

THE DAWN CHORUS



SPRING / SUMMER 2026



DISTURBANCE

Putting songbirds at risk
PAGE 5

PROTECT PETS, SAVE BIRDS

Call for Government action
PAGE 18

GARDEN BIRD FEEDING

A growing conversation
PAGE 17

Skylark



Chairman's notes

As I reach the end of my first full year as Chairman, I want to begin with a heartfelt thank you. Our members and supporters continue to show extraordinary generosity, even in a tough and unpredictable economic climate. Fundraising is challenging for every charity right now, and yet you have continued to show up for songbirds. Because of you, we've maintained a strong financial footing and - most importantly - we've been able to keep driving forward the research that fills the evidence gaps holding back progress.

Spring sees changes to our Board. We look forward to welcoming two new trustees, Andrew Garthwaite and Jodie Holyoake. We also say a fond farewell to Nick Forde, who has given almost 19 years of dedicated support. His contribution has been invaluable, and it's thanks to him that we use our strapline - saving songbirds with science.

Looking ahead, the coming months will be an important time for SongBird Survival. Across the conservation world, 2030 is a key milestone, with the familiar "30 by 30" target shaping much of the conversation around biodiversity. For us, it also coincides with refreshing our organisational strategy, so we are clear about our priorities and direction through to 2030. Identifying the next set of research projects in our pipeline is right at the top of the list.



The last time we undertook this process, in 2023, it led directly to our work on veterinary medications, disturbance, and endocrine disrupting chemicals - projects that continue to uncover essential new evidence. And as always, our community - you - will help shape that future. I warmly welcome your ideas and suggestions as we continue this important journey together for songbirds.

On a personal note, in January this year, I spent a day birdwatching with Barnaby Briggs, chairman of the WWT in Welney. I was fortunate enough to see 48 different species of wetland birds and songbirds including meadow pipits, fieldfares, one tree sparrow and fields and fields of whooper swans. My personal highlight was the thrill seeing an ascending skylark, singing. Well worth a visit if you're in the area - for the bird-watching, the heated bird hides and the paninis in the cafe afterwards.

12 Birds to Save Your Life is a gentle, uplifting book that shows how a skylark's song helped the author out of deep grief. A beautifully observed reminder of how nature can genuinely lift your spirits.



SONGBIRD SURVIVAL, PO Box 311, Diss, Norfolk IP22 1WW | 01379 641715
songbird-survival.org.uk | dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk

A Company Limited by guarantee & not having a share capital. Registered in England No. 4078747. Charity No: 1085281.

MEMBERSHIP | Individual £36 | Joint £42 | Corporate £300
JOIN US AT songbird-survival.org.uk/become-a-member



Please pass this on to a friend or recycle it.
 Printed on responsibly sourced FSC® certified paper.



Giving fledglings a fighting chance

Songbirds nest throughout spring and summer and baby birds face their toughest challenges in the first few weeks of life before being fully fledged.

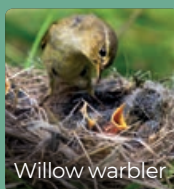
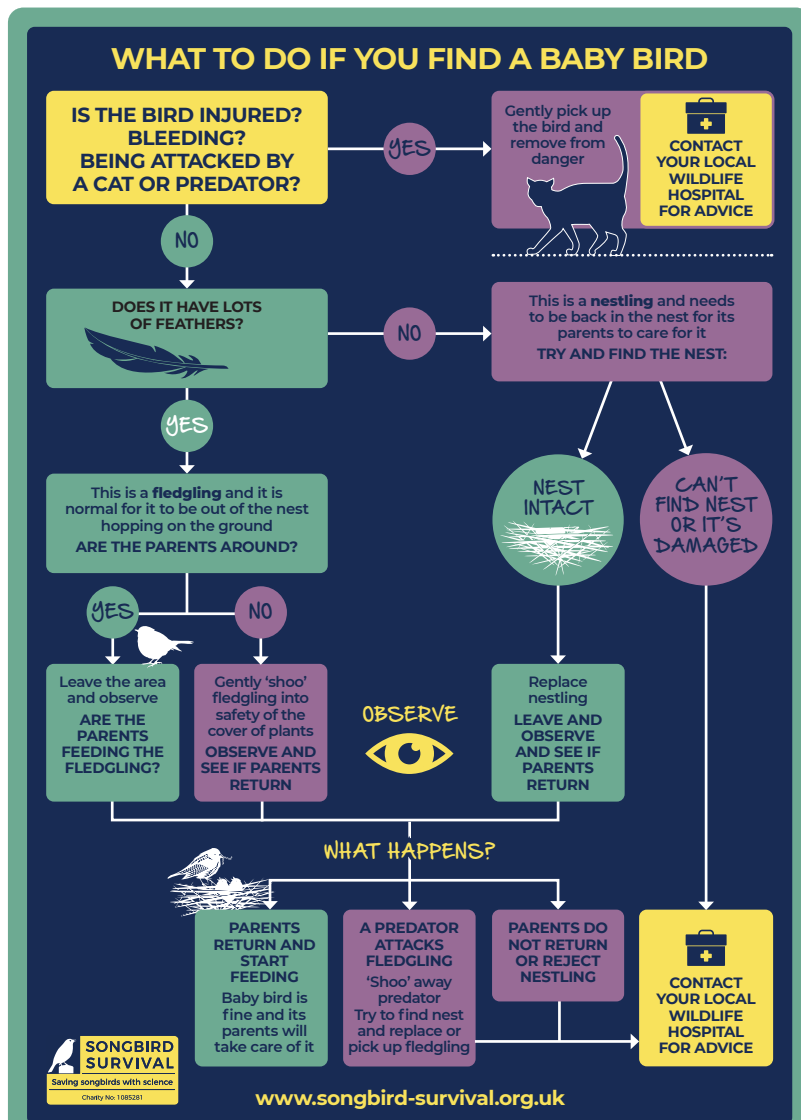
During this period, before they are strong enough to fly confidently, they have a limited sense of danger, rely heavily on their parents and spend a lot of time on or near the ground. All of this makes baby birds very vulnerable.

People often ask what they should do if they find a baby bird - either nestling or fledgling - on the ground in their garden. Before you do anything else, the first priority is to make sure it is safe from danger from predators and if not, gently move it to some cover such as a shrub.

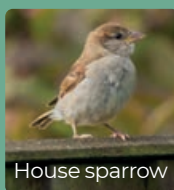
What you do next will depend on the bird's age, and if it is a nestling or a fledgling. Use our flow chart to help you decide the right course of action.

There are many other ways you can make your garden a safer place for baby birds.

- **Create safe spaces** by planting shrubs and hedges where young birds can hide while they practise flying.
- **Avoid cutting back hedges and plants** between February and September to give cover and leave space for insects, which are a vital food source for growing birds.
- **Reduce cat-related risks** by keeping cats indoors as much as possible during the peak fledging season - March to May - especially from dusk to dawn: a cat's night sight is much better than a bird's.
- **Provide fresh water** for drinking and bathing.
- **Observe from a distance** and keep dogs and children away from areas where birds are active.



Willow warbler

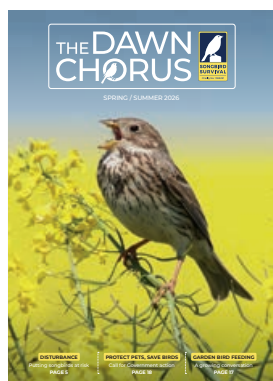


House sparrow

A **nestling** is a very young bird that remains in the nest and depends completely on its parents for warmth, protection, and food. It typically has little to no feather coverage and isn't yet capable of standing, hopping, or regulating its own body temperature.

A **fledgling** is a young bird that has grown enough feathers to leave the nest but is still learning how to survive on its own. It can usually hop, flutter, and follow its parents, but it hasn't yet mastered full, confident flight.

IN THIS ISSUE



- 2 Chairman's notes
- 3 Giving fledglings a fighting chance
- 4 Spotlight on whinchat
- 5 Research update
- 7 Recreational disturbance
- 8 Spotlight on wood warbler
- 9 CEO column
- 9 Ruby Robin Award
- 10 Small birds, big journeys
- 11 Thank you to our members
- 12 Science news
- 13 A view from a kitchen window
- 14 Government news
- 15 Creating a garden for songbirds
- 16 In the news & Out and about
- 17 Garden bird feeding – the growing conversation
- 18 Protecting pets, harming birds?
- 20 Leave a gift of hope

Thank you to our contributors. All content is produced by the SongBird Survival team including Emma Phipps, George Bradley, Lisa Beamish, Robyn Cooper, Sue Morgan and Tracey Spensley as well as the named authors of specific pieces. Cover image: Corn bunting

SPOTLIGHT ON Whinchat

STATUS:

RED

(AV. % CHANGE):

-60% (1995-2023)

Estimated number of UK
breeding pairs: **49,500**

Data from www.bto.org/birdtrends

Sources: see songbirdsos.org/DC-links



KEY INFORMATION:

Scientific name:
Saxicola rubetra

Family:
Muscicapidae

Average length:
12.5cm

Average wingspan:
21-24cm

Average lifespan:
2 years

IDENTIFICATION: The whinchat is a small perching bird with delicate, striking markings which is most at home in grasslands and meadows, often near moorland. Both males and females feature a prominent white stripe above the eye, dark cheeks, and streaked brown upperparts. The male is distinguished by his warm orange-brown underside, extending from the throat to the flanks, while juveniles resemble females but can be identified by their more speckled breast. Their song is short and sharp, with a few trills and whistles at a time.

BREEDING AND NESTING: Whinchats are summer migrants to the UK, typically arriving between April and May, with the majority of the breeding population found in Wales. Upon arrival, females construct a cup-shaped nest from grass, leaves, and moss, usually tucked into long grass or bracken, and lay a clutch of 5–6 eggs. Incubation is carried out solely by the female for around two weeks, but once the chicks hatch, both parents are involved in feeding them until they fledge roughly two weeks later. The young leave the nest a few days before they are able to fly and remain dependent on their parents for almost a month after fledging.

DIET: Whinchats primarily feed on invertebrates, including flies, moths, spiders, worms and beetles. In autumn, they may supplement their diet with seeds and berries, such as blackberries.

THREATS AND HOW TO HELP: Like many songbirds, the whinchat is predominantly threatened by increasingly intensive agricultural practices. Earlier mowing of grassland and overgrazing not only reduce the availability of suitable nest sites but can also directly destroy nests and leave them more exposed to predators.

Other threats to whinchats include adverse weather events such as flooding, and predation by both mammalian and avian predators such as red foxes, badgers, carrion crow and magpies.

You can help to protect whinchats by supporting efforts to safeguard grassland habitats and, if you own grassland, delaying mowing until after the breeding season (March–September). This will help to both maintain nest sites and camouflage nests from predators. When walking on moorland or grassland during the breeding season, keep dogs on leads and watch for ground nests to avoid accidental disturbance.

DID YOU KNOW? Despite its small size, the whinchat undertakes an astonishing migration, travelling all the way to the Sahara Desert for its wintering grounds, a journey of more than 3,000 miles!

References: songbirdsos.org/DC-links

Recreational disturbance:

When our love of nature puts songbirds at risk

The drivers influencing the population sizes of the UK's breeding songbirds are complex, interconnected and ever-changing.

Disturbance is one of the recognised threats to songbird numbers but there are a number of questions and unknowns about the impact it is having on overall numbers. Access to the outdoors is essential for human wellbeing. Walking, cycling, dog walking – these everyday activities help many of us feel calmer, healthier, and more connected. But as more people head into the countryside, and as our favourite green spaces carry increasing visitor pressure, a quieter story is unfolding in our woodlands: the growing impact of recreational disturbance on songbirds.

Disturbance occurs when birds and other wildlife change their behaviour because of human presence. Most of it is subtle - footsteps drifting off path, dogs rustling through undergrowth, a sudden burst of voices. But these small, repeated interruptions accumulate, causing birds to avoid high quality habitat, abandon foraging areas or even relocate nesting sites. Over time, this reduces survival and breeding success. Ground nesting songbirds, for example, may abandon nests entirely or avoid prime habitat when disturbance is persistent.

Cavity nesting woodland songbirds face challenges too. Their nests may be hidden, but they still depend on quiet, undisturbed territories to feed chicks successfully. Frequent flushing - even from well-intentioned walkers or off lead dogs - forces adults to spend less time feeding and more time scanning for threat. Over the breeding season, this lost time adds up. Birds may choose poorer quality cavities or suboptimal territories simply to avoid disturbance.

The pressures are increasing. Dog ownership has risen sharply in recent years, and dogs now accompany up to half of lowland walks, with many off lead even in sensitive conservation areas.

So how do we respond when people are both the source of disturbance and vital to the solution?

Across the conservation sector and among landowners, work to understand and reduce disturbance is growing rapidly. This includes our own study on the impacts on songbirds in woodland settings

Encouragingly, organisations are collaboratively sharing evidence, best practice and codeveloping practical solutions. Research shows that seemingly small changes - such as more positive signage (e.g. please keep to paths) - can meaningfully improve onsite behaviour. Other trials, from symbolic fencing to increased staff presence, already show promise. Our study will add to this, helping shape effective

Dartford warbler
Image: Paul Kaiser



interventions in woodland sites.

But long-term success requires more than signs and infrastructure. It relies on people seeing themselves not just as visitors, but as custodians. So, we invite our members and supporters to pause and reflect:

- *How do my choices affect the wildlife I treasure?*
- *What are the responsibilities that come with enjoying the countryside?*
- *How can I help others tread more lightly?*

Together, we can create woodlands where both people and songbirds truly thrive.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP WOODLAND SONGBIRDS

- ✓ **Keep to marked paths**, especially during nesting season.
- ✓ **Put dogs on a lead** in sensitive wildlife areas or where birds may be nesting.
- ✓ **Pause and look around** before entering quiet woodland areas - birds may be feeding or nesting nearby.
- ✓ **Share positive behaviour** with friends and family; small conversations shift social norms.
- ✓ **Support evidence-based conservation** through volunteering, donating, or spreading awareness.

When we see ourselves not just as visitors, but as custodians, woodland songbirds can truly thrive.



RESEARCH UPDATE

Sand martin

Are polluted waterways putting Britain's songbirds at risk?



Researcher Jenny Darby is making impressive headway with her PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University where she is investigating whether polluted waterways may be putting some of the UK's most iconic songbirds at risk.

Jenny's work focuses on Hirundines, a family of birds that includes sand martins, house martins and swallows. These agile aerial feeders often visit wastewater treatment sites that are rich in the flying insects they depend on for food. However, these sites also expose the birds to pollutants such as endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) which are known to interfere with hormone systems in both wildlife and humans. Jenny's research aims to identify which pollutants are present in these waterways, how they move through the food chain,

and whether EDCs affect the ability of insectivorous birds to reproduce.

Jenny has already uncovered striking results. Monitoring eggs in sand martin nests, the results show reduced hatching success in sand martins nesting at polluted sites compared to cleaner sites. This early evidence suggests that exposure to EDCs may be affecting the sand martins' ability to reproduce. She has also started analysing water, sediment and insect samples to screen for a wide range of pollutants including veterinary medicines, pharmaceuticals and neonicotinoid pesticides. Jenny will begin collecting blood samples from birds to directly measure their exposure to EDCs later this year. Her findings will provide vital evidence to support future conservation efforts and help protect the UK's insectivorous songbirds.



From pets to songbirds: emerging evidence on flea and tick treatments

As a nation of pet lovers, we care deeply about the health and wellbeing of our cats and dogs. However, many people are unaware that most pet flea and tick treatments contain pesticides that are banned for

use on farms in the UK and EU because of the harm they can cause to wildlife.

Building on her previous research, Dr. Cannelle Tassin de Montaigu has been investigating whether this chemical exposure is

influencing breeding success and survival in songbirds. By measuring pesticide levels in the eggs and dead chicks of blue tits and great tits, she has uncovered some compelling results. With her study due to be published in early spring, we're on the cusp of learning far more about the hidden impacts these chemicals could be having on our songbirds.

This research is laying the groundwork for new approaches in songbird conservation. Cannelle's findings add to growing evidence that veterinary medicines can pose environmental risks which SongBird Survival, along with other environmental organisations, is using to push for stronger environmental risk assessments for flea and tick treatments.

🔗 [Turn to page 18 for more information about our public campaign](#)

The hidden impact of recreation on songbirds

The UK's woodlands offer a treasured space for many of us, whether we're hiking, running, cycling, horse riding, or walking our dogs. They also provide vital habitat for many species of songbird, including woodland specialists that rely on these environments to survive.

But as more people use woodlands for recreation, how might this increased activity affect the birds that live there? To help answer this question, we're funding a PhD student at the University of Exeter, studying how recreation influences woodland songbirds and exploring ways to reduce any negative impacts.

Gavin Kellerman is now one year into his project and has made good progress. His main

study site is a woodland in East Dartmoor National Nature Reserve as it has areas with different levels of recreational use. Gavin has also gained access to a long-term dataset of nestbox monitoring for several woodland songbird species and he will be adding new information to this using trail cameras installed at nest boxes.

His key study species include the pied flycatcher, marsh tit, redstart and nuthatch. By comparing nesting behaviours across areas with different levels of human activity, Gavin hopes to understand whether this activity affects how often songbird parents visit their nests.

🔗 [Read more about recreational disturbance on page 5](#)



Nuthatch

SPOTLIGHT ON Wood warbler

STATUS:

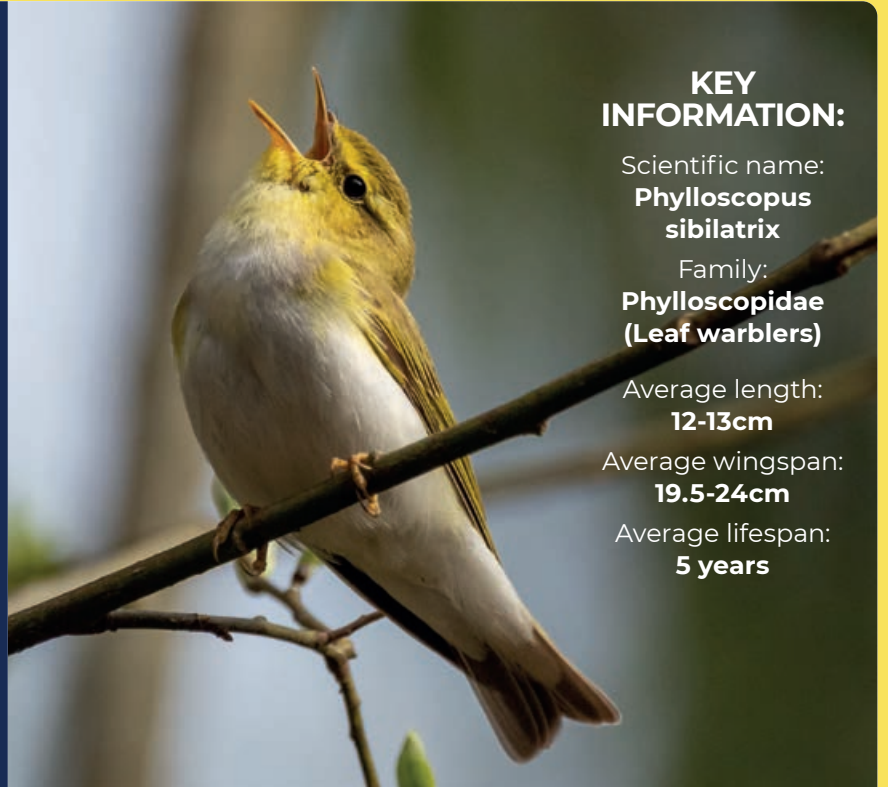
RED

(AV. % CHANGE):

-81% (1995-2023)

Estimated number of territories in UK: **6,500**

Data from www.bto.org/birdtrends



KEY INFORMATION:

Scientific name:
Phylloscopus sibilatrix

Family:
Phylloscopidae (Leaf warblers)

Average length:
12-13cm

Average wingspan:
19.5-24cm

Average lifespan:
5 years

IDENTIFICATION: Wood warblers are summer migrants to the UK and resemble their relatives, the willow warbler and chiffchaff, though they are noticeably larger-bodied with longer wings. They are brightly coloured, with yellow-green upperparts, a bold yellow stripe above the eye, and a vivid yellow throat and breast that contrast with their white underparts. Their distinctive song, a rapid, vibrating trill often compared to the sound of a coin spinning on a tabletop, sets them apart from other warblers. As their name suggests, wood warblers are most often found in woodland, particularly oak.

BREEDING AND NESTING: Upon arriving in the UK in late April, female wood warblers select a suitable nesting site within a woodland territory that has already been defended by a male. The female constructs a dome-shaped nest from dry grasses, plant stems, and animal hair, usually on or close to the ground and tucked beneath vegetation or fallen branches for cover. She incubates a clutch of 5–6 eggs alone for 12–13 days, after which both parents feed the chicks for a further 12–13 days until they fledge.

DIET: Wood warblers feed mainly on insects and other invertebrates, including beetles, spiders, and flies. They forage with agility, sometimes hovering to pluck insects from leaves or catching them in mid-air.

THREATS AND HOW TO HELP: The wood warbler is the UK's rarest breeding leaf warbler and has suffered severe declines over the past 30 years. The causes are not fully understood, but are thought to include land-use changes and deteriorating habitat quality both in Europe and in their West African wintering grounds. Other wider pressures affecting similar species such as the loss of invertebrate prey are also likely contributors.

The upland oak woodlands of western Britain are especially important breeding habitats for wood warblers. If you live or walk in these areas, take care not to disturb active nests during spring and summer, and consider supporting efforts to protect and restore these valuable woodland habitats.

DID YOU KNOW? Perhaps unsurprisingly given their similar appearances, the wood warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff were once believed to be a single species known as the "willow wren". It wasn't until the late 1700s that Reverend Gilbert White, through careful observation of their distinct songs, became the first naturalist to recognise that this "species" was actually three separate birds.

References: songbirdsos.org/DC-links

CEO Column

Our staff team only meets in person a few times each year, so our early 2026 gathering at the Aga Khan Centre was a real highlight.

Stepping away from our screens to reconnect in such a beautiful space felt energising, and the Canticle of the Birds exhibition provided a perfect backdrop. A particular joy was the mural created by local primary school children, depicting all 84 UK breeding songbirds. Seeing the natural world through their eyes - the creativity, the focus, the sense of wonder - was a powerful reminder of how early experiences can spark a lifelong commitment to protecting nature.

The new year has also brought valuable opportunities to connect with others working on issues central to our mission. Alongside the first national Recreation in Nature Conference, which gathered more than 400 participants from charities, landowners and researchers, we were pleased to be part of the Wilding Gardens Conference led by the team at Knepp. Both events showcased the strength of collective effort: open sharing of knowledge, practical experience and innovative thinking.

For us, this means ensuring that our Gardens for Birds guidance remains a prominent, year-round part of our educational activity - empowering communities to create spaces where birds can thrive. At one of these events, a comment from Sue Sayer at the Seal Research Trust particularly resonated with me: disturbance may be only one of many pressures on wildlife, but it is one we can reduce now. It was a timely reminder to focus our energy where meaningful change is achievable.

Closer to home, I've had my own reminders of the resilience of songbirds. A pair of intrepid wrens found their way into the walls and warmth of my house during the relentlessly wet start to the year,



Sue Morgan

even appearing in the bathroom while repairs were underway. It was a delight to see them up close - though I hope they've now settled somewhere more suitable for the breeding season. Even in the most unexpected places, nature finds a way.

As February's sunshine finally broke through, it provided a welcome lift as we stepped up our campaign on veterinary medicines. Dr Cannelle

Tassin de Montaigu and I met with peers in the House of Lords to discuss our research and the urgent regulatory changes needed to prevent further harm to songbirds. Momentum is growing, and it is vital that the evidence we have gathered leads to real action. We know many of you who use flea and tick treatments for pets will have questions. As ever, our approach is to stand firmly for birds while providing clear, balanced guidance that considers pets, people and wider wildlife.

With our research producing critical evidence and campaigns gathering real pace, your support is vital. Our new appeal offers a chance to make a tangible, immediate difference for songbirds at a moment when change is truly within reach. If you are able to contribute, it will be deeply appreciated.



Ruby Robin Award Success

This year's Ruby Robin Award ran throughout January and February 2026. We kicked things off with National Robin Day on the 21st December, and within days thousands of children had signed up to take part. In all, nearly 60,000 children signed up and had started downloading our materials to learn more about songbirds.

Activities for the children

taking part included everything from families making bird feeders at home to forest schools and large primary school groups signing up entire classes to earn their certificates. While designed for ages 5-11, we were pleased to see many nursery groups (ages 2-5) taking part with great enthusiasm.

We would also like to extend a special thank you to those of

you who took part in fundraising as part of your award activities. These vital funds help us keep our educational resources free for all. The feedback from parents and educators has been consistently positive, highlighting a genuine appetite for practical conservation and helping to inspire a new generation of songbird guardians.

SMALL BIRDS, BIG JOURNEYS

Migratory Status

44 wholly resident in the UK

18 are short distance migrants or make interruptive movements

22 are Afro-tropical migrants moving to south of the Sahara for their non-breeding range

Each spring, millions of migratory songbirds leave Africa and travel to the UK to breed. Among them are the common whitethroat and the spotted flycatcher. Their long journeys link our hedgerows and woodlands with distant wintering grounds, showing how even the smallest birds connect whole continents.

A good year for whitethroats

In 2025, whitethroats enjoyed an excellent breeding season. Warm, dry spring weather meant plenty of insects and safe, dry nests. Many monitoring sites recorded more chicks fledging than usual. This was a sharp contrast to the wet, cold summer of 2024, when prolonged rain caused widespread nest failures.

These year-to-year swings show how vulnerable birds are to increasingly unpredictable weather. As extreme conditions become more common, migratory birds face greater risks during their short and crucial breeding window.

A tougher time for spotted flycatchers

The spotted flycatcher has declined by 67% since 1995, and its challenges are different. Earlier springs mean insects peak before the birds arrive. Habitat loss in Africa and on European stopovers removes safe resting places, and cold snaps during nesting can wipe out whole broods.

Comparing whitethroats and flycatchers shows how even similar species can struggle in very different ways - and why detailed, species-specific research is essential.

Why we focus on breeding birds

At SongBird Survival, we focus on UK breeding songbirds because this is the stage where our actions can make the greatest difference. Migrants face many pressures along their routes, but once they reach our countryside, we have real power to help.

Breeding is the riskiest part of a bird's life. Many chicks never make it out of the nest, and those that do still face high mortality. To keep populations stable, each pair needs to raise enough fledglings every year,

otherwise numbers fall - even if conditions abroad remain good.

We can improve outcomes by:

- ✓ creating insect rich habitats
- ✓ avoiding all pesticide use
- ✓ keeping hedgerows, scrub and woodland edges healthy and connected
- ✓ reducing disturbance during nesting
- ✓ managing predator pressure
- ✓ supporting biodiversity friendly farming and land use friendly farming and land use

Even small improvements can tip a breeding attempt from failure to success, especially for declining species.

Why this year's World Migratory Bird Day matters

The 2026 World Migratory Bird Day theme - "Every bird counts: your observations matter!" - highlights just how powerful community science has become. Every record, whether from your garden, a local park, or a trip abroad, helps build a clearer picture of how birds are coping with rapid environmental change. Good data leads to good decisions. And much of that data comes from everyday observers.

You can get involved by taking part in monitoring efforts such as bird counts; for example, BTO's BirdTrack project enables volunteers to log their bird sightings online. By contributing to data portals like this, you help build a more accurate picture of bird distributions and migration patterns.

The power of our songbird members

Chaffinch



Last year, we asked you, our members, why you support SongBird Survival and the answers were remarkably consistent: the cause is important and the research that we do matters.

And you're absolutely right. Songbirds are facing an ecological emergency. We hear it every spring when the dawn chorus grows a little quieter, or when we notice that familiar visitors haven't returned. The only answer is rigorous, independent, scientific research that identifies real threats and informs real solutions. Science is what underpins everything we do at SongBird Survival, and since 2000, we've been researching the difficult questions other organisations aren't asking.

That's why we're so grateful for every one of our members who support us. You help fund research that matters, like our vet drugs research that has highlighted alarming levels of pesticides in nests and chicks, or evidence reviews that help us strategise and prioritise our research pipeline.

This isn't research that gets turned into academic papers just to gather dust, it's evidence that's driving campaigns to change conservation policy, giving practical solutions to people who want to help songbirds in their own gardens, and informing land management decisions across the country.

But here's what makes our members really special: you're a community that genuinely cares about songbirds. As one member put it, "I feel I am contributing to a vital cause and seeing your results gives me hope." Another said, "Since time is scarce for me, my one real contribution is to support you through membership. I feel I'm doing something to help songbirds." That's exactly what we aim for, because helping songbirds shouldn't feel like a burden, it should feel like being part of something hopeful.



If you know someone who shares your passion for songbirds, or if you're part of an organisation that would be interested in supporting our work, now is the perfect time to invite them to join us. We have membership options to suit everyone, from individual memberships at £3 per month to corporate partnerships starting from £300 per month.

songbird-survival.org.uk/join





SCIENCE NEWS

Native trees boost songbird success

Do songbirds care whether the trees they nest in are native to the UK? Scientists in Scotland have been exploring this question using blue tits as model species.

Drawing on nine years of nest box data from 20 sites across Scotland, the researchers found that native trees, particularly oaks, boosted breeding success by increasing the number of fledglings produced. They also counted caterpillars, the blue tits' preferred prey, and discovered that caterpillar

abundance rose in areas with more native oak foliage, suggesting that increased prey availability was the driver of improved breeding success.

As many other songbirds rely on caterpillars, the scientists believe this pattern likely extends beyond blue tits to other insectivorous birds. Their findings support the planting of native trees, especially in urban areas, to help sustain healthy populations of insectivorous birds.

➔ Read more at: songbirdsos.org/DC-links



Skylark



The lingering impact of banned pesticides

Evidence shows that pesticides are contributing to the decline of insectivorous songbirds. These chemicals can harm birds directly, and they also reduce the number of insects that many declining species such as skylarks and spotted flycatchers depend on for food. But how

long does this damage last? Should we expect bird numbers to bounce back after the UK and EU banned the agricultural use of neonicotinoid pesticides in 2018?

Researchers in France looked at pesticide use and insectivorous bird populations between 2013 and 2022. They found a consistent

pattern: bird numbers fell as pesticide use increased, with the strongest negative link to a neonicotinoid pesticide called imidacloprid. Because imidacloprid was banned in 2018, the scientists could track what happened afterwards. While some bird populations showed slow signs of recovery, the chemical's impact lasted for at least four years, likely because imidacloprid remains in soils long after it stops being used.

Recovery in the UK may take even longer. Despite the 2018 ban, the government allowed emergency use of neonicotinoids on sugar beet crops every year from 2021 to 2024 and every year 2500 kg of imidacloprid continues to be sold in pet flea treatments (about 4000 kg before the ban). This research highlights the importance of maintaining the ban and avoiding use of imidacloprid pet flea treatments so that insectivorous bird populations have the best chance to recover and thrive.

➔ Read more at: songbirdsos.org/DC-links

Nature in the city: an unexpected urban survival trick

As Europe's cities continue to grow, the birds that share these spaces are rapidly adapting to urban life. Their songs have become louder to rise above traffic and construction noise and they're increasingly creative in choosing nest sites. One of the more intriguing adaptations, however, is their use of human-made materials in their nests.

Previous studies have shown that several urban species, including blue tits, weave discarded cigarette butts into their nesting material. Curious about the purpose behind this behaviour, researchers in Poland set out to investigate whether these additions might influence the birds' health. Through a controlled experiment, they examined the impact of cigarette butts on blue tit nestlings.

The results were striking: chicks raised in nests containing cigarette butts were in significantly better body condition than those in nests without them. The scientists suggest that this advantage may stem from the anti-parasitic properties of nicotine, which could reduce the number of parasites in the nests.

Their findings hint at a remarkable example of urban adaptation - blue tits may be strategically using cigarette butts as a short-term strategy to improve the well-being of their chicks.

➔ Read more at:
songbirdsos.org/DC-links

A view from a kitchen window

By Colin
Strang Steel



Last year's hot summer blessed us with an abundance of insects, pollen, and seeds the like of which have not been experienced for many years. These all contributed to a successful breeding season for many birds, and a prolonged autumn resulted in a great bounty of fruit with blackbirds and fieldfares feeding on apples in the garden well into the New Year. Even the swallows seemed to have delayed their migration for warmer climes with the last departing in early October.



Fieldfare

During a visit to Edinburgh in November when walking past the famous Grange cricket ground (Scotland's equivalent of Lords) in the middle of the city, a curlew and pair of oystercatchers were observed, feeding quietly in the middle, totally unphased by a dog which was careering around the ground!



Long-tailed tit

The return of winter visitors always provides a lift to the dark days, and none more so than long tailed tits which suddenly arrived as a flock in mid-November and set about the hanging feed balls seemingly as a team. A few bramblings arrived shortly afterwards, and they too provide a colourful addition to the winter landscape, mixing in with chaffinches.

Although lapwings left their breeding ground on the farm earlier than normal due to the dry conditions, some returned in the autumn and remained until mid-November. A few were also observed in early January around a burst field drain when the rest of the ground was frozen solid. On one of the ponds the water level dropped more than usual, and the edges were then trampled down by cattle resulting in a muddy quagmire. This proved attractive to snipe and on one visit over 50 were counted. The outlet to this pond has now been adjusted so that the water levels can be raised or lowered to provide a muddy edge to the pond which proves attractive to waders.



GOVERNMENT NEWS

THE 2026 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN



The government's refreshed Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) has set a clear course for restoring England's nature over the next two decades. Central to this is the launch of the first Environmental Delivery Plans in 2026, which aim to restore 250,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat by 2030.

These updates represent a shift toward 'landscape-scale' recovery, ensuring that habitat restoration (from wildflower margins to wetlands) is embedded into national infrastructure and housebuilding projects through the new Nature Restoration Fund.

TRACKING TRENDS: WHY STATISTICS MATTER

Long-term monitoring remains the backbone of conservation. Recent releases from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee reveal a sobering 62% decline in farmland bird populations since 1970, though some woodland species are showing signs of stabilisation. Crucially, specific data on species like the turtle dove are now driving urgent legal reviews under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Without these robust statistics, we cannot target the interventions needed to reverse songbird declines.

BIRD LICENCES: 2026 UPDATES

Every January, the government publishes updated General Licences for wild birds. The 2026 releases clarify the legal framework for activities such as nest management and the removal of unsuccessful eggs. It is vital for land managers and the public to understand these laws to ensure all interactions with wild birds are responsible, ethical, and legally compliant.

FARMING AND LAND MANAGEMENT

Farmers are the primary stewards of our countryside, and new initiatives like the £12.6m Farming Innovation Fund are helping them adopt "nature-friendly" technologies. The extension of the Countryside Stewardship scheme into 2026 provides much-needed stability, rewarding landowners for maintaining the hedgerows and wildflower margins that are essential for songbird nesting. By aligning food security with biodiversity goals, these schemes turn agricultural land into a vital sanctuary for wildlife.

REGULATIONS TO BENEFIT POLLINATORS

Pollinators are the unsung heroes of songbird survival, maintaining the plants that provide seeds and the insects that feed chicks. New restrictions on neonicotinoid pesticides promised for 2026, are still under consideration by the EU with no confirmed implementation date.



PROTECTING FRESHWATER HABITATS

Healthy water systems are vital for all UK wildlife. The updated National Framework for Water Resources outlines a multi-billion-pound investment strategy to secure resilient supplies for nature and the economy. This framework specifically targets the reduction of nutrient

pollution in rivers and lakes - a major factor in the health of the insects that songbirds rely on. As SongBird Survival continues to study how water contaminants impact bird health, these national policy shifts provide a vital framework for improving water quality at the source.

Creating a garden for songbirds – lessons from a Chelsea garden

Gardens have the power to become thriving refuges for songbirds.

With 23 million gardens occupying an estimated 433,000 hectares of space across the UK, they could be a lifeline habitat, replacing places to gather food, shelter and breed which are being lost across our towns and countryside. Indeed, the RHS State of Gardening report says there are over 50 million trees in UK gardens and that our gardens are home to around 40% of the nation's birds and mammals.

Building on years of research



1.

Layers of cover

and armed with our bank of expert advice and guidance, the SongBird Survival Garden at RHS Chelsea Flower show demonstrated practical, beautiful ways to support birds in modern gardens.

We are continuing to encourage everyone with an outdoor space to be inspired to make small meaningful changes that can have a big impact on the future of our songbirds.

The core principles are simple: be pesticide free, peat free and guided by nature - creating a safe, nourishing backdrop for wildlife to thrive.

START WITH THE ESSENTIALS: FOOD, SHELTER AND WATER

Songbirds rely on a balance of all three. Here's how to weave these needs creatively into your garden design.

2.



Dog rose

3.



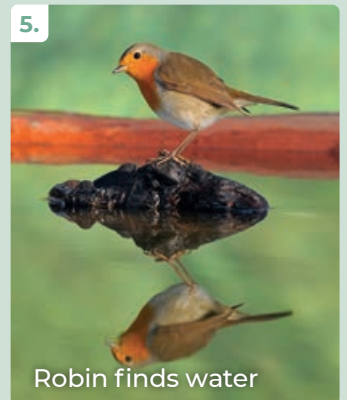
Natural food sources

4.



Dead hedge

5.



Robin finds water

1. BUILD LAYERS OF COVER

Think like a bird. What would make you feel safe from above and below? Create layers at every level - from canopy with trees and tall shrubs to mid layer shrubs to ground cover.

2. ADD PROTECTIVE PLANTING

Thorny or tightly packed plants give birds sheltered routes and perching points.

- **Cockspur thorn:** perfect high cover for birds avoiding ground predators.
- **Dog rose:** arched, thorny branches for excellent protection.
- **Yew or dense shrubs:** natural "highways" for birds like wrens, robins and dunnocks to hop through unseen.

3. PROVIDE NATURAL FOOD SOURCES

Make sure your garden has plants with berries, seeds and flowers to encourage insects year-round.

- **Plants with berries:** blackcurrant, black elder, alpine strawberry.
- **Let weeds stay:** dandelions and thistles offer seeds, water, and vital insect friendly plants
- **Include insect friendly plants:** foxglove, sedum, pink hawksbeard.

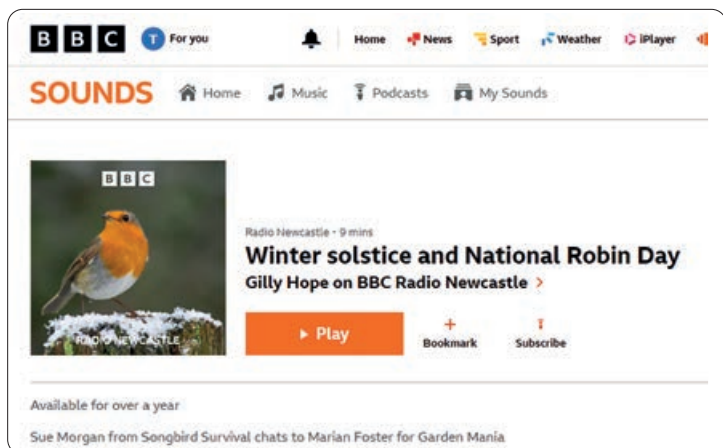
4. CELEBRATE INSECTS

Even snails and aphids have a role. Encourage biodiversity with dead hedges, log walls, and leaf piles - perfect insect homes and perfect bird buffets.

5. ADD WATER, BEAUTIFULLY OR SIMPLY

From a feature pond fed by a rain chain - as we used at Chelsea - to a washing up bowl sunk into the soil; birds just need clean water and safe footing. Add pebbles or stones so they can perch securely. Make sure you keep the water clean to avoid spreading disease among birds.

IN THE NEWS



National Robin Day has become a cornerstone of our programme of public awareness communications campaigns. We celebrated our 9th annual National Robin Day on Saturday 21st December 2025 with 4 BBC regional radio interviews and national coverage including BBC Radio 4, the Sun newspaper, Daily Telegraph, the English Garden and Country Living.

We've had a further three features in Country Living online – one on autumn migrating birds, a second one on birds commonly mistaken for robins and a third article on the different species of finch found in the UK.

➔ **Read and watch more here:**
songbirdsos.org/DC-links

OUT AND ABOUT



In January, Sue and Tracey attended the inaugural Garden Wilding conference at Manchester University. The 2-day event brought together a gathering of wildlife and nature charities, gardeners, designers, ecologists, and entomologists – all with a shared aim of thinking about how to garden more sustainably

for the benefit of the songbirds, wildlife and people who use these spaces. Ultimately, the aim of the conference was to show how applying a rewilding mindset to a garden or green space can create a deeper, more dynamic habitat for wildlife, greater resilience to climate change, and absorb more carbon.



Sue and Sussex University researcher, Dr Cannelle Tassin de Montaigu, have had positive meetings with peers in the House of Lords to discuss our research into the effects of flea and tick treatment on songbird nests and the need for urgent regulatory changes.

As a direct result of the BBC coverage of our SongBird Survival Chelsea garden last summer, we were contacted by the curator of the Aga Khan Centre Gallery in London. The curator invited us to take part in a new exhibition called The Canticle of the Birds. This exhibition has been inspired by a Persian poem, The Conference of the Birds, by Farid ud-Din Attar, and also reflects on the decline of the UK's songbirds. Our project is called Songbirds of the UK and features a fantastic mural (see below) of the 84 UK breeding songbirds, hand-drawn by school children from a primary school in north London. The exhibition is free to enter and runs until the end of May 2026, so if you're in the area do go along and see it.



Garden bird feeding – the growing conversation



As part of SongBird Survival’s mission, we are committed to providing guidance grounded in robust scientific evidence.

In 2024, we made the difficult decision to recommend that people stop feeding birds in their gardens during the summer months. As the growing body of research continues to indicate that garden bird feeding can have unintended negative consequences, we are continuing this recommendation into the coming spring and summer.

Over the past year, this issue has begun to move firmly into the public eye. Media coverage has increased, from national newspapers to local radio, and social platforms have energetic conversations with people sharing their love of feeding birds, their concerns, and their desire to do the right thing which can be a tricky balance. What was once a quiet, private habit is becoming part of a much wider conversation about how we support wildlife responsibly. There is a real sense of a movement forming - one driven by scientific research and by people who care deeply about nature and want their actions to help, not harm.



How can garden bird feeding put songbirds at risk?

We learnt during the Covid 19 pandemic that bringing large groups of individuals together can accelerate the spread of disease. The same principle applies in our gardens. Bird feeders draw large numbers of birds, often of many different species, into close contact, creating ideal conditions for disease transmission. Diseases such as trichomonosis, which has caused severe declines in finch populations, spread through contaminated drinking water and food where they can live for up to several days.

A less visible but equally significant consequence of garden bird feeding is the way it reshapes songbird communities, creating clear winners and losers. While supplementary food has boosted numbers of generalist species such as blue tits and great tits and even altered the winter distribution of species like the blackcap, specialist species that do not use feeders like the willow tit are suffering steep declines.

What can you do at home?

We understand that removing a food source may feel unkind. However, by doing so, you are supporting the long-term health and resilience of your local songbirds - both as individuals and as part of a wider community. This small change can help them thrive more naturally, sustainably and safely. Have a look at our list of do’s and don’ts for garden bird feeding to make sure your garden is a safe haven for songbirds.

DO

- ✓ Remove feeders in summer to reduce the risk of disease spread.
- ✓ Provide fresh water year-round.
- ✓ Clean feeders regularly with soapy water.
- ✓ Provide natural food sources by planting fruit and seed-bearing plants and trees.
- ✓ Allow your garden to grow wilder to attract insects.

DON'T

- ✗ Remove food suddenly – give birds time to find alternative sources by removing gradually.
- ✗ Continue to feed if you see a sick bird – remove and clean feeders and resume after 2-4 weeks.
- ✗ Feed birds spicy, salty or mouldy foods.
- ✗ Allow food to get stale.

PROTECTING PETS, HARMING BIRDS?

A call for government action on veterinary medicines

Since 2023, University of Sussex researchers funded by SongBird Survival have been uncovering how chemicals from pet flea and tick treatments are affecting the UK's songbirds. With the latest findings due for publication soon, this vital research is poised to reveal even more about this growing environmental concern.

The UK is home to over 22 million pet cats and dogs. But in keeping our pets permanently free of fleas and ticks, are we unintentionally putting our songbirds at risk?

In early 2025, our research found that chemicals used in spot-on flea and tick treatments, including fipronil and imidacloprid, were found in the nests of great tits and blue tits. Both chemicals are pesticides banned for agricultural use in the UK and EU due to their harmful effects on wildlife, yet they remain the active ingredients in most flea and tick treatments that we use on our pet dogs and cats.

Building on these troubling findings, we funded further research to explore whether pesticides are being transferred from contaminated nests into eggs and chicks and how this affects breeding success. The lead scientist, Dr. Cannelle Tassin de Montaigu, is due to publish her latest results in late spring.

Our findings point to a significant environmental and ecological issue, echoing concerns raised by

other environmental NGOs including Buglife, The Rivers Trusts, The Wildlife Trusts and WildFish.

Over the past 12 months we have called on the government to strengthen the environmental risk assessment process for veterinary medicines containing fipronil and imidacloprid. Currently, flea and tick treatments can be purchased without prescription and are not subject to environmental risk assessments by regulatory bodies. Through meetings with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) as well as veterinary organisations such as the British Veterinary Association (BVA), we are working hard to ensure that the environmental impact of these chemicals is recognised and addressed as a matter of urgency.

Alongside lobbying the government, we are launching a public campaign to help raise awareness of the environmental risks associated with pet flea and tick treatments. To learn how you can protect songbirds whilst keeping your pets healthy, explore our infographic which includes simple, practical actions you can start today.

Protect Pets, Save Birds



Use flea and tick treatments responsibly to protect your furry and feathered friends



THE EVIDENCE

Did you know?

Spot-on flea treatments for pet cats and dogs commonly contain potent pesticides banned for agricultural use in the UK because of their harmful effects on wildlife.



How does this affect birds?

Researchers have found these harmful chemicals in the fur-lining of birds' nests, feathers, eggs and chicks.

These pesticides have also been widely detected in UK rivers at concentrations that can harm aquatic life. The environmental impact is widespread.



HOW TO HELP

What can you do?

1 Don't put fur outside

If you treat your pets, avoid discarding their fur outdoors after grooming as birds may use it to line their nests.



2 Check the label

Check the product leaflet or instructions for your flea and tick treatments to see if your pet can be washed or allowed to swim after application. Treatments can remain on fur for up to 28 days.

3 Speak to your vet

Consult your vet for advice on treating your pet in a way that considers environmental impact.

Discover more tips for keeping your pets and the planet safe at www.songbird-survival.org.uk



SONGBIRD SURVIVAL

Saving songbirds with science

Charity No: 1085281

Save the songbirds you love with a gift in your Will



If songbirds have brought joy to your life, you can help safeguard their future by remembering SongBird Survival in your Will.

As a charity, SongBird Survival relies on gifts in Wills to plan for the long term and protect songbirds for future generations. A gift of any size makes a lasting difference and helps fund the scientific research and educational campaigns needed to tackle the threats facing our favourite garden birds.

Leave a gift of hope - request your free guide today.



Nightingale



If you'd like to learn more about leaving a gift in your Will, our free Gifts in Wills Guide is here to help. It includes clear information on your options, how to write or update a Will, and how a legacy gift - no matter the size - can help protect songbirds for years to come.

➔ Visit songbirdsos.org/legacy or call 01379 641715

