

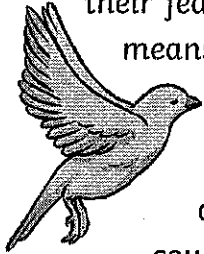
# Garden Birds

## Why do Birds Matter?

Birds are just there to look pretty and sound nice, right? Wrong! Birds are vital for the ecological harmony of the environment.



Birds contribute to the diversity of plant life through pollination and seed dispersal. They disperse seeds within their droppings, by catching them on their feathers and by dropping them from their beaks while flying. This means seeds get to travel to different places and grow elsewhere.

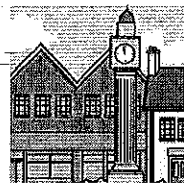


Birds control insect outbreaks and create important nesting areas for other species. Many birds, such as dunnocks, blue tits and blackbirds, eat insects. Without these insect-eating birds, we could be overrun with minibeasts. Also, their nests provide suitable habitats for insects, particularly the nests of sparrows, jackdaws and pigeons.

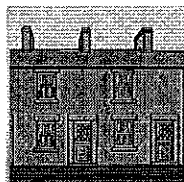
Many birds, such as carrion crows and magpies, help rid the world of disease through scavenger 'clean-up' services. Without these birds eating the carcasses of other animals' kills, diseases could be more easily spread.

## The Decline of Common Garden Birds

In the UK, there are a wide variety of garden birds. The most common species are the sparrow and starling. However, starlings, famous for their winter 'murmurations' (where hundreds of birds swoop together in the sky), have seen a steady decline in numbers. The loss of starlings has been linked to the lack of traditional, established farming pastures. Experts believe that intensively farmed land makes it more difficult for them to find their favourite food – crane fly larvae.



**Urban Environment**  
Cities and towns.



**Suburban Environment**  
Residential areas, less densely populated than urban areas

House sparrows have experienced a rapid decline in the last few years, particularly in urban and suburban environments. The causes remain largely unknown with everything from cats to air pollution being blamed. Fortunately, last year, there was an increase in house sparrows reported through an RSPB nationwide survey.

### The Rise of Less Common Garden Birds

There has been an increase in some species that are not commonly seen in back gardens, such as fieldfares and jays. Fieldfares are large, colourful thrushes that stand very upright and move forward with purposeful hops. The reason for this increase seems to be freezing winters forcing fieldfares to leave the countryside and look for food in gardens.

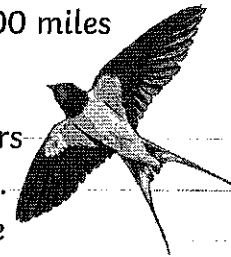
At the beginning of 2016, there was an increase in sightings of long-tailed tits and goldcrests. This is likely to be due to warmer winters so more of these tiny birds survive.

### Migration

Some birds migrate from the UK during the winter months and return later in the year when the weather becomes warmer. Swifts and swallows migrate to Africa, covering a staggering 200 miles per day.

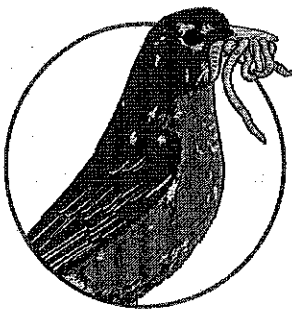


During their journey, they face a number of dangers including starvation, exhaustion, storms and predators.



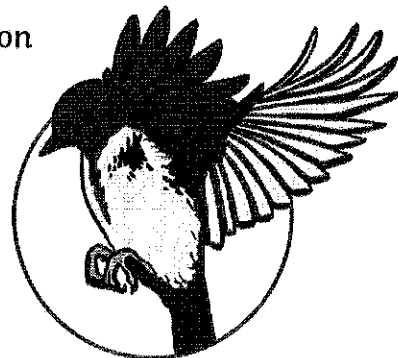
Few predators can catch a swallow in flight, but some sparrowhawks have been known to do this. Swallows can be quite threatening to other birds and have been known to 'mob' crows and magpies.

### Resident British Birds



One of the most common birds in British gardens is the robin. With its bright red breast, it is a cheerful bird to spot, especially in the winter months. Robins sing all year round. Despite looking cute, they are hugely territorial and will quickly see off intruders.

Magpies are another common sight. Their chattering cackle can be frequently heard and the flash of black and white plumage is easily recognisable. Known for being scavengers, thieves and aggressive characters, they are not well-liked. However, they are important insect controllers and clear up carcasses when necessary.



# Questions

1. Summarise what the general theme of the second paragraph is about.

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2. Give two examples of how birds affect the insect population.

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3. What benefit do carrion crows offer?

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4. What are murmurations?

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5. Why has there been a decline in the number of starlings?

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6. Which word has been used that means the number of house sparrows has gone down very quickly?

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7. Has there been any positive news about sparrows? If so, what?

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8. Why have fieldfares been seen more frequently in gardens?

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9. Choose one of the dangers that faces migrating birds, and explain why you think it could be a danger.

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10. Why do swallows not have many predators?

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11. Are Robins always cute and friendly?

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12. Why do magpies not have a good reputation? Find one positive point about them.

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