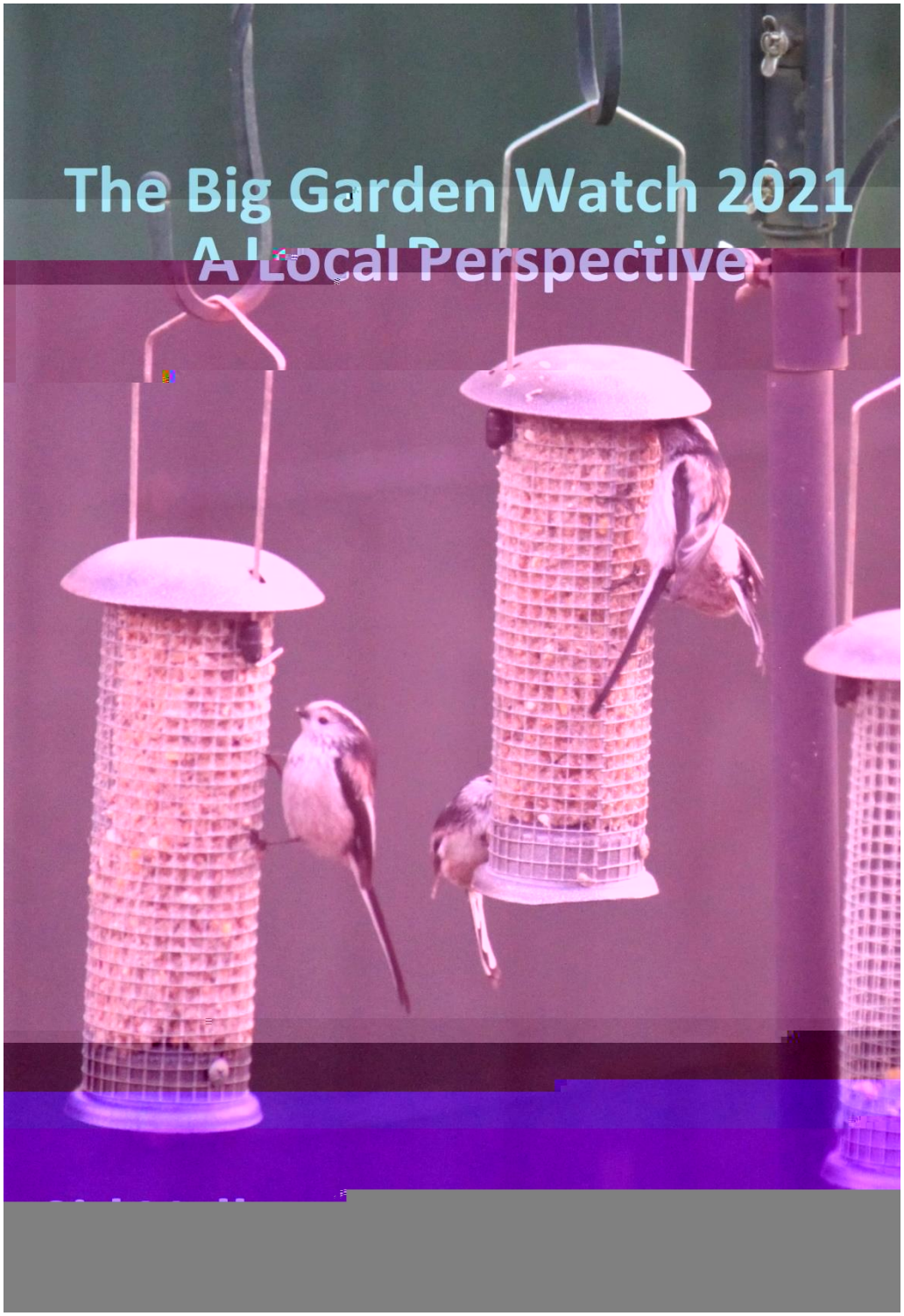
The Big Garden Watch 2021
A Local Perspective



The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch (BGB) is one of the largest citizen science projects in the world. For the last 40 years, thousands of volunteers have submitted data on the birds visiting their garden at the end of January. In 2020, nearly half a million people recorded nearly 8 million birds during the last weekend in January. The study focuses on 15 of the most common species, but sightings of other species are recorded also.

Over the years, this data has allowed the RSPB to track major changes in the urban bird populations. For example, it has recorded a 76% decline in Song Thrushes visiting gardens, while there was an increase in sightings of smaller bird species such as Long-Tailed Tits, Wrens, and Coal Tits, up by 14%, 13% and 10% respectively from 2019 to 2020. Of course, the data is just the start. It is used to plan work across the country to support our birds.

One of the most important impacts of the birdwatch is the raised engagement of the human population. It becomes part of the '*many small actions making a big difference*' effect that is one of the founding principles of the Sid Valley Biodiversity Group. Having birds visit your garden is a true delight and the publicity around the BGB encourages people to make provision in their gardens that supports birds through the winter, they put out food, they provide access to water, and they create nesting sites.

The RSPB publishes national results that include identifiable county statistics. The Sid Valley Biodiversity Group (SVBG) was interested to see how our valley compares. Members of the public were canvassed through local and social media to collect data. There were 28 responses, a small sample but sufficient to give a reasonable picture. The national and county results for 2021 will not be published until April and so we use the 2020 results to evaluate the valley.

The RSPB headline is a top ten based on the total numbers of each species recorded, see **c** . As was said, the national count recorded nearly 8 million birds in half a million observations, but the RSPB do not publish individual species counts. Our observers recorded 660 birds in 35 observations.

> The raw national data provides a mean average of 16.12 birds seen in each garden observation; we do not have the frequency nor species range for individual observations. The Devon average is 16.32 birds per garden.
> The Sid Valley was above the national and county average with 18.86 birds per garden observation. This ranged from a single Woodpigeon seen in Alexandria Road to the 45 birds across 13 species seen in an hour in Salcombe Regis.

Nationally, 79 species were recorded, but that covers The Isles of Scilly to the Shetland Islands.

period. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has been running a much smaller garden survey for even longer than the BGB. This is a year-round survey that shows large seasonal variation as some species migrate and nature provides richer food sources away from gardens. A future SVBG project will investigate how the valley compares with the national picture in different seasons.

RANK	NATIONAL 2020	DEVON 2020	SID VALLEY 2021
1	House Sparrow	House Sparrow	Woodpigeon
2	Starling	Blue Tit	House Sparrow
3	Blue Tit	Starling	Blackbird
4	Woodpigeon	Blackbird	Goldfinch
5	Blackbird	Goldfinch	Blue Tit
6	Goldfinch	Woodpigeon	Long-Tailed Tit
7	Great Tit	Long-Tailed Tit	Robin
8	Robin	Chaffinch	Great Tit
9	Long-Tailed Tit	Robin	Chaffinch
10	Magpie	Great Tit	Greenfinch

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If you compile the top ten by the number of gardens visited by individual species rather than the gross count of birds, the aggressively territorial Robin jumps from 7th to 3rd in the local data and the Great Tit, which is often solitary, climbs 3 places from 8th to 5th, while the gregarious House Sparrows drop from 2nd to 6th and the Goldfinches drop from 4th to 10th.

This is a small sample and four double digit sightings, two each for House Sparrows (10 and 11 birds) and Goldfinches (18 and 10 birds), might skew the result, but the much more substantial county data reinforces the pattern. In the Devon data, Robins jump from 9th to 2nd and the Great Tits from 10th to 6th. House Sparrows drop from 1st to 5th and Goldfinches from 5th to 9th place.

Being a relatively small sample taken over a limited time slot, there is not the reliability to draw conclusions about the less common species. As mentioned above, a Sparrowhawk is a regular visitor to one of the gardens, but it did not visit during the observation period.

in the data appendix shows the total counts for the 28 species recorded in the Sid Valley; - shows the same data but ranked from most to least frequent. shows the number of gardens visited by each recorded species; – shows the same data ranked from highest to lowest number of gardens per species.

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There are two of the RSPB target species that are well down the rankings whether by number of birds or number of gardens, Collared Doves (25th and 23rd =) and Starlings (22nd = and 23rd).

When Collared Doves were first seen in the UK in the 1950s, they enjoyed a population explosion largely because of garden feeders and there was concern that they would become a serious agricultural pest. Across southern England, the 2020 national data records them in 30-40% of gardens and they are ranked between 13th and 18th in most individual counties. They are ranked 16th in the Devon data.

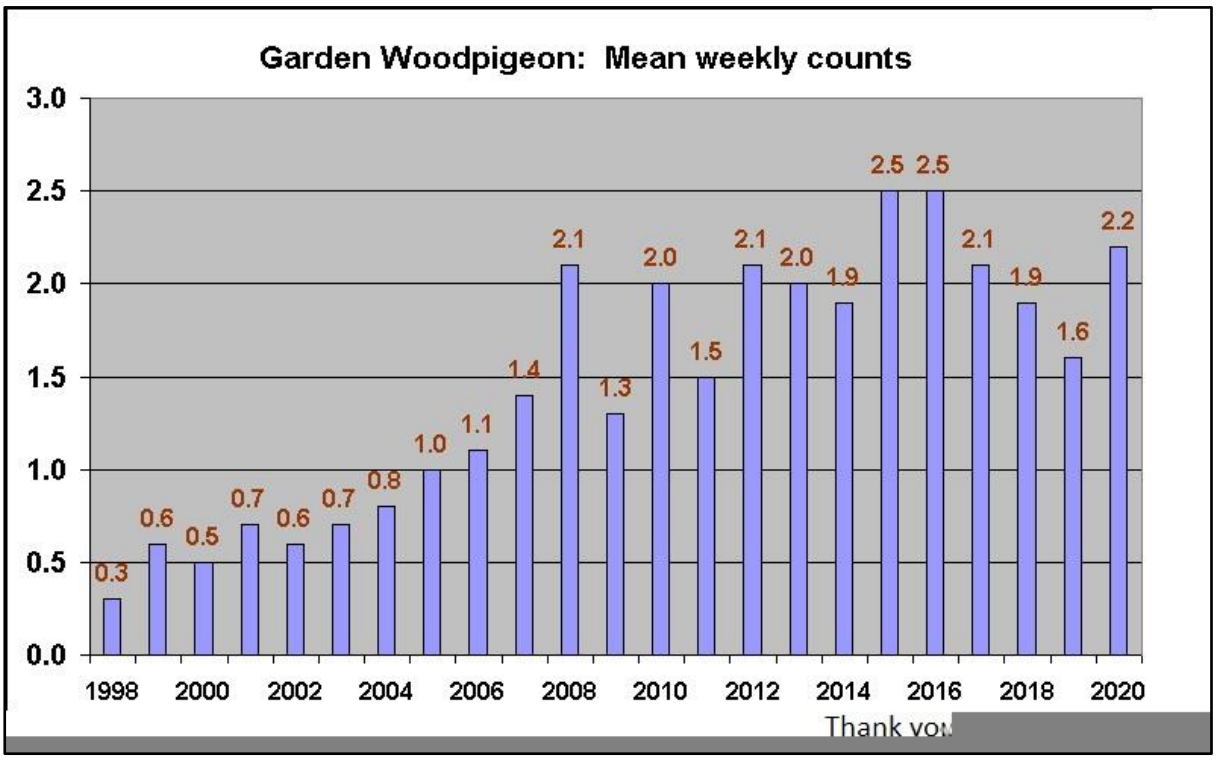
Starlings are ranked 2nd nationally and 3rd in the Devon data. There is a winter flock of Starlings in Sidmouth that feeds on the cricket club grass most afternoons, perhaps this is one reason they do not need to visit gardens to feed.

In the Devon data, Starlings (3) and Collared Doves (16) ranked very differently on total numbers, but they are very close if you look at the percentage of gardens visited, 28% and 26% respectively. As with the local Robins and Goldfinches, the difference is between flock and solitary birds. Analysis of the Devon data reveals that you would expect to see 74 Starlings in their 28% of 100 gardens but only 16 Collared Doves in their 26% of 100 gardens.

One result that did draw early attention was the success of Woodpigeons. These birds have adapted to humans very successfully. It is not clear when or why they were named as woodland birds, but they were birds of arable farmland almost exclusively one hundred years ago. In the last 50 years there has been a significant shift as many Woodpigeons have taken up an urban lifestyle.

In 1995-97, the BTO scheme reported Woodpigeons in 40-60% of gardens. Ten years later the reporting rate had gone up to 60-80% and currently Woodpigeons are reported in 80-90% of the BTO gardens in the UK throughout the year. shows the change over time for the records in one garden in Hampshire.

The Sid Valley results are in line with the BTO data, it shows Woodpigeons visiting 91% of the gardens. Ours is a small sample, and the BGB national data is lower but still showing a very successful species, 78% of English observers recorded Woodpigeons in their gardens in 2020. The figure for Devon was 73%. The very rural counties such as Lincolnshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire are all in the mid-80s, but Wood Pigeons are no longer a rural species. Largely urban areas of England are still recording in the mid to high 70s. 73% of Greater Manchester gardens were visited by Woodpigeons in the 2020 survey, Greater London 77%, South Yorkshire 78%, and 83% of the West Midlands gardens.



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We managed to collect data from 35 separate observations, but these were from 28 separate gardens ( ) because some sites were observed on two separate days or at different times. Including the repeated observations is valid as can be seen by the variation. On the Saturday, one garden recorded 32 birds across 8 species, on the Sunday the same garden recorded 39 birds across 11 species. Another garden recorded a single Great Tit on one day, but 6 different birds on the second occasion.

Observers for the national BGB enter details about their gardens such as whether it has trees, bird feeders and ponds, three things known to help birds. Also, observers are asked whether the garden is rural or urban and the proximity to farmland and woodland. This data can be analysed to measure the impacts on bird numbers or species diversity.

Our gardens are mostly medium size town gardens, and the sample is too small to draw any significant conclusions. It is clear that those gardens on the edge the town tend to have more birds, and this is where uncommon species such as Tree Creepers and Bullfinches were more likely to be seen.

We await the 2021 national data, and data from different seasons gathered by participation in the BTO scheme later in the year. In the meantime, the RSPB and BTO have used their national data to provide plenty of advice on their websites if you want to support the local bird population, *many small actions making a big difference.*

Ed Dolphin
February 2021

Black Cap	Dunnock**	House Sparrow**	Sparrowhawk
Blackbird**	Goldfinch**	Less Spot Woodpeck	Starling**
Blue Tit**	Great Tit**	Long-Tail Tit**	Tree Creeper
Bullfinch	Green Woodpecker	Magpie**	Woodpigeon**
Carrion Crow	Greenfinch**	Nuthatch	Wren
Chaffinch**	Grey Wagtail	Pheasant	
Coal Tit**	Grt Spot Woodpecker	Robin**	
Collared Dove**	Herring Gull	Song Thrush	**RSPB target species

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Black Cap	7	Great Tit**	40	Pheasant	4
Blackbird**	74	Green Woodpecker	3	Robin**	42
Blue Tit**	53	Greenfinch**	24	Song Thrush	3
Bullfinch	5	Grey Wagtail	1	Sparrowhawk	1
Carrion Crow	15	Great Spot. Woodpecker	6	Starling**	3
Chaffinch**	31	Herring Gull	9	Tree Creeper	2
Coal Tit**	22	House Sparrow**	75	Woodpigeon**	76
Collared Dove**	2	Long-Tail Tit**	49	Wren	8
Dunnock**	19	Magpie**	14		
Goldfinch**	61	Nuthatch	11	** RSPB target species	

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Black Cap	5	Great Tit**	19	Pheasant	1
Blackbird**	32	Green Woodpecker	3	Robin**	29
Blue Tit**	23	Greenfinch**	12	Song Thrush	3
Bullfinch	3	Grey Wagtail	1	Sparrowhawk	1
Carrion Crow	9	Great Spot. Woodpecker	6	Starling**	1
Chaffinch**	7	Herring Gull	6	Tree Creeper	1
Coal Tit**	13	House Sparrow**	14	Woodpigeon**	32
Collared Dove**	1	Long-Tail Tit**	14	Wren	8
Dunnock**	13	Magpie**	10		
Goldfinch**	12	Nuthatch	7	** RSPB target species	

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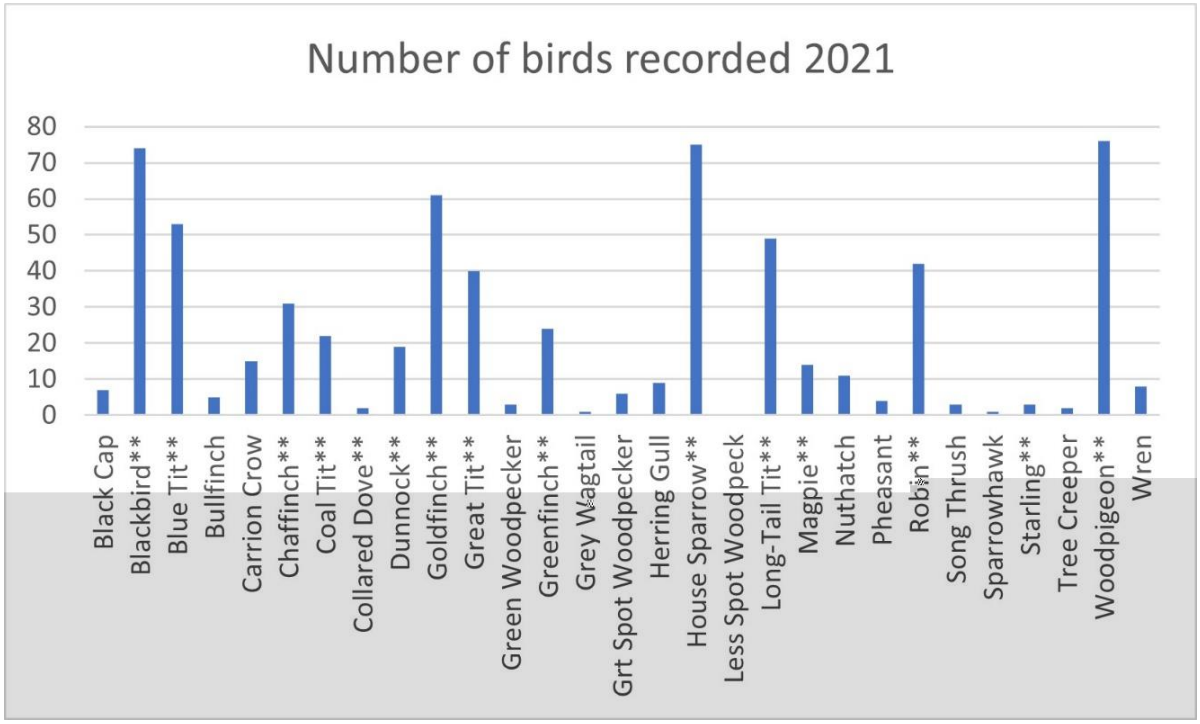
Number of birds recorded 2021
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Black Cap
Blackbird**
Blue Tit**
Bullfinch
Carrion Crow
Chaffinch**
Coal Tit**
Collared Dove**
Dunnock**
Goldfinch**
Great Tit**
Green Woodpecker
Greenfinch**
Grey Wagtail
Grt Spot Woodpecker
Herring Gull
House Sparrow**
Less Spot Woodpeck
Long-Tail Tit**
Magpie**
Nuthatch
Pheasant
Robin**
Song Thrush
Sparrowhawk
Starling**
Tree Creeper
Woodpigeon**
Wren

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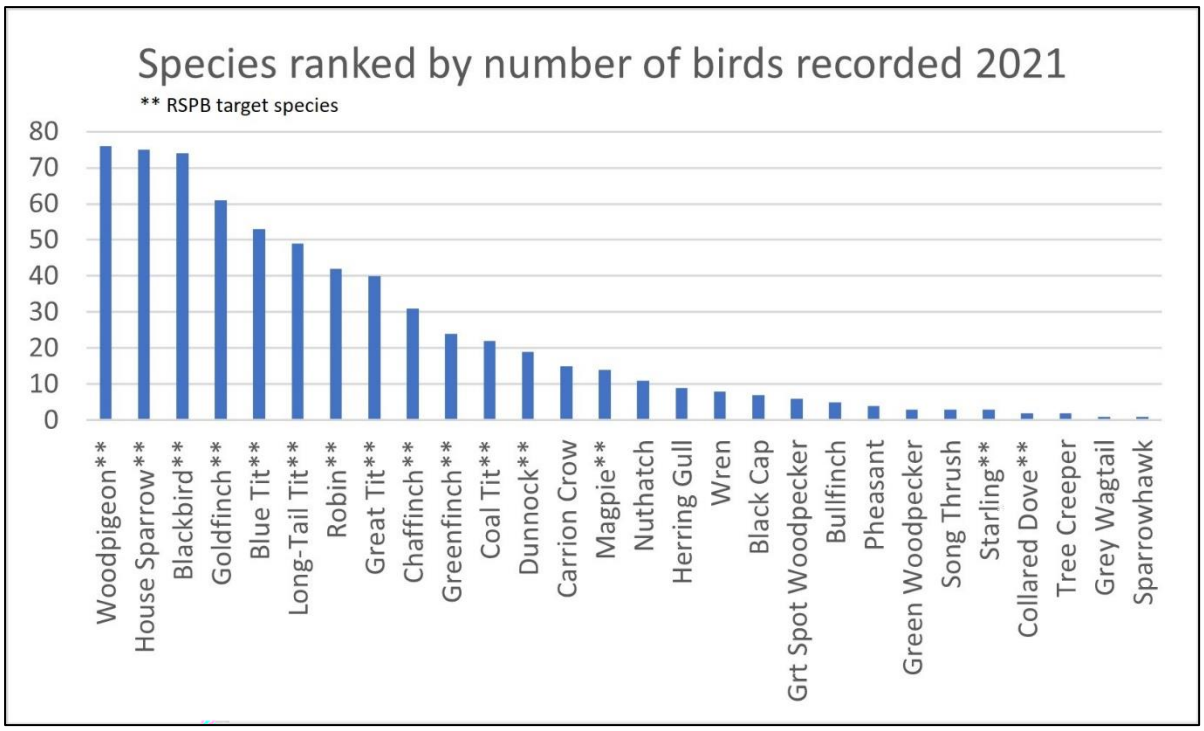
Species ranked by number of birds recorded 2021
** RSPB target species
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Woodpigeon**
House Sparrow**
Blackbird**
Goldfinch**
Blue Tit**
Long-Tail Tit**
Robin**
Great Tit**
Chaffinch**
Greenfinch**
Coal Tit**
Dunnock**
Carrion Crow
Magpie**
Nuthatch
Herring Gull
Wren
Black Cap
Grt Spot Woodpecker
Bullfinch
Pheasant
Green Woodpecker
Song Thrush
Starling**
Collared Dove**
Tree Creeper
Grey Wagtail
Sparrowhawk

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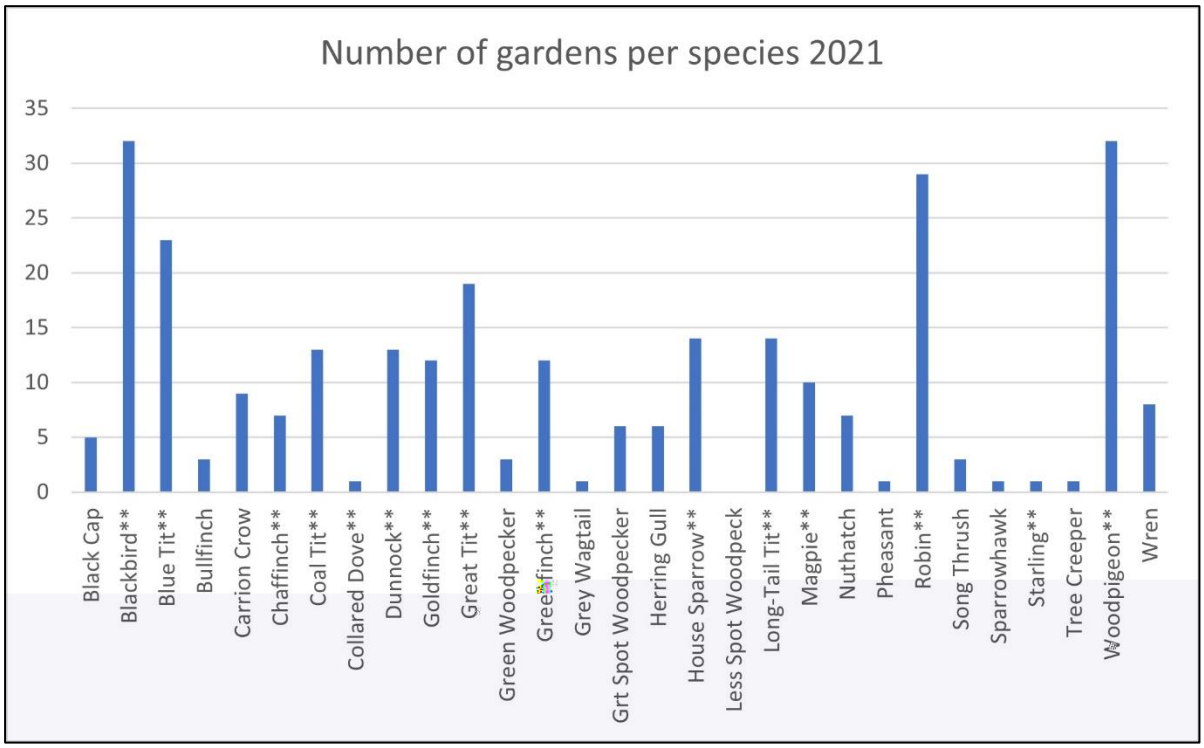
Number of gardens per species 2021
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Black Cap
Blackbird**
Blue Tit**
Bullfinch
Carrion Crow
Chaffinch**
Coal Tit**
Collared Dove**
Dunnock**
Goldfinch**
Great Tit**
Green Woodpecker
Greenfinch**
Grey Wagtail
Grt Spot Woodpecker
Herring Gull
House Sparrow**
Less Spot Woodpeck
Long-Tail Tit**
Magpie**
Nuthatch
Pheasant
Robin**
Song Thrush
Sparrowhawk
Starling**
Tree Creeper
Woodpigeon**
Wren

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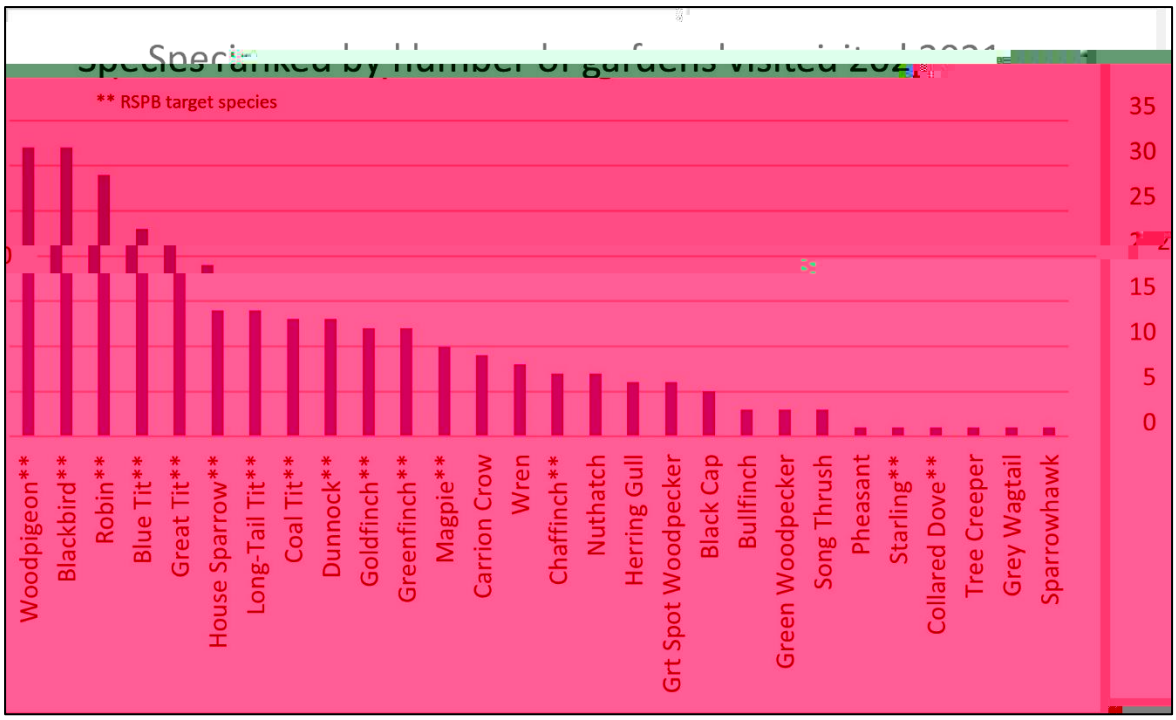
** RSPB target species
35
30
25
15
10
5
0
Woodpigeon**
Blackbird**
Robin**
Blue Tit**
Great Tit**
House Sparrow**
Long-Tail Tit**
Coal Tit**
Dunnock**
Goldfinch**
Greenfinch**
Magpie**
Carrion Crow
Wren
Chaffinch**
Nuthatch
Herring Gull
Grt Spot Woodpecker
Black Cap
Bullfinch
Green Woodpecker
Song Thrush
Pheasant
Starling**
Collared Dove**
Tree Creeper
Grey Wagtail
Sparrowhawk

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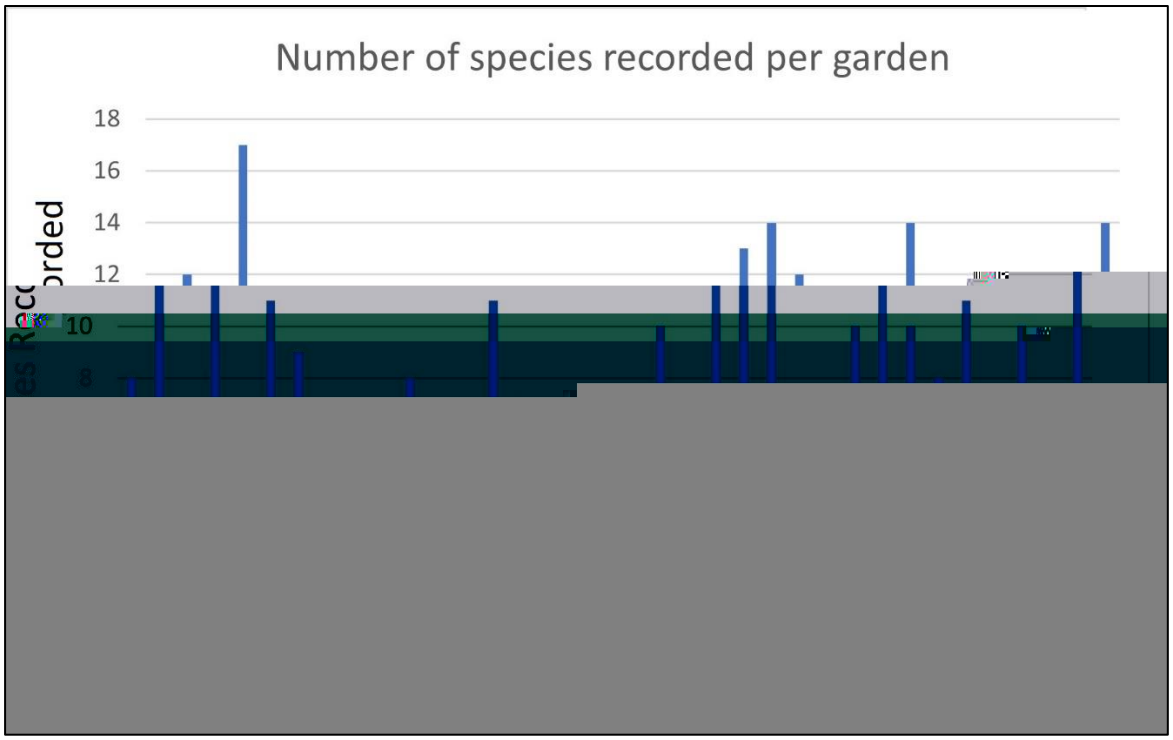
Number of species recorded per garden
18
16
14
12
10
8

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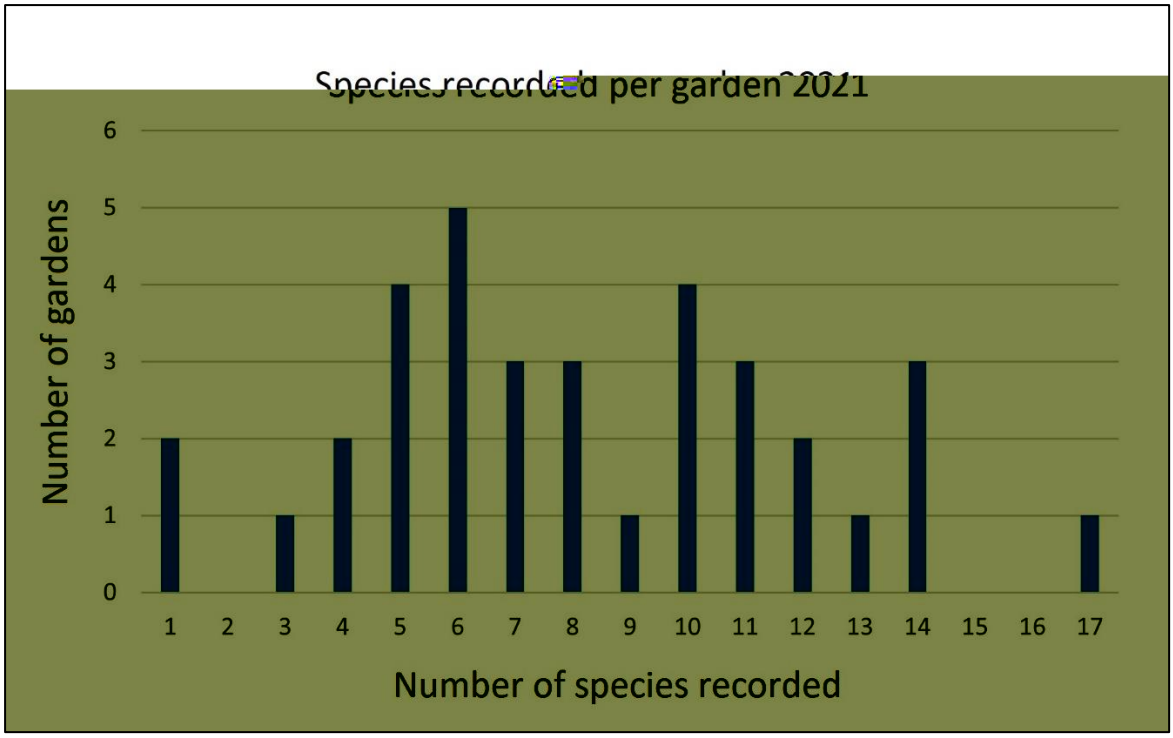
Species recorded per garden 2021
Number of gardens
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17
Number of species recorded

x **x** **x**