



# THE BIRD BOOK

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**A CURIOUS COMPENDIUM OF  
50 WILD BIRDS**

# HOW TO HELP LOCAL BIRDS

## AND WHY WE NEED TO

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**The wild has always been essential to our lives. Open a window, step out of your door, look up into the sky and celebrate the birds you see there.**

**Wildlife knows no national boundaries, and birds bring the wonder of the wider world up close. The help we can offer to the birds on our doorstep supports populations both at home and far away.**

But the numbers of many species have declined in recent years. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature™) Red List is an international database that gives each species a conservation status, from Least Concern to Extinct. This book lists the IUCN status of each bird, as well as giving local conservation information.

In the UK, birds on the Red List are in severe decline. Amber is the next most critical group, and Green the least critical. Picking up this book is a great first step towards helping birds survive and thrive. Fortunately, there are many more things we can do to help, and here are a few suggestions.

When humans build on wild areas, and introduce certain agricultural practices, it reduces the space available for birds to nest and forage for food. If you have a garden, or even a window-box, a good way of creating a haven for local birds is to grow plants that are native to your area. This will provide natural shelter and will attract the bugs that birds like to eat. Even better: avoid pesticides in your

garden to help emulate natural habitats and preserve the ecosystem.

If you have the space, build a bird feeding station. Birds' favourite foods include sunflower seeds, unsalted peanuts, suet balls and, in the autumn, soft fruits like apples and pears. This will give birds a reliable source of food all year round, and a better chance of survival when natural shortages occur.

Birds need water daily, both to drink and to bathe in. Cold winters can be fatal for them as rivers and lakes freeze over. In hot summers, birds can overheat, and competition for resources can be fierce when migratory species arrive early with the warm weather. Leaving out a shallow dish of water all year round, changing it two to three times a week, can help ease seasonal challenges.

Another way of helping birds is to be mindful of what we consume and how we live. Making sure that our food – particularly fish – is sourced sustainably, reducing waste and limiting light pollution will all have an impact. We can each play our part in protecting the world we share with birds. Conservation organisations (see page 112) explain how we can help the planet and birds in more detail, including how to install nest-boxes – out of reach of local cats – and how to maintain feeders.

Once your garden or local area is thriving, you can join in with citizen science initiatives to count the birds that visit. As we deepen our understanding of the natural world, as the community of bird-lovers grows, and as we do what we can to help the birds in our local patch, there is hope that we can protect the dawn chorus for generations to come.



# BLUE TIT

## CYANISTES CAERULEUS

Out of the corner of your eye, if you spot a flash of blue, yellow, white and green, it is likely to be a blue tit. Seeing these little birds zipping back and forth with beaks full of moss is a sure sign that spring is upon us.

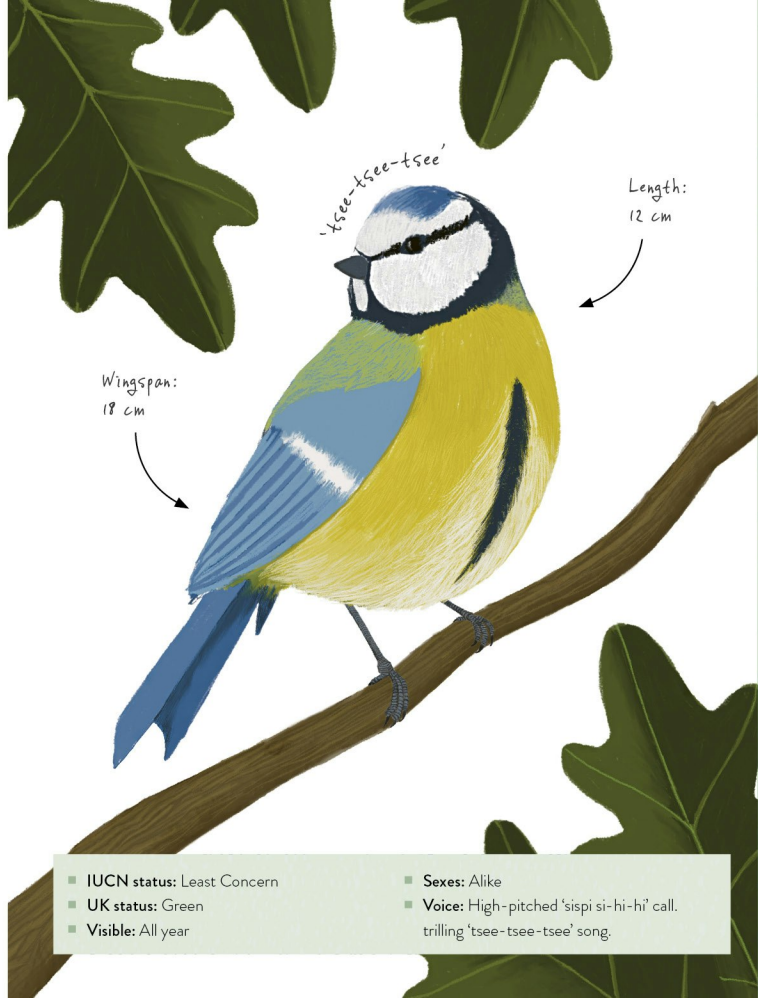
To their nests they add hair, leaves, feathers and even spiders' webs! They mainly choose holes in trees but are just as happy to use bird boxes. Blue tits usually raise a single brood each year. Eggs hatch in May, and chicks emerge for the world to see about three weeks later.

Blue tits are said to be the most attractive garden bird, but they are more than just a pretty face. They perform jaw-dropping acrobatic displays while on the hunt for their food, including their favourite: juicy caterpillars. It is these caterpillars that make their feathers a striking colour. They contain high levels of a pigment, known as carotene, which produces the bright yellow colour on the blue tits' chests.

These birds are not particularly fussy eaters, and will tuck into fruit, seeds

and peanuts left out on bird feeders. Those who have their morning milk delivered to their doorstep may observe clever blue tits breaking through the foil bottle tops, drinking the creamy top layer inside!

In winter, blue tits join up with other tit species to visit gardens in large groups in search of food. When they are all together it can be a little challenging to tell them apart from great tits but look out for their defining bright blue caps – great tits' caps are black – and their smaller size.



■ IUCN status: Least Concern

■ UK status: Green

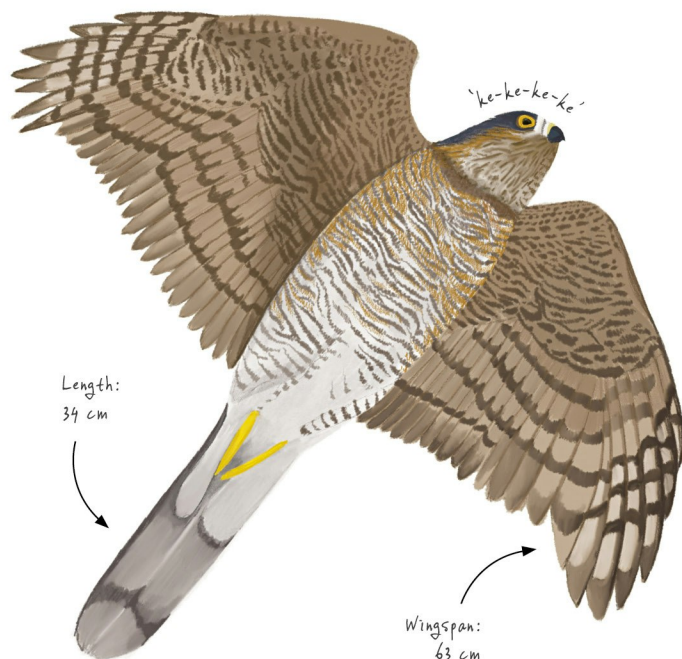
■ Visible: All year

■ Sexes: Alike

■ Voice: High-pitched 'sisi si-hi-hi' call, trilling 'tsee-tsee-tsee' song.

# SPARROWHAWK

ACCIPITER NISUS



■ IUCN status: Least Concern

■ UK status: Green

■ Visible: All year

■ Sexes: Differ, see opposite

■ Voice: Shrieking 'ke-ke-ke-ke' call.

As you sit in your garden, watching birds dart to and from your feeder, a sparrowhawk appears from behind a hedgerow as if out of nowhere and seizes its prey: taking the bird (and you) by surprise! These small birds of prey rely on ambush and stealth, and gardens are an ideal hunting ground. Their diet is predominantly songbirds – thrushes, starlings, finches – although they will occasionally feast on small mammals.

As with most birds of prey, the female is larger – by up to twenty-five percent, which is one of the greatest size differences between sexes of any bird species. Their colouration is remarkably different too. Females have grey-brown upper parts compared to the males' bluish-grey appearance. Both sexes have much paler underparts. This 'countershading' breaks up the birds' outline against the sky in flight, so their prey is less likely to see them approach with their flap-flap-glide flight pattern. A perfectly crafted predator.

World War Two as more pesticides were used in farming. Once harmful chemicals were banned, populations recovered, and sparrowhawks are now one of the most common bird of prey species in Europe.

Once at home on the edge of woodlands, sparrowhawks are now just as likely to be spotted in the suburbs as they are in the countryside. You can see sparrowhawks at any time of the year, but the most exciting time to spot one is early spring, when males perform a territorial 'rollercoaster' flight, climbing high into the sky before diving back down again at stomach-churning speeds to ward off rivals and attract a mate.



Sparrowhawk populations crashed during the agricultural boom that followed

# CHAFFINCH

FRINGILLA COELEBS

The chaffinch is a frequent visitor to bird feeders all year round, preferring to pick up fallen seeds from the ground rather than feeding from the table itself. As the year progresses, these birds shift from a diet of insects in spring, to one of mainly seeds, and they forage both in trees and on the ground.

Listen out for their vast repertoire of powerful calls. Their song differs depending on their location – chaffinches are one of the few birds with regional accents! Their main call is a short, repetitive trill known as a 'rain call' in the UK, as it was believed to predict storms.

Chaffinches have had a difficult history with humans. Their beautiful song attracted attention, and wild chaffinches were caught and sold as caged songbirds. People would bet on the number of times each chaffinch would repeat its song. Though largely outlawed, the practice still continues with captive-bred birds in parts of Europe.

The male chaffinch is vibrantly coloured and unmistakable. He has a blue-grey cap, with pink or rust-red cheeks and

underparts and white bars on his wings.

Females are much duller in colour, covered in pale brown feathers with white bars on the wings and, occasionally, a green or yellowish tone to the rump.

They are abundant in the wild, with a breeding range extending across most of Europe. Breeding occurs from April to June, during which time the female will build a deep, cup nest within the fork of a tree and lay up to five eggs. Both the eggs and nestlings can become prey to crows, squirrels and domestic cats. If you have a garden, planting native trees and shrubs will ensure that these birds have places to hide their nests.



■ **IUCN status:** Least Concern

■ **UK status:** Green

■ **Length:** 14.5 cm

■ **Wingspan:** 27 cm

■ **Visible:** All year

■ **Sexes:** Differ, see opposite

■ **Voice:** Song is 'chip chip chip chooe chooe chooe'. Call is a soft, whistled 'huuit'.