

# One million birds and counting

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## One million birds and counting

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the New Zealand Garden Bird Survey.

The Landcare Research led citizen science project starts this Saturday (25 June) and runs until Sunday 3 July.

Last year, about 138,000 birds were counted nationwide, up 38,000 on the previous year and one of the highest counts on record.

Survey founder and organiser Eric Spurr, a research associate at Landcare Research, said harsh conditions last winter probably forced more birds to move into gardens in search of food.

“So far the weather this autumn has been really mild and NIWA has predicted temperatures to be above average this winter in all regions, so this may have an impact on bird numbers,” Spurr said.

Last year, the top 10 birds were similar to the previous year with the exception that the song thrush dropped out and the goldfinch swooped in, he said.

Since the survey began in 2007, volunteers have counted more than one million birds in over 25,000 gardens across the country.

Over that time, the top two most abundant species have remained the same – the house sparrow and silvereye.

Third and fourth position has been battled out between the blackbird and starling. While fifth and sixth place has typically either been myna or tui – although the myna does not occur in the South Island.

“Before the survey we had no idea what was happening to populations of our more common native species, such as tui, bellbird and kererū. I didn’t want them to become rare like kiwi or kokako. I’m hoping that the survey will act as an early warning system to alert us if their numbers are declining,” Spurr said.

Since the survey started, participation rates have doubled. Last year over 3500 people took part. Spurr hopes they will continue to grow.

“I would love for the number to be a lot higher this year,” he said.

Landcare Research ecologist Catriona MacLeod said studying bird populations provided valuable information about the state of the environment.

“Birds not only bring enjoyment to our everyday lives, they also tell us about the health of the environment we live in. To understand our environment we need to build a picture of birdlife across New Zealand,” she said.

“All you need is an hour, a comfy seat, record what you see, and then submit the results online.

“The more people involved, the more we can learn.”

MacLeod has been using the survey as a case study for her building trustworthy biodiversity indicators research, funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment.

Full instructions on how to take part in the survey, including the [tally sheet](#) and [bird identification guide](#), are available on the [Landcare Research website](#).

“The guide takes the guess work out of identifying what bird you see and makes the survey an activity for all ages,” she said.

MacLeod also came up with the “[Chocolate Fish Index](#)”, a way to make it easier to identify birds by comparing their size with a 20 gram chocolate fish. At one end of the scale a fantail weighs the same as a chocolate fish

tail, while at the other extreme a kererū is the equivalent of 30 chocolate fish.

There are also a range of [activities](#) this year to get children, and the young at heart, excited about birds, including printable bird masks.

The NZ Garden Bird Survey is supported by Forest & Bird, Birds NZ, Topflite, Nature Watch, CORE Education and the Department of Conservation.

**ENDS**