

# Focus on the Redwing

The arrival of the Redwings in the garden is a sure sign that winter has really set in and that there is frozen ground or snow cover. These birds have a remarkable history of long-distance movements — as shown by ringing — and a habit of being very picky with their food. *Chris Mead.*

This handsome little thrush is a winter visitor to Britain and is the bird responsible for most of that thin, plaintive whistles one hears on a misty evening in October or November. These are the migrant bird's contact calls as they fly from their breeding grounds in Scandinavia (or further east) to end up on the western seaboard of Europe for the winter. The dark red under the wing is characteristic (the Song Thrush has a flash of orange) but the easiest plumage feature to see is the prominent eye-stripe. Redwings are about 10% smaller than Song Thrushes and rather darker but, being much more accomplished migrants, their wing lengths are about the same.

Redwings are currently colonising Britain. About 50 – 100 pairs now breed in the Highlands of Scotland and there are the occasional breeding records (or at least breeding season records) elsewhere. They require scrubby areas and often choose damp patches (mind you, they would have difficulty avoiding this in Scotland!) In winter they are found over large areas of farmland where they form large loose flocks and forage on soil invertebrates. If these are denied them by frozen ground, or lack of suitable areas they feed ravenously on fruit and berries.

It is quite astonishing how a flock of Redwings will take over a well-berried Holly or Cotoneaster and strip it in a few hours. Even a small Holly can have 100 or 150 birds on it. I have seen prudent Mistle Thrushes who have been resource-guarding a berried shrub for several weeks against other Mistles, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes being absolutely overwhelmed by the Redwings. They are driven frantic and have to give up a losing battle. But the Redwings do need that fruit. They do not eat normal bird food - worried bird-feeders have been shocked that starving Redwings, surrounded by foods that other thrushes would eat, have just carried on starving and would not even eat food carefully stuffed into apple skins. The apples themselves, or other fresh or dried fruit, would be accepted but not other items, although mealworms would probably be taken.

Wintering Redwings roost in flocks often choosing areas of scrub. The flights to their roost are very urgent and direct but if you want to find a roost it is a very good idea to use a bike as the roosting flights can be much longer than you think. Many years ago I wanted to find a roost to ring the birds. They were flying over the Blackbird roost where I was ringing at a height of about 20 feet, but were they roosting nearby? Not a bit of it! The first evening we walked two miles and saw no sign of the birds coming down. The next evening we started where we had left off on bicycles and got another five miles — Redwings still flying at 20 feet. The third night we finally found the roost 13 miles from where we had started — already being ringed by another ringer!

*Chris Mead*



Redwing - Tommy Holden © BTO

## Redwing Fascinating Facts

### Icelandic giants

Redwings are quite variable but there is a population which is consistently bigger and more strongly marked than average. These are the birds of the race *coburni* which breeds on the Faeroes and (mainly) in Iceland. They are up to 5% longer than the nominate birds and it's quite easy to tell the two apart — if you are lucky enough to have both in front of you. These birds are most likely to be found in the west of Britain and Ireland where they winter — also in Iceland, western France and Iberia.

### Wandering the continents

Redwings wintering on the UK mainland may breed as far east as 160° of longitude. Intriguingly, many birds ringed in Britain, Ireland and other Western European countries during winter have been recovered in subsequent winters in trans-Caspian countries such as Georgia, and in Iran. These birds are probably far-eastern breeders that have come west one year (possibly as young birds) and then have wintered to the south of their breeding area in subsequent years.

### Honey I missed Ireland!

One very common Redwing movement recorded in cold winter weather is a spread westwards into Ireland or south-west to Spain and Portugal. At the start of the very cold weather of 1963 Harold Lapworth put ring CX02630 on a Redwing in his garden at Nuneaton. Three days later the bird was found dead on a ship in the mid-Atlantic about 2,400 miles away. The ship was coming this way so the bird was not a stowaway! It must have left the West Midlands in fairly good condition but missed Ireland by going just too far South. Even with this amazing effort, it failed to survive.