

Nestboxes

A great way to attract birds into your garden is to provide them with safe places to nest. Modern houses have few holes or crevices for nesting, and old trees, which may have suitable holes, are often felled or absent from new housing developments. Nestboxes provide the ideal solution and make excellent substitutes for natural nest sites for hole-nesting birds. They can be designed to suit the requirements of a range of different species, but the most popular are the ones which have an entrance hole suitable for the members of the tit family.

Broadly speaking, there are 2 main categories of box that are suitable for most gardens, though BirdWatch Ireland can supply you from a range of nearly 20 different designs. A box with a small entrance hole will suit the following species: Blue Tit & Coal Tit (25mm), Great Tit & Tree Sparrow (28mm), House Sparrow (32mm), Starling (45mm).

A similar box with the upper half of the front taken away altogether is ideal for Robins, Pied Wagtails and Wrens. Spotted Flycatchers prefer a somewhat shallower open-fronted box. Some other species will use specifically designed nestboxes or platforms, including Swift, Swallow, Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Kestrel, Barn Owl, Jackdaw and Treecreeper. For further details on purchasing or choosing a nestbox shop online at www.birdwatchireland.ie



Dick Courthorn

When & where to put your nestbox

Put your nestbox up well before the start of the breeding season, as many birds begin searching out nest sites from February onwards. Don't be too disappointed if the box isn't used for the first year or two. Ideally it should be located at least 2m from the ground (preferably 3 – 5m) to ensure that cats and curious people can't disturb it or look inside. Affix it to a wall, fence or tree trunk in a quiet area, away from your bird table if possible. It is best to angle the box forward slightly and



Michael Finn

Great Tit

to keep it away from the wall or tree by using a strip of wood. Unless the site is very sheltered, the box should be fixed facing between north and south-east to avoid the hot sun and the wettest winds. In all but the largest gardens only one box of each type is likely to be used, perhaps one by tits and one by Robins. On the other hand, two nestboxes quite close together are sometimes occupied at the same time if they are both at the edge of a territory. Sparrows and House Martins will nest in small colonies.

Care of your nestbox

The box can be opened from the end of October and cleaned out. Empty out old nest material and any unhatched eggs and clean the inside of the box with boiling water (which should kill most parasites that may be lying in wait, ready to infest next year's brood). In cases of severe parasite infestation it may be necessary to use one of the less harmful insecticides, such as pyrethrum powder, but this should be avoided unless thought absolutely necessary. A small handful of wood shavings placed in the box may encourage some birds to roost in it during the cold winter nights. Don't use straw, as this will get damp and turn mouldy in the box over the course of the winter.

Providing a safe environment for nesting birds

If birds take up residence in your nestbox you should resist the temptation to keep having a quick peep, as this could result in the parents abandoning the nest. Instead, watch the comings and goings of the birds from the safe distance of your kitchen window: they will behave more naturally and you will enjoy and learn more this way. An alternative is to purchase a nestbox camera kit and watch the nesting season progress via your own television. Attacks by predators can also sometimes cause parent birds to desert their eggs or chicks. Nestboxes can be afforded some protection against predators by fixing a metal plate around the entrance hole. Alternatively, bundles of gorse or thorn tied round the tree above and below the box offer protection from most mammalian predators.

Feeding Wild Birds

Nuts

Peanuts are the most popular food for garden birds and attract a wide range of species. When feeding during the spring and summer ensure all peanuts are fed from a mesh peanut feeder, as whole peanuts can be harmful to young birds.

Seeds

Sunflower seed is a highly nutritious and popular food for birds, especially the tits and finches. The 'black-shell' variety tends to be more popular with birds than the 'striped shell' type, but both will be eaten. Nyjer seed is an extremely fine seed, very attractive to Goldfinches, Siskins and Redpolls in particular, though it requires a special feeder to hold the seed. 'Mixed Wildbird Seed' is very popular with pigeons and doves, but other garden birds tend to avoid it as they find it hard to digest. Different mixes attract different birds.

Fats

Don't waste any fat! It's a nutritious food for garden birds. Lumps of suet may be hung out, and meat trimmings, bacon rinds and table scraps will also be eaten. The large 'Fat Balls' which can be bought in pet shops often prove highly popular – remember to remove the plastic wrapping as birds can catch their toes in the mesh. You can make your own home-made version by pouring melted fat over bread or cake scraps in a yogurt carton mould to make 'bird cake'. This can be made even more nutritious if some seeds, nuts, oatmeal, grated cheese or dried fruits are added.

Fruit

Fruit will attract several species of bird which may not otherwise visit your garden. Apples and pears cut in half and placed on the ground will attract Blackbirds and Song Thrushes, and in particularly hard weather they might bring in Redwings and Fieldfares. Sparing cut apples onto the ends of branches will also attract Blackcaps. Smaller fruit such as grapes will also be taken. A coconut sawn in half and hung upside down from the branch of a tree is welcomed and much enjoyed by the tits.

Other foods

Stale bread, biscuits and cake are often available in the kitchen and can make great bird food, though modern processed bread is not suitable for wild birds and should be avoided where possible. Grated wholemeal bread should be moistened slightly, as this makes it easier for the birds to swallow. Moist bread is also less likely to blow away or be taken off in pieces



Jay

Orla O'Sullivan

by the larger, more aggressive birds. Maize flakes, oat flakes and even puppy meal are other valuable food sources. In very cold weather, cheese scattered on the ground beneath bushes should attract wrens and help them through difficult conditions, and left-over mashed potato is a great favourite with Blackcaps.

Tips about Feeding

1. Feed regularly: don't put out lots of feeders and then forget to refill them. Birds can become dependant on a food source during harsh weather.
2. Only use fresh peanuts and seed. Do not feed mouldy, wrinkled or wizened peanuts or seed.
3. Ensure fresh water is always available for drinking and bathing. An upturned dustbin lid with a stone in it is often all that is required. Be sure to remove the ice in cold weather so that birds can drink.
4. Birds often feed on the ground below a feeder. Make sure that there is no shrubbery nearby that could conceal a cat, and try to keep all feeders at least 2 meters above the ground.
5. Remember to wash all feeders regularly and to change the water in the bird bath on a regular basis.
6. Wear gloves when handling food and feeders.

Can I feed all year round?

Although birds need our help most during winter, feeding between the months of April and October can also be helpful, as there is a great demand on natural resources due to the increase in hungry mouths to feed. If feeding during the summer, only put out peanuts in a fine mesh container so that parent birds cannot take large pieces that might cause young chicks to choke, and avoid fats completely. Safe foods to use at this time of year include sunflower seeds, pinhead oatmeal, sultanas, raisins, currants and mealworms.

Gardening for Birds & Biodiversity

As well as putting out food for birds you can also attract them into your garden by planting suitable trees and shrubs. Plants can provide suitable nesting sites and shelter as well as offer a rich and abundant food source. Some of the more suitable of the commonly-grown garden plants which are bird friendly are listed below:

Cotoneasters These provide dense cover for nesting and an abundant supply of red/orange berries in the winter months. A particular favourite of Blackbirds and Blackcaps.

Pyracantha Needs to be grown against a wall. they provide an abundant supply of red/orange berries in the autumn. Thorns are cat proof.

Holly For a good crop of berries, plant female trees of the native wild form: note that to ensure good fruiting there should be a male Holly tree nearby.

Holly Trees defended by territorial Mistle Thrushes may hold their berries until the spring. Larger Holly trees also provide good secure nesting sites. An important plant for Holly Blue butterflies which lay their eggs on holly blossom.

Ivy (the normal wild form) Climbs up trees and walls: Is particularly valuable to wildlife because the blossoms are borne in autumn and are attractive to butterflies and other insects. The fruit is eaten in late winter and early spring by Woodpigeons, thrushes, Robins and Blackcaps. Ivy also provides good cover for nests, though if left unchecked can cause mechanical damage to old trees and shrubs.

Honeysuckle A range of different varieties provide a long flowering and long fruiting season. Attracts warblers as well as thrushes and Bullfinches. The dense growth of this climber provides ample cover for nesting.

Rowan/Mountain Ash (the normal red-berried form) The large clusters of red berries attract winter thrushes such as Redwings and Fieldfares. These berries are also a source of food for the rare Waxwing.

Hawthorn it's berries are a great favourite with Redwings and Blackbirds. A dense hedge will provide plenty of nesting cover for a wide range of species and is stock proof.

Crab Apples The small fruits on these trees are welcomed by wintering Blackcaps and thrushes.

Bird Tables

When should a bird table be used?

Bird tables are usually left in position all year round, but feeding birds is most important during the winter months, when birds need it most and natural food is scarcest.

Where should it be?

Ideally you should position your bird table in a reasonably open area, either fixed to the top of a post or hanging from a branch or bracket. This will make it easier for you to observe and will also reduce the risk of cats or other predators sneaking up on the feeding birds. Don't put your table within easy reach of a fence or tree from which a cat can leap, but place it near a bush which gives birds somewhere to 'queue up' for a place on the table, or to dash if disturbed. By the way, a garden is not essential - a feeding tray may even attract birds to a windowsill on a block of apartments!



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Should there be a roof?

A table with a roof gives extra places for seed feeders or nut bags, and gives some protection from the elements but an open one is really just as good.

Keep it clean: Clean the table regularly to prevent any risk of disease to the birds. Also, move it from time to time, as droppings will accumulate underneath.

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Notice Nature is Ireland's public awareness campaign on biodiversity. The aim of the campaign is to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity and to encourage everyone to play their part in its protection. This will help halt the damage being done to our plants and animals and the landscape, waters and habitats in which they live.



The Garden Bird Survey

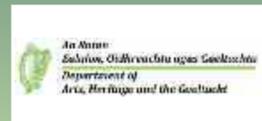


Brian Johnston

The survey runs for twelve weeks each winter, beginning in December. Join over 1,100 participants from every county in Ireland. Even if your knowledge of birds is limited, you can provide records which will be of great value to us. You can receive full instructions and fill in your records on line, or download the form and enter your records on a hard copy. To keep up to date with garden bird matters, check out our blog

www.gardenbirdyear.blogspot.com

Garden Birds



Garden Birds



Siskin Siscín 12 cm

A small green finch with black streaks. Male has black cap and small black 'bib', while the female has a streaked head and is browner overall. Usually only visits gardens during the winter months, when it readily uses peanut feeders.



Female

Blackcap Caipín dubh 13 cm

A member of the warbler family, the male is grey with a jet black cap. The female is slightly browner and has a reddish-brown cap. One of the finest singers of all Irish birds.



Male

Goldfinch Lasair choille 13 cm

Very colourful, with a red and black face and black and yellow wings. Often seen on peanut feeders, this species also loves feeding on teasel and thistle heads.



Woodpigeon Colm coille 41 cm

Our largest pigeon, instantly recognisable by the white patch on each side of its neck (missing in young birds) and the broad white band visible on each wing when in flight. Often seen foraging on open lawns.



Bullfinch Corcrán coille 16 cm

A chunky, compact finch with a plump body, and thick 'bullish' neck. Usually seen in pairs, the male is grey above with a stunning red breast, black cap, wings and tail, with a white wing bar and rump patch. On females, the red is replaced by greyish-brown. Eats flower buds and seeds.



Coal Tit Meantán dubh 11 cm

The smallest of the tit family, it is mainly black and grey with whitish cheek patches. The white patch at the back of its neck distinguishes it from other species.



Long-tailed Tit Meantán earfhada 14 cm

A tiny black, pink and white fluffball with an almost absurdly long tail. Almost always seen in highly mobile family flocks, constantly calling to each other. Usually forages in well wooded parks and gardens, but will also come to peanut feeders.



Goldcrest Ciorbhúí 9 cm

Our smallest bird, most common around conifers. Olive-green above and off-white below, with a large dark eye and a striking yellow patch on the crown (more orange in males), bordered with black. Very active, but easily overlooked due to its tiny size. Song and calls extremely high-pitched.



Blue Tit Meantán gorm 14 cm

Smaller than the Great Tit, and a frequent visitor to peanut feeders. It has a blue cap, white cheeks and yellow underparts. Young birds are more yellowish overall.



Collared Dove Fearán baicdhubbh 33 cm

Quite a small, elegant, long-tailed dove, mostly greyish-beige in colour with a prominent black half-collar around its neck. In flight, tail shows much white near the tip. Feeds on the ground, looking for seeds and grain.



Great Tit Meantán mór 14 cm

The largest member of the tit family. It has a black head with white cheeks. The underparts are bright yellow with a wide black stripe (wider in males than in females).



Female



Male



House Sparrow Gealghan binne 15 cm

A familiar streaky-brown garden visitor, the male has a large black 'bib', dark brown head with a grey crown, pale grey underparts and a small white bar on each wing. The female is a duller beige colour overall, with a streaky brown back and a paler beige stripe just above the eye.

Blackbird Lon dubh 25 cm

Our most common thrush. Males are all black with a bright yellow bill, females are browner with a duller coloured bill. Often hops around on lawns in search of worms.



Hooded Crow Caróg liath 49 cm

Slightly larger than a Rook, from which it can easily be distinguished by its 'two-tone' black and grey plumage. Noisy and aggressive, this species is usually dominant over other crow species.



Greenfinch Glasán darach 15 cm

Common visitor to peanut feeders. Males are bright green with yellow wing stripes, females are a dull olive colour. Often seen in small feeding flocks.



Wren Dreoilín 10 cm

One of our smallest species, as well as being the most widespread. Identified by brown, barred plumage and short tail, usually held cocked.



Redwing Deargán sneachta 22 cm

Our smallest thrush and, like the Fieldfare, only occurring here in winter. Not unlike a Song Thrush in appearance, but darker brown above, with a bold white stripe over each eye and a blood-red patch on its flanks and under its wings. Eats worms and berries.



Rook Rúcach 47 cm

A very common, large, all-black crow, often seen in flocks. Most common on farmland and along roadsides, but will also visit gardens. Adults can be separated from other crow species by the contrasting bare patch of pale skin at the base of the bill.



Sparrowhawk Spioróg 30-40 cm

The most frequently seen bird of prey in gardens, this short-winged hawk sits in trees or dense cover waiting to ambush smaller birds. Male blue-grey above, with rufous wash on cheek and breast. Female greyer overall, and often much larger than the male.



Starling Druid 20 cm

Often seen in flocks on garden lawns or at bird tables. Noisy, all-dark birds with long pointed bills. Frequently mimics the songs and calls of other birds. Large flocks heading to roost often resemble wisps of smoke as they twist and turn in the evening sky.



Magpie Snag breac 45 cm

Distinctive, noisy, black and white bird with a long tail. At close range the black patches show a green and purple iridescent gloss.



Song Thrush Smólach ceoil 23 cm

One of our best songsters, its most striking feature is its distinctly spotted breast. Slightly smaller than Blackbird and significantly smaller than the similar Mistle Thrush, from which it can also be distinguished by its warmer brown colour, smaller spots and orange underwings. Enjoys eating snails, which it breaks open on habitually-used flat stones known as 'thrush anvils'.



Jackdaw Cág 33 cm

Our smallest crow, frequently seen alongside Rooks. On close inspection it appears very dark grey rather than black, and it has a noticeably paler silver-grey patch at the back of its head and neck. Often nests in chimneys.



Robin Spideog 14 cm

One of our most familiar and easily identifiable birds, with its brightly coloured red breast. Males and females look the same, but fledglings have thrush-like pale spotting.



Pied Wagtail Glasóg shráide 18 cm

Familiar and confiding, this is our commonest wagtail. Strikingly black and white (females and young birds are greyer), with a very long tail which it constantly bobs up and down. Often seen searching for insects on concrete, asphalt and lawns.



Dunnock Donnóg 14 cm

A shy, skulking bird, often seen hopping about under the bird table or at the edge of flower beds. It has dark streaks on its brown body, pink legs and a slight bluish-grey cast to the face. Its scratchy song is sometimes said to resemble the sound made by an unrolled shopping trolley wheel.



Mistle Thrush Liatráisc 27 cm

Often noticed feeding in the middle of a lawn, this thrush is larger and greyer overall than the otherwise similar Song Thrush, with larger breast spots and whiter underwings. It has a distinctive rattling call, usually given in flight.



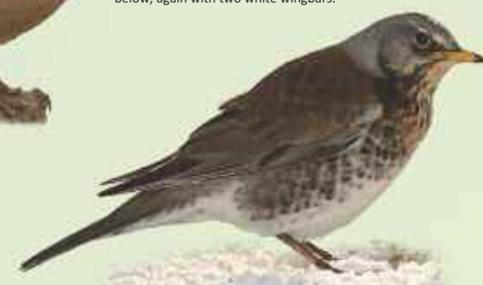
Redpoll Deargéadan 13 cm

While this small finch breeds in birch and conifer forests, it sometimes comes to garden peanut feeders in winter. Streaky brown all over, with paler underparts, a bright red forehead and a tiny, stubby yellow bill. Breeding plumaged males also show a reddish-pink wash on the breast.



Fieldfare Sacán 26 cm

Large thrush that visits us during the winter, when flocks can frequently be seen foraging on large lawns and parks, often in the company of Redwings. Similar to Mistle Thrush, but with fewer spots below and a striking grey head and rump.



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