

# Focus on the Robin

Although Robins are not in all gardens all the year round, the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey recorded at least one Robin in 244 of the 247 gardens. This December millions and millions of Robin images will be speeding round the country on Christmas cards and on Christmas stamps – now why is that?

The answer is easy and nothing to do with blood from the crown of thorns. If it was, Robins would be on Easter cards! The real reason is that cards were first introduced about 25 years after the penny post, when the postman's standard dress included a red top-coat. His nickname was Robin and hence the Robins on your Christmas cards are a long-forgotten visual pun.

But what of the bird? The fact that the Robin is very familiar and most of us see one almost every day certainly does not mean that the bird is not itself interesting. The Robin's life history was studied in detail by David Lack, one of the pioneers of modern ornithology. Through colour-ringing, he got to know a whole community of Robins as individuals and was able to find out how territories worked. He began to realise things about birds which just were not appreciated fifty years ago.

Territory turns out to be *the* thing for a Robin. The spotty-plumaged fledgling is not considered a threat to any other Robins. But as soon as it has acquired the red-breasted badge of adulthood, it will be chased away from any territory it enters. If it is to survive, it must find its own and defend it. Song is important at all times of the year and both sexes sing the rather weak, watery song. In the spring, it is the male who sings the beautiful breeding-season song. Singing actually starts early in the year and marks the juggling of territorial boundaries which are first established after the moult has been completed in the autumn.

The red breast is *the* important visual badge for Robins. Two birds that are disputing territory will first sing at each other, the 'owner' attempting to get a song post above the intruder, intimidating him or her by presenting as much red as possible.

Physical conflict may arise between rivals and a surprising number of cases of murder happen when territories are fully occupied. In some studies up to 10% of Robins die due to fighting each other. Even stuffed Robins, or very simple red-breasted models, are physically attacked because they 'refuse' to go away.

Robins are less common in gardens in the summer. Nesting places are often in very short supply and the erection of a secure nestbox (open fronted) is always a good idea. Often they will nest in strange places – see my book *Robins* in the Whittet series. Just leaving a drawer open in a chest in the shed, and the window ajar, can help by providing a safe nest site and a short-term secure area for newly fledged young. The main enemies in the breeding season are cats and Magpies and a nest site hidden from both is ideal.

Most UK Robins are sedentary, but a few move about – some dispersing a few dozen kilometres to breed in a new area. The few ringed ones that have gone long distances are migrants wintering in the warmer climes of France or Spain. Many Robins from colder Fennoscandia pass through Britain in autumn on their way to Iberia or North Africa. A few of these stay with us for the whole winter. *Chris Mead*

## Robin

### Fascinating Facts

#### Hard Cheese...

is the way to keep your Robins and other insectivores alive in cold weather. Grate it very finely and scatter it where the birds feed. The real way to a Robins heart, however, is through meal worms, purchasable from CJ Wildbird Foods. A cheaper alternative, that usually works well is sultanas.

#### Why do they like garden forks?

If you are a tidy gardener a garden fork stuck in the ground means that you are at work in the garden, exposing edible worms and grubs. The fork makes an excellent lookout point for food as well as a really good perch from which to intimidate any intruder.

#### Boy or girl, young or old?

Sexing Robins is impossible on plumage features but ringers, catching them in the breeding season, can tell by the loss of fathers from the female's brood patch. It is quite easy to tell the age of many winter Robins as most young birds have pale edges to their greater coverts.



Robin by Tommy Holden © BTO