



for birds  
for people  
for ever



# **WILD SQUARES**

**Attracting wildlife  
to London's squares  
and public gardens**



Blackbird by C Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

**The small parks and squares that give Londoners so much pleasure and space for relaxation are also important for birds and other wildlife. The birds add colour, song, movement and vibrancy to our green spaces.**

A survey of more than 290 sites in central London recorded 31 different bird species. They like plenty of trees, shrubs and undergrowth, and a natural style, which brings something of the countryside to town. Only a few species occur where there are large areas of hard surfacing and short mown grass.

**Here is some advice on managing parks and squares to encourage birds and other wildlife.**

## WHAT WILDLIFE NEEDS

Birds and all other animals must have food, water and safe places to shelter and breed. Many of the native birds in our parks and squares evolved in woodland and scrub. The diversity of woodland birds in a small park or square tends to increase with the amount of tree and shrub cover and the similarity of the landscaping to our countryside.

Creepers such as ivy are very useful, providing both shelter and food for a wealth of wildlife. Decaying wood provides nest holes and a source of insect food. Birds also come out to feed in open areas, such as mown lawns, flowerbeds and meadows. All birds visit water to drink and bathe and some, like ducks, will only live where they find a large enough area of water and wetland plants.

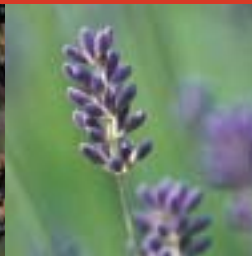


Mallard by D Norton (rspb-images.com)

Starlings by T Hamblin, people by D Levenson (rspb-images.com)

## TREES, SHRUBS AND HEDGES

These are the most important features for birds, providing nesting and roosting sites, as well as cover from predators. They supply food directly in the form of berries and seeds, and indirectly by supporting and attracting insects and other invertebrates. Tall and dense cover, which resembles natural woodland with undergrowth, is especially useful. In winter, evergreens offer extra shelter. Native oaks support more wildlife than any other tree species.



Robin by B Glover (rsqb-images.com)

## CHOICE OF PLANTS

Native plants generally support more wildlife, and should ideally be from British-grown stock; imported plants may have different characteristics. Aim to provide a good mix of heights and species, with dense cover, attractive flowers and a range of berries and seeds.

**According to the conditions and requirements of the site, native species could include:**

- oak
- birch
- ash
- blackthorn
- bramble
- wild cherry and bird cherry
- hawthorn

- holly
- ivy
- field maple
- hazel
- rowan.

**Valuable non-natives include:**

- cotoneaster
- pyracantha
- buddleia
- berberis.

**Smaller plants that will attract bees and other nectar-loving insects include:**

- lavender
- rosemary
- shrubby mallows.

## MANAGING TREES, SHRUBS AND HEDGES

There is a clear link between the number and variety of birds on a site with the amount and type of greenery grown there. Trees, shrubs and hedges provide structure and give a relaxed 'countryside' appearance, which people appreciate. House sparrows especially like dense cover such as privet, bramble and hawthorn. Pay careful attention to these benefits when you consider cutting back cover to address concerns about public safety. It should be possible to get a balance between enough visibility and maintaining shrubby areas for a natural and informal environment. Seek a sensible balance.

Cutting and pruning must not be carried out while birds are nesting – it is illegal to deliberately destroy the nests of birds. It is best for wildlife if pruning is done in late winter after birds have been able to eat the berries and seeds. Aim to prune about half of the shrubs each year to ensure continuity of cover and food. If possible, avoid cutting all of the same species in any one year.

Decaying wood is an important part of the natural cycle, and a home to many insects, which in turn are food to birds. Decaying branches in the tree canopy offer feeding habitat and potential homes to hole-nesters, such as tits, and at some sites, woodpeckers. Logs and clippings on the ground break down to improve the soil, and may support the stag beetle, a priority species in London. Creating a woodpile is especially easy and will boost insect numbers. Woodpiles can be decorative features, partially buried or tucked away out of sight.

Tree management must, of course, take account of public safety. Where limbs or trees need to be removed, consider first if part of the limb or standing tree can be retained. Reducing the limb or height of a tree may often eliminate any danger. Where possible, leave the wood in large pieces below the tree and try to mimic natural breaks in limbs rather than a traditional clean cut. Avoid grinding out any stumps unless they pose an obstruction to machinery.



Blue tits by G McCarthy (rsph-images.com)



Robin by S Austin, honeysuckle by E James, woodpile by A Hay (rsph-images.com)

## CLIMBING PLANTS

Ivy is a real asset, providing evergreen cover for roosting and nesting birds. It harbours a good range of insects, including bees and butterflies attracted to the autumn flowers, and many birds enjoy the berries when other food sources are in short supply.

Research in London shows that blackbirds, robins, wrens and blue tits are among the species that benefit from the presence of ivy-covered trees. Generally, ivy does little or no harm to mature trees, but may possibly increase the risk of 'wind throw' on slender trees such as birch.

On walls too, ivy provides greenery and a habitat for wildlife all year. Honeysuckle also supports a variety of insects, especially night-flying moths, and birds take the berries.

## GRASS

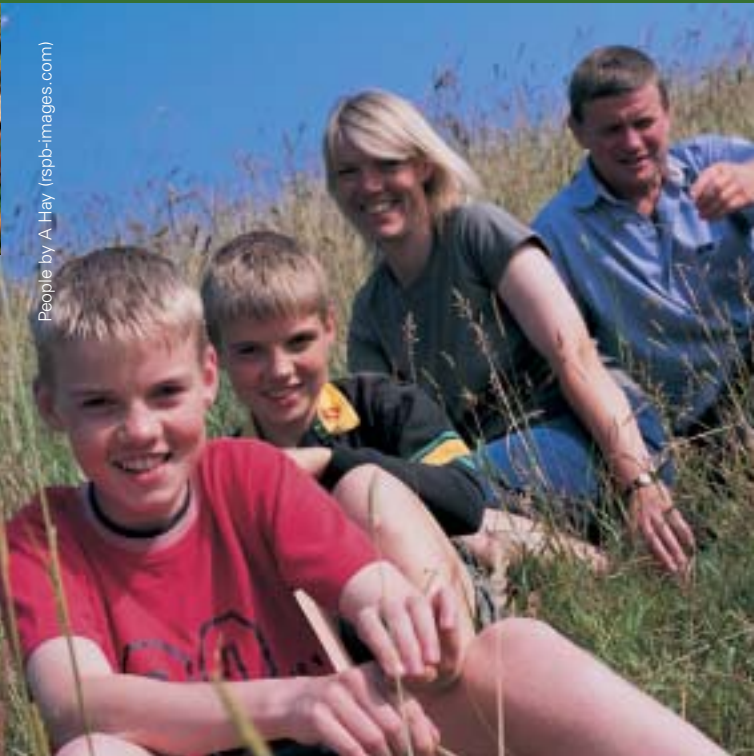
Areas of short grassland are valuable for birds such as blackbirds, song thrushes, mistle thrushes and starlings that hunt for worms and leatherjackets. Instead of mowing the whole area, consider allowing some of the grass to grow to its full height to create a different habitat with more opportunities for wild flowers. Where there are spring bulbs such as daffodils in parts of the lawn, you could allow naturally occurring wild flowers to follow on, then mow when the flowers die back. This approach will encourage

more insect life, which in turn boosts food sources for birds. It also lends an air of variety and informality. Make sure you clear any litter so that it does not look neglected and you could install some interpretation boards explaining why you have left these areas uncut. Long grass may be best grown against shrub beds. This helps buffer against the wind and increases humidity within the shrub bed, benefiting thrushes hungry for snails and slugs. Where possible, leave at least part of the long grass to stand over winter. Many insects need this to survive the winter.



Song thrush by L. Campbell (rsqb-images.com)

Daffodils by P Cairns, blackbird by C Gomersall, Leaves by L. Campbell (rsqb-images.com)



People by A. Hay (rsqb-images.com)

**Avoid removing all leaves from grassy areas; worms will be encouraged to do the job naturally and at the same time provide food for birds. Excess leaves may be spread in shrubberies as mulch or can be composted on site.**



A Hay (rsfb-images.com)



Chaffinch by R Kennedy (rsfb-images.com)



A Hay (rsfb-images.com)

## **WILD FLOWERS UNDER TREES, SHRUBS AND IN BORDERS**

Naturalised bluebells, or common wild flowers such as willowherb, garlic mustard and cow parsley will grow under shrubs where they are not weeded, sprayed out or suppressed with bark mulch.

Native wild plants attract a variety of insects, which are in turn food for birds or other wildlife. You may also consider introducing pot-grown wild flowers such as foxgloves, red campions and primroses.

Wild plants such as groundsel, shepherd's purse and fat hen may be allowed to grow in discrete parts of borders and shrub beds. Birds, particularly house sparrows, eat the seeds as well as the insects attracted to the plants.

Maintain these areas by lightly cultivating after the plants have seeded to encourage fresh germination. Alternatively, an approved herbicide may be considered. At the end of the growing season, you could leave seed heads and stems to provide food and shelter for some of the insects to overwinter in.

## **WATER**

People like to see clean water in a park, whether it is a fountain, pool, pond or lake. It is essential for all birds to drink and bathe, and may bring in extra species, such as mallards and moorhens, pied and grey wagtails. Where there are suitable aquatic and marginal plants, there could be dragonflies and damselflies, and possibly even frogs, toads and newts.



Common frog by M Lane (rsfb-images.com)



Greenfinch by C Gomersall (rsnb-images.com)

## BOXES AND FEEDERS

In areas with house sparrows or starlings, installing nestboxes will increase the likelihood of them breeding. Choose your boxes wisely if space is limited or go for a variety with different hole sizes and some with open fronts to attract different species.

Tits, finches and, increasingly, robins are adept at using hanging feeders with seeds or peanuts, while others, such as blackbirds, take the food that falls to the ground. Create a spectacle by maintaining hanging feeders all year round. Extra food sources help birds survive the winter and keep them in better condition while nesting. A permanent feeder soon becomes a regular haunt for birds and an added attraction for people to enjoy a close encounter with nature. Clean them regularly to help prevent disease.

## THE BIRDS TO LOOK FOR

The advice given here follows a survey of birds in London's small parks and squares for the London Biodiversity Action Plan. The survey found blackbirds were the most common visitors to our squares (found in 87% of sites), followed by feral pigeons. Woodpigeons and blue tits were widespread and numerous. Wrens and robins were present in more than a third of the sites, while a quarter were frequented by crows, magpies and starlings, the latter often in small flocks. There were greenfinches, dunnocks and house sparrows at one in ten sites, and other species recorded included the chaffinch, long-tailed tit, mistle and song thrushes, pied wagtail and goldfinch. Just a few places met the special requirements of green and great spotted woodpeckers, mallards and moorhens.



Bird feeder by D Trilling (rsnb-images.com)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This booklet is a summary of a longer report entitled *London's small parks and squares – a place for nature?* available as a free download from the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum website – [www.lpgsf.org.uk](http://www.lpgsf.org.uk)

The Mayor of London's policies towards wildlife in parks and green spaces can be found in the Mayor of London's Biodiversity Strategy – [www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)

This survey was part of the London Biodiversity Partnership's Parks and Green Spaces Habitat Action Plan – [www.lbp.org.uk](http://www.lbp.org.uk)

The RSPB website offers a wealth of information about the birds mentioned here, including an A–Z of wildlife gardening – [www.rspb.org.uk/gardens](http://www.rspb.org.uk/gardens)

The RSPB's Homes Fit For Birds project offers practical advice targeting management for key species: house sparrow, starling, song thrush, house martin and swift – [www.rspb.org.uk/homesfitforbirds](http://www.rspb.org.uk/homesfitforbirds)

The London Wildlife Trust also offers advice and has a Centre for Wildlife Gardening – [www.wildlondon.org.uk](http://www.wildlondon.org.uk)



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The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all.

Cover: great spotted woodpecker by M Read, blackbird by R Kennedy (rspb-images.com) Regd charity no 207076 860-1350-05-06