



# Mistle Thrush

## Species focus

by Mike Toms

Mistle Thrush, by Peter Howlett

The Mistle Thrush nest is a rather bulky affair, made of grass, moss and plant roots. Sometimes, as in this nest, the bird may incorporate bits of string or twine. The construction is strengthened with mud and thickly lined with finer grasses.



**For me, there** are two Mistle Thrushes. The first is the bird of late winter, whose strident song is heard against the backdrop of squally showers and a biting wind. The other is the bird of summer, the family party that takes to the wing from the garden lawn with a harsh warning rattle. This robust thrush may be overlooked at other times of the year, perhaps because it is less of a garden bird than its smaller relatives or because for some of us it remains a tricky identification challenge. It is, however, a bird full of character and worthy of our appreciation.

### DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT PREFERENCES

**The Mistle Thrush** is to be found across most of Britain and Ireland, although it is absent from most of our uplands. There is a clear preference for woodland edge habitats, including suitable lowland farmland, urban parks and larger gardens. This preference underlines an association with deciduous trees which provide song posts, vantage points and favoured nest sites.

The nest site itself is usually high in a tree – nests range from 2 m to 17 m above the ground – and placed at the base of a branch or in a horizontal fork. The earliest nests of the season may be placed in the cover provided by Ivy or a conifer, such as Yew. A few nests are placed on or inside buildings, typically ruined buildings,

or on a natural rock ledge or other structure. The large size of many nests makes them easy to spot as you glance up, but others may be much better hidden. The Mistle Thrush is less common in gardens than Song Thrush, with a Garden BirdWatch reporting rate of less than 1 in 20 gardens most weeks (compared with 1 in 5 for Song Thrush). Rural gardens are utilised to a greater extent than urban or suburban ones, although the species is certainly not uncommon in our conurbations where larger trees are available.

### STORM-COCK

**The early nesting** behaviour of this species has earned it the name of 'storm-cock', a reference to the territorial song being delivered so early in the year. Egg-laying may begin as early as mid-February, the first of two or three breeding attempts that see the breeding season extend through until the end of June.

Although rather quiet when building, the adults become rather vocal once they have young chicks in the nest. In fact, the parents can become rather belligerent and intolerant of any other birds that they consider might be a threat to their young. The harsh 'football rattle' alarm call is characteristic and should alert you to the presence of Mistle Thrushes locally. Even without young in the nest these birds are wary and likely to fly off uttering the alarm call. Look for the white spots on the tail feathers as they fly away, a useful feature for identification. Although often encountered singly, family parties are a feature of the summer months, when they may feed together on larger lawns.

Mistle Thrush nest, by Herbert & Howells

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BERRIES

The **strong association** of the Mistle Thrush with berries can be seen in the scientific name of 'viscivorus' given to it by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Swedish biologist Linnaeus. 'Viscivorus' means 'devourer of Mistletoe' and was translated by Linnaeus from the Greek word used by Aristotle to describe the species. Aristotle had watched Mistle Thrushes feeding on a red-berried form of Mistletoe in the Mediterranean, somewhat different from the white-berried form that occurs within Britain and Ireland.

Interestingly, it appears that Holly berries are more important to Mistle Thrushes than Mistletoe within Britain and Ireland. These remain on the bush for longer and may be vigorously defended, either by an individual or a pair of thrushes. It has been found that pairs guarding berry-producing bushes in this manner produce bigger and earlier clutches than those that don't. This suggests that the berries are an important resource for these birds. It has also been found that pairs guarding a bush will also feed elsewhere, on unguarded bushes, which presumably helps to make their own supply last that much longer.

The Mistle Thrush plays an important role in the spread of Mistletoe, a shrub that is parasitic on trees. The white Mistletoe berries, which pass through the thrush's digestive system, are sticky and stick strongly to any branch onto which they are deposited. Unlike certain other seeds, those of Mistletoe do not have to pass through the digestive system of a bird in order to germinate. Ingestion then, provides a mechanism for dispersal to a new site. The berries, which start to ripen from November, are dispersed throughout the winter and into early spring. In addition to Mistle Thrush, the berries may be dispersed by Fieldfare, Blackcap and Waxwing.

## FAMILY MATTERS

The **roving family** parties, which are a feature of late summer and early autumn and which may number five or six birds, will break up with the arrival of winter. It is at this time of the year that we may see a small arrival of Mistle Thrushes from breeding populations elsewhere in Europe. Support for such arrivals comes from a handful of recoveries of ringed birds, together with occasional reports from coastal bird observatories of birds passing through. Such movements could simply be birds passing through, rather than seeking to winter here. We don't receive the numbers of winter visitors seen in some of our other thrush species.

Our own breeding birds appear to be largely sedentary in their habits, excepting the dispersal of young birds away from the territories in which they were born. There may be some movement of birds from more northern parts of Britain, perhaps moving south in response to poor weather conditions during the worst of the winter months.

## FACTBOX: Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*



Mistle Thrush, by Peter Howlett

### Population:

Breeding: 205,000 breeding territories

Winter: currently unknown

### Conservation status: AMBER-LISTED

**Diet:** invertebrates, also berries in autumn and winter

### Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Max recorded lifespan: 11 years, 4 months and 9 days

### Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 4 (range 3–6) eggs

Number of broods: 2 (3)

Incubation: 13–14 days

Young in nest: 14–16 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year

[www.bto.org/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/birdfacts)



▲ Mistle Thrushes may be tempted to windfall apples, or those put out deliberately by Garden BirdWatchers.

### CHANGING FORTUNES

**Like those of** both Blackbird and Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush populations have declined significantly since the 1970s. In fact, they have declined by 52% since 1967, when the BTO first started monitoring them. The decline has been most pronounced in southern Britain, where it is very much still continuing. In the north of the Britain, things appear to be improving, this regional split also being seen in a number of other species as well.

Examination of the information collected by BTO's network of Nest Recorders suggests that productivity has held up, or may even be increasing, so it seems likely that the population decline is being driven by changing survival rates. This has prompted placement of the Mistle Thrush onto the Amber list of birds of conservation concern. Populations elsewhere in Europe also appear to have undergone moderate levels of decline.

Your Garden BirdWatch records also support a long-term decline, with reporting rates falling somewhat since the survey began in 1995. The seasonal pattern of garden use reveals a small peak in February, perhaps highlighting the first singing birds, and there is also the autumn trough that we see in many different species.

Despite its grey-brown tones, the Mistle Thrush is a handsome bird, its size and habit of standing upright, emphasising its very obvious character. If you are fortunate enough to have Mistle Thrush feed (or even nest) in your garden then you will certainly be aware of their presence. In fact, given that they are more striking and charismatic than the Song Thrush it does make you wonder why it has been the Song Thrush that has received all of the attention in literature and poetry. Surely the Mistle Thrush deserves some wider recognition. ■

Mistle Thrush, by Jill Pakenham

### Mistle Thrush/Song Thrush?

Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush are two species that may be confused by birdwatchers. Both have brown backs and speckled breasts, and both feed on lawns and in berry-producing bushes.

**Mistle Thrush** is larger than a Blackbird and is cold in its plumage tones, sometimes appearing rather grey. The thorn-like spots often coalesce to form darker patches on the sides of the breast, a feature not seen in Song Thrush. The spots on the belly and flanks are more rounded in appearance than in Song Thrush. Pale outer edges to the tail is a diagnostic feature in Mistle Thrush. Tail colour appears to contrast with the slightly paler rump and lower back. The underwing is white. The tips of the wing feathers are edged with white. Call is a diagnostic rattle. Song is similar to Blackbird but uttered in much shorter phrases and has a more haunting tone.

**Song Thrush** is smaller than a Blackbird. The general appearance is of warm tones. The spots on the upper breast are shaped like upside-down hearts or arrowheads. Note the shape of the spots and how this changes on the flanks and belly (right). The tail colour is the same as the rest of the upperparts and Song Thrush lacks the white outer tail feathers seen in Mistle Thrush. The underwing is a rusty-buff colour and this may extend onto the flanks. The tips of the wing feathers are edged with orange buff. The call is a diagnostic 'zit' likened to the single click of a spinning bicycle wheel. The song is a repeated series of three phrases.

There is a really useful identification video to these two species on the BTO YouTube Channel.



Peter Howlett

Song Thrush



John Harding

Song Thrush



Edmund Fellowes

Mistle Thrush