

# Wintering Blackcaps

## Title

Wintering Blackcaps 1978

## Description and Summary Results

Most Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla* breeding in Britain and Ireland, and much of western Europe, spend the winter in southern Europe and northern Africa, but small numbers had wintered regularly in Britain and Ireland since the early 19th century. The first attempted survey was based on records published in local bird reports for 1945-1954. The next was a request for information issued for the winter of 1969/70 including a nationwide appeal for sightings. Notes of about 350 individuals were received, primarily from SW England, but it was far from complete as a survey (see *BTO News* no. 39 (July 1970): 1-2 for a report). There was thought to have been an increase in the frequency of overwintering by Blackcaps since the 1950s, and so the BTO conducted a full survey over the winter 1978/79. That winter proved to be the coldest for 15 years. Nevertheless, approximately 1000 correspondents supplied details of a minimum of 1714 Blackcaps. Examination of local bird reports for 1970-77 (attempting a direct comparison to the earlier 1945-1954 survey) showed there had been a considerable increase but that it was impossible to quantify the extent to which this increase simply reflected the growing numbers of observers. Of the total, 974 were specified as males and 682 females (1.43:1), this ratio varying from 1.25:1 in eastern England to 1.77:1 in northern England.

In 1978/79 the largest concentrations were found in the south and southwest of England with Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Somerset producing the highest numbers, and in the Midlands. A low total for Cornwall was surprising. Blackcaps were relatively scarce in eastern and northern Britain (especially in Scotland), where most birds were in towns close to the coast. Similarly, most Welsh records were from coastal conurbations in the north and south. Of the 1714 birds recorded, 76% were seen in urban and suburban gardens, 19% in rural gardens, and only 5% were in orchards and woodland. Most were found at low altitudes.

Birds seen for the first time rose to a peak in the first week of January, there was a second (lower) peak in late January and early February, but after this the number of 'new' birds fell steadily.

Blackcaps wintering in Britain are of necessity opportunistic feeders. As 95% of birds were seen in gardens, reports of food taken were biased towards the items available at bird-tables; bread and fat accounted for 41% of observations. A wide variety of berries were taken, especially early in the winter, apples were a valuable food source, and a high number of birds were reported as feeding on seeds. Since previous surveys they also appeared to have learnt to feed from suspended mesh bags containing nuts and fat.

Wintering Blackcaps were noted frequently as aggressive towards other species as well as conspecifics.

**Methods of Data Capture**

Requests for information on winter sightings of Blackcaps in Britain and Ireland in 1978/79 were placed in major ornithological journals, and publicity was also obtained through BBC radio, local newspapers, regional bird clubs, and BTO members. The details requested included place, date, numbers, sex, feeding habits and any notes on aggression. The winter period was defined as 1 December to 31 March, to avoid the main migration seasons. Early arrivals occur in southern England in late March, but in 1979 the arrivals of most migrants were generally late, due to a cold early spring period.

The survey coincided with a prolonged postal strike in the Republic of Ireland, which is assumed to be one reason why very small numbers were reported from there.

**Purpose of Data Capture**

To assess how many Blackcaps wintered in the UK and Ireland.

**Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain and Ireland.

**Temporal Coverage**

The winter of 1978/79 with records requested from 1 December 1978 to 31 March 1979.

**Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by Iain Leach with the full support of the BTO.

**Organiser(s)**

Iain Leach as a volunteer

**Current Staff Contact**

archives@bto.org

**Publications**

The main report of the survey is:

Leach, I.H. 1981. Wintering Blackcaps in Britain and Ireland. *Bird Study* 28: 5-14.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 95 and 102.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

None. All data were disposed of by the organiser many years ago.

**Notes on Access and Use**

**Other information**

**Notes on Survey Design**

**Specific Issues for Analysis**