirds of participants. The House sparrow and the Swift were among those, despite the decline in numbers experienced by both in recent decades. The Goldfinch was also in this category, in line with the relative increase in its numbers nationally during the last 25 years.

Table 1 Species recorded by at least two-thirds of survey participants

Species	Rank	Number of people recording
Blue tit	1	31
Great tit	1	31
Magpie	1	31
Blackbird	1	31
Robin	5	30
Wood pigeon	6	29
Ring-necked parakeet	7	27
Carrion crow	8	26
House sparrow	9	24
Feral pigeon	9	24
Goldfinch	9	24
Dunnock	12	23
Swift	13	22

3.2 Other species recorded by one-third or more of survey participants

There were seven birds in this category, with Starling ranked highest at 14th. Jays were another widely observed corvid, but less so than Magpie and Carrion crow in category 1. Coal tit and Long-tailed tit represent the tit family in this category, less widely reported than Blue and Great tits. The Blackcap is the only warbler in this group: it may have been heard more often than seen.

Table 2 Other Species recorded by one-third or more of survey participants

Species	Rank	Number of people recording
Starling	14	20
Jay	15	18
Wren	15	18
Coal tit	17	17
Herring gull	18	15
Long tailed tit	19	11
Blackcap	19	11

3.3 Species observed by 3-10 participants

There were 17 species in this category, many of which would have been seen flying over people's homes or gardens, rather than being in gardens. Five of this category were raptors - Red kite, Common buzzard, Peregrine falcon, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel; two were finches - Greenfinch and Chaffinch; and two were thrushes - Mistle thrush and Song thrush. It is

interesting that five raptor species were seen or heard at least as often as Song thrush and Chaffinch. That almost certainly would not have been the case 20 years ago.

Table 3 Species observed by 3-10 participants

Species	Rank	Number of people recording
Great spotted woodpecker	21	10
Jackdaw	22	9
Collared dove	23	8
Red kite	24	7
Buzzard	25	6
Goldcrest	25	6
Greenfinch	27	5
Mistle thrush	27	5
Cormorant	27	5
Lesser black-backed gull	27	5
Song thrush	31	4
Peregrine falcon	31	4
Sparrowhawk	31	4
Kestrel	31	4
Chaffinch	35	4
Nuthatch	35	3
Mallard	35	3

3.4 Seldom observed species

Again, many of these species (14), including the wetland ones, would have been observed flying over. Some (e.g. Tawny owl, Green woodpecker, Oystercatcher) may have been heard, but not necessarily seen.

Table 4 Species observed by two people or less

Species	Rank	Number of people recording
Tawny owl	38	2
Stock dove	38	2
Little egret	38	2
Grey heron	38	2
Green woodpecker	38	2
Willow warbler	43	1
Pied wagtail	43	1
Canada goose	43	1
Mute swan	43	1
Oystercatcher	43	1
Little owl	43	1
Chiffchaff	43	1
Hobby	43	1
Marsh harrier	43	1

4. Discussion of the Survey Findings

It is interesting to compare the findings of this survey with those of the BTO's Garden BirdWatch (GBW), although we only have national data for the latter. It is also important to bear in mind that the BTO survey:

- only includes records of birds heard or seen in the recorder's garden;
- does not include birds that are flying past overhead or birds outside the garden; and
- includes records for the whole year.

Table 5 Comparison of rankings of 25 species with those of BTO GBW 2019

Species	Rank		Difference in rankings*
	CLLG Survey	BTO GBW	
Blue tit	1	1	0
Great tit	1	5	+4
Magpie	1	9	+8
Blackbird	1	3	+2
Robin	5	4	-1
Wood pigeon	6	2	-4
Ring-necked parakeet	7	39	+32
Carrion crow	8	16	+8
House sparrow	9	7	-2
Feral pigeon	9	20	+11
Goldfinch	9	8	-1
Dunnock	12	6	-6
Swift	13	35	+22
Starling	14	13	-1
Jay	15	25	+10
Herring gull	16	33	+17
Coal tit	17	12	-5
Wren	17	17	0
Long tailed tit	19	18	-1
Blackcap	19	28	+9
Great spotted woodpecker	21	19	-2
Jackdaw	22	14	-8
Collared dove	23	10	-13
Red kite	24	- (not in top 40)	-
Buzzard	25	- (not in top 40)	-

* The rankings of species in the CLLG survey in comparison with those in the BTO survey (e.g. Great tit is four places higher in CLLG survey).

For some species the rankings are very similar, if not identical; while for others there are major differences. Species with similar rankings in the two surveys were: Blue tit (0), Blackbird (+2), Robin (-1), House sparrow (-2), Goldfinch (-1), Starling (-1), Wren (0), Long-tailed tit (-1) and Great-spotted woodpecker (-2).

The high ranking of the Goldfinch in the CLLG survey mirrors that in the GBW survey. We know from the latter that there "are now two and a half times as many Goldfinches in the UK as there were 25 years ago", when they were the 20th most common species in the GBW survey. BTO assume "that this is mainly due to these birds exploiting garden food supplies, initially niger seed and later sunflower hearts, though there may be other factors at play".

4.1 Reasons for markedly different rankings of some species

Species that are much higher in the CLLG rankings include: Magpie (+8), Ring-necked parakeet (+32), Carrion crow (+8), Feral pigeon (+11), Swift (+22), Jay (+10), Herring gull (+17) and Blackcap (+9).

The Ring-necked parakeet's much higher ranking is not surprising, given that its distribution in Britain is very much concentrated in south-east England, including much of Greater London. Feral pigeons and Swifts, being predominantly urban birds, would also be expected to figure higher in the CLLG survey rankings than in the national ones; and in the case of Swifts the CLLG survey includes any aerial sightings, whereas the BTO survey does not.

The reason for the significantly higher ranking of the Blackcap in the CLLG survey is less obvious. It may be related to: (a) the fact that audio records were included in our survey as well as visual ones; and/or (b) the high density of garden feeders within urban areas. On the other hand, the BTO survey includes winter sightings, when Blackcaps are more visible due to the lack of leaves on trees and bushes.

The higher rankings of Magpie, Carrion crow and Jay are also somewhat surprising - why would they be seen relatively more widely in suburban London than in the country as a whole? In the case of Magpie and Carrion crow this might be related to the fact that they are opportunistic generalists that have been able to adapt to, and take advantage of, increased and varied food opportunities in urban areas. Jays (and maybe Carrion crows and Magpies too) may be attracted to urban gardens in spring by the concentration of nests and the opportunities they provide for predation.

Species that were notably lower in the CLLG rankings were Dunnock (-6), Coal tit (-5), Jackdaw (-8) and Collared dove (-13). The Dunnock's lower ranking is surprising, as it is quite common in Greater London, particularly in gardens.

5. Conclusion

Even when London's human inhabitants are largely confined to their homes, gardens and immediate local areas, there are still plenty of opportunities for observing birds, and still quite a variety of species to be seen or heard. The lockdown has encouraged us to notice and appreciate more the birds on our doorstep.