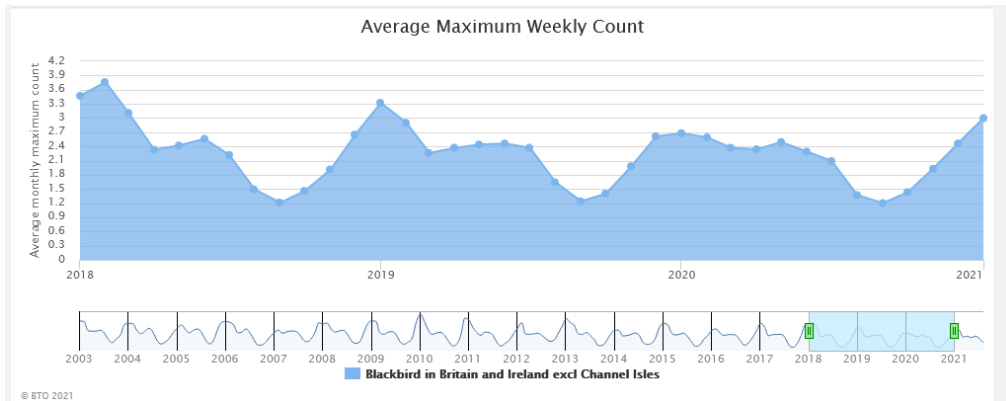


## Disappearing garden birds

During August and September, charities such as the RSPB and the BTO are deluged with emails and phone calls asking “Where have all my garden birds gone?”. It happens every year, and is supported by evidence - birds do indeed leave gardens in the late summer. Have a look at the graph below for Blackbirds, taken from the Garden Birdwatch data:



So what is going on? Well three things really. The first is that birds have finished breeding so they are no longer so conspicuous - no singing and no collecting food for broods of youngsters. And finding food for themselves is easy with the hedges laden with berries and plenty of insects. But there is more than that.

Once birds have finished breeding they moult. All or most of their feathers are replaced in sequence over a period of weeks or months. When they are moulting they are vulnerable to predation, as their flight is impaired. And they probably feel pretty fed up and very itchy! So they find a dark bush in which to sit and wait for their feathers to grow. A few quick visits outside for food but otherwise they are invisible. Once it's all over they emerge a “new bird”, and in the case of Robins, waste no time in setting up a winter territory, by singing and chasing away intruders.

However, if you are not a Robin, for example if you are a Blackbird or a Chaffinch, you will very likely wander around the neighbouring countryside, finding easy living in the hedges, woods and fields. Goldfinches may join big flocks feeding on thistles in field edges, Natural food in gardens may be at a low point as so many birds have been feeding there all spring, but even feeders fail to attract much interest. But as soon as the weather turns cold round about November, the birds will all be back again and the feeders will return to their springtime activity.

As I write this in mid-October the birds have not really returned yet. Even the windfall apples are untouched, apart from by hungry Jays who have no acorns to feed on this year. It seems that the tits may have had a poor breeding year so perhaps the numbers may be a little low, but they will be back!

*Rosemary Royle*