



EARLY BIRD CATCHES A SNAKE

Although the British Trust for Ornithology often receives reports of birds eating unusual prey items, a recent record of a Blackbird taking a snake proved to be quite exceptional.

The snake, identified by the observer Christine Dancey as a young Grass Snake, was reported to the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Team. It was seen to be coiled in the beak of the Blackbird, with the head and tongue clearly visible dangling from the beak. However, it wasn't all plain sailing for the Blackbird - it had to defend its prize from a pair of Magpies that seemed intent on stealing its meal.

Mike Toms, BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Organiser commented "*Although it may seem odd that a Blackbird should attempt to predate a snake, young Grass Snakes are surprisingly small and are not much thicker than a large worm. The snake would make a good meal for the Blackbird and it is possible that this choice of menu item is more widespread than we realise. We would love to hear from any other observers who have witnessed Blackbirds (or other species) taking snakes or small lizards .*"

Last year, the BTO commented on Blackbirds taking newts, tadpoles and even small fish. This shows that they are adaptable when it comes to diet and this may be why they have done so well.

Anyone witnessing birds feeding on unusual foods should contact the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Team at GBW, Room 66, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU, email gbw@bto.org or telephone 01842-750050. A free information leaflet on feeding garden birds is also available.

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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 Blackbird**, a member of the thrush family, is a common garden bird; the UK population is estimated at 4.9 million pairs. It has a varied diet, feeding mainly on earthworms, other invertebrates, soft fruits and berries.
2. **The Grass Snake** has a largely southerly distribution within the UK and is often found close to water. Garden ponds are well used since this species hunts mainly amphibians. It is not poisonous. This particular incident took place in Suffolk.
3. **The BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch** is the only nationwide survey of garden birds and other garden wildlife (including snakes) to run weekly throughout the year. It provides important information on how birds and other wildlife use gardens and how this use changes over time. Currently, some 16,000 people take part in the project. The scheme is funded by participants' contributions and supported by CJ WildBird Foods Ltd. For more information see www.bto.org/gbw
4. **CJ WildBird Foods Ltd** is Europe's leading supplier of bird food and bird feeding products. The company 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. CJ WildBird Foods Ltd has also been supporting research into the changing fortunes of garden bird populations, most notably through its association with the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch.
5. **Colour photographs** of Blackbirds and Grass Snakes are freely available for use in association with this press release. Please contact images@bto.org to request an electronic version, **quoting reference 2007/09/66**
6. The BTO has an ISDN line available for **radio interviews**.

For further information, please contact:

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