

Hawfinches in and around Bewdley

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The autumn and winter of 2017/18 has seen the biggest influx of Hawfinches into the British Isles in living memory and hopes are high that this will boost a dwindling population nationally. In Wyre, Hawfinches have been in decline for some time, possibly down to a handful of pairs, so the arrival of so many Continental birds may augur well for a good breeding season.

Hawfinches have had a mixed history in Britain and may not have bred here until early in the 1800s. Prior to that they had been noted as winter visitors, though a reference to them taking ripe cherries in Norfolk in the 17th Century hints at possible breeding. The first confirmed breeding record was of a well-established colony in Epping Forest in Essex in the early 1830s, after which there was a rapid colonisation which involved most of the English and Welsh counties and extended into Scotland. It's likely that an increase in fruit growing in the mid 19th Century, in particular the popularity of cherry orchards, may have encouraged the bird's spread - not for nothing is its German name Kirschkernbeisser, the "cherry-stone biter". Areas of large cherry orchards were favoured by Hawfinches and that may explain the bird's persistence in Wyre. Following a period of expansion during the latter half of the 19th Century, partly checked by persecution from orchard-owners, Hawfinches consolidated their hold on northern England and even bred in Scotland. By the time of the first Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland (1976), there were thought to be 5000-10,000 breeding pairs. Since then there has been a noticeable decline and current estimates suggest 800-1,000 breeding pairs.

In the Wyre Forest, the Hawfinch is now a rare and shy breeding bird with pairs known from just a few locations. During the 1980s, a time when the Wyre population seemed to peak and flocks of up to 20 birds were seen, John Robinson found several nests in a variety of trees, including rowan, birch, oak and beech sometimes in honeysuckle. Rosemary Winnall recorded a nest near Horsehill in the 1980s whilst participating in the BTO Nest Record Scheme. It was in a beech tree about half way along a horizontal branch at a height of about 15 feet.

Finding Hawfinches in the breeding season can be a difficult task, especially when numbers are low. For John Robinson it was a matter of looking for the males at dawn when they sang from the tops of huge Douglas Firs. In winter, they are easier to locate when there is little tree foliage and when they often perch high in the tree canopy, often on the topmost shoot. In profile the large beak is very conspicuous making

the bird look big-headed and bull-necked even from a distance. Its skull is four times heavier than that of a Chaffinch and its powerful neck muscles can produce a pressure of 12kg per square centimetre – enough force to crack cherry stones, olives and yew seeds. In Britain it feeds especially on beech mast, the fruits of hornbeam, hips, haws, yew berries and kernels, tree buds and shoots. In Jubilee Gardens in winter 2017 one was seen nibbling on a larch cone.

Although they're famously shy, Hawfinches often venture into towns when, with a good view, their large white wing patches and tail tips are very conspicuous. Wary is perhaps a better word than shy - the birds in Jubilee Gardens in Bewdley fed in a Yew tree in front of an audience of up to twenty keen watchers. Generally they are quiet and retiring without a conspicuous song. The alarm call is obvious though, a sharp tick like an amplified robin, which has been described as like "jabbing a spike into solid granite". The softer Redwing-like flight call 'see' is often a sign that Hawfinches are about or flying overhead.

That's certainly been the case during this extraordinary autumn and winter. Occasionally Hawfinches can erupt to locate more food sources, and birds regularly visit the British Isles in winter, but it's the scale of the 2017/18 invasion that will remain in our memories.

Hawfinches from north-eastern Europe normally fly from Poland and Latvia into Germany and Romania for the winter. In 2017 though, they may have had a very successful breeding season or more likely, have experienced failures in their food supply, the crop of nuts and tree-seeds. Whatever the cause the arrival was sudden and dramatic. In mid-October, birders began to notice large numbers of Hawfinches flying into Britain. One Bedfordshire watch-point produced 115 flying over in a single day. The press suggested that the strange pink sun and Saharan sandstorms of mid-October may have disorientated the birds, though other species don't seem to have been affected. According to the British Trust for Ornithology, the numbers of birds seen in south-west England suggest that some Hawfinches may have arrived from France or the Iberian peninsula, which might add credence to this theory. Exact numbers are hard to estimate, but it's thought that thousands, maybe more than ten thousand, birds have been involved in the 2017/18 invasion.

On October 15th the first flock was noted in Worcestershire when Brett Westwood and Ian Ellis saw a single bird and then a flock of 14 flying together over

Caunsall. They were recorded regularly in the county by many observers over the next few weeks, mostly flying over, but none were noted in the Wyre Forest area. Then on 8th November Rosemary Winnall spotted one high up in her garden Ash tree (Bliss Gate) at 7.20am. Later that day one was seen feeding on Hornbeam fruits in the same garden. A cherry orchard next door and Yew trees in the lane may have provided more feeding opportunities. 2 were seen perched in a birch tree in the garden on 26th November and so a remote camera was placed down in the stream in the hope that they would come down to drink. It was obviously a popular watering spot with visits by Blackbird, Song Thrush, Redwing, Great Tit, Blue Tit, and Wren. Then a Hawfinch arrived to drink and was filmed on 26th November at 14.53, 28th November at 11.55 and 13.45, 29th November at 11.37, 1st December at 08.49 and 13.22, and 3rd December at 13.21 (see photos).

Then, just before Christmas, Hawfinches were spotted in Jubilee Gardens in the centre of Bewdley. Numbers soon built up into double figures until on 14th January 2018, around 25 were seen feeding in the Yew trees and perching high up in the Sycamores, often with Greenfinches. Up to a dozen were also seen in Arley Churchyard and a single bird was at Huntsfield Farm

in Eymore Wood in late December and January. Here they were feeding on Yew berries and when the berries themselves were exhausted, fed on the ground beneath cracking the hard kernels with their enormous beaks. Brett Westwood observed up to eight at Arley in late February feeding quietly under Yews while the nearby arboretum filled up with parents and children for a half-term event: not, you'd think, ideal conditions for watching a supposedly timorous bird.

There may well have been up to 40 Hawfinches in the Wyre area during January and February 2018 and at the same time there was a flock of up to 30 near Kidderminster, which suggests that maybe 70 birds were in the general area. Arrivals on this scale have been repeated in many places in England and Wales usually where there are Yew or Hornbeam trees. In Ludlow for example up to 50 birds fed on Hornbeam and in Halesowen around 60 were been reported in parkland Yews in February. The last big influx to Wyre was in the winter of 2005/2006 which accounted for several Worcestershire records, as documented by various birders in Issue 20 of Worcestershire Record. Before then, a flock of 22 birds in Jubilee Gardens in winter 1994/5 suggests a Continental influence rather than local residents. In the intervening years



Hawfinch, Bliss Gate, 3 December 2017

R. Winnall



Hawfinch in top of Sycamore, Jubilee Gardens

Sean Cole



Hawfinch drinking in garden Bliss Gate, 1 December 2017

Rosemary Winnall

small numbers, usually fewer than ten birds, have turned up at Lodge Hill Farm in winter and without ringing the birds, it's impossible to tell the migrants from the residents.

Given the decline of breeding Hawfinches locally, it will be interesting to see if any of the migrants stay in Britain to breed and boost the resident Wyre population. Whatever happens, their presence in Bewdley's gardens has been a great Christmas present for local birdwatchers and a chance for many people to see their very first Hawfinches.

References

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Hawfinch feeding in Yew tree, Jubilee Gardens Bewdley, December 2017

Sean Cole