

The Bullfinch

The usual view of a Bullfinch is of a grey bird with a bright white rump flying across the road between tall hedges. Only when they pause to perch do you see their amazing plumage. The male, with his black cap, smart pale grey back, white rump and bright pink underparts is one of the top competitors for the most colourful bird in the UK. But they do tend to hide their light under a bushel – keeping well concealed in the tall hedges and scrub which is their favoured habitat. But once you know their contact call, you will hear them far more often than see them – it is a soft, plaintive, breathy whistle – “piuu”.



We have Bullfinches around where we live and they are always a very welcome visitor to the garden. They are particularly fond of the seed of Herb Robert which is a common “weed” in our garden – I let it grow wherever possible as the little pink flowers in Spring are irresistible to insects, particularly Orange Tip butterflies, and I like the red foliage and aromatic smell. The snag is that Herb Robert stems are quite weak and do not support the weight of a Bullfinch, so they either perch on something nearby and lean acrobatically across, or trap the stem underfoot on the ground. These antics are quite entertaining to watch!

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Bullfinches is their breeding behaviour. They are strictly monogamous, barely sing and appear not to hold a territory. This is reflected in their biology – they have very unusual and non-mobile sperm because they never have to compete with other males. However their closest relative, the Grey-headed Bullfinch from China has completely normal sperm. The reason for this disparity is completely unknown.

Bullfinches build quite a crude nest up to 5 metres up in a thick bush – frequently hawthorn, brambles and honeysuckle, or on a flat low branch of a conifer. They can have up to three broods but two is more usual.

It was not long ago that Bullfinches were considered a serious pest of orchards – they would descend on the trees in the spring and consume the flower buds. They were probably very hungry – like most seed eaters in the UK there is very little for them to eat in the spring and the first dandelion clocks are eagerly awaited! Some Bullfinches are learning to use garden feeders but alas ours are not doing that – but they do bring their youngsters (pale brown with a white rump and the characteristic chunky bill) for training sessions on Herb Robert!

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