

# Knight the pioneer

How did 'bird gardening' become established in British life? **SIMON KING** reveals its origins in the ideas and writing of the famous WW2 spycatcher – none other than Maxwell Knight

## BIRD GARDENING

**T**HE practice of putting out food for birds in gardens is more popular now than ever before, with more than half the UK's population feeding birds on a regular basis. Bird-food companies have responded to public interest by producing a range of diets and accessories from bird tables to squirrel-proof feeders. In short, "bird gardening" has become big business.

But how did it all start? Individuals, probably naturalists and eccentrics, have most likely fed wild birds for centuries; however, the (bird) table has literally and figuratively turned. Birds are now seen as our garden guests.

At what point in popular culture, though, did feeding birds become a more informed pastime? It is difficult to be sure, but a good starting point for wild-bird feeding today is the book *Bird Gardening: How to Attract Birds* (1954) by Maxwell Knight. (For more about Maxwell Knight see "From the Bookshelf", *Cage & Aviary Birds*, May 14, 2014.) Older readers may remember Knight as one of the radio personalities who appeared on such programmes as *Nature Parliament* and *The Naturalist* in the 1950s. He was an enigmatic character, as documents are now revealing, and played an important part in MI5 in the Second World War. As a friend and colleague of Ian Fleming, whom he recruited to MI5, he was probably the inspiration for "M" in what has become one of Hollywood's most successful film franchises, James Bond.

On the flysheet of his book it says: "Most people like having birds in their gardens, but few know the best way of supplying their needs as to food and nesting. In this book advice is given as to how and when to erect nesting boxes and the subject of bird tables and feeding birds at all seasons is examined thoroughly. The problem of improving gardens so as to make them more attractive to birds is dealt with, and even the difficulties of protecting birds from cats, squirrels, and other predators is considered. The book is illustrated with pencil sketches by Jean Armitage, who also contributed to the wealth of advice contained in this essential book for all bird lovers."

It's likely to be a revelation to many

that one of the modern-day, founding fathers of bird gardening was once a World War Two spycatcher. He foiled a plot to stop the Americans entering the war and his MI5 department, B5(b), immobilised Britain's "fifth column" of Nazi sympathisers. Yet Knight's unique observational fieldwork skills were put to work in the service of natural history, too: organising and presenting best practice for would-be bird gardeners and nature enthusiasts.

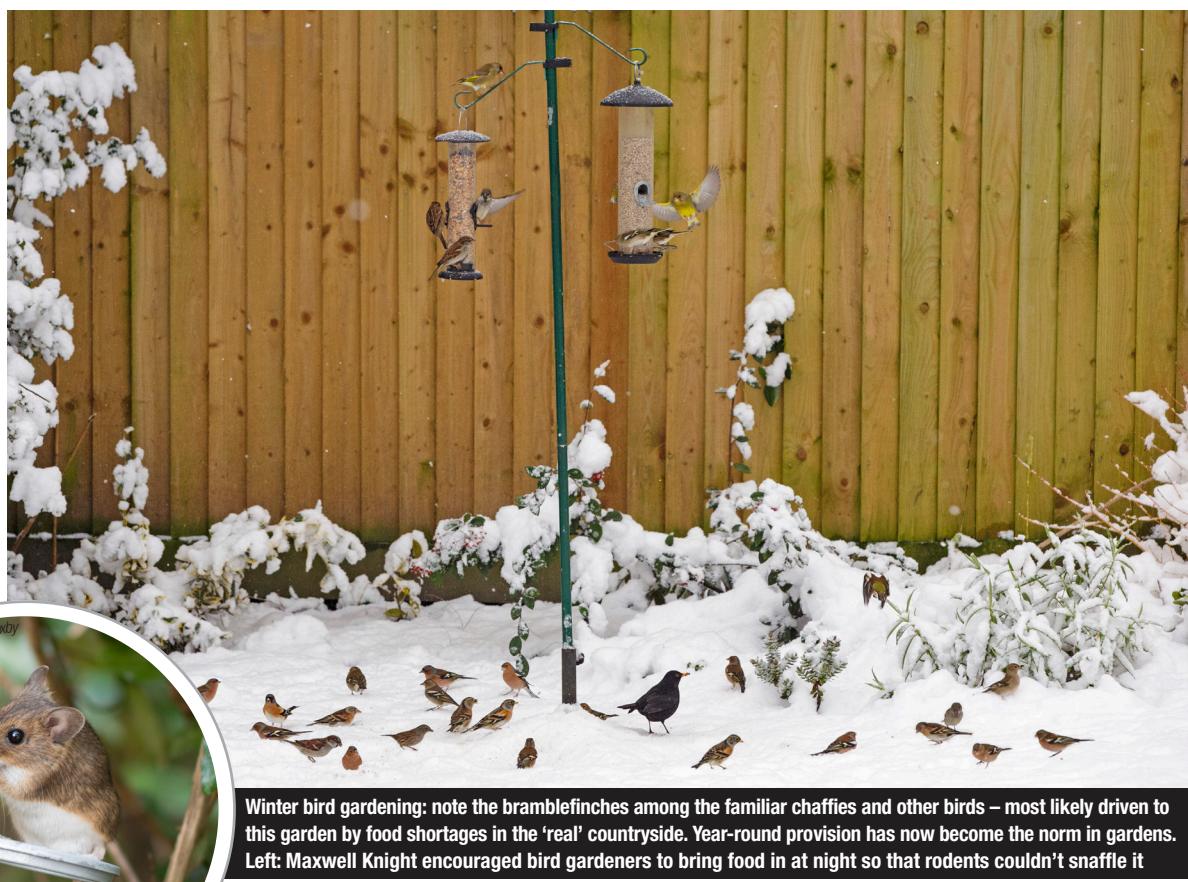
"Stale cake – particularly plain cake – is better than bread if it can be spared," wrote Knight reflecting the period (post-war). Today's garden birds are presented with a plethora of bird diets and treats that have moved on dramatically (and scientifically) since Knight's time. High-energy peanuts and sunflower hearts bursting with calories, high-fat suet offerings of all shapes and sizes, and even no-mess bird-seed mixes where all the seeds and husks have been carefully removed to leave the goodness intact, so garden birders no longer have to sweep up waste husks.

**66** One of Maxwell Knight's hitherto unpublished works was recently discovered in a cabinet now owned by John and Margaret Cooper

Paradoxically, however, there are garden birds that get enrichment from the rolling action of cracking open seed husks, such as the greenfinch.

In *Bird Gardening* Knight pays tribute to the Americans as bird-feeding pioneers. However, the British, with their long history of creating and tending gardens, played a significant part and were probably responsible for the introduction of the term "bird gardening". Bird-food specialists Haith's says that their records show how food has been provided for wild-bird feeding since the late 1930s. But, at some point around the 1950s, bird gardening stepped forward and announced: this is how to do it well and do it safely!

In Knight's *Feeding Birds in Winter*



Winter bird gardening: note the bramblingfinches among the familiar chaffinches and other birds – most likely driven to this garden by food shortages in the 'real' countryside. Year-round provision has now become the norm in gardens.

Left: Maxwell Knight encouraged bird gardeners to bring food in at night so that rodents couldn't snaffle it



(1957), he remarks that this congenial task is a pleasure for much of the year, "but a duty in hard weather". What Knight couldn't possibly know in the 1950-60s was that bird gardening would become increasingly popular as a year-round pastime, with more and more enthusiasts electing to

feed throughout the summer. What he did spot, though, was that there was a right and wrong way to go about bird gardening and that the wrong way would

inevitably affect birds' welfare.

This thought was never too far away in Knight's written work. Indeed, one hitherto unpublished work (recently discovered inside his personal filing cabinet, owned by John and Margaret Cooper) documents his concerns for wildlife population declining on a global stage. It's about the depredations of humans and industry on the world of nature, which is why the manuscript was entitled *The Frightened Face of Nature*. (For more on the contents of Maxwell Knight's filing cabinet, visit: [www.thefrightenedfaceofnature.co.uk](http://thefrightenedfaceofnature.co.uk).)

Welfare and what to feed went hand in hand for Knight. In terms of bird gardening, his focus was on food selection and how best to present it as

safe offerings. In this respect, he was ahead of his time. For example, Knight encouraged bird gardeners to bring food in every night to stop mice or rats feasting on the food. With regards to food selection, he championed food safety and was never afraid, either to stand up and be counted or to admit when he was wrong.

One published example documents that in Knight's time, the use of coconut as a food source for garden birds was controversial. Coconut returned to the market after the war and bird gardeners saw it as an ideal food source. Initially, Knight agreed but was met with opposition from his readers and listeners, so soon gave the advice to "never give any kind of shredded or desiccated coconut" to the birds (Knight, 1957; Knight, undated). Further, he suggested a use for coconuts that is still in service today: "Saw the complete coconut into two halves and hang up – open end downwards. When empty, the shells can be filled with fat and used in this way as containers."

Today, bird-food companies like Haith's are joined by leading wildlife charities (the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts, British Trust for Ornithology) in stating that bird gardening is good for humans and for birds. Knight would have been pleased to hear how feeding niger seed has helped swell goldfinch populations until they are now a common sight on bird feeders across the UK.

Britain's birds are the beneficiaries of people power. However, with power comes great responsibility and one such

responsibility is bird-garden hygiene.

Our gardens have become a haven for wild birds displaced from our countryside. Wherever the term bird gardening appeared from, one thing is incontrovertible: Maxwell Knight helped open our hearts to birds and wildlife detection and, as long as we continue to remain a nation of nature lovers, bird gardening seems likely to stay. It gives much pleasure to those involved and arguably both helps to augment the nutritional status and promote survival of many wild birds.

Simon King is an associate director of Haith's. Simon gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Prof John and Margaret Cooper in preparing this article.



### REFERENCES and further reading:

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- Knight, M., 1957, *Feeding Birds in Winter*, leaflet produced by the RSPB, Sandy, Bedfordshire.
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Since Knight's day, foods have been tailored for virtually all possible wild garden visitors, such as these enchanting long-tailed tits © Shutterstock.com/Kletr



Good idea in a nutshell: decades after Maxwell Knight first suggested it, we still do this with coconuts © Shutterstock.com/taviphot

### Be aware of contamination

ATTRACTING groups of birds and encouraging them to gather in one place to feed requires good animal husbandry to reduce the hazards of cross-contamination. Thankfully, many forward-thinking bird-food companies have mitigated this by educating bird gardeners to take sensible precautions.

This is best achieved by regular cleaning of bird tables and other feeding areas and by providing

high-quality bird food.

Companies are increasingly aware of the need to produce such diets if the health of garden birds is not to be compromised (see Cooper, 2012).

Next, don't overfeed birds: they need to look for food in gardens and hedgerows so that they don't come to depend solely on human intervention. And finally, ensure you wash your hands and, if possible, wear gloves if handling sick or dead birds.