

# Going for a song?

## Song Thrush



Song Thrush by John Harding

There are early mornings when, working in my study with the window open, I can hear the Song Thrush going about its business. A soft tapping sound, as the bird bashes open a snail, hammering it against the garden paving to get at the goodness within. I am fortunate to have my pair of Song Thrushes; a decline of 51% over the last 39 years gives a clear signal that the species has been in difficulty and is deserving of its own Biodiversity Action Plan. Yet the Song Thrush remains one of our most charismatic garden birds, a real charmer, whose name is known to even the most casual of garden birdwatchers.

### STRONG TIES

That so many non-birdwatchers know 'the' thrush may, to a large degree, be down to its rich song. Of course, 'the' thrush is really two different species, the Song Thrush and the Mistle Thrush, but it is the rich repeated phrases of the Song Thrush that provides the stimulus for our affections. The name 'thrush' was traditionally applied to the Mistle Thrush, with the Song Thrush referred to as a 'throstle' – a term that may still be heard in some areas as a regional name. West Bromwich Albion sport a thrush on the club badge and

their supporters are known by some as the 'throstles'. Another local name is 'mavis', possibly derived from the French 'mauv'is' and still used in Orkney, where some 10–30 pairs nest regularly.

Our fondness for the Song Thrush can also be followed through literature, with reference to the bird or its song appearing in the works of Thomas Hardy (the Darkling Thrush), Robert Browning (Home Thoughts from Abroad) and Ted Hughes (Thrushes). Browning, in particular, shows his knowledge of the bird, writing:

*'That's the wise thrush; he sings each song  
twice over'*

*Lest you think he could never recapture  
The first fine careless rapture!*

Song Thrushes draw on a repertoire of a hundred or so phrases, selecting from these randomly and then typically repeating each phrase several times over. It is this aspect that Browning recognises and then immortalises in his poem.

Another poet, Edward Thomas, who featured thrushes in 15 of his poems, went a step further and wove the element of repetition into one of his poems. Thomas's poems largely



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# SONG THRUSH

## DIFFERENT RACES

The Song Thrush found over much of Britain and Ireland belongs to a distinct race, known as *clarkei*, which differs from the Song Thrushes found across the rest of Europe (known as *philomelos*). A third race, *hebridensis*, is found on the Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Skye. The different races form a cline, with the birds progressively darker and more strongly marked as you move northwest across the range.



Song Thrush by Steve Round



Song Thrush movements through Britain and Ireland are complex (see text).

Young Song Thrush by Steve Round

combined an attentive understanding of nature and the countryside with the realities of the war in which he was caught up. Thomas only really started writing poetry when he enlisted in the army for World War I, writing 142 poems in the two short years before his death at Arras in April 1917.

Our affection for the song of the Song Thrush has also extended to taking it with us when we have colonised new lands. Settlers introduced the bird into Australia (where it failed to flourish) and New Zealand (where it has established widely and well).

## ON THE MOVE

Although most of our breeding Song Thrushes are sedentary in their habits, some of those breeding in the northern parts of Britain or alongside upland areas, move south in the winter. Some of these northerly birds winter in Ireland and some of our birds winter in France, Spain and Portugal. Most, however, are sedentary, though birds may move if forced on by severe winter weather and restricted access to favoured invertebrate foods.

Superimposed on these movements are those of birds from Scandinavia, which pass through on passage in spring and autumn, and from the Low Countries, the latter individuals arriving here to overwinter alongside our resident birds in the south of Britain. This pattern of movements explains the large numbers that may sometimes be seen on the east coast of England during late September or early October, together with the absence of birds from much of inland Scotland during the winter months.

## CHANGING FORTUNES

The Song Thrush seems to have been more abundant than the Blackbird during the first few decades of the Twentieth Century. However, since the 1940s this pattern has



This young Song Thrush can be recognised as such by the remains of the gape, visible as a yellow 'lip' at the base of the bill, and the presence of juvenile feathers across its back.



# FACTBOX : Song Thrush

changed and the Blackbird has become the more abundant of the two. The reasons for this change lie, in part, with the decline in Song Thrush numbers. BTO data have been used extensively to examine the nature of the decline and to suggest possible causes.

Over the period concerned it seems that, while breeding success per nesting attempt and adult survival have remained buoyant, survival rates of first-year birds have fallen. In addition, more intensive work, looking at Song Thrushes within farming landscapes, suggests that the number of nesting attempts made per season has also declined. Both the number of breeding attempts and a decline in first-year survival may be the result of changing feeding opportunities within farmland, with fewer suitable prey items available for the birds.

Interestingly, gardens have been an important habitat for Song Thrushes in some areas. In Essex, for example, gardens were the most frequently used breeding habitat, suggesting that feeding opportunities here were better than in the surrounding farmland. Mind you, the increasing use of slug pellets, means that many gardens no longer support the numbers of snails favoured by the thrushes.

## SNAILS AND SONG THRUSHES

Medium-sized snails appear to be important for Song Thrushes at those times of the year when other favoured foods are less readily available. In particular, snails become important during periods of summer drought, a time when many soil-dwelling invertebrates (like earthworms) move further down within the soil and become unobtainable. It is also during such periods that Song Thrushes take more smaller invertebrates – less profitable prey but all that is available to them. Snails may become important again during the winter months, especially during periods of cold weather, when the ground becomes hardened with frost.

Snails are usually grabbed by the lip of the shell and then transported to a favoured anvil, often a stone but any suitable hard object will do. The bird then bashes the snail against the anvil to break open part of the shell in order to remove the soft body. The thrush usually wipes the snail's body on the ground, presumably to deal with the defensive slime, before eating it. As a gardener with hostas it is a rewarding sight to see the pile of shells left by a busy thrush; a natural form of pest control!

**Common Name:** Song Thrush

**Scientific Name:** *Turdus philomelos*

'turdus'=a thrush + 'philos'=lover + 'melos'=song

**Family:** Turdidae

### World distribution:

**BREEDS:** Europe & West Asia (Introduced to Australasia)

**WINTERS:** Resident and winter visitor

**Habitat in Britain & Ireland:** Woodland, scrub and gardens

**Diet:** Invertebrates (esp. earthworms), snails and fruit

### Population:

**Breeding:** one million territories

**Winter:** lacking up-to-date figures

**Conservation Status:** **RED** : UK Biodiversity Action Plan

**Migratory Status:** Resident/Migrant

**Average date of first arrival:** Not applicable

### BREEDING ECOLOGY:

**Clutch Size:** 4 eggs

**Incubation:** 14–15 days

**Young in nest:** 14–15 days

**Number of broods:** 2–3(4)

**Age at first breeding:** 1 year



Song Thrush nest and eggs by Simon Thurgood

**Typical lifespan:** 3 years

**Maximum recorded lifespan:** 10 years 8 months



Song Thrush anvil by Mike Toms

### How you can help:

Plant thick nesting cover to help garden-nesting Song Thrushes to find somewhere secure from predators. Avoid using slug pellets and allow your Song Thrushes to control the numbers of snails in your garden.

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