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South Ronaldsay, Orkney

I joined Garden BirdWatch (GBW) in 1997, when I was living in Hertford. In the summer of 2000, my husband and I swapped our small, modern, three-storey town house for a one-and-a-half storey detached house on South Ronaldsay in the Orkney Islands. Not only was our way of life going to be totally different, but also the species that I was would be recording for GBW.

No longer was I going to be recording the tit species that frequently flitted into our town garden; instead I would end up recording visits from species as varied as Oystercatchers, Redwing and Hooded Crows. Our previous English garden was, to say the least, 'handkerchief-sized', but we crammed in quite a bit – shrubs, flower borders, a tiny lawn, and even a small water feature (half a barrel sunk into the ground). We were also lucky to have plenty of tall trees and dense shrubs along the rear property line. In contrast, our new home is set in a third of an acre, and surrounded by fields, with a small burn flowing past at one end.



September 2001

Improving the garden for wildlife

Although the previous owners of our new home had lived there for some years, the garden was pretty immature – the evergreen shrubs were small, as were the flowering current bushes which had been planted along the front fence as hedging. We were also fortunate to find that there were a few immature trees (mainly Whitebeam) in the garden, so we didn't have to start from scratch.



Summer 2000



Summer 2010



Summer 2000



Summer 2010



Summer 2000



Summer 2010

Finding things that will grow in what is, effectively, a hostile environment is a hit-and-miss affair. In the 14 ½ years that we have lived here, I have tried to introduce more wildlife-friendly species, especially fruiting shrubs, in an attempt to tempt migratory birds to stop over. I am also gradually replacing some of the Crack Willows, which follow the line of the back fence, with native willows and broad-leaved species, not least because the roots are deeper and more suitable for the very wet winter ground. They're not wasted though, as they make ideal kindling for our living room fire.

Garden birdwatching with a difference

The most interesting times to be a birdwatcher here in Orkney are during the spring and autumn migrations, especially when the winds are from the south-east, as that is when we get our Scandinavian (or ever further away) 'visitors'. Common species such as Dunnock and Robin are actually migratory species here with 'our' Robin usually arriving around October and disappearing sometime in March. Also, a vast number of our overwintering Blackbirds are likely to be Scandinavian, with our own local birds flying south for the winter.

About five years ago, I started putting up nest boxes specifically for House Sparrows, and now have four in total. The boxes have proved to be very successful indeed, producing two, if not three, broods from each. If it wasn't for the fact that my mother, who lives in Surrey, tells me that she never sees a House Sparrow in her garden, I wouldn't believe that this delightful little bird was on the Red List. We make a daily count of the House Sparrows that visit the garden – on one day in August 2004 we counted 63 individuals of various sex and age.

At that time they weren't nesting in the garden, but presumably at the nearby farms; however, for some reason, they were coming to us to feed.



House Sparrow nest boxes on a north facing wall (October 2014). The Beech and Whitebeam trees grow, laterally, quite a lot in the summer, and so have to be trimmed back before the autumn and winter gales set in, so that they don't damage the guttering. The second photo shows the proximity of the boxes to both the trees and the field (and burn).

The most unusual GBW-related incident when we were still living in Hertford was the crash-landing onto the flat roof of our kitchen by a female Pheasant; here in our Orkney home, Pheasants are now daily visitors to the garden, following the very cold and snowy winter of three years ago. Another daily visitor is a Moorhen which originally took shelter in our garden during vicious storms at the beginning of December 2014.

A bird which we never saw down south, but which we often see from our house here, is the Hen Harrier – a very successful Orkney breeder. Normally, this wouldn't get reported to GBW (although sightings do get reported to the County recorder); however, the occasion when a male was seen hovering over our bird table was *definitely* entered into my GBW return!

I remember one night in Hertford, being woken up by a Tawny Owl stomping up and down the roof above our bedroom and calling to its mate on the roof opposite. No Tawny Owls in Orkney, but Short-eared Owls nest on our island and, in the summer, they often hunt up and down the fields by us, frequently taking a detour over the garden. Being day-time hunters, we get very good views of them, especially from the patio, and we don't always need binoculars!

Another rarity (for us) is the Raven. Before we moved north, the only time I had seen them in the wild was when we visited Herm in the Channel Islands; since coming here, we see them almost daily from autumn to spring – they gather in large numbers at the top of the nearby hill. I have seen some pretty amazing aerobatics from males attempting to woo a female, and was really chuffed when one actually touched down on the lawn for a few moments.

In 2014, we had two new birds for both our 'life list' and the garden – a Ring Ouzel and a Pied Flycatcher – both blown in on the winds, and both regarded as local rarities. The Pied Flycatcher was ringed, but unfortunately it wouldn't stop flitting about for long enough for me to be able to see the number through my telescope.



Pied Flycatcher (May 2014)



Juvenile Rooks (July 2014)

Island preferences

Unlike the county of Hertfordshire which is, effectively, one 'land mass' from end to end, Orkney is an archipelago of 70 islands. The effect of this is that different species will turn up on different islands. For instance, a lot of the rarities that are seen at the North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory may never show up down here on South Ronaldsay. This can also apply to the less unusual species including Rooks which are very common on Orkney Mainland. I frequently see them in large numbers in the fields as I drive into Kirkwall, and there several known rookeries in the towns and established woods. However, they are not often seen on South Ronaldsay (although sightings have become more frequent in the past couple of years); so it was very exciting to have two youngsters spend some time in the garden in July 2014, polishing off the leftover food that I had put out for the Pheasants and Rock Doves.

Other species of note

Orcadian House Martins are pretty choosy in where they nest – we are not one of the chosen locations, unfortunately. On the other hand, although we don't have a suitable nesting site for Swallows – there are plenty of farms with welcoming byres in the locality – they do like to use our house and garden as a 'feeding and flying training ground' for their offspring. Our roof is one of the highest structures around, and it has a nice large area for not only practising landings, but also spreading out and taking in the sun (the roof orientation is east/west). The most amazing 'Swallow time' is late summer, after the second broods have fledged and all the various colonies are gathering together in order to feed up before they fly south. They soar over and swoop through the garden in large numbers, chattering away – it always makes me smile. Again, we do a daily count and, on 28th August 2010, I counted around 60 birds taking in the afternoon sun on our roof.

Other species of note which have visited our garden (which definitely *weren't* on our Hertford garden list) are Woodcock, Curlew, Snipe, Redstart and Black Redstart; and on one particular day in July 2013, no fewer than four different species of gull – Herring, Black-headed, Great Black-backed and Common (the latter is present in Orkney in large numbers, and they are frequent visitors to the garden) – were feeding in the garden together.

There are, of course, similarities in bird visitors between the two gardens – Blackbird, Collared Dove, Greenfinch, Blackcap, Chaffinch (migrant here), Swallows and Swift spring to mind, and it always nice to

know that they are still using our garden as a feeding station (either over or in). So, being a member of GBW has been, and continues to be, very rewarding, not least because it helps to give a picture of not only the rarer species visiting the garden, but also the 'common' species, and by this I mean the House Sparrow in particular. The likelihood is that, sometime in the future, we will be forced to downsize; whatever size garden we end up with, I will happily continue to be a member of GBW and, hopefully, continue to report visits of House Sparrows to my garden.