



Countryside Close to Home

Winter: it might be cold but there's still plenty of wildlife to enjoy in the garden

The three months which meteorologists regard as winter are December, January and February. Wintry weather might come earlier than December 1st and sometimes persists well into spring. Although Christmas cards often depict snow, and Easter cards may feature spring flowers, snow is actually more commonly encountered at Easter than at Christmas. There's an old saying: 'as the days grow longer the cold grows stronger'. January is on average the coldest month, but more often than not the second week in February is the coldest period of the year.

Winter isn't packed full of wildlife, unlike the other seasons. On some dark days, especially in December, gardens and the countryside seem empty of life. This means that the first stirrings of wildlife in January and February are extra-special. It's a moment to pause and reflect when you hear for the first time in the year the quiet of the January dusk pierced by the thrush's song. Often only a few days later a blackbird's song might be heard, welcoming the sunrise. It's a sound full of anticipation for the year ahead.

Winter-flowering plants and trees, and winter fruits and berries

In some country districts it was the custom to keep the Christmastide greenery in the house until February 2nd, the Christian feast of Candlemas. The date was also a pre-Christian festival of light at the mid-point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. An anecdote from Shropshire tells that women would replace their Christmas greenery on this day with bowls of snowdrops, also known as Candlemas bells: their flowering is a sure sign that spring is on its way.



The leaves of spring bulbs often start to push up into the light before Christmas, especially if the weather is mild. These snowdrops were caught by a fall of snow in late January, but snow doesn't seem to do them any harm. An alternative name is 'snow piercer', due to their hardened leaf-tips adapted to growing up through frozen soil. They are possibly not a native species, although widespread in the countryside, especially alongside riverbanks, and they are regarded as a wild flower. Many are associated with ecclesiastical buildings, which is perhaps where colonies started and subsequently escaped from.

Fruits like holly berries and haws which persist into winter provide vital food for birds, including wintering redwings and fieldfares.

Birds have often stripped the holly berries in my garden hedge completely by Christmas.

Holly berries



On sunny winter days bees and other pollinating insects are tempted out of their winter homes to go in search of both nectar and pollen. Ivy carries its flowers until well into winter, an important nectar and pollen source. Once the flowers are over the fruits appear: they contain fats which provide valuable food for birds such as thrushes, blackbirds and wintering blackcaps.

This photo was taken in November, but ivy fruits persist until at least Christmas and make great decorations. The ivy is growing over the stump of a hawthorn tree which died. We removed most of the dead crown but kept the stump at about 12 feet above the ground for ivy to colonise.



Ivy flowerheads



This photo was taken on Christmas Day. Blossom at this time of year always lifts the spirits. This species is known as autumn-flowering cherry, since it sometimes flowers in autumn, although its best blossom is usually in late winter and early spring.

Blossom is a source of pollen, providing protein and oils to insects. Early-flowering garden flowers rich in pollen include snowdrops, winter aconites and crocuses. Winter-flowering shrubs like wintersweet and various forms of Viburnum also produce pollen.

Prunus x subhirtella 'Autumnalis Rosea'

An introduced *Prunus* or plum species, Cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) is native to south-east Europe and grows in a hedge in my garden. It is the earliest flowering of the *Prunus* species, often in flower in February in mild winters. It can be confused with native blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) but as well as being in flower much earlier in the year, the flower petals have narrower bases, making the flower look less entire. Bullfinches love the flower buds and I have seen as many as eight pairs feasting on them in my hedge at one time.

Cherry plum



Cherry plum is especially common in hedges in the Chilterns (where I live) and in the Vale of Aylesbury. The Rothschild family introduced this plant onto the land around the houses they built in this area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Blackthorn



Watching birds in winter



Winter is a good time to look for birds in gardens and green spaces, because many trees and shrubs have leafless branches, making the birds easier to see.

Bird feeders placed near your windows will encourage birds to come closer, and they may perch on nearby branches while waiting to visit a feeder. This blue tit, puffed up against the cold, was waiting in a rose bush right outside my window.

If squirrels are troublesome on feeders, try hanging them from a house wall (a tip I learnt from the TV gardener Monty Don). It works for me.

Blue tit

Watching birds which regularly visit feeders helps to identify similar species which might be confusing. Coal tits are similar in size to blue tits. Spending more time than blue tits in conifer woods, they will also appear in gardens to visit feeders. Coal tits share features with both great and blue tits. Unique to coal tits is the white strip on the back of the head, clearly seen in this photo below.



Coal tits

Coal tits regularly take food away from feeders to store or cache for eating later. Both blue and coal tits nest in holes in trees and also in garden nest boxes.



The largest of the tits resident in Britain, the great tit has a distinctive 'teacher-teacher' call. Its yellow underparts with a black central band, glossy black head and large white cheeks are all clearly shown here.

Great tits also nest in bird boxes, and in holes in trees. They frequently visit bird feeders, often aggressively chasing away other birds. Like many birds they often perch nearby before visiting a feeder, perhaps waiting their turn or checking that no predators are lurking in sight.

Great tit



The last of the quartet of tit species often seen in gardens and open spaces, and on feeders, is the long-tailed tit. Easily distinguished by its very long tail and patches of pale pink plumage, especially on the underparts, this is my favourite bird.

These birds move around in sizable family groups as well as in flocks of mixed tit species, which might be joined by goldcrests and tree creepers. They also mass on feeders, but are restless birds and seldom stay in one place for long.

Long-tailed tits

Unlike the other three species of tits featured here which will use nest boxes and otherwise nest in holes, long-tailed tits construct beautiful domed nests in dense vegetation, made from moss, lichen and spiders' webs, lined with feathers and with a side entrance. I once watched a pair making a nest for about two weeks before laying its clutch and starting to sit.



There is a debate growing about the value of putting out food for birds, with some research suggesting that the species which tend to dominate feeding places are displacing more solitary species. Also causing concern is the growing impact of bird diseases: these may be spread from feeding places and almost certainly have caused the decline of some species such as greenfinches. So regular cleaning of feeding places is essential.

I'm in no doubt that in really bad weather feeding helps birds to survive. In the summer I put away my feeders and let the birds enjoy the seeds and invertebrates in the garden. They do a great job of pest control.

Robin in a blizzard

Putting out fresh cold water is also really helpful to birds all year, especially if you don't have any other water sources nearby. A bird bath makes a focal point in a garden, but any wide shallow container works just as well.

Although tits dominate the bird feeders for much of the time, other birds use them too. Robins often patiently wait their turn while the voracious tits are feeding, then pop in for a quick beakful when the opportunity arises.

Underneath the feeders there are usually seeds to clear up, which the squirrels often devour. Ground feeding birds take advantage of the seeds too, especially dunnocks. Magpies have a go at perching on the feeders but they lack the agility of the smaller birds and usually resort to feeding on the ground as well.



Robin waiting its turn at a feeder



We often hear and see great spotted woodpeckers in the garden and on the feeders. We frequently hear the gentle tapping of a nuthatch, another common woodland bird species, searching for insects on the trunks of the larger garden trees and shrubs. They stay largely invisible for much of the year, with just an occasional sighting on the pine tree trunks, and a view of them rapidly departing when disturbed.

Once the feeders go out nuthatches are regular visitors, often aggressively chasing away other occupants. Used to feeding under tree branches, and heading down tree trunks head-first, they easily cope with feeders.

Nuthatch

Goldcrests announce their presence in the garden with their rather thin and high-pitched call. They are Europe's smallest bird, along with firecrests. Their bright yellow head stripe is distinctive; they might be mistaken for a small coal tit otherwise. They often join mixed flocks of tits and other species in winter.

In autumn many goldcrests fly in from Scandinavia to escape the harsh weather there. It's amazing to think that a bird weighing about the same as a 20 pence piece can fly that far.

This goldcrest is searching for food - typically tiny insects - among the yew hedge branches.

Goldcrest



Blackbirds like this male, a member of the thrush family (the females are brown), do much of their winter feeding in the leaf litter which accumulates in borders. Here they find worms and invertebrates.

Fieldfares, which are winter visitors and also members of the thrush family, love to feed on fallen apples.

Wrens also do much of their feeding in the leaf litter under plants and in the corners of paving and steps. So leaving piles of leaves such places helps these tiny birds to survive.

Male blackbird



Three species of finch appear regularly in my garden. These birds are similar in size or slightly larger than a robin. They are mainly seed eaters although eat invertebrates as well when seeds are scarce. They use their powerful beaks to pull seeds from seed heads and split them too. In previous articles in this series I've featured bullfinches and goldfinches.

This male chaffinch completes the trio. The species is one of the UK's most common birds, although numbers have declined slightly in recent years. The reference sources say that chaffinches don't use feeders, but they do in my garden!

Greenfinches were once common in the garden, often giving away their presence by the long drawn out and rather monotonous phrases of their song. Lately their numbers have declined, probably due to the disease trichomonosis, which makes it difficult for birds to feed. This is a reason to keep feeders clean.

Male chaffinch

Another finch which we sometimes see in the garden is the siskin. They are UK residents living mainly in woodland in summer, where they especially enjoy tree seeds but also eat insects. Winter numbers are augmented by migrants from further north: at this time of year they range more widely looking for food and will visit gardens. The males are more brightly coloured.



Siskins in my garden in late January

Winter birdsong

Most birds are silent in the autumn and early winter, except for alarm calls. Only robins sing at this time, with the females joining the males in song until the turn of the year.



In January other birds begin to sing again. You might hear a thrush singing from a treetop towards dusk early in the month. From mid-January the much-loved morning song of the male blackbirds (left) is heard again.

Other birds are noisy during January and February, especially blue tits, which move around in pairs calling constantly. The 'teacher-teacher' call of great tits gets going too at the same time.

Birds sing to establish their territories and attract a mate. Not a song, but with a similar purpose, from January you might hear the staccato drumming of a great spotted woodpecker in woods and orchards. Its lesser relative drums too but is sadly now quite rare.

Male blackbird

Seldom seen, you will know if tawny owls are about from their call, often heard through the night until just before dawn. The male call is a characteristic owl hooting: you might hear one nearby and another answering from a distance. The female call is the classic 'to-whit': a pair calling together will sound like 'to-whit, to-who'.

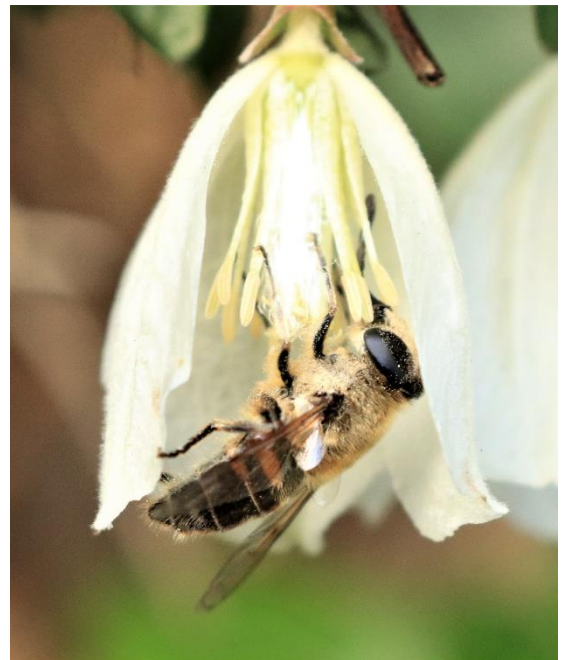
Tawny owls are one of the earliest species to start breeding, from February, along with ravens and herons. In the middle of the month we mark St Valentine's Day on the 14th. The date is also sometimes known as the birds' wedding day, as many birds pair up at this time, noted by poets including Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Winter insects

In mild winter weather it is worth looking out for honey bees and queen bumble bees visiting winter flowers. Honey bees don't hibernate but huddle together in the hive to keep warm and feed on honey stores made the previous summer to produce body heat.

On mild and sunny days a few honey bees emerge to stock up on fresh supplies of nectar. In this photo, taken on 28th January, a honey bee is visiting a Clematis cirrhosa flower. The beautiful nodding bells of this clematis are usually in flower throughout the winter.

Only queen bumblebees live through the winter, hibernating underground. If you see one tempted out in winter it will almost certainly be a buff-tailed bumblebee: I've seen them in my garden on winter honeysuckle in mid-January. They don't make honey stores but rely on body fat built up from feeding on nectar and pollen the previous year. If they wake early in the year they will go out in search of nectar.



Honey bee on Clematis cirrhosa

On sunny days too you might see a small cloud of tiny insects dancing over grass or other vegetation. These are winter gnats. Also called winter craneflies, they prefer habitats rich in decaying vegetation. As the weather warms they hide away in the shade of trees. The cloud, sometimes called a ghost, is likely to be made up of males, performing courtship dances to attract females. Their reflective wings catch low winter sunshine, making them visible to humans, but also to small birds looking for some food on days when insect life is scarce. Winter gnats can even be seen flying over lying snow.



A few of the UK's butterfly species pass the winter as adults. Some, including the brimstone and comma, hide away under ivy or deep in other vegetation, especially evergreens.

You might find peacocks and small tortoiseshells in the corner of a cool shed, garage or outhouse. They may look dead but don't disturb any you find. Red admirals are increasingly overwintering in the UK, possibly due to milder winters.

I have a record from 2021 of a brimstone seen in my garden on 24th February, although this photo of the species was taken in April. It's a sign of spring which I always look forward to seeing.

Brimstone butterfly

Occasionally there are very early sightings of adult butterflies of species which normally overwinter as an earlier stage of their life cycle. This includes the speckled wood, which is sometimes seen as early as January in mild weather. Some sightings are thought to be adults from the previous year which have somehow survived the winter. With climate change this might become more common.

The majority of butterflies overwinter in one of the early stages of their life cycles (as an egg, caterpillar or chrysalis). Many lay their eggs on stems or leaves of grasses and other plants, which is where the overwintering stage remains. When we want to attract butterflies to the garden we focus on providing nectar-rich plants, but tend to forget that these insects need somewhere safe to overwinter. Being too tidy, cutting down grass and other vegetation in the autumn, destroys these vital habitats. Instead, leaving tall vegetation in a corner, at the back of a border, or in a hedge bottom, helps butterflies and many other pollinating insects.

Winter pond life

When a garden pond freezes over in cold weather, it's difficult to believe that in spring, summer and autumn it is a focus for garden wildlife. A sudden cold spell or snowfall can make a pond a potentially toxic place for wildlife! There's something missing from this photo and that's some clear, unfrozen water.

I now float an old tennis ball on the water surface in winter, which is enough to keep a small area of the surface free of ice. This allows toxic gases to escape. They arise from decaying plant matter under the water, and can kill frogs. Adult male frogs sometimes lie dormant in the bottom of a pond in winter, breathing through their skin.

It is also a good idea to keep some water ice free at the edges of the pond, where birds can perch to drink.



My garden pond, frozen solid after a fall of snow

Amphibians (frogs, toads and newts) come into ponds to breed, when they lay their spawn underwater. Some adult frogs might stay in the water all year. A few newts might also overwinter in ponds. Other frogs, as well as most newts and all toads, leave the water after breeding and spend the rest of the year in other places, often underground in winter or under dense vegetation.

Frog spawn might be laid as early as January and until April, in large clumps. Toad spawn is very different, laid in long strings from March onwards. Toads prefer deeper water so might not use garden ponds. I haven't seen toad spawn in my pond but sometimes see them in the garden. Newts lay their eggs between February and April individually on leaves of aquatic plants, then wrap them up.



I took this photo of frog spawn in my pond in mid-March, during a cold spring when many species were unusually late to appear for the first time. In some years frog spawn appears much earlier in the year.

Herons regularly visit the pond in our garden. We don't have any fish, so assume they come for amphibians. Our pond is hidden from the house windows behind a dense hedge, and I haven't yet managed to get close enough to photograph a heron by the pond.

Frog spawn and tadpoles are also eaten by a variety of predators including dragonfly larvae, water boatmen and birds. Frogspawn is also damaged by frost.

Frog spawn

The summer pond becomes a home and hunting ground for a variety of species of dragonflies and their cousins the damselflies; some species fly until late autumn. What happens to them in the winter? Most adults die or are snapped up alive by a predator. Being cold-blooded the adults need the sun's warmth to survive, and they only live during a single year.

Late in the autumn we often see this species of dragonfly, common darter, resting in the sun on a warmed stone. It is usually the last species we see in flight before the winter.

Common darter dragonfly in autumn



It's important not to disturb or clean out a pond too much in winter. This avoids unintentionally disrupting or destroying overwintering eggs and larvae, which eventually turn into adult dragonflies or damselflies.

Dragonflies overwinter as eggs or as larvae (also called nymphs). Eggs are laid directly in water or attached to vegetation within or outside a water body. They might stay as eggs until the spring, or hatch into larvae within a few weeks. Larvae are often large and active, feeding on smaller invertebrates. If conditions are cold they may enter a state called diapause, a sort of hibernation. Some species spend several years as larvae. Unlike other insects such as butterflies, dragonflies change from larvae to adults without the pupa or chrysalis stage. The larva climbs up a plant stalk out of the water, where the adult form emerges. In my garden, in a warm spring the first dragonflies and damselflies appear before the end of April, but it might be a month later before they emerge when spring is cold.

Icy Forms



A heavy frost is usually accompanied by a starlit sky, and often followed by clear sunny daytime weather. Early in the day is the time to see the garden and its plants in a new light, with a covering of frost. Hoar frost covers plants in feathery crystals of ice, and forms when water vapour in the air comes into contact with solid surfaces which are below freezing point. Rime forms when water vapour turns to droplets of water first which then freeze.

I photographed this cobweb just as the frozen droplets were melting.

I think this teasel seed head is covered in rime which has just started to melt in the sun, but it's quite difficult in practice to be sure.

Perhaps it is better not to get too technical, but just enjoy the simplicity of this frosted seed head against the blue sky.

Both this teasel and the ivy below were photographed on the same morning following a cold night in late November.



Teasel seed head



Frosted margins on often overlooked or taken-for-granted leaves, like this ivy, make you look again and appreciate their intricate veining.

This is the native ivy (*Hedera helix*). Many other varieties and species of ivy are grown in UK gardens. Some are variegated (with patches of yellow or white amongst the green coloration). These pale patches have no chlorophyll, which gives most leaves their green appearance.

Many species of invertebrates and some birds find valuable shelter within the branches of climbing ivy in winter. By allowing ivy to scramble up walls, fences and trees you are helping these species to flourish.

Ivy leaves

And finally.....

I started my series of articles about the plants, trees and wildlife in my garden in spring, when early-flowering native plant species, many of them yellow, were in full flower in late March and early April. As winter comes to an end and spring approaches, we can look forward with eager anticipation to those flowers appearing again.

Sometimes though in mild years flowers like primroses and hazel catkins (which are the male, pollen-producing flowers of this shrub species) are fully developed much earlier, even in January.



Hazel catkins

You can visit <https://naturescalendar.woodlandtrust.org.uk> to find out how variations in seasonal weather patterns, and climate change, affect the UK's wildlife. Such observations form the science of phenology. You can add your own records to this website.

At the moment we are experiencing milder winters (with a few exceptions such as the cold period called the 'Beast from the East' in 2018). This apparent trend is reflected in earlier flowering times or earlier appearances of leaves on some plants. Some migratory birds are arriving sooner than usual in the spring, and some bird species are starting to nest at an earlier date.

This seventh and final article in my Countryside Close to Home series completes the cycle of the seasons through the year. I hope that my photos (mostly taken in or from my garden) have encouraged you to take a closer look at your gardens and local green spaces, to see what wildlife you can find there. It's fascinating to keep a record of the species you see, especially of first sightings in the spring.