



DECEMBER AND BEYOND – MORE WINTER VISITORS

The start of meteorological winter, December is a month of short days and precious little greenery to brighten the countryside. There is, however, still plenty of birdlife to look out for.

Many thousands of birds come here to escape colder conditions in their breeding grounds. In colder weather, numbers of birds coming to feed in gardens can increase as natural food sources diminish. Resident **Robins** (*right*) are joined by their continental cousins, and less common species such as **Siskin** and **Lesser Redpoll** can be seen at garden feeders alongside the more usual birds.



One winter visitor that has increased in number over recent years is the **Blackcap**. Much more commonly seen in summer along with other migrant warblers, since the 1960s the number of blackcaps which spend winter in the UK has grown and grown. It's no longer a rare sight to see them in your garden in the middle of winter. Research shows that the blackcaps that come here for the winter tend to have been hatched or breed in southern Germany, and it is thought that the growing number of people in the UK putting out plenty of bird food has made spending the winter here a viable option for them.



Look out for mixed flocks roaming the countryside, as various species of bird flock together, sometimes in large numbers, foraging in trees and hedgerows. A flock may include birds such as **Blue** (*left*), **Great, Coal** and **Long-tailed Tit**, **Greenfinch**, **Chaffinch** and our smallest resident bird, **Goldcrest**. It is always worth looking closely at these flocks, as you may sometimes see **rambling** and if you are very lucky, a **Firecrest**.

Winter sees large numbers of geese and swans, with winter visitors swelling numbers. **Mute Swan**, and the seemingly-ubiquitous **Greylag** (*right*) and **Canada Geese** can all be seen and, whilst most of the more uncommon swans and geese avoid Rushcliffe, with luck some can be seen. Look up and you may be fortunate enough to see skeins of **Pink-footed Geese**. Each winter seems to bring small numbers of **Whooper Swan**, often joining winter herds of Mute Swans in fields around Rushcliffe.





Water bird numbers can be very impressive in the winter months. Sites like Skylarks host large gatherings of coots and ducks, including **Mallard**, **Tufted Duck** (*below right*), **Gadwall** (*below left*), **Shoveler** and **Pochard**, augmented by visiting **Wigeon** and **Teal**. The sound of Wigeon whistling is particularly evocative of winter.



Keep a particular eye out for more unusual visitors such as **Pintail** (*below left*) and **Smew** (*below right*), the males of which are perhaps some of the most handsome birds to brighten the winter months.



Gull numbers will increase as resident **Black-headed Gulls** (*below left*) are joined by **Common**, **Herring** (*below right*), **Lesser Black-backed** and **Greater Black-backed Gulls** often in mixed flocks feeding in fields during the day before heading back to roost for the night.





Resident **Great-crested** and **Little Grebes** are occasionally joined by small numbers of **Slavonian**, **Black-necked** and **Red-necked grebes**.

The chain of water-based reserves along the Trent is encouraging **Bitterns** to overwinter in increasing, but still small, numbers skulking secretly in reedbeds, where you might also find **Bearded Tits**.



So, although the coming three months may be devoid of greenery and flowers, there should still be plenty to see.

Chris Overton 29/11/23

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