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Country diary
Birds

Country diary: A sunlit view of two hungry bullfinches

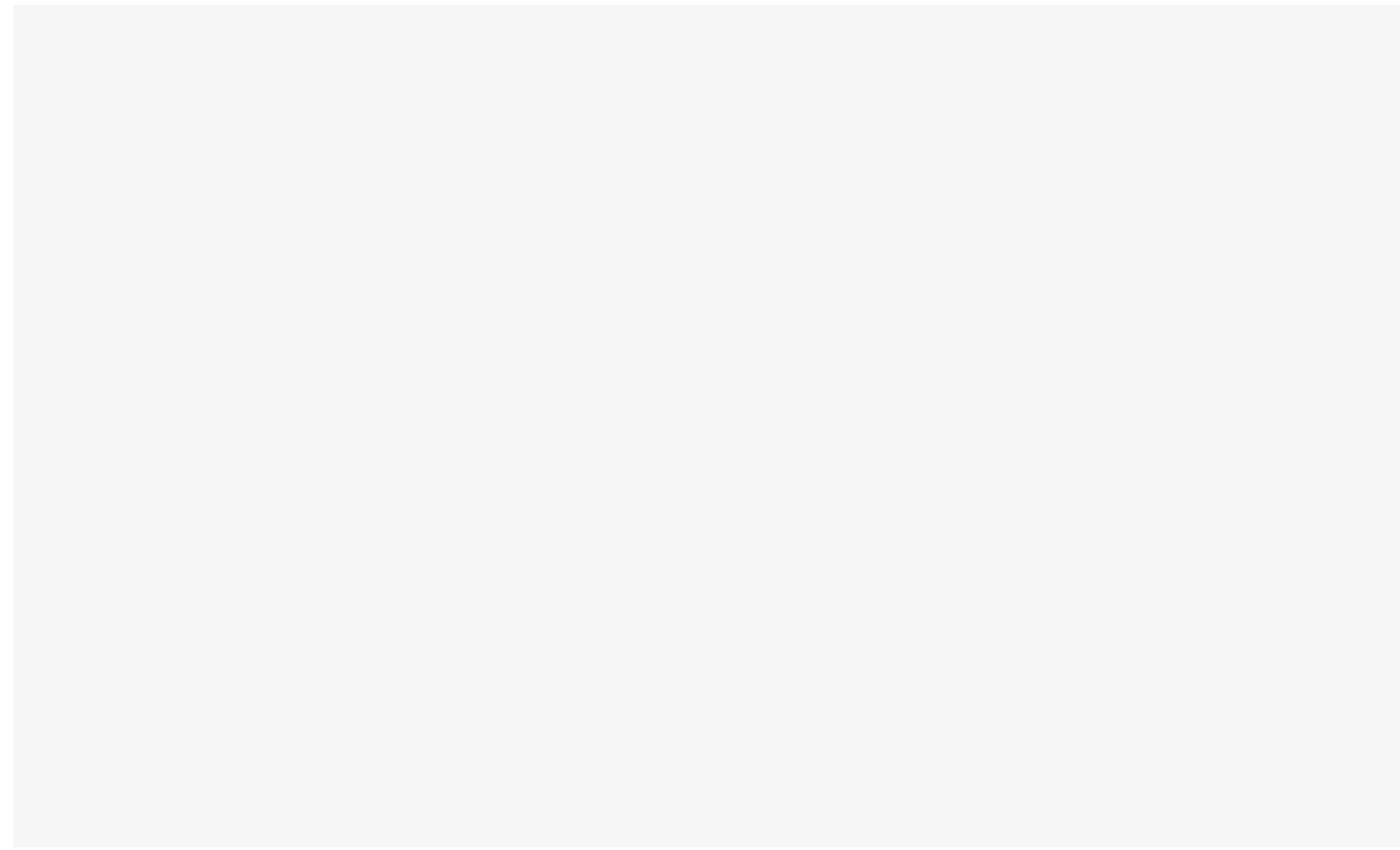
Llandrindod Wells, Powys: They're such captivating birds to watch, and this pair is indulging their preference for flower buds on my cherry tree



I observed closely the notorious traits that have caused them to be vilified by commercial fruit growers. Photograph: David Chapman/Alamy

“Hardly hedgerows, little lines of sportive wood run wild”. I was sitting at my dining table, relishing the growing warmth of early spring sunlight, idling over coffee and musing on how apt a description of the towering unkempt hedges around my garden Wordsworth’s lines from **Tintern Abbey** are, when the pair of bullfinches that inhabit there captivated my attention.

They are so conjugal - the dowdier hen always in close and discreet attendance on her more brightly coloured spouse. To my mind, few small British birds can match the exquisite colour balance of the male bullfinch - the bright pink glow of his breast, his sleek black cap, the beautiful grey of his wings. I love them, and can watch their activities for hours, especially in early spring when they are notably active, with branches bare of foliage and little else stirring.



Yesterday I observed closely the notorious traits that have caused them to be vilified by commercial fruit growers. He was clinging to a twig of cherry, his weight causing it to sway alarmingly. Undeterred, with his powerful bill he stripped it of the small round buds that open out into five-petalled white flowers. But he left plenty of buds to open in their own time and proclaim spring’s arrival. Early this morning, when I looked again, there he was, the twig rimed with hoarfrost. He was working steadfastly at stripping another twig and leaving plenty to serve the tree’s fruiting needs.

Perhaps the bullfinches are happy in the dense cover of my hedges, with their crops full of delicious fruit buds? I like to think so as I watch them. When I lived in the foothills of the Pyrenees, sitting out on my terrace each morning, a pair of **pine grosbeaks** - close relatives of the bullfinch - would approach confidingly, slip down unobtrusively on to my table, and feast on my muesli, spraying it far and wide. I loved the sweet disyllabic excitement of their calls. The grosbeaks would cock their heads to my discordant pipings, then correct me with their own peerless pure tones. Just as it should be! The birds know best.

• Under the Changing Skies: The Best of the Guardian’s Country Diary, 2018-2024 is published by Guardian Faber; order at guardianbookshop.com and get a 15% discount

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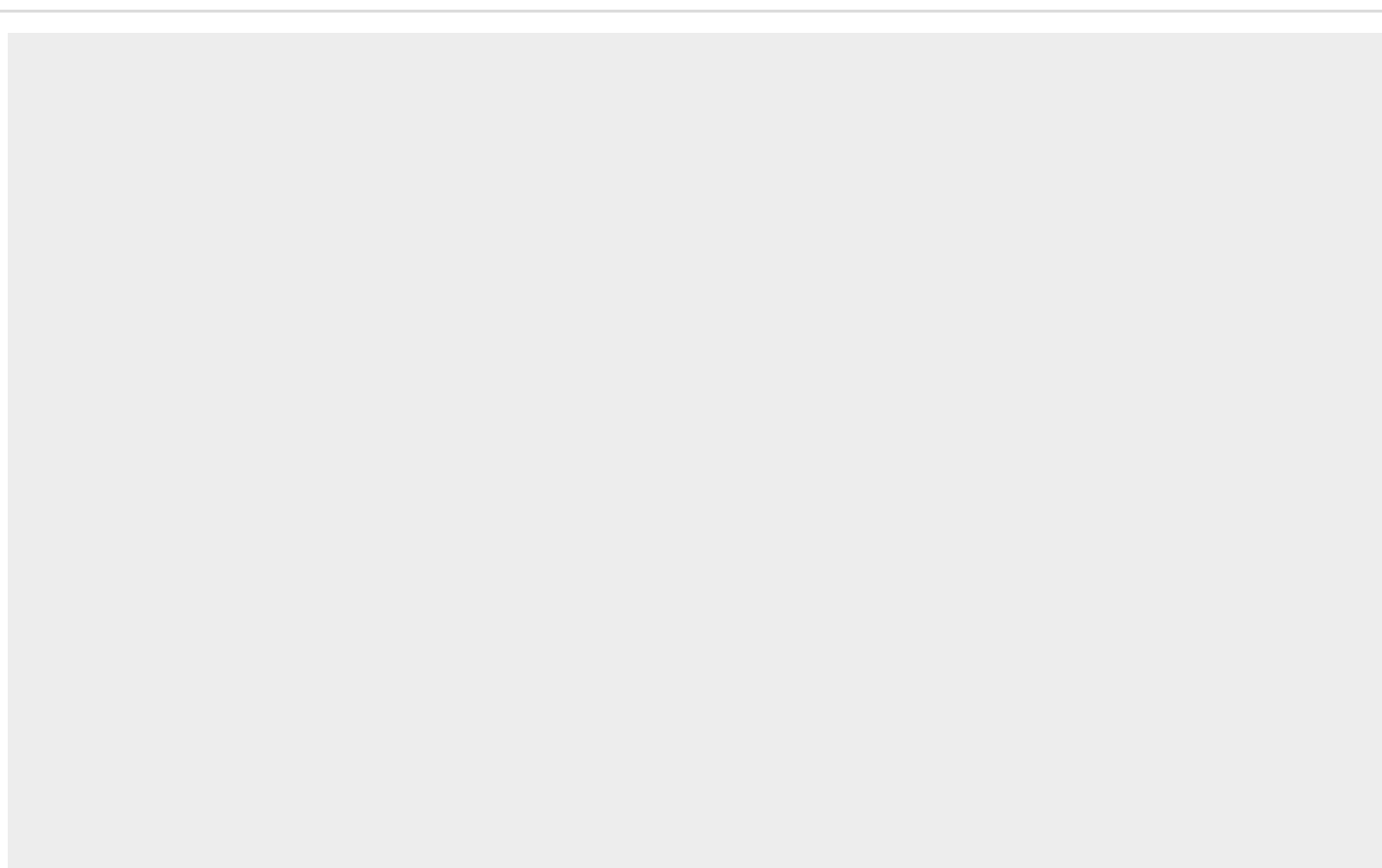
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