

Where have all the bullfinches gone?

David Lindo laments the decline of this once familiar finch, but shows how we can all do our bit to help.

IT FILLS ME WITH JOY to see, or even hear, a bullfinch. I think they are gorgeous. When I was a boy, I watched the birds that visited the makeshift feeding stations in my garden in Wembley, north-west London. It was always a delight to receive a visit from a roving bullfinch or two. Shyer than the other birds, they would stay for a short while before spiriting away. I never took them for granted, even though they were a frequent and expected sight in my garden in those halcyon days.

Where did they go?

Then, all of a sudden, they became very irregular visitors; it almost felt as though it happened overnight. Maybe I had become less diligent in my garden birding because it coincided with the time that I discovered girls and music?

A more likely explanation was the fact that several neighbours ripped out their garden hedges and trees; replacing them with fencing and stone patios. That dreaded action destroyed a lot of nesting and feeding places for many species in one fell swoop.

Nationally, the bullfinch's population was at its peak from the 1950s to the 1970s to the point that they were considered a pest by the fruit-growing industry. The birds descended upon fruit farms when their natural food sources of hawthorn, blackthorn buds and ash keys failed. They scooped their way through orchards, making short work of cherry, apple and plum buds.

War cry

A war against bullfinches was declared and a cull commenced. The bounty placed on their heads probably did not have a direct correlation with their demise; changes in farming practices and the decrease of their natural foods in deciduous woodland ultimately led to them being 'Amber Listed' in the UK (making them officially a bird of conservation concern).

As I grew up, I still noticed them with some regularity. For 12 years, I used to see them year-round at Wormwood Scrubs, my local patch. I discovered two nest sites and during the winter, I occasionally came across a family party in the spartan, litter-strewn woodland.

Then, six years ago, one of my pairs deserted their traditional nest site due to human disturbance, never to return. The other pair persisted for just an additional year. In the space of 12 months, they went from being a part of the furniture to a rarity. Nowadays, I count myself lucky if I see one bird for just a few seconds during a year. Sadly, I didn't see one last year on my patch. Despite being scarce in London, I still glimpse them from time to time locally. On those occasions my heart still races.

Who wears the trousers?

Bullfinches are strange, as finches go. They don't usually form sizable flocks during the winter, they are not particularly territorial and any ladies reading this piece may take heart in knowing that it is the female who bosses the male in the relationship!

Furthermore, unlike the fluty, chirrupy songs uttered by most other finches, the bullfinch's scarcely heard natural song hardly sets the world alight. In all the years that I have spent watching this secretive finch, I think I have only ever heard the male's quiet scratchy, whistling composition once.

A straw poll amongst my birding mates revealed that most had not knowingly experienced the pleasure of being serenaded by a bullfinch either. Most of us are familiar though with the plaintive piping contact call that usually precedes the sight of a white rump flashing past and disappearing into a nearby bush.

Less well known is the fact that captive male bullfinches can be taught quite complicated songs. They are brilliant mimics. Historically, they were taught to sing national anthems and the current tunes of the time. A pretty remarkable feat when you compare those utterances to their 'natural' feeble song.

Garden regulars

So how is our humble bullfinch faring in the UK? According to the British Trust for Ornithology, there are fewer than 160,000 pairs. There's good news though: through the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch and the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey, it appears that these lovely birds are resorting to feeding in our gardens on a much more regular basis.

Garden bird lovers like you are providing a more varied menu for our birds – and bullfinches find that to their liking. This is yet another example of how important it is to feed our birds, particularly in the winter.

I travel around the UK quite a lot, especially to urban centres. Last summer, I was in Plymouth and my host told me that she regularly had a family of bullfinches feeding on her lawn. Despite the chucking rain, I stood by her kitchen window for nearly an hour until I was rewarded by the arrival of an adult male, resplendent in its red and black plumage feeding a brown and black youngster. Bliss. Why chase after some inner city rarity when you can discover a brilliant bullfinch? ✓

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Have you seen one?

Do you have bullfinches in your garden or, like David, have you lost them from your patch?

Let us know on our blog: www.rspb.org.uk/birdsmagazine



David Lindo is a broadcaster and writer with a special interest in urban birds and other wildlife.