

# GEOFF STONEBANKS

## The Driftwood Garden Diary



# Small changes can help garden birds

RECENTLY chatted with Marcella Whittingdale on the BBC Sussex Breakfast Show about feeding birds in the garden, following the recent advice from the RSPB.

The following information comprises extracts from their website. We all want to help birds and make our gardens or outdoor spaces a place where all wildlife can thrive. But some species, such as greenfinches, are experiencing serious declines because of disease. Their research has shown a worrying decline in some of our much-loved garden birds due to a disease called trichomonosis. This is a highly contagious disease and can spread where birds gather in large numbers, such as at bird feeders.

Greenfinches, for example, have dropped by over 65 per cent in the last three decades – and you may have seen this decline yourself.

Back when their Big Garden Birdwatch started in 1979, greenfinches were at number seven in the top ten birds seen. This year, they were down to number 18.

Their advice to help stop the spread of disease among garden birds is to make two simple shifts in how we feed them.

During summer and autumn, there's apparently a higher risk of disease spreading. But it's also when there are more natural foods available to birds, such as seeds and insects, so from May 1 to October 31 they recommend pausing filling your bird feeders with seeds or peanuts but continue to offer small amounts of mealworms, fatballs or suet.

From November 1 to April 30, we can revert back and feed the birds a full range of bird foods, including seeds and peanuts.

Other recommendations are that we all clean our bird feeders and water baths at least once a week.

Good hygiene is essential, so be sure to also clean away any old food or droppings from beneath feeders. They suggest we place bird feeders in a different spot every week. This will help to prevent any build-up of potentially contaminated debris underneath. If you have more than one



Geoff at Bluebell Wood. Image: Geoff Stonebanks

feeder, put them in different areas to reduce the number of birds in one place and the mixing of different species.

Try and avoid putting feeders under places where birds roost, such as under trees. This will help to avoid contamination through droppings. Don't use bird feeders with flat surfaces, such as bird tables, window feeders and feeders with trays. Research has confirmed that there's a higher risk of disease spreading on flat surfaces, where contaminated food can collect.

They tell us to feed in moderation. Make sure all the food you put out is eaten within one to two days. Adjust the amount you offer based on demand to avoid overfeeding and keep food as dry

as possible. Damp food allows disease to survive and spread. Choose feeders that prevent rain getting in and limit condensation, also change water in bird baths daily. Only offer water if you're able to change it every day and make sure it's tap water. A pond is the best way to provide birds and other wildlife with water.

One of the best ways to support garden birds in the long term is to help them find their own food. So, fill your outdoor space with bird-friendly plants – such as sunflowers, teasels and ivy. These help provide natural food sources for birds. See the full details on their website [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)

I am very lucky to be able to see quite a few birds in my garden. You can see a couple of robins

pictured. There are plenty of them around the plot, with many nesting in the garden hedgerow too. They enjoy the fat balls in the feeders and find plenty of food under their own steam around the garden, like small worms and insects. We see a few blackbirds too and they seem quite friendly, not darting away when you approach. There are a couple of pairs of pigeons nesting in the trees as well.

This weekend, why not visit the beautiful Legsheath Farm in Legsheath Lane, near Forest Row, pictured. Sadly, due to a typing error, the garden opening was not listed in the NGS Sussex Booklet or the main Gardens to Visit Handbook. However, it will be opening its garden gate tomorrow,

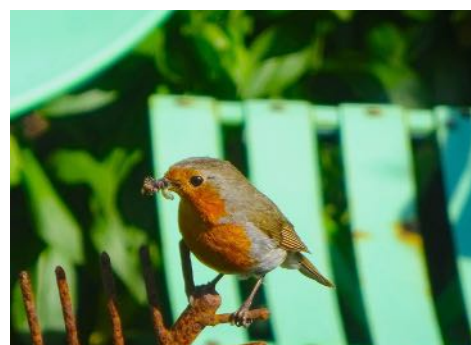
Sunday, May 10 from 1330 to 1630 with entry £10. It is also open for visits by arrangement too. Set high in the Weald, with far-reaching views of East Grinstead and Weirwood Reservoir. The garden covers 11 acres, with a spring-fed stream feeding ponds. There is a magnificent davidia, rare shrubs, embotrium and many different varieties of meconopsis and abutilon.

I recently visited the Arlington Bluebell trail, it was a lovely day with lots of bluebells on show. This is its last weekend and full details can be found at [www.bluebellwalk.co.uk](http://www.bluebellwalk.co.uk)

Read more of Geoff's Garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk) or follow both him and the garden on social media.



A pigeon in the garden



A robin self feeding with worms



Legsheath farm



A robin feeding on a fat ball at driftwood