

IN YOUR GARDEN

Winter may be here, but this month is far from quiet for garden bird life, says the RSPB's **Helen Moffat**

IT MAY be the depths of winter but December is far from quiet in terms of bird life in our gardens. If you've kept your feeders topped up, a really cold snap could bring in lots of different species, keen to take on some quick and much-needed calories.

Colourful travellers

It's very dependent on what is happening elsewhere, but this is the month you could see large numbers of waxwing descend on our shores.

Windfalls

Another autumn migrant which will sometimes venture into gardens when food becomes scarcer elsewhere is the redwing. It, too, will often be seen in flocks, sometimes mixed with other birds, including fieldfare. The redwing is from the thrush family, and easy to identify from the flash of red under its wing. If you have any apple trees in your garden, a few windfalls may bring a flock to make the most of this mid-winter bounty...

As well as leaving some fruit out like this, and keeping bird feeders topped up with seed, fresh water is another essential for all birds. It is especially vital in very cold weather, when other water sources may have frozen.

You can also choose native plants for your garden, which will naturally provide a food source for birds and other creatures at different times of the year. It's one of the many things you can do in your garden to help wildlife - there are lots more ideas on our website: (www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/nature-on-your-doorstep).

Though they are regular winter visitors, some years we have huge flocks arriving en masse, which is known as an irruption. This is because populations in their Scandinavian and Russian breeding grounds have grown too large and many have to go elsewhere to find food.

Look out for a plump reddish-brown bird, with a prominent crest, black throat with yellow and white in the wings and a yellow-tipped tail. They appear to wear a small black mask around their eyes like a cartoon robber! Look out for them 'plundering' berries from trees and hedges.



Flock together

You'll often see large flocks of birds moving around together during these colder months, sometimes quite spectacularly, as in the case of a starling murmuration. This is because the cold weather brings birds together for more warmth and, outside the breeding season, there's not the same competition between them either, so it's smarter to cling to the safety of a larger flock.

Seeing a starling murmuration is very special, as they swoop and move in a mesmerising pattern, as one, but it's possible to see smaller-scale flocks looking pretty amazing too.

Jackdaws in particular can gather in really large flocks at dusk as they prepare to head to their roost in a woodland or copse - they can almost fill the sky with their dark swirling forms. They are also quite a noisy bunch, making them hard to miss when they're nearby...