**Birdwatching for Wellbeing - Additional Information**

**Our Stories**

Just as feral pigeons did they are establishing themselves in many towns and cities, having originally been imported as engaging pets. They are now widespread in the UK, with roosts of thousands of birds in some places. Eating fruit, nuts and seeds there is plenty of food for them.

Many of us will have seen the delightful performance of a male pigeon courting a female. It’s one of those beautiful things that happens all around us and we often hear the cooing of a male pigeon in his courtship if we cannot see the display. Many people find the performance comical to watch. Usually the female is busy eating or minding her own business when a male comes over to her and starts fanning his tail and dancing around her. It can seem very pushy and desperate – especially when the female ignores him.

Pigeons are monogamous and pair for life, and when one of the partners dies or goes missing, the other will eventually search for a new mate. Pigeons are dedicated parents and therefore have a strong bond with one another. Amongst paired pigeons, the courtship display is performed to reaffirm and reinforce the bond between them.

**Common Birds in Your Garden**

**Dunnock**

Hedge sparrow/hedge warbler – and neither a sparrow or a warbler! They live mostly close to the ground, with a quick, shuffling and hopping action when feeding.

(One of the most remarkable things about the animal kingdom and just one of the many strange things about the English language is the variety of collective nouns that all mean ‘group’. Many of these words endure because they were recorded and published in Books of Courtesy handbooks designed to educate the nobility. ‘They were created and perpetuated as a means of marking out the aristocracy from the less well-bred masses,’)

*Collective Term – A jovial of Dunnocks*

**House sparrow and Tree Sparrow**

The house sparrow is best known for its noisy song. Their grey breast and brown wings make them easy to identify.

Two species of sparrow are found in Britain. Tree sparrows are smaller than house sparrows – tree sparrows are identifiable by their chestnut-brown crowns, white collar and black cheek spots. House sparrows have a grey crest and cheeks, and are slightly dumpier.

***Collective term****– a host, quarrel or ubiquity of sparrows*

**Starling**

Known for being a social bird, starlings are often found flying in a flock. Keep an eye out for its distinctive speckled, metallic feathers and bright yellow beak. They are noisy, social birds who feed together during the day. They also love garden feeding stations!

*Collective Term – A murmuration of starlings*

**Blackbird**

True to their name, male blackbirds can be spotted easily thanks to their black feathers and bright yellow beak. However, the female blackbirds are speckled brown. Both have yellow beaks and eye-rings, and dark legs. The song of the blackbird is arguably the most beautiful and best-loved of any British bird, as well as being the most familiar.

*Collective Term – A cloud, flock, grind or merl of blackbirds*

**Blue tit**

The blue tits striking blue and yellow feathers make this little bird easy to spot in any garden. These birds are resident, and rarely wander far from their birth place.

During daylight hours, you'll often see them spending time on bird feeders, consuming large amounts to get them through cold winter nights. They also search out insects and spiders and can eat up to 30% of their body weight in food each day.

**Wood pigeon**

Part of the dove family, the wood pigeon has a small, round head and large grey breast. Listen out for the woodpigeon’s coo. Woodpigeons nest all year round

*Collective Term – a loft of pigeons*

**Goldfinch**

The goldfinch is easy to spot with its distinctive red head and bright yellow wings. Their beaks are long and tweezer-like to help them extract small seeds, such as from thistles and teasels.

*Collective Term – A charm of goldfinches*

**Robin**

Robins stand out because of their red breast and spotted brown wings – and they sing almost all year round. Unlike other songbirds who tend to sing in spring and early summer to attract a mate, robins use their voice all the time to warn intruders to keep away from their territory. Winter can be fatal for robins – they can lose as much as 10% of their body weight – need to feed every day to survive so we can help them by setting up garden feeding stations

*Collective Term – a bobbin, breast, carol, gift, reliant, riot, rouge, round, ruby, or worm of robins*

**Great tit**

Not to be confused with the blue tit, the great tit is easily recognisable by its yellow breast, blue and green wings, and black and white head. Male great tits have a broad black stripe on the belly, whereas females have a much thinner black stripe. The stripe on the male is an indicator of status and whether the male will be a good choice as a father. The wider the stripe, the more attractive the male is to females.

**Chaffinch**

The chaffinch can be hard to spot amongst the bushes, as its patterned feathers can keep it well camouflaged. Listen out for their loud song, which will let you know when they’re nearby. It does not feed openly on bird feeders - it prefers to hop about under the bird table or under the hedge.

*Collective Terms – A Charm, Trembling or Trimming of Finches*

**Long-tailed tit**

This tiny bird can be spotted because of its very long and narrow tail which is bigger than its body! Its feathers are black, white, grey and pink and they tend to move in sociable groups that call to each other continually. Outgoing and noisy residents, long-tailed tits are most usually noticed in small, excitable flocks of about 20 birds.

*Collective Term – a volery of tits*

**The 7 Therapeutic Effects of Bird-Watching**

**The Great Outdoors** - Getting out into the fresh air is great for mind, body and soul and is a great source of Vitamin D which is vital for building strong bones and muscles. You might not see another person all day but the blue tits, robins and blackbirds that hop, flutter and sing in your garden cheer you up and make you feel less alone – more connected to the outside world. They help us to care about something other than ourselves, especially if we feed the birds by keeping their feeders healthy and filled

**Connect with family and friends**

Birdwatching can be a great way to connect with family and friends. If you’re planning a birdwatch yourself or for a loved one, why not extend an invite to a relative or nearby friend to see if they’d like to join in the fun? This family friendly activity can be enjoyed by all ages and abilities, and the common topic can be a great talking point – not only can you discuss what you see in your garden, but you can also compare notes with others who are taking part.

**Time for calm**

Recent studies suggest that spending time around nature can be a great way to combat stress and relax. Birdwatching can be a very meditative activity, and often provides those taking part with the opportunity to spend a time in a quiet place without any distractions. Getting out and experiencing the nature around them has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression.

**Keeping the mind active and healthy**

The process of looking for birds, and identifying the species over a period of time can be calming and keeps people’s minds active.

**Providing a change of scenery**

Although birdwatching can be enjoyed from inside the house, it’s also a great opportunity to get out and about – even a short trip to a nearby park or nature reserve will provide a change of scenery.

**Connecting with nature**

Spending time in nature can have some incredibly positive effects on our mental health, but the different sights, colours, smells and sounds found outside can all help occupy the mind, and help provide a fantastic distraction.

**Physical benefits**

Not only does birdwatching encourage people to get out into their local community and explore the nearby parks and woodlands, but it can have physical benefits even if you’re just venturing out into your garden. Taking a walk around the lawn, or going out to replace the bird feeders can all provide regular activity to help keep people healthy and active

**Bird-Watching for Mental Health**

After conducting extensive surveys of the number of birds in the morning and afternoon in Milton Keynes, Bedford and Luton, the study found that lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress were associated with the number of birds people could see in the afternoon.

In the study, common types of birds including blackbirds, robins, blue tits and crows were seen. But the study did not find a relationship between the species of birds and mental health, but rather the number of birds they could see from their windows, in the garden or in their neighbourhood.

[Three combined studies](https://www.naturettl.com/bird-watching-boosts-mental-health/) carried out by the University of Exeter (UK), the British Trust for Ornithology (UK), and the University of Queensland (AUS), have discovered recently that people who are exposed to more natural environments have significantly fewer feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety. The studies defined nature as “more birds, trees, and shrubs.” The studies included 270 people and contained a diverse range of people of all ages, ethnicities, and genders.

Perhaps one of the most interesting results of the studies was the fact that even if people rated their depression/stress/anxiety levels high in the mornings, several hours of birdwatching were seen to consistently raise these feelings and helped people to feel much happier in themselves and the world around them.

What’s more, it didn’t matter what kind of birds were spotted; whether these were native birds or all different species and varieties or lots of the same species, the benefits seem to remain the same.

This study is interesting because so many people have long described the benefits that nature has on us as human beings, and how we are somehow connected on a mental, psychological, and sometimes even spiritual level; this research is another step in confirming it.

So many of us have refined ourselves to office tower blocks, flats and apartments, and metal box vehicles, meaning some of us might not have contact with nature for a prolonged amount of time; maybe even for several weeks.

 **‘Bird-Watching’ with Your Eyes Closed**

Spring is when birdsong is at its peak. This is when birds are looking for mates and beginning nesting. They time the hatching and fledging of their young to coincide with warmer weather and more food in the form of spring and summer insects. Many resident bird species begin their courtship songs in early February and they are joining from March to May by many tuneful songsters. By July, most birds fall silent.

The best time to hear birdsong is usually early in the morning – known as ‘the dawn chorus’ – when there are few other human sounds to block out the birds. However, in 2020, the COVID-19 crisis meant that road, rail and air traffic is so reduced, the birds sound louder than ever. It offers us the rare chance to listen to their lusty singing throughout the day.

Birds can be heard throughout the year, but on spring and early summer mornings they seem to be louder and more persistent. Birdsong is generally produced by male songbirds (passerines) that are looking for a mate. Once they have found one, they tend to sing less, however songbirds also use their voices to help them establish and maintain their territory.

**Mindfulness and Bird-Watching**

* Mindfulness is all about experiencing the moment by using awareness.
* Bird feeding and watching as a wonderful way to keep my awareness focused on the present.
* Hang a bird feeder outside the window - see a variety of bird species come and go
* Watching birds helps to live in the moment. - observe the way the sunlight backlights a wing in flight, listen to the call of one bird species and mentally separate from the other calls in the background.
* Keep attention and focus without drifting off or being distracted by the dramas of the day.
* It is low commitment, for example, if you stop feeding the birds or need to take a break, they will be fine and just find food elsewhere.
* Refilling bird feeders can be a great encouragement for going outside regularly for those who are able to get out for about five minutes or more.
* Great way to connect with others in day to day life – chat to neighbours about the local bird population
* Even if you just have one window, you may find that it is a gateway to a viable mindfulness practice.
* Even if you aren’t ready to get a bird feeder, you can just watch the birds fly by and watch the clouds drift slowly by.
* Backyard birding helps to bridge the gap and create a sense of peacefulness and wellbeing

**Steps for the Future**

If you find that you’re suffering from a mental health condition such as stress, anxiety, or depression, while it’s not recommended you cut out or stop taking any medication or treatments you’re currently using, it may be a good idea to get outside to see what kind of birds you can see.

Whether you’re simply investing in a bird feeder and setting it up in your back garden or you’re going for a walk in nature to see what you can see, the act is beneficial to your mind and body, even if you don’t see something.

You can do this in a nearby rural area or even in your local park or wildlife reserve. Once you become mindful of these natural areas, you’ll soon realise that birds and wildlife are present throughout society, even in built-up areas.

All you need to do is become mindful and watchful for their existence, and already you’ll start to see the benefits. Birdwatching is renowned for being a meditative exercise and can help nurture your connection with nature.

Instead of allowing your mind to run free on unhelpful thoughts or ruminating, which usually result in anxious or stressed out thoughts, allowing yourself to focus on something like looking for birds can help keep your mind present and those pesky thoughts at bay.

Of course, this is a practice that takes time to develop and nurture, but with regular practice and focus, you’ll be there in no time at all.