

Birds

Introduction

Churchyards are great places for birds to thrive and for people to watch them and enjoy their song. Many churchyards have a rich variety of habitat types which provide food and cover for birds. This is really important in both urban and rural areas.

The importance of churchyards for birds

Churchyards are an important home for British birds, including many declining species. The variety of habitats in churchyards: old trees, hedgerows, longer and short grass areas, boundary features such as stone walls and church buildings provide a haven for birds. Piles of dead leaves, twigs, compost heaps, tombstones and walls are all important places to find food. Old yew trees in churchyards offer winter food for birds fond of their juicy red berries. Ivy, cotoneaster and holly provide food for robin, greenfinch and song thrush. The ivy-covered trees and walls in churchyards, as well as the evergreens, are superb cover for winter roosts for wrens, house sparrows, dunnocks and finches.

Well known native British birds found in our churchyards include wren, robin, blackbird, song thrush, tawny owl and also the less common spotted flycatcher.

Birds and the law

All wild birds are protected by law, this also includes their eggs and their nests, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is a legal offence to take, kill, or injure a wild bird and/or its eggs, or to damage or destroy a nest while it is being used, or while it is being built.



By Elizabeth Dack

Did you know?

The robin will sing its song well into the night, sometimes under the spotlight of a street lamp.

Blackbirds are often seen purposefully walking across a patch of grass in a park or garden, with their head tilted at an angle, listening out for a tasty earthworm!

The tawny owl can be distinguished by their famous tu-wit tu-woo call. This is two separate calls between the male and the female: the tu-wit is more of a keewick sound made by the female, and the tu-woo is the hooting of the male.

The spotted flycatcher is known for finding a good vantage point from which to hunt its prey. Perching on a branch, for example, it will dart out and pluck an unsuspecting flying insect from the air, and then dart back to its perch.

For further information please visit the NWT website or contact:

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Birdwatching in churchyards



By Mark Ollett

Blackbird

Distinctive bright yellow beak and matching yellow eye-circle. The female is brown. They can be seen all year round.



By Alex McLennan

Spotted flycatcher

Greyish and/or brown plumage, with a lighter, streaked breast. They are a migratory bird, coming to the UK between April and May, returning to Africa around September.



By Elizabeth Dack

Robin

Both sexes share the brightly coloured breast and can be seen all year round. They are well known for their aggressive behaviour, males fighting in the spring for their territory.



By Graham Brownlow

Wren

Brown to reddish-brown plumage, paler underneath. It has a long pale line above the eye. It is a tiny, dumpy, almost rounded bird with quite long legs and toes and a narrow tail which is sometimes pointed vertically.



By Elizabeth Dack

Song thrush

A small brown bird with orange-red underwing. The brownly coloured spots on its breast are like upside-down hearts or arrowheads. The colour of the tail is the same as the rest of the upperparts. Both sexes are similar in appearance.



By Julian Thomas

Tawny owl

Mottled brown or grey plumage, they have a prominent disk shaped face with large dark brown eyes and no ear tufts. It is pigeon sized and likes to nest in the hollows of trees or abandoned crows' nests. You are unlikely to see them during the day time as they are nocturnal.

Other birds you might see in your churchyard

Blackcap, blue tit, bullfinch, carrion crow, chaffinch, coal tit, collared dove, dunnock, feral pigeon, goldcrest, goldfinch, great tit, green finch, house sparrow, jackdaw, linnet, long-tailed tit, magpie, mistle thrush, starling, stock dove, swallow, swift, willow warbler, wood pigeon

How to help

- Retain old and mature trees. Ones with holes in, hedgerows and areas of scrub all provide important places for nesting and sheltering birds.
- Put up nestboxes as these provide additional accommodation.
- Leave ivy on some gravestones as it provides both food and shelter for a variety of birds.
- Manage hedgerows to provide berries through the winter for birds.
- Leave an area of longer grasses next to a hedge, this provides an invaluable food source for birds.
- Scrubby areas and wildflower areas will attract insects, which a number of birds will eat.