

# The Bird Book



**An inspiring introduction to 50 wild birds for mindful post-Covid nature watchers.**

- Sample contents: HOW TO SPOT BIRDS; GARDENS - Wren; Robin; PARKS AND URBAN OASES - Mute Swan; Magpie; TOWNS AND CITIES - Swift; Starling; FRESHWATER - Dipper; Mallard; AGRICULTURAL LAND - Kestrel; Buzzard; COASTS - Puffin; Gannet; WOODLANDS - Jay; Pheasant; MOORLANDS AND MOUNTAINS - Curlew; Raven
- Birding has become popular among urban twenty- and thirty-somethings that Conde Nast *Traveller* called it one of the biggest international trends of 2017.

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## HOW TO HELP LOCAL BIRDS

### AND WHY WE NEED TO

The wild has always been essential to our lives. Open windows, trees and 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) has a global 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 serious decline. Another in 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 there 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 attract the bugs that birds like to eat. Even better, avoid pesticides in your

garden to help maintain natural habitats and preserve the ecosystem.

If you have the space, build a bird feeding station. Birds' favourite foods include softwood seeds, unsalted peanuts, sunbaked nuts, 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 use. 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 10) explain how we can help the planet and birds in more detail, including how to install water-loops – out of reach of local cats – and how to maintain feeders.

Once your garden or local area is thriving, you can join with citizen science initiatives to count the birds that visit. As we deepen our understanding of the natural world, and the complexity of bird-behaviour, and as we do what we can to help the birds in our local parks, 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's likely to be a blue tit. Seeing these little birds zipping back and forth with heads full of nuts is a sure sign that spring is on.

To their credit they add hair, beaks, feathers and even spines! While they may seem like a tiny bird, they are just as happy to get their beak into a nut as they are to get their beak into a nut. Blue tits usually raise a single chick 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 attentive garden bird, but they are more than just a pretty face. They perform an amazing acrobatic display while on the hunt for their food, including their famous 'wing' waggle. It is these complex skills that make their feathers a striking colour. They contain high levels of a pigment, known as carotenoids, which produces the bright yellow colour on the blue tit's chest.

These birds are not particularly fussy eaters, and will eat just about anything.

and peaches left out on bird feeders. Those who have their morning walk delivered to their doorstep may observe these little birds breaking through the foil bottle tops, drinking the creamy top layer inside!

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

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■ IUCN status: Least Concern  
■ UK status: Green  
■ Visible: All year

■ Sexes: Alts  
■ Voice: High-pitched 'tup' to 't' call, 'tutting' from their nest song.

## SPARROWHAWK ACCIPITER NISUS

As you sit in your garden, watching birds dart to and from your feeder, a sparrowhawk appears from behind a hedge or a field of reeds and snags its prey, taking the bird fast and by surprise. These small birds of prey prey on insects and small, and garden are an ideal hunting ground. Their diet is predominantly songbirds, thrushes, starlings, finches – although they will occasionally feed 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 male's bluish-grey appearance. Both sexes have much paler underparts. This 'counter-shading' blends up the bird's 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.

Sparrowhawk populations crashed during the agricultural boom that followed

World War Two as more pesticides were used in farming. Once levels of sparrowhawk were low, populations recovered, and sparrowhawks are now one of the most common birds 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 nesting time is just over a week in early spring, when males perform a territorial 'underneath' flight, diving high into the sky before diving back down again at stomach-churning speeds to ward off rivals and attract a mate.

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## 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 chooee chooee'. Call is a soft, whistled 'tuit'.



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