

# Focus on the Song Thrush

That's the wise old thrush;  
he sings each song twice over,  
Lest you think he never could recapture,  
The first fine careless rapture!

**B**rowning's poem contains the most useful tip for anyone wondering whether a melodious song, ringing out from a large bush or halfway up a tree, is being produced by a Blackbird or by a Song Thrush. The bird repeating itself is always the Song Thrush, the Blackbird's song being more varied (and rather less strident — although I would not want to be without the Song Thrush!) The Song Thrush is noticeably smaller than the Blackbird, a thrush larger than a Blackbird producing a loud and rather boring song from the very top of a tree is a Mistle Thrush, a bigger, bolder bird with very much "splodgier" spots and white on the outer edges of the tail.

Both male and female Song Thrushes are a warm brown above, similar in tone to a Robin, and pale below with the dark spots prominent on the breast. A distinctive orangey-buff patch under the wing is visible in flight, whereas when the Mistle Thrush flies you can see bright flashes of white under the wings, and often hear its distinctive mechanical rattling call. The characteristic undulating flight of the Mistle is noticeably different from the fast, direct flight of the Song Thrush and the Mistle is much greyer in overall tone, with big round spots extending right underneath across the belly. Winter-visiting Redwings are easily distinguished from Song Thrushes by the red under their wings and bold eyestripe.

Song Thrushes can be very early nesters and the young may be on the wing by the end of March in a good season. In common with other thrushes, mud is incorporated into the nest but the Song Thrush does not bother with a grass lining — she lays her lovely blue eggs (with a few dark spots) onto a smooth mud inner surface which makes their nests quite easy to recognise. Famous for feeding on large snails, the Song Thrush uses a big hard object (usually a stone) as an anvil to bash them on and break the shells and the remains of many shells can be quite decorative, especially if the boldy-marked *Cepea* snails are being eaten. This strategy is very valuable when the weather is dry and hot and other food is difficult for the birds to find. Worms retreat deep into the soil during drought periods and even with their exceptional vision thrushes find them hard to detect — incidentally when the bird cocks its head to one side it is not actually listening for prey but searching for visual clues to the worm's location.



Song Thrush by Tommy Holden © BTO

The Song Thrush is usually one of the loudest and earliest singers in the spring dawn chorus but although the early bird is supposed to catch plenty of worms, BTO data has shown a long-term decline in their population. The Song Thrush to Blackbird ratio has been going down for more than 60 years and the CBC (Common Birds Census) score for Song Thrush has gone down by a very worrying 73% on farmland in only 25 years. The use of slug and snail killing chemicals has greatly increased on farmland as well as in gardens but a direct link has not been demonstrated and until further research can be funded it remains unclear what exactly is causing this serious decline. There are still almost a million pairs of these attractive birds in the British Isles, so it is not exactly rare yet, the concern is that only 30 years ago there were probably 3 million pairs — we have been warned!

*Chris Mead*

## Song Thrush Fascinating Facts

### Partial Migrants

This does not mean that Song Thrushes are partial to migrating, but that some do and some don't. A few of our birds go to Ireland, France, Iberia and even North Africa every year. When very cold weather comes even the stay-at-home birds often flee cold areas, the BTO Ringing Unit receives many records of birds travelling over 1,000 kilometres to avoid the cold and find food.

### See and not be seen

It used to be thought that bush and hedge nesters like Song Thrushes valued concealment above all other factors when choosing nest sites. Recent research has demonstrated that the birds compromise — the most favoured sites are indeed well-concealed but also have a good view out, so that approaching predators can be observed. The adult bird can then take avoiding action, hopefully to escape from the attacker and hence survive to build another nest elsewhere.

### First year survival could be the key

BTO scientists are working hard to understand the decline of this bird, using data supplied by our volunteers. Careful analysis of ringing recoveries has shown that poor survival of young birds through their first winter could explain the observed drop in the overall population. Between 1962 and 1973, winter survival probability for first year birds was 48.4%, compared to only 40.5% between 1975 and 1993 — a drop of nearly 20%. There does not seem to be any comparable decline in nest productivity or in the survival rate of adult birds once they have made it through this first winter bottleneck. Anything we can do to help young birds through their first winter in our gardens will help.