

The arrival of spring

Our gardens will transform in the springtime, with warmer weather, longer hours of daylight and birds suddenly seeming more lively and louder than ever, we have just joined in the RSPC Big Birdwatch Survey in the churchyard and I find myself reflecting on the regional variations I saw on bird feeders during Christmastide. I was



fortunate to spend a few days with my son in Dorset followed by a couple of days with my daughter in the Cotswolds over the new year. All three locations had a selection of titmice, blue tit, great tit, coal tit and (in Dorset and Shirley), long tailed tit. All had robins and dunnock and the greater spotted woodpecker visited

Dorset and Shirley. All were visited by blackbirds, but only Shirley and Cotswolds had Starlings. Only Dorset had bullfinch but Shirley attracted **blackcaps**.

Not a very scientific survey but some regional variations were beginning to appear. I was pleased to see the blackcap reappear for our weekend birdwatchers to show it is worthwhile to look more closely at the little grey/brown birds. While these birds are traditionally summer visitors, typically arriving in March and April and migrating south for the autumn, they are increasingly staying in the UK all year round. The blackcap is a grey warbler, easily identified by its distinctive cap.



Males have black caps (as the name suggests), while the female's cap is chestnut brown. Juvenile males also have a brown cap. They have thin, dark-coloured beaks and brownish-grey wings. They are a similar size to robins. Blackcaps eat a diet mostly made up of insects, including flies and caterpillars. Unlike the majority of warblers, they also enjoy eating berries, and are particularly fond of mistletoe berries. They are actually extremely efficient at spreading mistletoe seeds, eating the flesh of the berry and wiping the seed on a branch, allowing it to potentially germinate there. Food sources decline in winter, but ivy berries are still available in our churchyard and a good option for many birds, including blackcaps. In general, birds can digest the pith and the juice, but not the seed. This may be one of the reasons ivy often grows close to places where a bird might perch, such as fence posts or the church boundary hedge.



Once the fruit supply runs low, if you provide feeding stations in your garden you may see blackcaps making their way there, in 2013 a survey found that they are most fond of fat-based foods like suet and sunflower seeds. It is understood that Blackcaps often see off other birds at the feeder with their aggressive manner, fending off the usual “top dogs” such as Robins. This overly enthusiastic method of defending the feeders could be related to the critical nature of their requirement for food over winter i.e. they will fight with greater verve because this food is of such critical importance to them.

We take the **magpie** for granted here in Shirley but it is not regularly seen by my family in Dorset, it is unmistakable with a long tail and iridescent, green -purple sheen on their black and white feathers. Magpies are, in fact, small crows, and are omnivorous, feeding on carrion, invertebrates, and chicks and eggs. They are sociable birds and are often seen 'chattering' noisily in small groups across many habitats, from gardens to parks, and heaths to hedges. During spring, the males help the females to build nests by bringing materials which they then arrange. They are famous for collecting all kinds of objects, particularly anything shiny, to decorate the nest.

Folklore surrounds the magpie: From providing good luck when greeted, with “Good Morning”, to being in league with the Devil, its ubiquitous presence has provided plenty of opportunities for stories. Many surround religion, including the belief that it didn't mourn with all the other birds at Christ's crucifixion, and that it refused to enter Noah's Ark, preferring to stay on the roof and 'swear' for the whole journey.

However the familiar folklore legend of counting them when in a group to predict the future is a rhyme that many children learn.

'one for sorrow, two for a joy, three for a girl four for a boy. Five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told.' is a rhyme that many folk still remember.

Springtime emerges more each day in the churchyard. The regular group of purple crocus is showing itself beneath the Whitebeam tree. Primroses are beginning to flower behind the Tamberlin Room, yellow celandines will soon follow but ahead of them all clumps of the specially toughened tips of the green shoots of snowdrops poked through the grass. Traditionally symbols of purity, snowdrops first appear in February to coincide with Candlemas, the Christian Feast of the Purificatio



