

## BURTON BIRD MONTHLY - OCTOBER 1998

Burton enjoys an interesting bird population - from the common starling to the shy wren, the raucous rook to the nocturnal tawny owl. Watching them can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience both for the beginner and for the more experienced ornithologist.

At this time of year, as the amount of natural food starts to decline, it can be of great benefit to both bird and bird-watcher to provide extra food for them. Whether this is a simple peanut feeder hanging from a convenient place or a full feeding station is really a matter of both personal choice and how much room you would want to devote to it.

A peanut feeder - whether a mesh bag or a sturdier plastic or wire type - will probably ensure visits from hungry members of the tit family, along with sparrows and greenfinches, whilst a bird-table would greatly increase the range of visitors. Don't forget as well the many ground-feeding birds, such as blackbirds, chaffinches and, of course, the very friendly robin.

As well as peanuts, sunflower seeds can be offered in feeders - these are particularly like by the finches - mine seem to be most attractive in a yellow feeder. Good quality mixed bird seed can also be served this way, but much of it will end up falling onto the ground, and will germinate. To avoid an unwanted clump of grass or whatever, a good idea is to mix the seed with some melted fat - lard or dripping are especially good. The benefits are twofold, the seed does not get sprinkled liberally over your garden and the birds enjoy and will profit from the fat which helps them survive in the colder weather.

In addition to the above, if you grow certain plants in your garden, then some species will honour you with regular visits. For instance, teasels, those large prickly plants of hedgerows, produce a seed which is a very important part of the diet of the goldfinch, as do thistles and dandelions. Other plants which produce seeds also help to feed the birds through the winter, so rather than cutting off all of the seed heads after flowering, why not leave them on to help vary the diet of your feathered friends?

One very important item which we have not yet mentioned is water. This is needed every day, not just for drinking but also for bathing. You might think that sensible birds would not want to splash about in near-freezing water in the depths of winter but they do. Being able to wash and preen their feathers is vital to birds to ensure that the feathers do their job and keep the owner warm. Dirty feathers do not do this nearly half so well as clean, preened, oiled feathers. A bird-bath can be made out of any container which is not too deep - they want to bathe not drown! A shallow bowl, tray, dustbin lid, or a purpose made bath will all be welcomed equally, or they may, if you have one, use the edge of your pond for this purpose. Just make sure that any ice which forms on it is melted - a jug of hot water over it usually does the trick, and the ice cools the hot water rapidly so that the birds do not scald themselves. A note of caution - never add anything to the water to stop it freezing - substances such as salt, glycerine or anti-freeze can be fatal to birds.

Finally, if you have a cat, or if your garden is regularly visited by one, do ensure that any food which you put out is out of their reach. The idea is to feed the birds, not the birds to the cat! If all fails, an electronic device can be put up in the garden to deter cats from entering the space, and thus give the birds a safe haven in which to feed and wash.

