

# Focus on the Mistle Thrush

One of the biggest thrushes in the world, the Mistle Thrush, is easy to tell from the much smaller Song Thrush. It is a bulky and very upright bird with bold and discrete black spots on the breast and white underwing. It has been chosen for a spring focus as it is one of the earliest garden birds to breed. *Chris Mead.*

**A**round about the turn of the year, the strong song of the Mistle Thrush rings out over much of the countryside. They appear in all sorts of places where trees are present, except dense woodland. It is sometimes known as the Storm Cock as it is one of the very few birds that sings after a winter storm.

In many gardens, we only get a good look at Mistle Thrushes when they are forced to find food from unfamiliar sources during cold weather. In some gardens, however, these birds are familiar friends. Their harsh chattering calls, which I always think are half way between the similar calls of Magpie and Fieldfare, may be heard at any time of the year.

These are big and bold birds, very confident of themselves, and able to hold their own against Magpies or Sparrowhawks. Indeed, they will often noisily chase Sparrowhawks away and draw the attention of other birds to the presence of the predator. They can sometimes be very unkind to an innocently sleeping owl and may even lead the mobbing activities by the other birds.

Their nests are often big and untidy, sometimes including odd materials such as waste paper and plastic. One pair cost a nurseryman dear when they stripped the labels from many rose bushes and made a very strange nest! Many nests are built in late February. A typical site in woodland is 30 feet up on the top of a snapped-off tree. I know of two occasions when there has been a Mistle Thrush nest on top of a stub and a Great Spotted Woodpecker has later excavated its nest in the trunk. The Mistle Thrush pairs are so aggressive it is likely that in both cases they must have finished before the woodpeckers started!

Two or occasionally three broods are raised by each pair and they may sometimes use the same nest. The nests may be very well concealed and the first time that you realise the birds have been breeding nearby is when the rather high pitched and more squeaky rattles of the juveniles mingle with the usual calls of the adults. During the late summer and the autumn there are often flocks of over 100 Mistle Thrushes on newly ripening food supplies in areas where several pairs have bred.

The most interesting behaviour of Mistle Thrushes in gardens is resource guarding. This is when one or sometimes two birds, defend a source of food such as a yew or holly tree or clump of cotoneaster bushes, against all comers. The vigilant bird is trying to ensure that food resources are maintained for itself right through the winter. It has been shown that the resource guarding birds have bigger and earlier clutches than ones that do not do it.

In my Tring garden, over about 30 years, we had resource guarding Mistle Thrushes for four or five years. The objects of their desire were either the holly or the crab apple, but never both at the same time. When resource guarding was successful, the food was defended until spring. In the other years the attempt to defend the berries was unsuccessful as other birds poured in during cold weather. We had one frantic Mistle Thrush in a medium sized crab apple taking on two Song Thrushes, eight Blackbirds, ten Fieldfares and 40 Redwings. It had to surrender to overwhelming numbers!



*Mistle Thrush by Tommy Holden © BTO*

## Mistle Thrush Fascinating Facts

### Do they eat Mistletoe?

The quick answer is yes. However, as there is relatively little Mistletoe in Britain, the connection between the plant and the bird probably comes from other parts of its range. There, there is a much stronger link and the scientific species name *viscivorus* means Mistletoe-eater (*Viscum* is the generic name of the plant).

### Top of the thrushes

There are many gardens that have all three species of winter thrush feeding in it when the weather is really cold. When this happens one can easily see what the pecking order is. Mistle Thrush comes out on top, followed by the winter Fieldfare, Blackbird, Song Thrush and Redwing.

### Mud sandwich!

All the thrushes use mud in their nests. The Song Thrush smooths the inner lining of mud with its body and lays its glorious blue eggs straight on to this surface. The Mistle Thrush, on the other hand, has the mud layer sandwiched between the outside ragged finish and an ample inside lining of fine grasses.