

Blackbird

Species focus

by Mike Toms



Blackbird, by John Harding

The Blackbird is one of the most familiar of our birds and a firm favourite with garden birdwatchers. It is a species that has adapted well to the opportunities available in human-dominated landscapes, where it can be found feeding from our lawns, nesting in our shrubby borders and (occasionally) taking mealworms and fruit from our hands. Our knowledge of the behaviour and ecology of this species comes from many different studies, underlining that there is much of interest to discover about this familiar member of the thrush family.

ORIGINS

Like many of our other garden birds, the Blackbird was originally a bird of mature woodland but its move into urbanised landscapes, which began in the early 19th Century, underlines an adaptable nature. In many ways our gardens resemble woodland edge habitats, with shrubby cover, some taller trees and some more open areas (like lawns and flowerbeds) for foraging. Across its wider breeding range (which extends east from the Atlantic seaboard to central and eastern China) the Blackbird occupies a number of different habitats. It has also been introduced into Australia and New Zealand.

The latest information on the distribution of Blackbirds within Britain and Ireland, which comes from *Bird Atlas 2007–11*, reveals that the highest breeding densities occur in central and eastern Ireland, and in the lowlands of England and Wales. Densities in the north of Britain and in upland areas, are much lower. There has been some increase in abundance

in more northern areas, perhaps reflecting the 23% increase in the breeding population over the period 1995–2010, as recorded by the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. This recent increase needs to be set against the longer term decline charted by BTO volunteers, which shows a 15% decline since 1967.

LIVING ALONGSIDE HUMANS

Within urban and suburban habitats, which is where many of the studies on Blackbirds have been carried out, birds occupy traditional breeding territories year after year. Because of the amount of food available within such habitats, breeding densities can reach seven pairs per hectare. Densities over wider areas are typically two to three times greater within suburban habitats than they are in woodland.

The birds using these suburban and urban landscapes tend to remain on their territories throughout the year, although the male and female of a pair will utilise different parts of the territory in winter. Young birds may set themselves up within the territories of established pairs for a time during winter, particularly if there is an abundance of food.

Not all Blackbirds are resident and there is a significant migratory component to breeding populations occupying more northerly parts of their European range. Large numbers pass through eastern Britain during autumn, with individuals originating from Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany and the Baltic states. It is thought that the numbers arriving to winter here may have declined over recent decades, as European winters have become less severe.

Garden-breeding Blackbirds face different hazards to those breeding in other habitats but they also gain certain benefits. Cats and collision with windows (see page 21) are two of the risks faced by birds breeding in gardens but they have fewer nest predators to contend with and they have greater access to food throughout the year. Perhaps the most serious problem faced by garden-breeding Blackbirds is during the period when young birds first leave the nest. Not only do these naive individuals have to deal with cats, they may struggle to find invertebrate food, especially soil-dwelling earthworms which may be particularly scarce when dry conditions force them deeper into the soil.

NERVOUS NEIGHBOURS?

The chinking calls of Blackbirds are some of the most familiar sounds of late afternoon throughout autumn and winter. Such calls are uttered primarily by resident, territory-holding birds, and appear to have a territorial function, asserting ownership at a time when other individuals are moving around ahead of going into roost.

Another familiar call is a low-pitched 'chook, chook' note, typically given through a closed bill and uttered as a nervous warning. This is a call that may be heard throughout the year, whenever an individual is in a situation where it feels somewhat uncomfortable. For example, I have heard the note given by female birds during nest building, when being watched, and by an individual taking mealworms from a dish just a few feet from two observers.

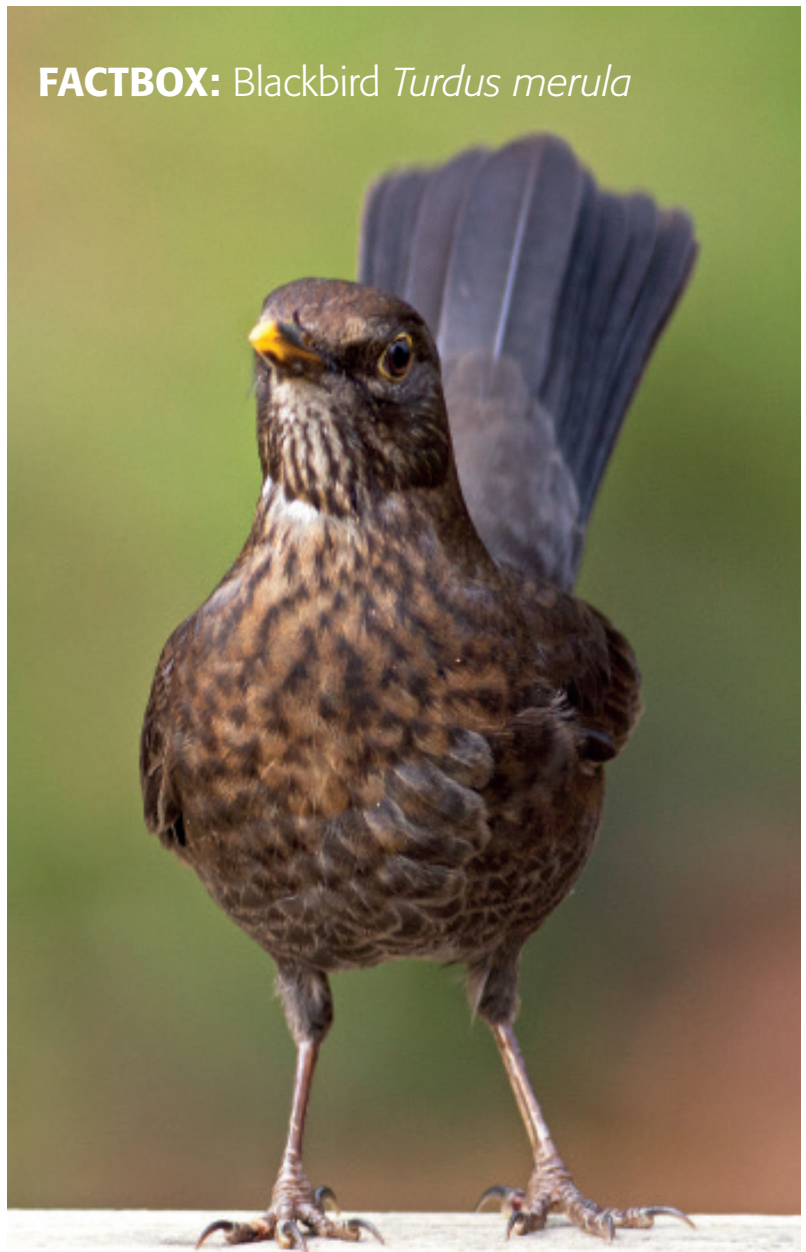
When an individual is alarmed it produces a loud chattering call that may, on occasion, be drawn out into a long and undulating screech. Startled individuals make the call when surprised and flushed from cover, while a bird that has been caught by a cat or Sparrowhawk will make a heart-rendering scream.

Individual Blackbirds can become surprisingly tame and we have received many letters and emails over the years from Garden BirdWatchers who have Blackbirds that follow them around or demand food, in the form of mealworms or sultanas. One bird even learnt to associate the householder's visits to their garage with sultana treats, since this is where they were stored. Whenever the householder went into the garage the Blackbird appeared and called until it was fed.

CHANGING PLUMAGE

Young Blackbirds, fresh out of the nest, have beautiful warm-toned, plumage. Juvenile males tend to be darker than juvenile females and this is particularly noticeable across the wing and tail feathers. These young birds begin their first moult from July onwards, replacing most, though not all, of their feathers. The body feathers and some of the wing feathers are replaced and, as the moult progresses, some rather unusual looking plumages may

FACTBOX: Blackbird *Turdus merula*



Blackbird, by John Harding; Blackbird egg © Paul Sterry (www.naturephotographers.co.uk)

Population:

Breeding: 4.9 million breeding pairs

Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

Diet: Mainly insects and earthworms, also fruit, often taken from the ground but also while still on the bush

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Max recorded lifespan: 14 years, 2 months and 1 day

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 3–4 eggs

Number of broods: 2–3

Incubation: 13–14 days

Young in nest: 14–16 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



www.bto.org/birdfacts



▲ An adult male Blackbird is a very smart looking bird. However, by the end of the breeding season he can look rather tatty, something that is remedied following his annual moult.

be seen, some of which prompt phone calls and emails to the Garden Ecology Team of 'mystery' birds. The 'adult' feathers that appear are usually paler than those that will follow in a subsequent moult. In young males, for example, the feathering is not as black as in an older individual and, additionally, many of the breast feathers will be edged brown. Once the moult has ended you should still be able to spot young birds, notably males, as the paler, brown-coloured wings contrast with the darker body plumage. The moult from juvenile to adult plumage takes just over a month on average.

The colour of the beak and the eye ring are also useful features by which a bird can be aged. In juveniles, both are dark in colour and remain so for some time after the adult plumage has been acquired. Some young males acquire an off-yellow base to their bill by September but others may carry a dark bill through into the following spring. A yellow bill and eye ring are usually obtained before or during the first breeding season and, once attained, remain as the bird ages. Bill colour is strongest during the breeding season and older individuals tend to be more strongly coloured than younger ones. Blackbirds with unusual plumage, typically involving some white feathering, are reported from time to time by garden birdwatchers. If you encounter one then do submit the record to the BTO's Abnormal Plumage Survey, details of which can be found on the Garden BirdWatch web pages.

MUD, MUD, GLORIOUS MUD!

There is a good chance that you will have seen the nest of a Blackbird at some stage during your life. Its outward appearance is perhaps a little bit scruffy; a large cup of grass and other plant material with a moderately deep cup. Such nests may be revealed during the winter months, once the trees and shrubs have lost their leaves, and many last into the following breeding season. One reason for this is the nest's robust construction, a layer of mud being used between the outer layer of grass and inner layer of finer material used to line the cup.

CHANGING TIMES

The long-term trend in UK Blackbird populations did result in the species being placed on the Amber list of birds of conservation concern for a while, but improved fortunes over recent years have seen it moved back to the Green list. With a significant proportion of our Blackbirds breeding within urbanised landscapes your Garden BirdWatch records provide a unique insight into the changing status of this familiar bird. In addition to the long-term information that your data provide, they also reveal fascinating seasonal patterns to garden use. The autumn 'trough' is perhaps the most visible of these, reflecting a time of the year when Blackbirds move into the countryside to feed on hedgerow berries, or become skulking as they moult. There is no doubt that your records will continue to deliver new information on this familiar bird. ■



Young Blackbird; by John Harding