



## Early birds in the Wirral

**The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has had a report of a pair of Blackbirds already fledging young this year. Is this a bizarre one-off or is spring getting earlier? The BTO needs garden owners to let them know about early nesting birds.**

Spring seems to be getting earlier, and every year we hear warnings of climate change and global warming. One way of monitoring potential changes is to record the timing of certain behaviours of plants and animals that are, in part, dependent on spring temperatures. One such behaviour is the breeding and nesting of birds and we know from studies by the BTO that some species are now breeding up to two weeks earlier than they did 35 years ago (see Notes for Editors).

Already this year we have had a report of Blackbirds fledging young in the Wirral, Cheshire on 2nd February. For the chicks to leave the nest this early, the first eggs must have been laid at the end of December! So, as we were getting ready to go out for our New Year's Eve celebrations, this female Blackbird was settling down to a night of incubating. There have also been reports of a Robin with eggs and baby sparrows in the Scottish borders.

*"It is amazing to think of Blackbirds and sparrows managing to produce young so early in the year, but are these just isolated cases or are birds breeding even earlier this year?"* says Martin Fowlie, of the Garden BirdWatch team.

The BTO needs the help of garden owners across the country to keep an eye out for and report on signs of birds nesting.

*"People taking part in the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch survey provide weekly records of the numbers of birds in their gardens and also report signs of early breeding. This gives us information that can be added to our long term data and helps us figure out if the effects of climate change on birds are real,"* Martin adds.

The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch scheme needs people to record early nesting attempts of Blackbirds and other birds in their gardens. The survey has been running since 1995 and has highlighted changes in the use of the UK's gardens by different bird species. To receive a free information pack, phone on 01842 750050 or write to GBW, Room 7, British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU.

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The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation. Over thirty thousand birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys. They collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 80 at its HQ in Norfolk, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry and conservation organisations.

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## Notes for Editors

- 1) The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. Currently, some 16,500 people take part in the project across the British Isles. The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch is funded by participants' contributions and supported by CJ WildBird Foods Ltd and is the largest year round survey of garden birds anywhere in the world. For more information see [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw)
- 2) CJ WildBird Foods is Europe's leading supplier of bird food and bird feeding products. CJ WildBird Foods has been responsible for a number of significant developments within the bird food and feeding industry, including the introduction of black sunflower seeds to the UK as a major new bird food and the development of specialist seed mixes for use in tubular feeders. The company has also been supporting research into the changing fortunes of garden bird populations, most notably through the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch.
- 3) Dr. Humphrey Crick of the BTO and lead author of the climate change paper that appeared in the journal *Nature* says, "*This is just another example of climate change having a possible effect on the nesting behaviour of birds.*" The study found that out of 65 species monitored between 1971 and 1995, 20 were laying their eggs significantly earlier. On average, species were laying nine days earlier, with the range being from 4-17 days. The data for this paper came from the BTO/JNCC Nest Record Scheme that is funded by a partnership of the British Trust for Ornithology and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (on behalf of English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales, and also on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland).
- 4) The earliest Blackbird clutches are usually laid around the end of March and comprise of 3-4 eggs. Incubation lasts for two weeks and chicks are fed in the nest for about 16 days after hatching. Only about half of young Blackbirds will survive their first year of life to breed. The oldest recorded Blackbird was 14 years and 2 months.
- 5) Images of Blackbirds and other birds are freely available for use alongside this article from [images@bto.org](mailto:images@bto.org)
- 6) The BTO has an ISDN line available for radio interviews.

### For further information contact:

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