

A Hidden Gem in the Urban Landscape

Within a few metres of the busy Bristol Road, Edgbaston Cricket Ground and the Priory Tennis Club is Martineau Gardens, a garden and wildlife sanctuary in the very heart of the city. Martineau Gardens is a community garden with formal garden areas, an orchard, a 'veg' patch and one hectare of broadleaf woodland. All these (and more) habitats are maintained by a group of volunteers without whom the gardens could not survive, or open free of charge, six days a week.

The woodland is bordered by residential gardens on one side and the tennis club on the other. It is dominated by pedunculate oak trees some of which are over 150 years old and the woodland also includes sweet chestnut, elder, beech, sycamore, hazel and field maple trees. Down the slope at the very bottom of the woodland is a clearing that is home to six permanent beehives, (tended by an expert bee keeper), whose honey is harvested each year, poured into jars and sold to the public, as if to underline the organic credentials of every thing grown and sold at Martineau Gardens.

Speaking to Brian Perry the bird recorder at Martineau Gardens, it is evident that some notable bird sightings do take place including great spotted woodpecker, nuthatch, and treecreeper. Typically, great, blue and coal tits, bullfinches, and long tailed tits are seen, especially at the birdfeeder or from the bird hide, as well as the occasional green woodpecker. While Martineau Gardens is not renowned for bird sightings it does have the secluded location and habitats to attract rarer one-off sightings such as woodcock, willow (or was it a marsh) tit, kestrel, peregrine falcon, as well as one sighting of a red kite!



Photo by Brian Perry©

Winter visitors include goldfinches, siskin, greenfinches, redpoll and goldcrests. Jays are regular visitors, jackdaws are seen from time to time, and buzzards and sparrowhawks have been seen overflying. These sightings along with others may be in part due to a fragmented 'green corridor' running along the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, to Cannon Hill Park and Edgbaston Pools, (accessed from the nearby Winterbourne Gardens) that the birds can travel along.

A jay, a regular visitor to the gardens

Brian explained that the volunteers are able to put out peanuts and seeds for the birds throughout the winter and spring seasons due to a generous donation of feed from one of the garden's supporters. Also in the woodland, (managed primarily as a nature reserve), there are seven nest boxes. Most are used each year by blue and great tits and this is largely determined by the size of the hole on the plate fixed to each box. Although one year, when the nest boxes were flooded out, the birds nested under the eaves of the roof of the pavilion! The nest boxes are checked each year and old nesting material is cleaned out and the boxes are sterilised to remove the danger of parasites surviving from one year to the next.

Some readers may be surprised by the presence of bullfinches at Martineau Gardens, but figures from the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey show that the numbers of bullfinches visiting gardens has increased six fold since the mid-1990s. Brian speculated that they may have travelled in from the orchards of Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Other reasons suggested by BTO studies include the fact that they are no longer persecuted as an agricultural pest, and that food supplements and feeder designs have diversified hugely in recent years allowing the bullfinches to get a toe hold in gardens. So much so that counts are now higher in suburban than rural gardens.



John Bridges (rspb-images.com)

A male bullfinch

Quite apart from birds, Martineau Garden's oak woodland also has purple hairstreak butterflies and the oak bush cricket. It has the nationally scarce Deptford pink wildflower and eyed and pine ladybirds. In addition there is bog bean in the garden's ornamental pool and the nearest place where it occurs is Little Bracebridge! Moths are trapped on a regular basis and over 200 species have been found with still more to be identified.

So Martineau Gardens has a lot to offer to the visitor, not the least for being a place of peace and quiet and a homely cup of tea or coffee (in return for a donation). Martineau Gardens is open six days a week (closed on Sundays), between 10.00am and 4.30pm.

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