

Is watching birds good for us?



Monty Don OBE, horticulturalist and TV gardener

I think the best lesson I have had about watching birds was the simplest. I once asked a brilliant ornithologist what was the secret of finding and observing rare and unusual birds. His reply could not have been more simple. "You have to look," he said.

This is a powerful life-lesson. Because when you take the time to really look and

notice the bird life that is all around you – wherever you are, from a tower block to a garden to a windswept shore – you will always find something that is fascinating and new as well as build upon the sightings and knowledge that you have. This adds to the million links and connections that bind our lives to the natural world and means that you become part of this chain of life and this is empowering, fascinating and richly rewarding. And all you have to do is look.



Our winter blackcaps are a different population from our summer blackcaps, who will have departed in autumn.

Why don't garden birds fly south in winter?



Alison Steadman OBE, actor and bird enthusiast

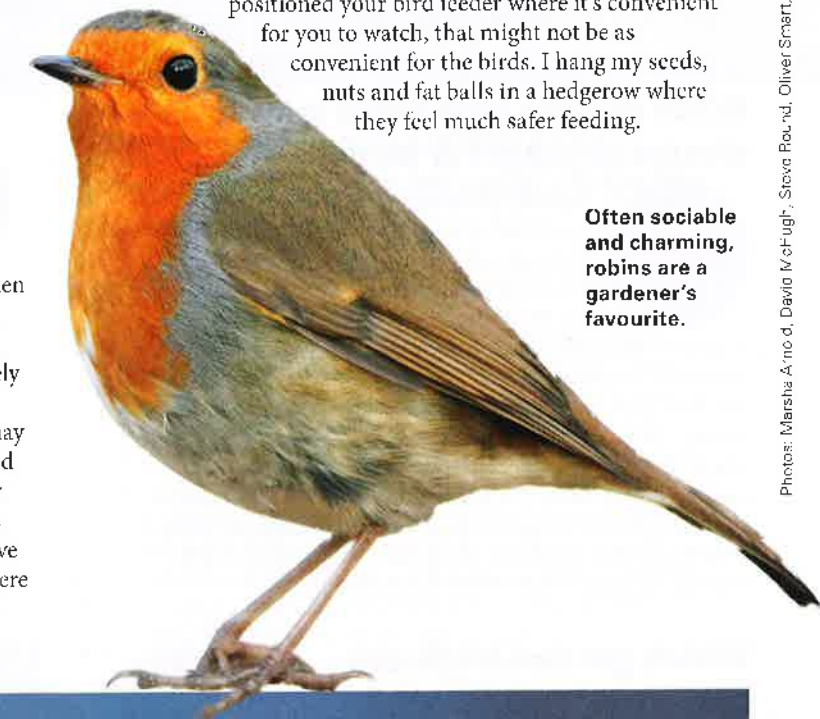
The birds we see regularly in our gardens are often woodland birds, such as blue tits, which have adapted to find food and places to nest around people. Many can eat seeds, nuts and fruit in winter and don't rely so much on insects, which are scarce during the colder months. Having said that we do see birds in our gardens in winter that may have come from further afield. While our resident blackbirds and robins don't usually travel far, they'll be joined by others of their kind from northern and eastern parts of Europe and sometimes even Russia. The blackcaps we see in the UK during summer have flown to southern Europe and Africa. But we do see blackcaps here over winter – these will be from colder parts of the continent!

Why are some birds nervous around people but others (like robins) follow us around?



Iolo Williams, TV naturalist

This is because of the way they feed and what they feed on. Robins are always upright, alert, hopping around the garden. They're used to following large animals around the forest and pecking at the insects they stir up. So they're comfortable following us around if we're digging and exposing worms and other tasty goodies for them! Dunnocks, however, tend to have their heads down as they sift through leaf litter under hedgerows. That makes them much more vulnerable to predators so they try to stay out of sight. Other woodland birds that come into our gardens, such as blue and great tits, have evolved in dense, leafy places where they can hide if necessary. So if you've positioned your bird feeder where it's convenient for you to watch, that might not be as convenient for the birds. I hang my seeds, nuts and fat balls in a hedgerow where they feel much safer feeding.



Often sociable and charming, robins are a gardener's favourite.

How did our common birds get their names?



Stephen Moss, author and natural historian

We often talk about 'folk names' of birds being in decline, but we're missing the point! While rare and unusual birds were mostly named by professional ornithologists, most common and easily visible birds were given names by ordinary folk. Take the warblers: chiffchaff, blackcap and whitethroat were named from their obvious sound or appearance, while rarer species (aquatic, barred, etc) were named by professionals. Common birds were generally named long ago, after their sound, colour, appearance or habits – eg cuckoo, blue tit and treecreeper; other birds were named later (from the 18th century onwards), and often after their habitat (reed, sedge and willow warblers) or to commemorate the name of a famous person – such as Bewick's swan or Montagu's harrier.



The whitethroat is one of many birds named for its appearance.