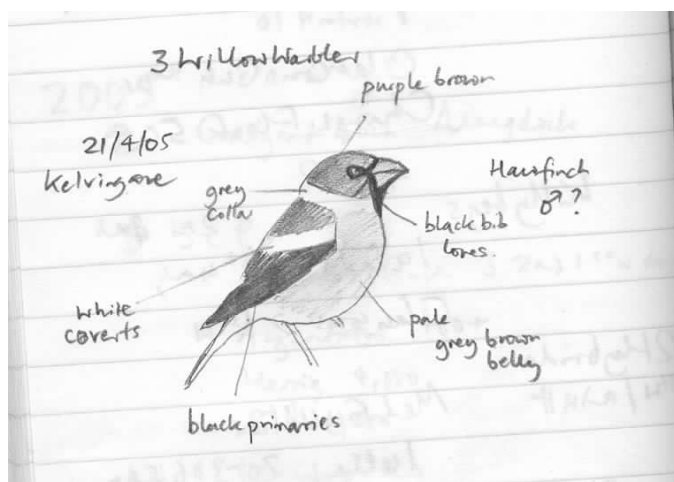


Hawfinch in Clyde

by Christopher J McInerny

On 21 April 2005, I was lucky enough to find a Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow, while walking to work. At this time of the year I search the park each day for possible Wood Warblers *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* and other migrant passerines. On this morning I noticed a largish finch-like bird sitting on the top-most twigs of a tall, leafless tree, just south and down from the flag-pole in front of the Gilbert Scott building at the University of Glasgow. On getting my binoculars onto the bird, I was immediately stunned to realise it was a Hawfinch, because of its huge thick-based bill, black lores and bib, thick body of purple-brown and grey hues, and short tail.



Field sketch of Hawfinch (♂?), Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow 21 April 2005 (Chris McInerny).

The following features were noted. It was a large and dumpy finch-like bird with a massive, thick-based bill and short tail, with a general purple-brown and grey colour tones, though with a striking face pattern with black lores and around the eyes, and a black bib. The head was darker purple-brown, with an obvious grey collar separating the head from mantle and wings. The mantle, scapulars and wings were dark brown, apart from white coverts, which formed a bar, and black primaries. The belly and breast were light grey-brown with a white vent. The bill was massive and pale, and the legs dark. I suspect it was a male because of the extent of black bib.

I watched the bird for 10 minutes or so while it mostly sat still, apart from occasionally moving its head to look around, and once moved slightly along the branch. At this point I had to leave for work commitments, but immediately phoned the news out. Unfortunately, the bird was not seen again, although other observers looking for it found a group of Bohemian Waxwings *Bombycilla garrulus* in the park.

Clyde 1919-2005

Hawfinch is a very rare bird in the Clyde recording area, with this 2005 record being the first since two were seen in 1993 at Ardess, Rowardennan. This status prompted me to look through

the literature to establish the species' history in Clyde: in total there have been just 11 records of 12 birds.

The first published observations were both in 1919, with the earliest being one reported at Edinbarnet, north of Bearsden, by Mr J A Anderson on 3 July (McWilliam 1936). The second was a male "bird of the year" caught in a fruit net at Camis Eskan, between Helensburgh and Cardross, a month later on 3 August, identified by Colonel Sir R C Mackenzie and sent to the taxidermist Charles Kirk (Kirk 1919). The fact that it was a juvenile in August is interesting, and suggests that nesting may have occurred locally, especially as the ornamental gardens at Camis Eskan House contain much suitable breeding habitat, although it is also possible that the bird may have arrived from elsewhere. The third was just a few years later when Mr R Oswald Blyth discovered one in a garden at Kilmacolm on 16 February 1924: "I saw a Hawfinch on the lawn of Moorcote as I passed this morning. It was hopping away from me when first noticed and puzzled me greatly, but flew into a tree and I got a fine view of the unmistakable head" (Mackeith 1924, McWilliam 1936).

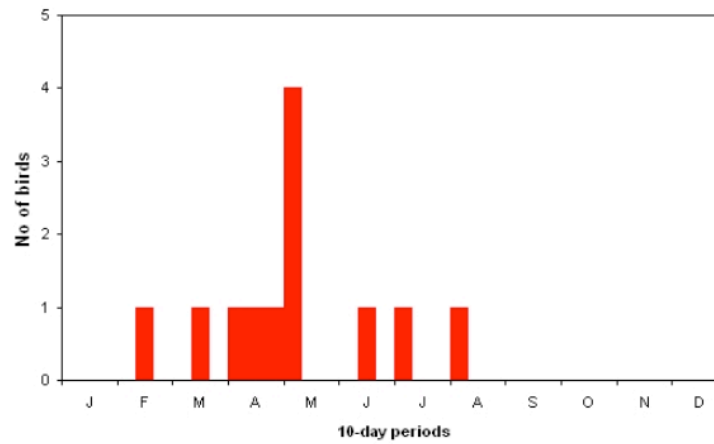
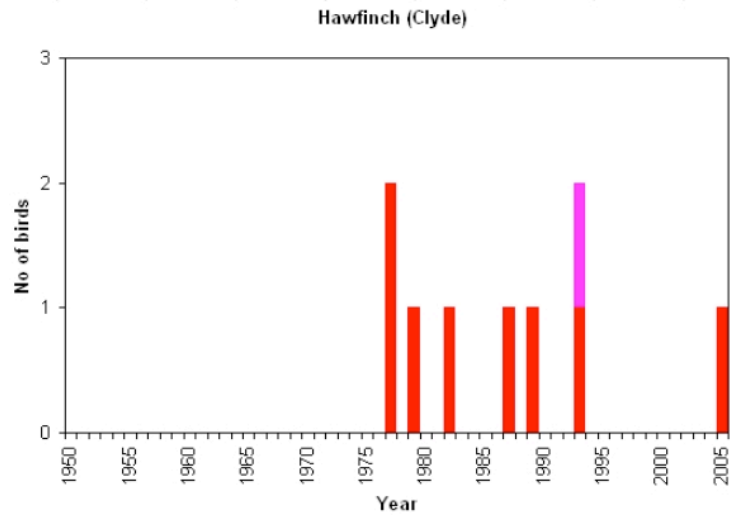
These three observations fit the pattern of Hawfinch seen in Scotland in the early 20th century, with increasing, though still few, sightings of a previously very rare visitor. This increase, first observed in England during the mid to late 19th century, expanded north into Scotland (Holloway 1996), and culminated with the first confirmed breeding in 1903, when a nest was found at Newport in Fife (Berry 1904). Subsequently, nesting in very small numbers, mostly at a few favoured localities, was observed in Scotland along the east side of the country, from Borders to Aberdeenshire, with spring and autumn migrants noted throughout the country north to Shetland and west to the Outer Hebrides (Nash 1925, Baxter and Rintoul 1953). This pattern of localised breeding and small numbers of migrants has remained throughout the 20th century to the present day, with the closest nesting report to Clyde being at Bridge of Allan, Stirlingshire, in 1973 (Thom 1983, Langston *et al.* 2002, *Scottish Bird Reports* 1968-2001).

Date	Year	Site	Number/age/sex	Source
3 July	1919	Edinbarnet	1	McWilliam (1936)
3 August	1919	Camis Eskan	1, juvenile ♂	Kirke (1919)
16 February	1924	Moorcote, Kilmacolm	1	Mackeith (1924), McWilliam (1936)
16 April	1977	Balloch Park	1	SBR 1977
5 May	1977	Mugdock Loch	1	SBR 1977
8 April	1979	Endrick Mouth	1	SBR 1979
2 May	1982	Mugdock Country Park	1	Clyde BR 1982
19 March	1987	Giffnock	1	SBR 1987
12 June	1989	Carstairs Wood	1	Clyde BR 1989
5 May	1993	Ardess, Rowardennan	2, a pair	Clyde BR 1993
21 April	2005	Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow	1, ♂?	

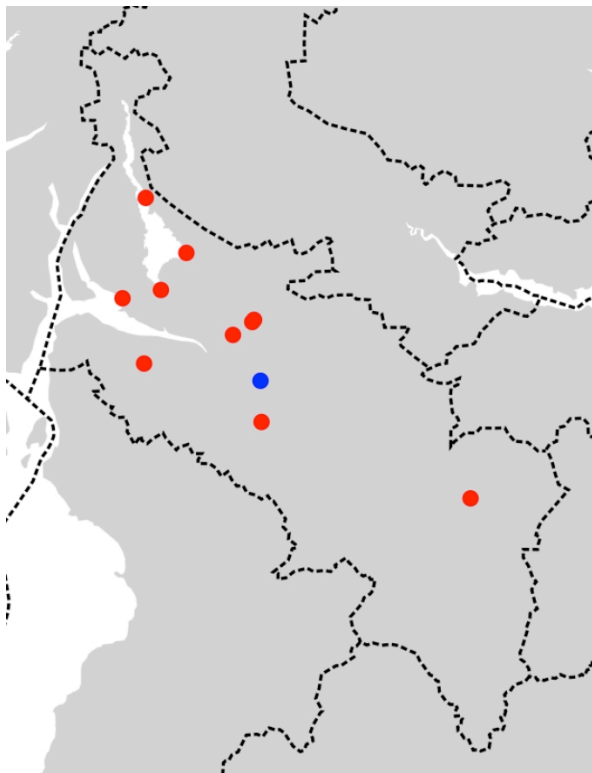
Observations of Hawfinch in Clyde, 1919-2005. Another record of a bird at Luss on 20 October 1944 (*Scottish Naturalist* 1953: 1) was subsequently withdrawn (*Scottish Naturalist* 1955: 65).

Subsequent to the two early observations in Clyde, Hawfinch remained very rare in the recording area, with another nine records, mostly in the north and all from mid-February to mid-June. Although there were rumours of birds in south Clyde during the 1950s (Gibson & McWilliam

1959), the next confirmed sightings were not until 1977, when two were seen, one at Balloch Park on 16 April and another at Mugdock Loch on 5 May. Another was observed near Loch Lomond at the Endrick Mouth on 8 April 1979, with the following a bird at Mugdock Country Park on 2 May 1982. The next was seen at Giffnock on 19 March 1987, with a bird in south Lanarkshire at Carstairs Wood, feeding on Sycamores, on 12 June 1989. Possibly the most interesting record, however, was two birds, thought to be a pair, watched “at close quarters from a house window” at Ardess, Rowardennan, also near Loch Lomond, on 5 May 1993. This is the only observation of more than one in Clyde, and the fact that it was a pair in an area eminently suitable for nesting, suggests that breeding might have occurred in the region at the time. Bridge of Allan, where a Hawfinch nest containing three chicks in a hawthorn tree in similar habitat was found during May 1973, is about 25 miles from this site (Geoff Shaw pers. comm).



Yearly (1950-2005) and monthly (1919-2005) incidence of Hawfinch in Clyde.



Geographical incidence of Hawfinch in Clyde, 1919-2005. Blue dot 2005 record.

Although there are just 11 records for Clyde in total, the recent observations show a clear pattern of spring incidence, falling between 16 February and 12 June, and most April and early May. This pattern is consistent with sightings of migrants seen elsewhere in Scotland, particularly on offshore islands. Autumn passage birds are also observed in Scotland, mostly on islands, but are probably overlooked on the mainland because there are still many leaves on the trees. Certainly, the absence of leaves in mid-April enabled me to find the Kelvingrove bird which, typically for this species, was remarkably inconspicuous, a feature which also means it is probably under recorded at all times of the year. The geographical pattern for Clyde reveals most in the north in areas with large stands of deciduous trees, the habitat typically associated with Hawfinch (Mountfort 1957, Smith 2004). Thus, the best chance for observers hoping to see this attractive finch in Clyde is to search in these areas from late March to early May, paying particular attention to the high tops of tall leafless trees.

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