



Hawfinch

Coccothraustes *coccothraustes*

Status

Amber listed: BDM
Non-SPEC

National monitoring

None.

Population and distribution

Hawfinches have a sparse distribution in the UK, concentrated mainly in the south and east of England. There are small populations throughout the rest of England, some in Wales (mainly in Gwent), a few in south-east Scotland and none in Ireland (88–91 *Atlas*). Between the two atlas periods the breeding population apparently declined, partly due to the loss of mature trees in the 1987 gale (68–72 *Atlas*, 88–91 *Atlas*). The current breeding population is estimated at 3,000–6,500 pairs (*Population Estimates*).

Ecology

Hawfinches favour a variety of habitats, from broadleaf and mixed woods to large gardens, coppices, thickets, orchards and hedges. Examples of typical habitats are: natural open mixed oak and hornbeam forest, other tall deciduous trees which carry fruits (such as beech, ash, wych elm, sycamore and maple) or areas near other fruit trees such as cherry and apple. In Gwent and the Forest of Dean (Gloucestershire) there is high dependence on wild cherry and ivy. Many nests are built in ivy, so areas containing ivy-covered trees, particularly slender cherry, ash, birch, etc, should be covered. Pairs are also regularly found in conifer and mature ivy-covered larch (Bealey and Sutherland 1982, Roberts and Lewis 1988). Hawfinches are elusive and secretive birds, preferring the thick cover of the high canopy. Eggs are laid from the first half of April to late June.

Breeding season survey – population

This species is sparsely distributed and difficult to locate. As a result, this is an intensive method (requiring knowledge of vocalisations) which may be difficult to carry out in larger woodland areas.

Information required

- maximum number of individuals recorded on any one visit, divided by two
- map of the survey area with the boundary clearly marked.

Number and timing of visits

At least three visits from mid-March to mid-May.

Time of day

In March and April, when the canopy is relatively leafless, any time of day will do. In May, when leaf cover makes observation difficult, mornings are best.

Weather constraints

Poor weather should be avoided, especially moderate or high winds (greater than Beaufort force 4) and heavy rain.

Sites/areas to visit

Areas containing any of the following: broadleaved and mixed woodland, large gardens, thickets, orchards and hedges.

Equipment

- 1:10,000 OS map of the survey area
- compass (optional).

Safety reminders

No specific advice. See the *Introduction* for general guidelines.

Disturbance

Hawfinches are extremely wary and if disturbed will immediately fly to cover in the canopy. Although this method only involves observations from the ground, be as unobtrusive as possible as this helps in obtaining accurate observations.

Methods

Mark the boundary of the survey area on the map. Decide on a route which enables you to walk within 50 m of every point in the survey area. Because of this distance rule, it is likely that you will only be able to cover about half of a 1-km square on a single visit, although it would be possible to cover a larger area in a shorter time with a coordinated team.

Walk through the area as quietly as possible, paying particular attention to bird movement in the tree canopy, checking out any movements with binoculars. Stop every 50 paces (or less) and scan the trees around you.

Hawfinches often nest in loose colonies, with several pairs close together, and these groups are easier to locate than single pairs. In March and April, there is much territorial and courtship activity in the leafless canopy, and pairs will chase each other at high speed. Birds can be particularly noisy when flocks break up into their constituent breeding pairs, whereas single pairs quickly fall silent after an initial burst of courtship and are less easily found. In May birds may be busy nest-building and egg-laying and this can again be a noisy period in a colony. At this time, courtship feeding is accompanied by feverish calling from females and much calling and singing from males. Leaf cover in May makes observation more difficult.

It is difficult to discriminate between male and female hawfinches unless they are seen at very close quarters, so count all individual birds. It is *essential* to be able to recognise hawfinch vocalisations. Unfortunately, the song and calls are neither loud nor of striking quality, and the most characteristic vocalisation is the flight-call, a single explosive 'tzick' (Mountfort 1957) repeated at intervals of 2–4 seconds in leisurely flight (*BWP*).

On each visit, use a different field map with the route marked on it, but alternate the direction of the route on each visit. Mark any hawfinch registrations on the map using standard BTO notation (Appendix 1). It is particularly important to note when two or more individuals are seen or heard **simultaneously**. Cross-reference the notations to a notebook allowing more room for comments.

At the end of each visit estimate the total number of hawfinches present from the mapped registrations. Report the maximum number of individuals counted on any one visit, divided by two. This will give a rough approximation of the number of pairs of hawfinches present.

References

- Bealey, C E and Sutherland, M P (1982) Woodland birds of the West Sussex Weald. *Sussex Bird Report* 35: 69–73.
- Mountfort, G (1957) *The Hawfinch*. Collins, London.
- Roberts, S and Lewis, J (1988) Observations on the sensitivity of nesting hawfinch. *Gwent Bird Report* 23: 7–10.