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*A pair of bullfinches  
(male on the right)*



## Nature Studies By **Michael McCarthy**

### An incomer's discovery of the natural world in the West Country

The first time I saw a bullfinch in our garden, not long after we arrived in Dorset, it was one of the great birding events of my year. In 30 years living in West London, I had never seen such a sight. Not in our Richmond garden, where we certainly had goldfinches, where we had goldcrests, even. And not in nearby Kew Gardens, where you can find chaffinches, and not even in fairly-near Richmond Park, where you can find greenfinches, plus a stunning array of birds from treecreepers to ravens to buzzards.

No. Never a bullfinch. While other attractive finches have got used to suburbs, bullfinches tend to keep clear of large conurbations, and in all those years the only one I saw was in my mother-in-law's garden in the centre of Dorchester when we were down for the weekend, and I looked out of the window and was gobsmacked.

There it was, on the feeder. It's the colour, the colour of the breast of the male bird. Its one of the most remarkable things in nature, because even though it's stunning, you can't really decide what it is. Is it pink or is it red? If it's pink, it's a pink of tremendous power and force, by no means the sort of gentle hue to which some small girls are so drawn. If it's red, what sort of red? It isn't scarlet. It isn't crimson. It's something more than either, it's got a hint of orange in it, it's sort of throbbing with its own identity. Certainly, the moment when it suddenly fills your binoculars, after you think, *hey, is that a bullfinch?* and rush to focus, is one of the great moments in wildlife-watching. You gasp. I do, anyway. And indeed I did that morning a few weeks after we came to the village, when there it was on a bush barely yards from the kitchen window, and it stayed for at least five minutes with me watching in delight.

Bullfinches used to be popular cage birds, not least because when young they could be taught to whistle a tune. That has largely gone, but I personally caught their allure when at the age

of ten I read a book called *Ben The Bullfinch* by the old-fashioned natural history writer 'BB' (whose real name was Denys Watkins-Pitchford). I have loved them ever since and when I saw the bird in our garden part of me instantly thought: *this is why we've come to Dorset*. I had already had that thought about the small tortoiseshell butterfly, beloved in my youth when it was common, but now increasingly rare. I never set eyes on a single one in all our years in London, but we saw them in the village as soon as we arrived and they were plentiful (though last year the terrible spring weather wiped them out).

Bullfinches too are increasingly uncommon in southern England—according to the British Trust for Ornithology, the population virtually halved between 1967 and 2022, and there are swathes of the countryside where they are completely absent. But not, thank the Lord, in Dorset. Last year we started a Whatsapp group for bird lovers in the village, and in recent weeks various members have been posting their pleasure at bullfinches coming into their gardens, often in pairs. The male and the female make a stunning couple, as although the female does not have the dazzling red breast of the male, she has the same smart black cap and white rump and a breast of pinkish-grey which itself is very attractive.

The Whatsapp posts have made it clear that we have a very healthy population of them and I find that fantastic. As a bird-lover I find it almost a reason on its own to move to Thomas Hardy's county, besides all the Hardy associations. I certainly know how I personally would sum up the village's attractions, although I haven't seen an estate agent do this yet: *Lovely setting. Medieval church. Medieval houses. Chalkstream. Great village shop. Three pubs. Bullfinches.*

*Recently relocated to Dorset, Michael McCarthy is the former Environment Editor of The Independent. His books include Say Goodbye To The Cuckoo and The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy.*