

### Birds to see where we live

Spring is a great time to see birds.

Over the winter they tend to be less visible but the longer days and sunshine of spring brings a change in how they look and how they act. Why? Because birds breed in the spring and they want to attract mates or bond with their mates from previous years. Birds “show-off” in a number of ways, these are the most common:

1) Plumage

In the winter birds don't waste energy on looking good but in spring their plumage (feathers) become a priority. The better a bird looks the more attractive it is to a mate.

2) Song

Some birds still look superficially dull (until you see them through binoculars) and they rely on their song to impress.

3) Behaviour

Some birds impress or bond with their mate by undertaking behaviour that is only seen in the spring.

What birds might I see?

I shall concentrate on birds that you might see in gardens or if you took a walk in local parks: Kings Heath, Highbury, Cannon Hill etc.

The majority of images are from the RSPB site ([RSPB](#)) where you can also listen to the birds and find out lots more about them.

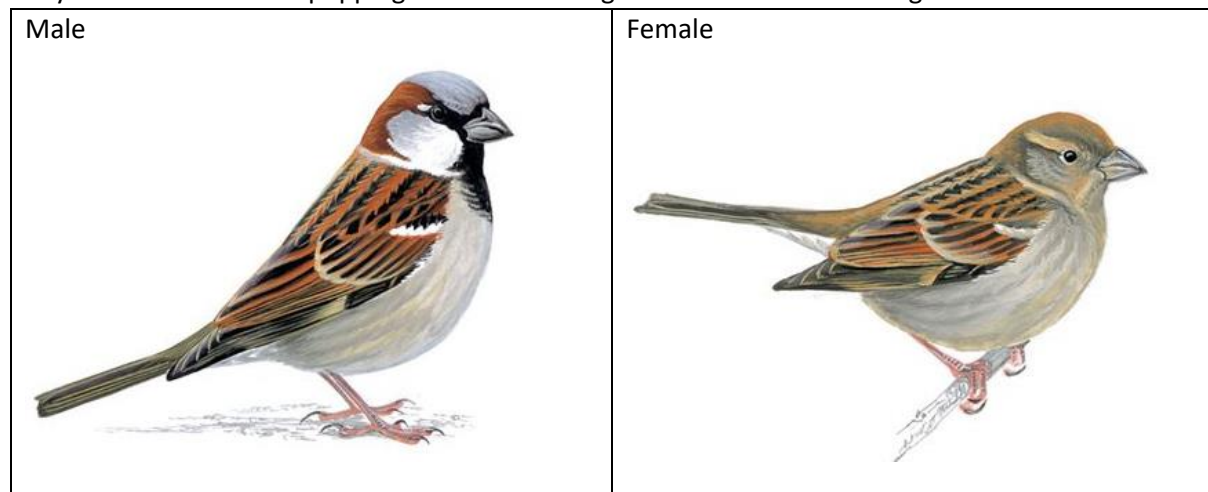
Why not try sketching them too

### House Sparrow

As its name suggests this bird is associated with houses. It is currently in decline and scientist can't figure out why.

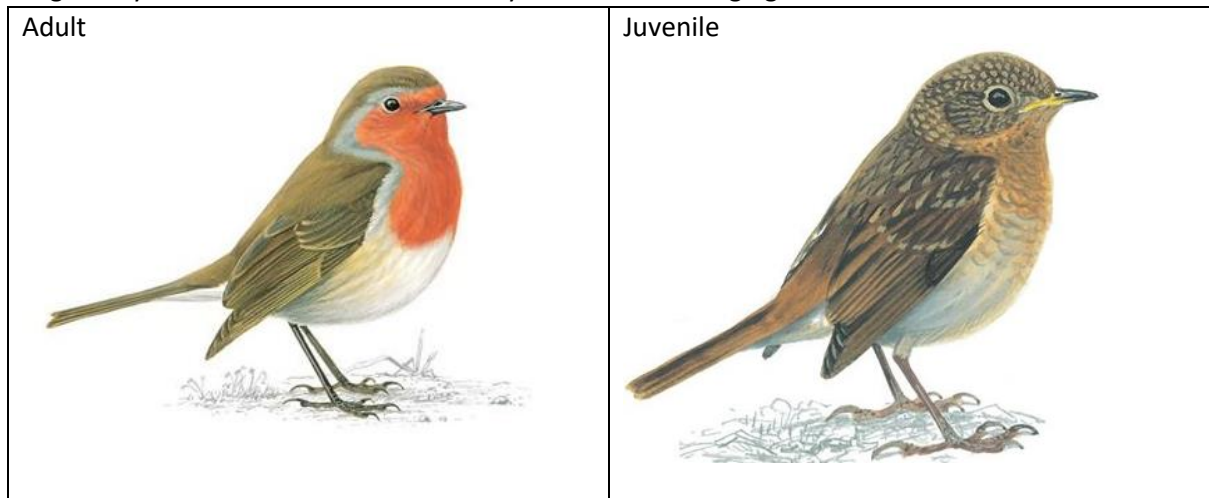
They like to nest in spaces in houses, like the eaves under the gutter, and they are gregarious all year round (this means they live and nest in groups).

They can often be found popping in an out of hedges and similar dense hedgerow.



## Robin

This bird is probably the most recognised in the UK. You won't have to walk too far to find a singing Robin. Whilst they are easy to identify, it is really helpful to learn their song. If you know the Robin song then you will know when a bird that you can't see is singing isn't a Robin.



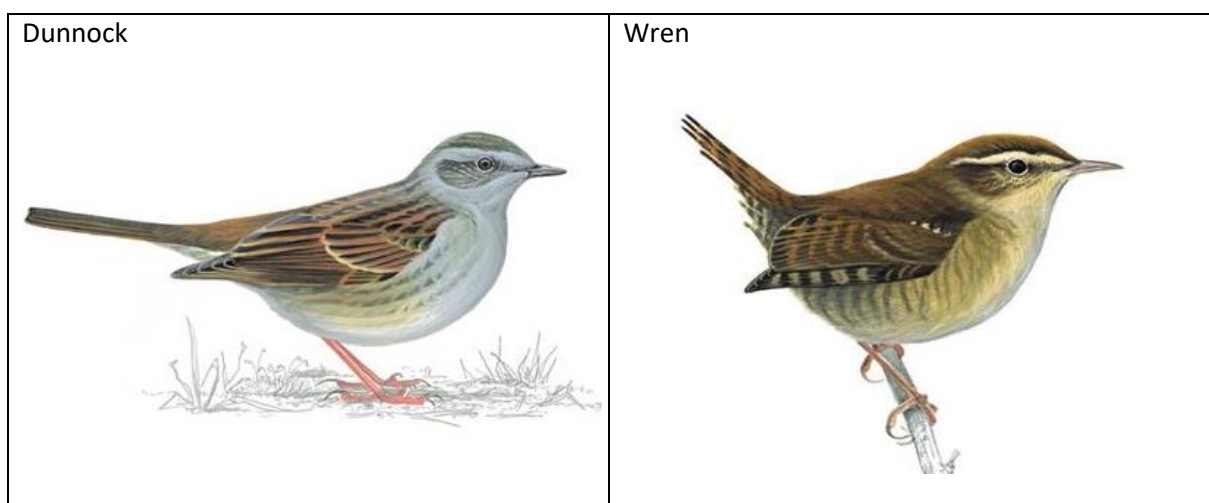
## Dunnock

This is a hidden gem. Commonly found in gardens and parkland but is shy, so not often seen. In spring it is a keen singer. It is also known as the Hedge Sparrow although it is not related to the sparrow family. One key feature to help separate it from the House Sparrow is its bill. Look at the sparrow's bill and you will see it's hefty. The Dunnock's bill is slender. This shows that the sparrow is a seed eater and the Dunnock is predominately an insect eater.

## Wren

The Wren is a tiny mouse like bird that is far more common than their sightings suggest. This is because they are very shy and skulk in hedgerow. That changes in the spring when their incredible song belies their size.

There is a legend about the Wren. All the birds gathered to find out who would be crowned king of the birds. It was decided that whichever bird could fly the highest would be declared king. The eagle flew higher than all the birds and when it could climb no higher the Wren that was hiding its plumage flew out and higher than the eagle. So the Wren became king of the birds.



## Starling

When I was a lad I lived in Stirchley and the common bird seen was the Starling. It was considered a pest. Because we saw them every day it was easy to overlook how pretty they were. They are related to the Minah bird family and are good mimics of other birds and also have a wide range of songs. Some years ago they started to disappear and scientist couldn't work out why. Whilst they still exist in good numbers they are still in decline. In winter they gather in big flocks and just before it goes dark they engage in a spectacular display known as a murmaration.



## Thrush Family

### Blackbird

Along with the Robin perhaps the most recognised of British birds. The male has stunning black plumage, it is far more shiny in the spring than in the winter, and a stark yellow bill. It also has a beautiful song which it will sing from a high perch.

Blackbirds are great sentry birds. They do not like the presence of predatory birds like crows, owls or hawks. They have an alarm call that pierces the air and warns all birds that something is not right. If you go to parkland with mature trees at dusk then Blackbirds will alert you to the location of the magnificent Tawny Owl.

The female is in contrast quite dull. Why? The female's plumage blends in with where they choose to nest. Birds like the Magpie will search for nests and eat the eggs and chicks. So, by blending in the Blackbirds lessen the risk.

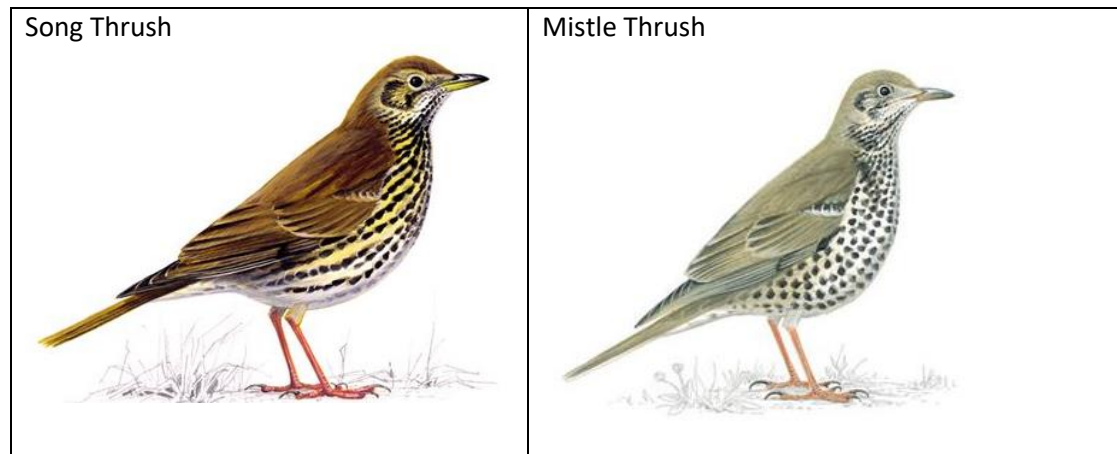


### Song Thrush

The bird is aptly name because its song is magnificent. Males like to perch up high and sing their repetitive songs. On a spring day when there's little noise, listening to the Song Thrush singing accompanied by a cold drink is time well spent. Song Thrushes are a common sight in gardens but there are far fewer of them than Blackbirds. They do like eating snails so are friend to gardeners. This is the bird that is depicted on the WBA football badge.

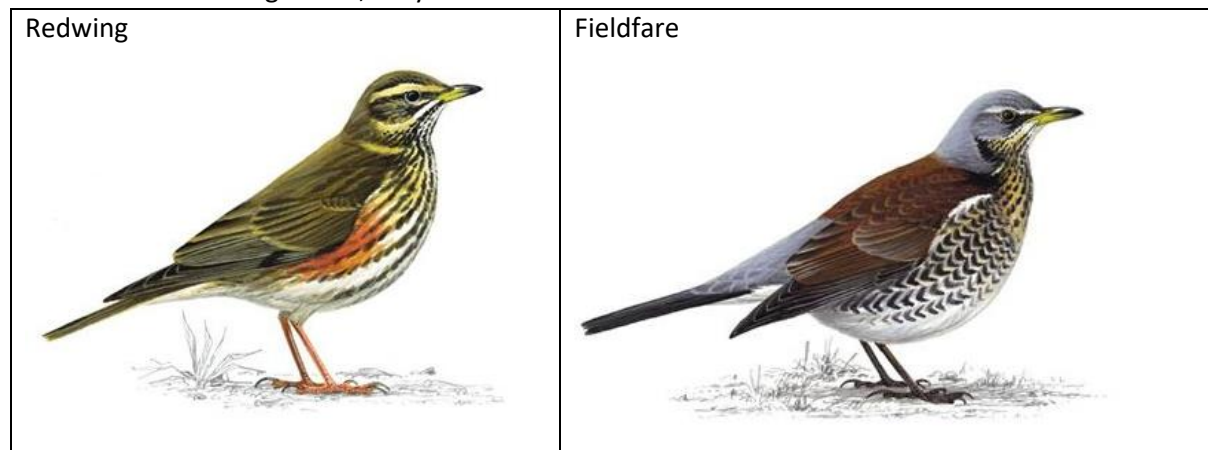
### Mistle Thrush

A much bigger bird than the Song Thrush. The Mistle Thrush is not often found in gardens but will certainly be found in parks. They make a very obvious nest on a big branch and ferociously defend it against invasion from predators. It too has a lovely voice but not quite the magnificence of its smaller cousin.



### Redwing and Fieldfare

These two thrushes are visitors from northern Europe for the winter months. They can still be seen in March but by this time they begin to mass in big flocks for their journey north. The Redwing is slightly bigger than the Song Thrush and the Fieldfare is slightly bigger than the Blackbird. Both are occasional visitors to gardens, they are attracted to fruit fall and berries.



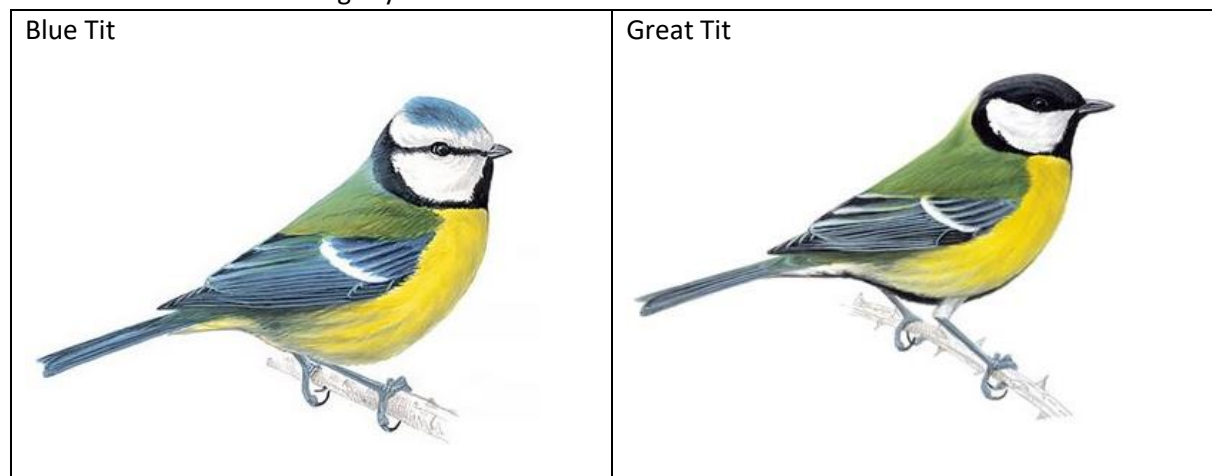
## Tit Family

### Blue Tit

A very familiar garden bird that likes to nest in small natural holes or bird boxes. It is a prodigious breeder with brood sizes as high as 13 eggs. Why so many? Because young Blue Tits are an easy target for Sparrowhawks and crows. This is their way of keeping their population healthy. Not much of a singer but its "chirrup" becomes a familiar clue that they are around. They like to nip the buds off trees and forage for spring insect larvae.

### Great Tit

The biggest of the tit family although only sparrow sized. The Great Tit is a bit of a bully to other tits, it will chase them away from bird feeders and oust them from nest sites if it can get through the entry hole. If you want to put a nest box up then a 25mm hole will attract Blue and Coal Tits, 28mm will allow Great Tits in but they will dislodge any of their smaller cousins if already occupied. The Great Tit has a range of sounds more than a song. Its bell like call is the one most easy to identify. The male and female are slightly different.

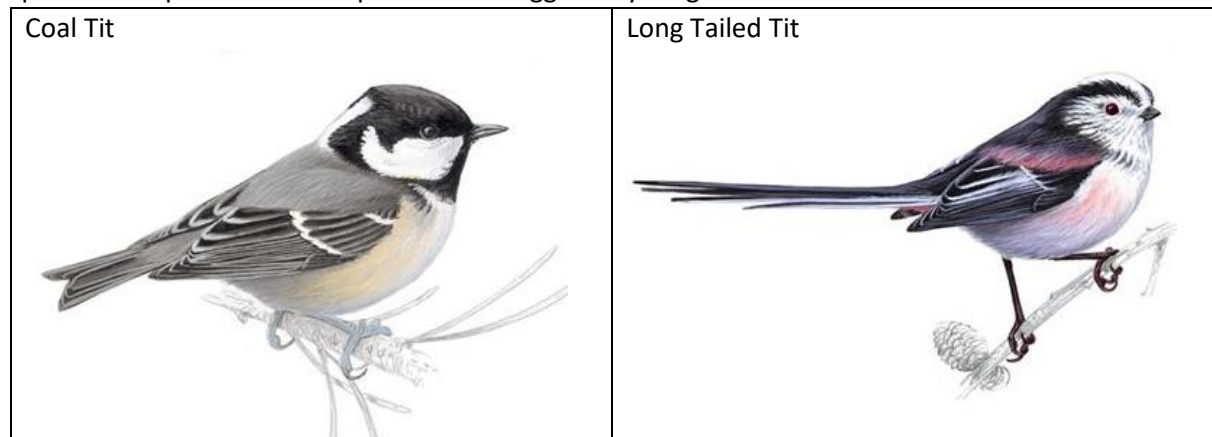


### Coal Tit

The smallest of the tit family and without binoculars can easily be overlooked. The Coal Tit is always on the move. Its usual method of feeding in the garden is to pop out of cover, eat, and then pop back into cover. Its bigger cousins are inclined to bully it if it hangs around.

### Long Tailed Tit

In body this would be the smallest of the family but for its disproportionately long tail. In the winter they always move in groups and they give out a high pitched call which is a give-away. They are not shy though and if you stand still they will happily feed around you. In the spring they make a spectacular spherical nest to protect their eggs and young.





**Often seen with the Tit family**

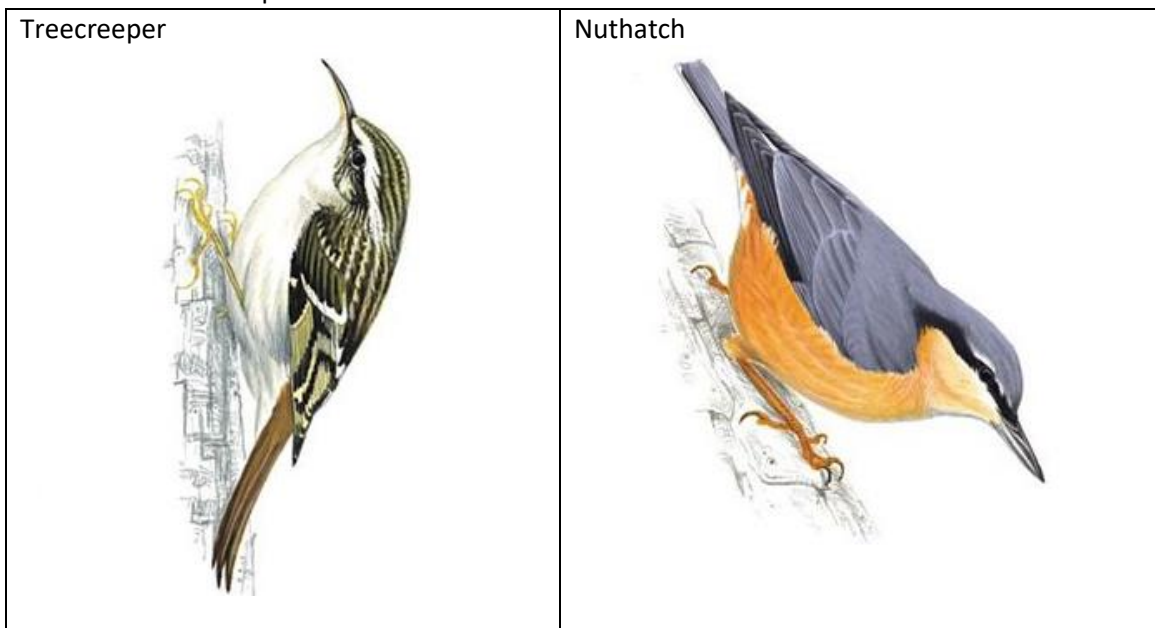
In winter tits often form large flocks. This has the advantage that when searching for much needed food, more eyes can spot if predators are about. These flocks can be 50+ and often contain two other birds.

**Treecreeper**

A beautiful little bird that is very common but easily overlooked. It blends in well with tree bark which is where it spends much of its time searching for food in crevices. It is unusual in that it uses its tail to help balance when creeping up and down trees and it has a de-curved bill to get into places that other birds can't.

**Nuthatch**

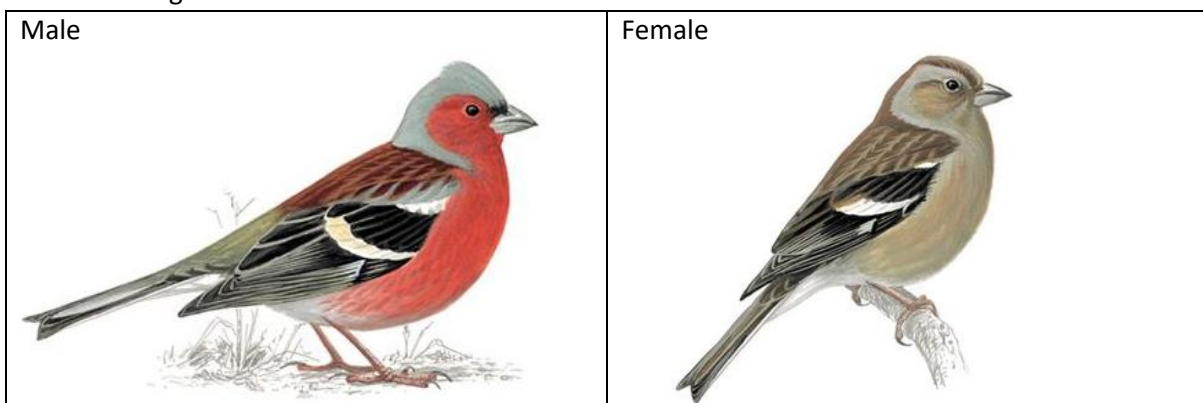
Not as numerous as the Treecreeper but a common sight in gardens and parks. They have a most distinct call that if learned will not be forgotten. They look for food on the trunks and branches of trees and can move up or down with ease.



**Finches**

**Chaffinch**

One of the most abundant birds in Britain. It is a common visitor to gardens and parks and will happily visit picnic tables in the hope of a few give-away crumbs. The male is a very pretty and has a distinctive song and the female is rather drab. The female can be tricky to identify but look out for the white wing bar that is a shared feature of the male and female.



**Greenfinch**

Very familiar garden feeder. It will gather in groups and feed all day. The male is very green and in summer has a distinct yellow wing bar. The female is similar but a little scruffy. Look out for their particularly large bills.

**Goldfinch**

This bird is so spectacular that when people first see it they think maybe it has escaped from a cage. They are smaller than their cousins and this allows them to feed on seeds such as thistle which would not hold the weight of a bigger bird. When they fly they make a jingling sound that can't be confused. Attracting them to your garden can be tricky but if you provide a feeder of Nyjer seed with small holes that others can't get their bills in then once they've found your garden they will visit regularly.



**Bullfinch**

The male Bullfinch is a magnificent contrast of bright red and dark colours. It also has a distinct white rump that is visible when flying. The female is pretty but her peach colour is not a match on the male.

Bullfinches have big bills and they like to nip the buds of fruit trees in the spring. This means that the fruit will not grow. Fruit farmers can apply for a license to shoot them if their crop is particularly affected.

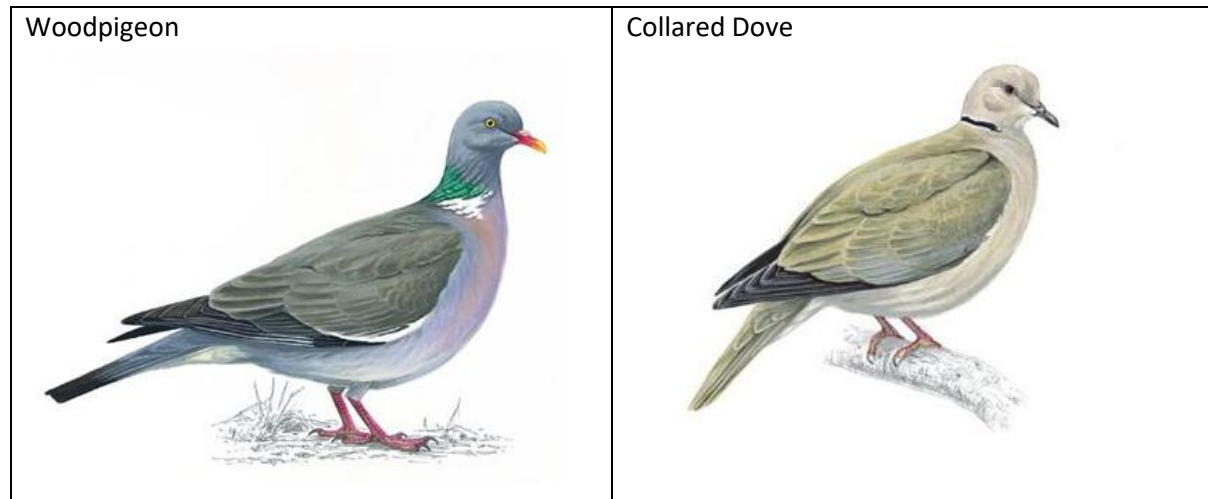


### Wood Pigeon

The Woodpigeon has become a very common sight in gardens and parks. It is a big bird and can consume a lot of food. It has a feature known as a “crop”. This allows it to store food that it eats which allows it to feed when food is available and then fly off to rest and digest it. This is why the Woodpigeon is not popular with farmers. Its cooing song is very commonly heard in the spring.

### Collared Dove

The Collared Dove is now a common sight in gardens and parks but incredibly it was not known in this country until the 1950s. Much smaller than the Woodpigeon of which it can't be confused, but the presence of feral pigeons in parks can make identification tricky. Look out for the dark collar after which it was named.



### Woodpeckers

There are three types of woodpecker found in the UK and all of them can be found in our local parks and if you're lucky in your garden.

### Green Woodpecker

A quite unique looking bird that makes identification easy. Despite their name they don't do much wood pecking but prefer to feed for insects on the ground. If they are on grass then they blend in very well and if disturbed they will jump into the air and commonly issue their call which has led them to be also called the “Yaffler”. The male and female are similar but the males red head is more pronounced and the juveniles look rather scruffy. Not a common sight in gardens but regular in parks.





### **Great Spotted Woodpecker**

This is the bird that drums on tree trunks and telegraph poles. It does this for three purposes: to make its nest hole, to find food and to advertise its prowess to a mate. Although it has a distinct call the Great Spotted Woodpecker will hammer into tree trunks to signal its territory similar to the way other birds sing. Visit any park with mature trees, sit on a bench and listen, and you will hear one. The GSW is a favourite of the garden birdwatcher but it does have a dark secret: it will open up the holes of nesting tits and steal a chick for a substantial supper.

### **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**

Much smaller and very hard to spot but they are in our parks. The key to finding them is to look up into the canopy where they spend much of their time. They will visit garden feeders and once they come they are likely to visit regularly.

Both woodpeckers look similar and size isn't easy to judge without something to compare to. The key feature is look for the red. There is no bodily red on the lesser only on the head. However, juvenile greats do have red on their head. The pictures below also show a key difference: the lesser is much more barred across the back.

Great Spotted Woodpecker



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker



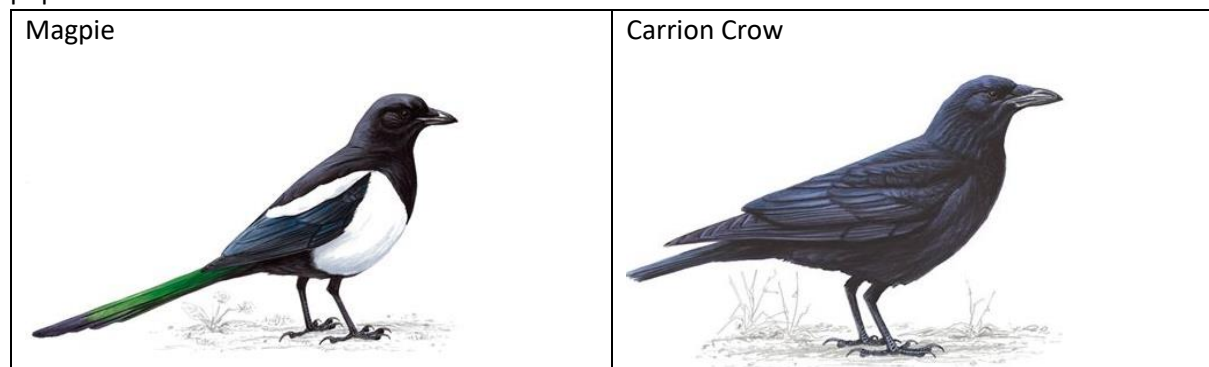
## Crows

### Magpie

The Magpie is so well known that it is easy to look past its beautiful plumage. It appears black and white but if sunshine reflects off it then you will see a range of black, blue and green. The Magpie is not popular because it is known to hunt smaller birds. It does this with brutal efficiency. When they hunt magpies call to each other in a distinct way that signals something is about to happen. Whilst they are very good at hunting their impact on the small bird population is limited. As I mentioned about the Blue Tit, they have so many young to guarantee the population remains strong. If Magpies didn't eat some then we'd be over-run with Blue Tits and then they'd begin to starve.

### Carrion Crow

The word carrion means dead meat. The Carrion Crow is named because in the past it was most associated with feeding on dead animals. It still serves that purpose today and it's an important one. The most common way a wild animal is killed in the UK is by vehicles and the Crow will happily clean up after. It is also an intelligent hunter of small birds, insects and mammals but will happily also feed on anything it finds discarded. A less common garden visitor than the Magpie but it will occasionally pop in to find what food is on offer.

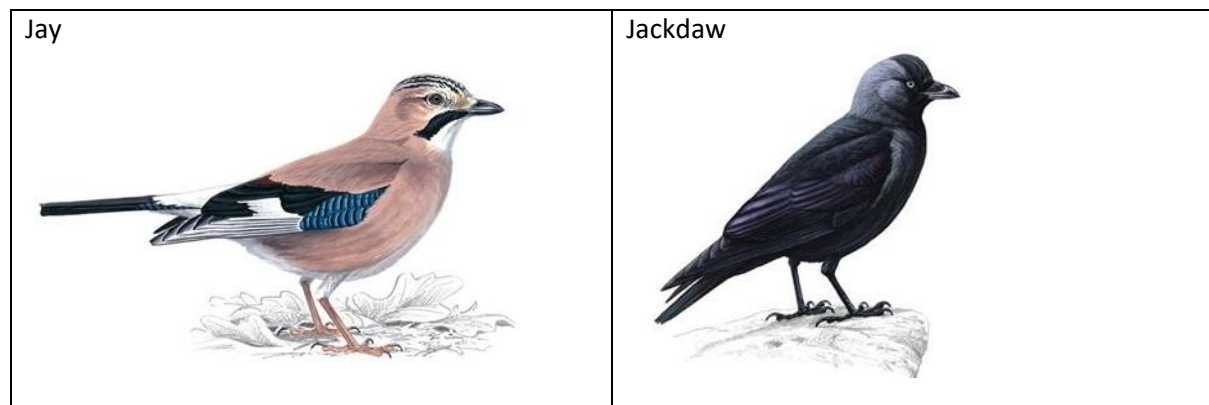


### Jay

The predominant colour of the crow family is black so that the Jay is a crow is a surprise. Its beautiful colour combination is unmistakable but in woodland they can be hard to spot. They are often seen flying away, look out for their white rump. Jays are credited with helping spread Oak Trees. In the autumn they collect acorns and bury them to store for later, then they forget where some are buried and Oaks grow.

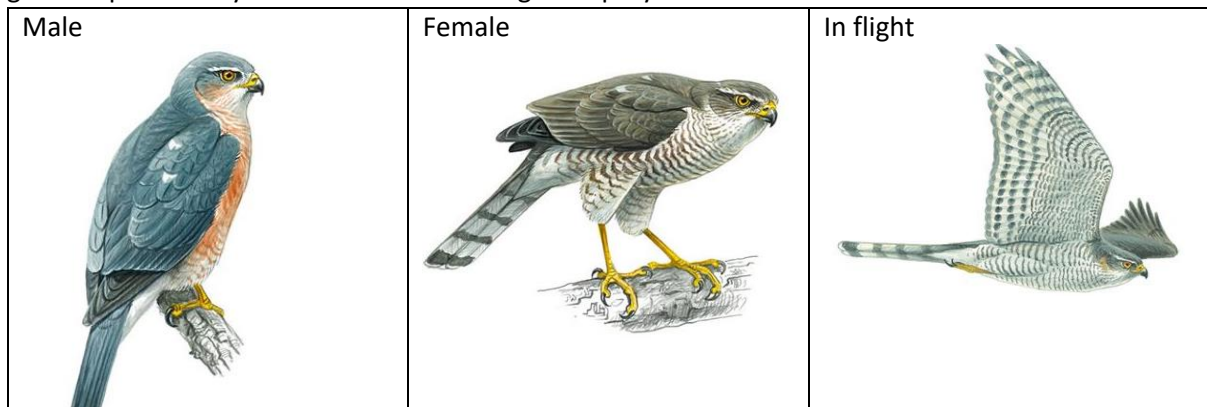
### Jackdaw

Much smaller than the Carrion Crow but can be easily confused. Not often seen in gardens but will nest in chimney pots so are attracted to houses. In the spring the Jackdaw has a grey nape (back of the neck) that makes identification easier and if they are seen in the presence of crows their size difference is obvious.



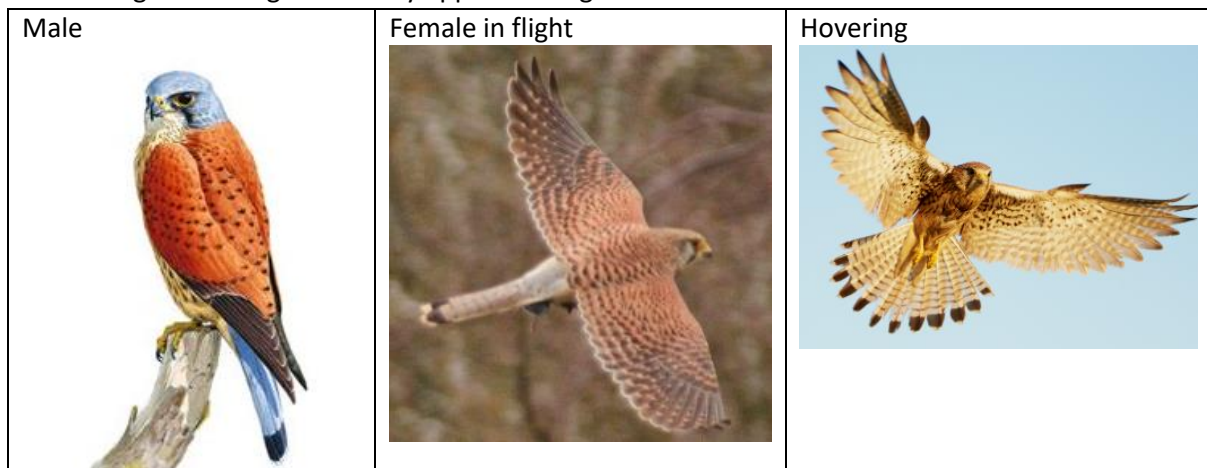
### Sparrowhawk

Its name suggest that the Sparrowhawk hunts small birds. It does but is also capable of hunting birds up to the size of Woodpigeon. Its tactic is to fly low and very fast using hedges or fences to disguise its approach then swoop over and nab its prey. To allow it to change direction quickly it has broad wings and a tight tail. Sparrowhawks suffered in the 1960s when the pesticide DDT was used. This led to a crash in their numbers meaning they were a rare sight. Thankfully their population is much stronger today and they are once again a common sight. I will see one most weeks at school. The male is much smaller than the female. There are a number of reasons for this: the female need to hold more energy reserves if she can't leave the nest, the male is more agile and can catch more prey and regularly, the female can catch bigger prey if needed. Sparrowhawks are regularly seen in gardens particularly if feeders are attracting their prey.



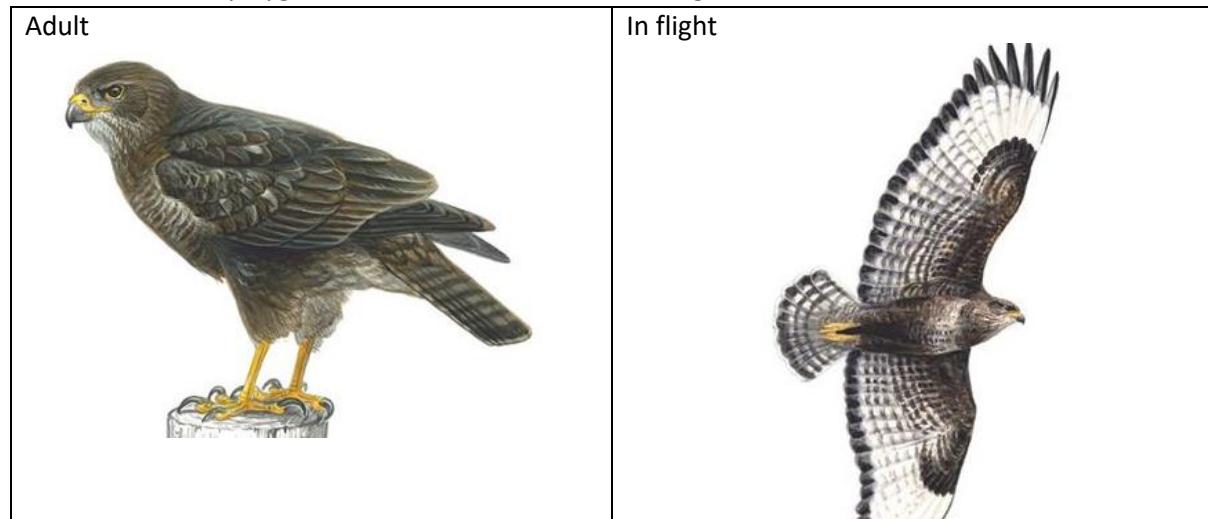
### Kestrel

Not usually seen in gardens or parks but often seen alongside the road on grassy banks. The Kestrel feeds on insects and small mammals. It does so by appearing to hover above the grounds with its eyes scanning for any movement below. It doesn't actually hover, it flies into the wind at the same speed so effectively stays still. The Kestrel is a falcon. The usual characteristics are sharp wings compared to the hawks broad wings and a straight tail. To allow it to hover the Kestrel shapes its tail into a wedge but in flight it usually appears straight.



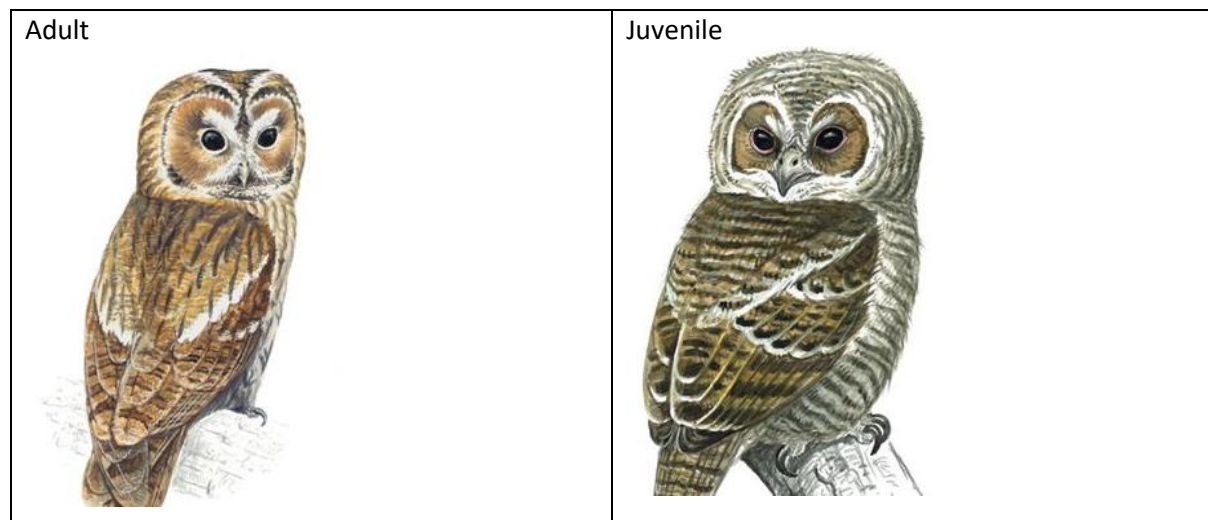
### Buzzard

The Buzzard suffered heavily as a result of the pesticide DDT. When I was young they were a rare sight and now they are the commonest bird of prey seen in the UK. They are big, about 1 ½ times the size of a crow and their wingspan is more than a metre. They will hunt a wide range of things including insects, bird and mammals and are also happy to feed on carrion. Although they are unlikely to be seen in the garden look up and you might be lucky. They like to soar on thermals and are often seen in groups. Crows and other birds do not like Buzzards as they see them as a threat so they “mob” them. Buzzards are often seen above Kings Heath and I’ve even seen one land in the trees on the front playground at school. Buzzards can range in colour.



### Tawny Owl

Although not often seen the Tawny Owl’s call shows that it is present anywhere there are sufficient mature trees for it to roost and nest. How to find one? Some birds like the Blackbird and Jay do not like the presence of Tawny Owls so if they find one they set about moving it on. They will tick loudly and fly close to the bird. This can happen at any time of the day but a good time to find this action is close to dusk. It will be happening in parks everywhere. Locate the fuss and stand still and look up into the trees. The owl will often be found sitting on a branch next to the trunk of the tree. If the birds are successful then you may get a sight of the owl in flight. Young Tawny Owls are even easier to find. They are out of the nest in the summer months and call to their parent asking for food. At this time the very fluffy young are really easy to see and if you sit quietly you may also see a parent come to feed them.



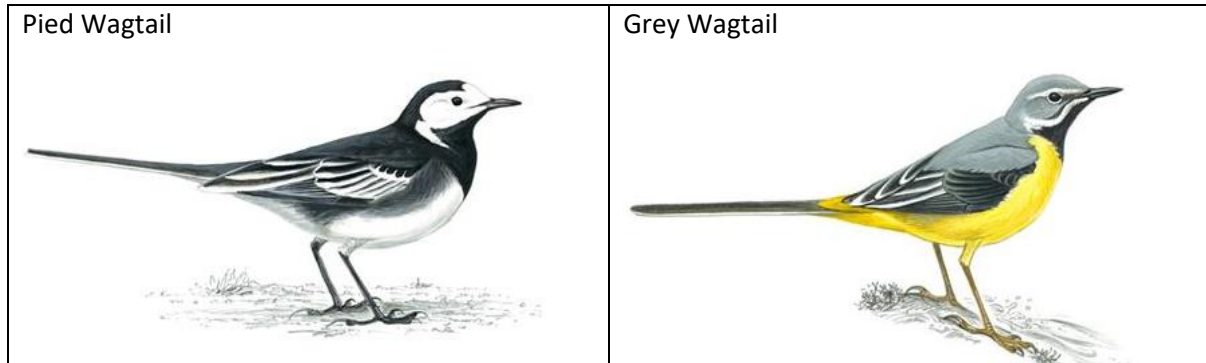
## Wagtails

### Pied Wagtail

Wagtails are named because they continuously wag their tails. The Pied is not a garden visitor but is commonly found in school playgrounds, car parks and roadsides. There can be up to ten of them on the front playground at school.

### Grey Wagtail

Is bigger than the Pied and it too is not seen in gardens. However, if you are near water then there's a chance that you will see one. Walk along the Rea Valley footpath from Stirchley to Cannon Hill park and look for them on the river side.



## Gulls

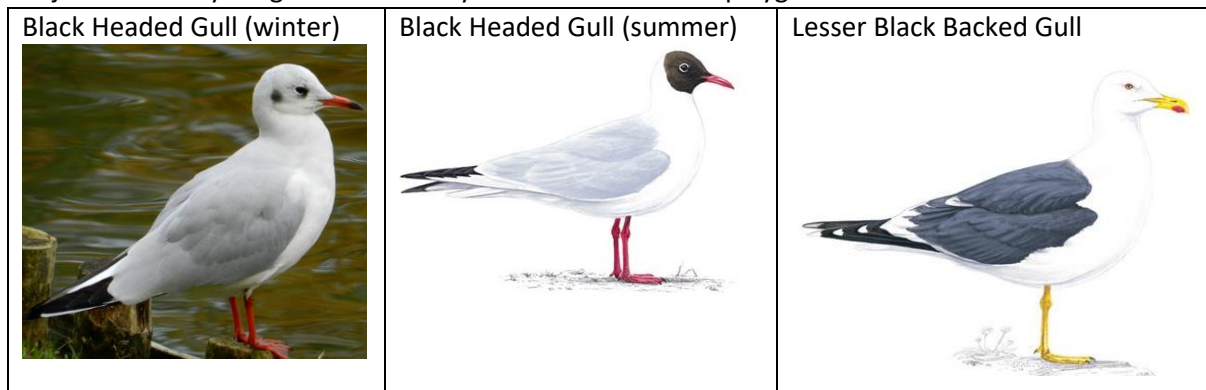
Gulls shouldn't really be found in Birmingham. They are creatures of the coast where they feed on just about anything. When farms started using machines to turn the soil this exposed and disturbed things to eat and gulls started following the plough. Then they found rubbish tips were full of food too. At school we get two types of gull.

### Black Headed Gull

This is the common gull on the playground. It doesn't quite fit its name because when we see them they are in winter plumage and lose their black heads (actually more chocolate brown). They will leave us when they go to breed.

### Lesser Black Backed Gull

This is the big gull seen on the playground. As its name suggests it has an even bigger cousin. It will eat just about anything as is evident by its behaviour on the playground.





If you are able to visit parks with ponds or walk along the Rea Valley footpath then you may see.

### Grey Heron

The Grey Heron is huge and cannot be mistaken for any other bird. It is a top predator and if something moves then it's prey. It is adapted for hunting in shallow water where it will take fish, frogs and birds. I have seen them eat fish far bigger than looks possible and take any young water bird that is unsure of the danger they present. They are also happy to hunt in fields and will happily fish in garden ponds.

Adult



In flight



### Kingfisher

The Kingfisher is a stunningly pretty bird that can be elusive. They are found wherever there's water with fish in it. A good place to see them is the along the Rea river in Stirchley. They signal that they are coming by emitting a high pitched call, look out for the flash of blue and orange of a small cigar shaped bird that seems to fly without flapping its wings. Alternatively, set up a chair on a quiet part of the river and watch and wait. Some people go many years without seeing one but when they do they're delighted to see this beauty.

Adult



In flight



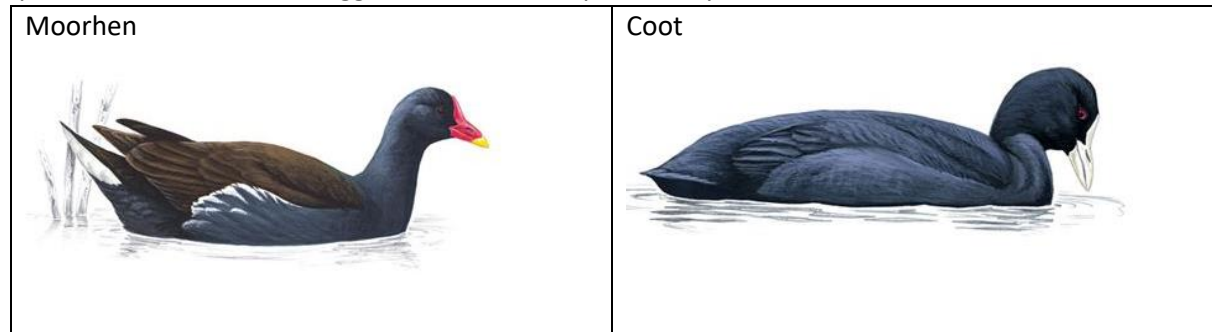
## Rails

### Moorhen

A small water bird found even in the smallest of ponds. Rails are not ducks, one difference is that they have lobed rather than webbed feet. They are very capable of feeding in or out of the water.

### Coot

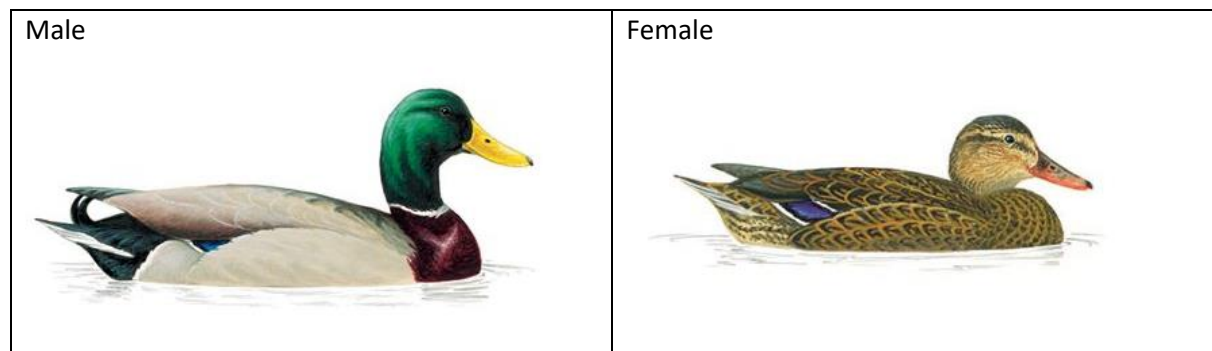
Also very common, sometimes in large numbers, where there is water. The Coot looks cute but it is quite a rascal. It is fond of eggs and little chicks, particularly of its cousin the Moorhen.



## Ducks

### Mallard

The Mallard is by far the commonest duck found in the UK such that it is easy to look past how striking it is. Male ducks (drakes) are usually much more colourful than the females. The drab plumage of the female is to allow her to blend in with the surrounding vegetation when nesting. Notice that the male and female both share a purple patch on their wing. This is called the speculum and is different in all ducks, it is used to aid positioning when ducks fly in v shapes. Mallard are dabbling ducks, this means they can put their upper body under the water to reach food but they cannot dive.



### Tufted Duck

Much smaller than the Mallard. The males and females have similar marking but the white is more pronounced in the male and in the summer he has a decorative tuft. Tufted ducks are diving ducks so don't be surprised to see them disappear.



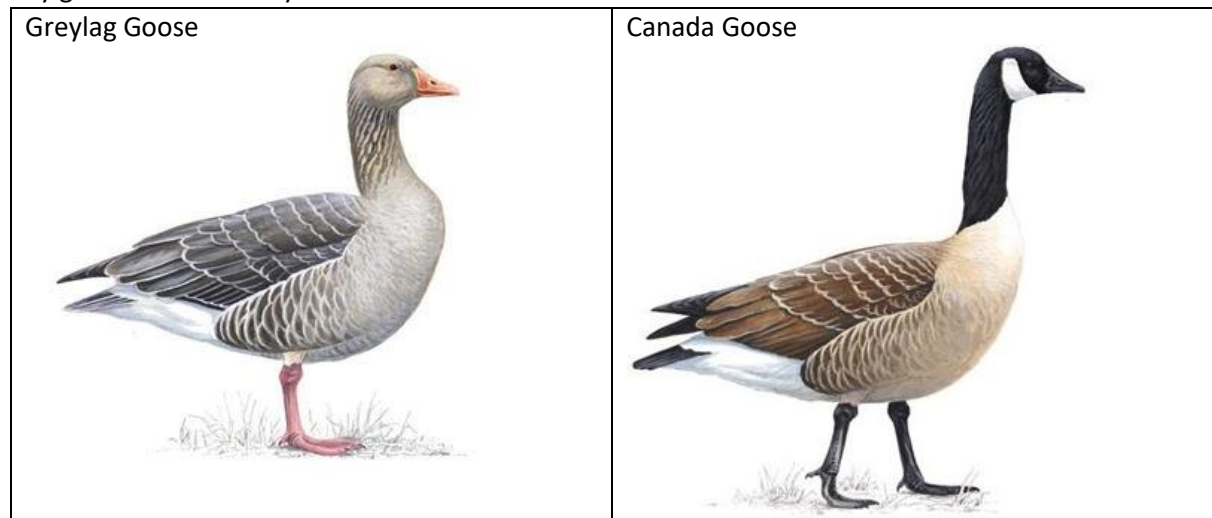
## Geese

### Greylag Goose

This is a huge bird that can vary in size and plumage. Sometimes wild geese breed with feral geese and this can lead to some off looking birds. Such birds are not able to breed. The same is true of ducks, if you see a duck that looks too big or has strange colouring then it's not truly wild.

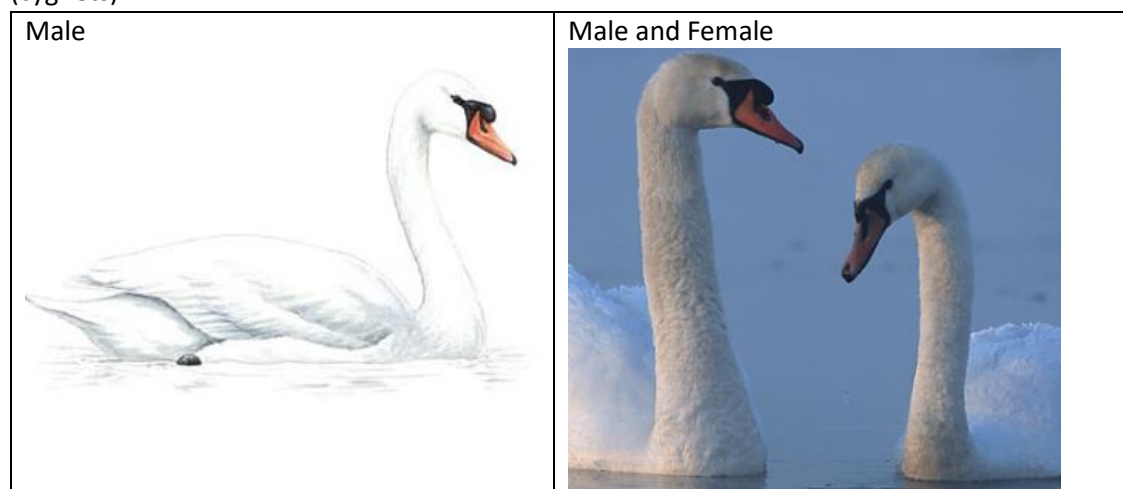
### Canada Goose

As its name suggest this goose is from North America. How did they get here then? In the eighteenth century until this day some people like to collect wildfowl from around the world to display them in ornamental ponds. The Canada Goose was introduced but birds escaped their captivity and began to breed as wild birds. They are aggressive, particularly if with young, and inclined to make a mess of any grass area that they feed on.



### Mute Swan

The largest bird in the UK. The male, known as a Cob, is bigger than the female (Pen) and can weigh as much as 11kg. The genders can also be separated by the presence of a knob on the bill of the male. Swans can be very aggressive in particular if they are on their massive nest or have young (cygnets).

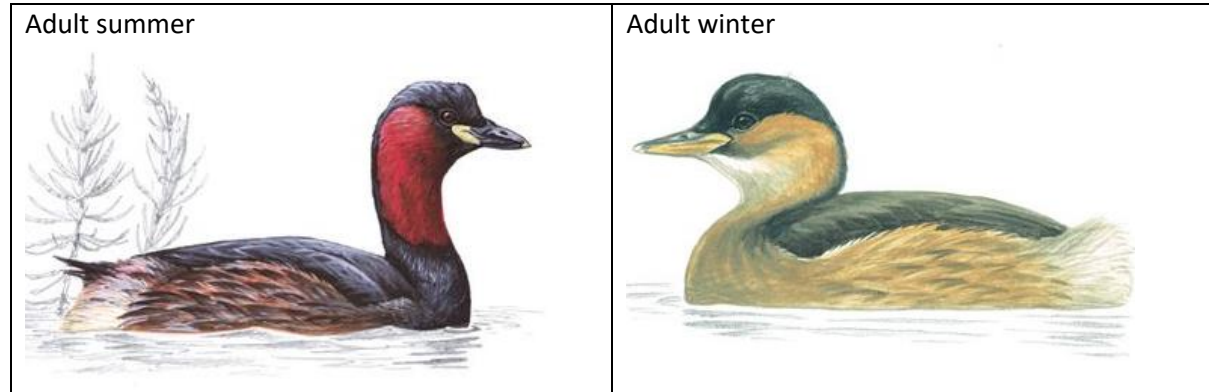


## Grebes

Grebes are highly adapted water birds such that out of the water they struggle to walk. This is because their legs are much further back in their body which makes them excellent underwater swimmers.

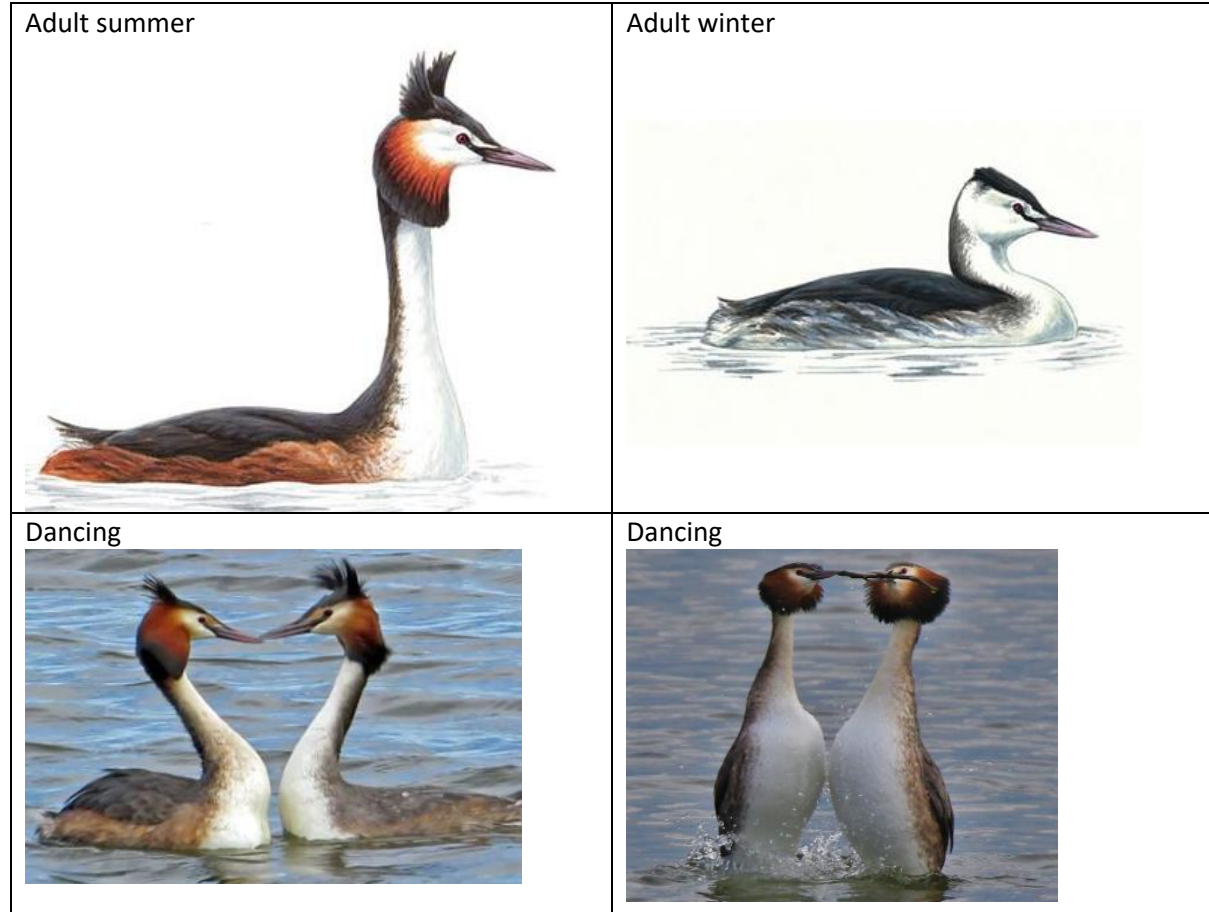
### Little Grebe

Is present in even small ponds but is very easy to overlook because it will commonly dive and then surface under the cover of overhanging vegetation. Like all grebes it has a dull winter plumage and in summer it dresses to impress.



### Great Crested Grebe

Dull in the winter and stunning in the summer. The Great Crested Grebe is much bigger than the Little Grebe, it is about the size of a Mallard but much slimmer and when on the surface it sits lower in the water. The GCB engages in spectacular courtship in the spring, the dance of the GCB is something to behold and it can be found anywhere there is deep enough water for them to dive.



### Summer Visitors

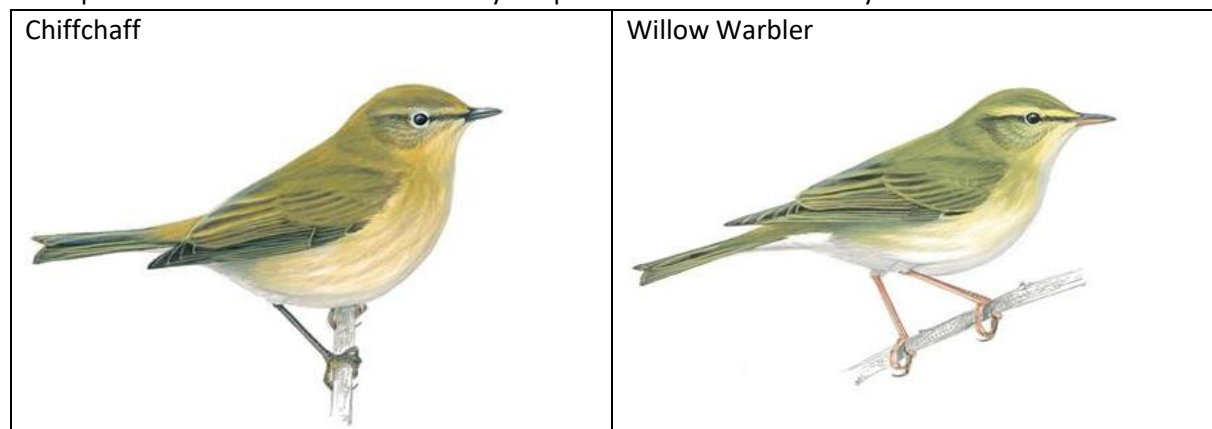
There are lots of birds that are attracted to the long hours of daylight and abundance of food in the UK during the summer months. Here are 6 to look out for.

#### Chiffchaff

One of the first arrivals. Often hard to see but their song is their name so very easy to identify. Once you know the song “chiff-chaff –chiff-chaff” you’ll find them everywhere that there is vegetation cover. Chiffchaffs are leaf warblers. They rely on insects and their larvae found on leaf so staying in the UK in the winter is not possible. However, changing climate means that some are found overwintering in the south.

#### Willow Warbler

There are about twice as many Willow Warblers visiting than Chiffchaffs but they are somewhat harder to find. They hide in vegetation and although their song is distinct it is not as easy to identify as the Chiffchaff. The two birds look very similar. The legs of the WW are paler and its eye stripe is more pronounced but these can be tricky to spot because the bird rarely sits still.



#### Sand Martin

The Sand Martin likes to nest in sandy banks or cliffs. Whilst this habitat is not common around Birmingham the bird is still regularly seen because it feeds where there is water. Although slightly smaller than its cousin the House Martin, this is very hard to determine. The Sand Martin is brown, has a cleft tail and has a brown band across its white chest.

#### House Martin

So named because it likes to nest on houses. Its nest is a detailed construction made from mud and saliva. The House Martin is blue, has a cleft tail and a white chest with no band, its most distinctive feature is its white rump.





### Swallow

The Swallow is strongly associated with the change of seasons. The old saying “one Swallow doesn’t make a summer” refers to the fact that some Swallows arrive early and poor weather can still follow. Swallows feed on insects and there’s always plenty to be found over water. Towards the end of the summer they begin to flock near water in readiness to set off for Africa. Before we knew that they migrated people believed that they spent the winter hibernating at the bottom of ponds. The Swallow can be confused with Martins as all three rarely stop flying. The Swallow is bigger and its most distinguishing feature is its tail streamers compared to the short cleft tails of the martins.

### Swift

Swifts are highly adapted birds that spend most of their life in the air. They nested on cliff edges so didn’t need to perch hence evolved to have very short legs. If a Swift was to land on the ground then it cannot launch itself into the air, if you find one then help it by gently throwing it upwards. Because they like to nest on cliffs they have adapted to living under the eaves of houses so are a common sight in Birmingham. Unlike other birds that have early arrivals followed by the majority, Swifts seem to arrive on mass in early May (30<sup>th</sup> April is the earliest I have seen them) and then suddenly in August they are all gone. They are marvels of flying and a joy to watch.

The Swift and Swallow are not from the same family.

