

Focus on the Blackbird

In most of the previous BTO garden bird surveys, the Blackbird has come in second after the Blue Tit, as the most frequently recorded bird. However, when we analysed the information from the Garden Bird Enquiry (fore-runner of the Garden BirdWatch) for the last three years it showed that Blackbirds just push Blue Tit into second place as being the species most frequently recorded in gardens throughout the whole year.

Everyone knows Blackbird and most people – except those woken to found out how early dawn is in the summer – love the rich fruity song of this species. If you look at your Blackbird closely you will see that most Blackbirds are brown not black. The youngsters are spotted and striped but young males have their major wing and tail feathers dark – almost black. These feathers are brown on females. During the autumn, young birds moult most of the spotty body feathers and males become mostly black. However, a panel in the wing remains dull brown for another year until the first complete moult of all the feathers.

Most people think that Blackbirds coming into their gardens will be from their local birds. This is far from the truth. During the autumn hordes of Blackbirds from Norway, Sweden and as far east as Finland, come to spend the winter with us. We know this from the work of ringers, both in Britain and abroad. By fitting birds with rings, it is possible to identify where they come from if they are found elsewhere. There are more than 3,800 records of ringed birds, moving between Britain and Scandinavia and Germany - a handful of birds have even got as far as Russia! Just now, in late March and early April, they are on their way home – flying up to 2000 kms before they reach their breeding grounds.

These foreign visitors are still with us when our own birds are starting to nest and the secret for telling them apart in the absence of tell-tale rings – our own males are already in full breeding plumage with bright orange-yellow beaks and eye-rings. Males with duller bills and lacking these eye rings were probably about to make their way back across the North Sea.

Blackbirds are easily attracted to gardens by supplying food. Many are happy to eat kitchen scraps of food spilt from the bird table or dropped from hanging feeders. They will often come to a raised table but many feel more secure on the ground – it is an exceptional Blackbird that can manage to use a hanging feeder.



Blackbird by Tommy Holden © BTO

An ideal natural food for them in times of hard weather is fruit – apples are ideal. Spoilt fruit can often be bought cheaply and flocks of Blackbirds can be attracted – they eat vast amounts of apples because, of course, most of the apple consists of water. For a real treat – or for a special favourite – sultanas or other dried fruit are greedily taken.

The BTO Nest Record Scheme has revealed much about Blackbird breeding biology. For instance, there is an average of about three breeding attempts between March to July. The most frequent clutch size is four eggs. Early and late nests average 3.5 eggs but at the height of the breeding season, in mid-May, the average is 4.5. Perhaps you would like to help us with this work. Even if you only find the nests of a few common birds each year your contribution would be valuable – see page 7 for further details.

Chris Mead

Blackbird Fascinating Facts

Territorial boundaries

These are often on open areas of lawn which the birds use as arenas for their display. Males are the usual combatants but sometimes all four birds from adjacent pairs join in. They often look like mime artists, with an invisible sheet of glass as the actual boundary between territories. Fights are common and sometimes can get nasty.

Partial albinos

Some Blackbirds, particularly older males, develop partly white plumage. This seems to be partly genetically controlled and sometimes albinos are very common in a particular locality. Often the extent of the white gradually increases from year to year – after the moult.

Warning calls

If you are lucky enough to have a pair breeding successfully in your garden: *learn Blackbird!* They have different calls to warn their young of danger on the ground, like you or your cat, or from an avian predator, like the local Magpie or Sparrowhawk. For danger on the ground, a fairly explosive 'pook' repeated whilst the danger is still about. For the aerial predator a thin whistling 'see' is used – very difficult to locate!