

The Wanderer Returns: REDWING



Redwing by Steve Round



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Migration pattern of Redwings, taken from
Time to Fly.

The crisp, clear late autumn nights are the ones that signal the approaching winter. A noticeable drop in temperature and the first dawn coatings of frost underline the changing of the seasons. At this time of the year, out late in the garden with the dogs, I am often distracted by the soft whistling calls of Redwing, whose hidden forms are somewhere above me in the dark. Redwings are classic nocturnal migrants, pouring into Britain and Ireland in large numbers during October and early November. If the Swallow heralds summer then the Redwing signals winter's arrival and the hard months that lie ahead.

ON THE MOVE

The Redwing is something of a nomad, a species whose wanderings can see it here in one winter and in Spain, Italy or even Greece in another (see map). Many of the Redwings that reach our shores come from Russia, from the vast tracts of scrubby woodland largely untouched by human activities. These birds are part of a wider breeding population, extending

from Scotland in the west to the Kolyma Basin (Siberia) in the extreme east. To the west of this breeding range is a darker, more heavily streaked race, which breeds in Iceland and the Faroes. Given the name *corburni*, these birds winter primarily in western Scotland, Ireland, western France and Iberia (see map). There is a degree of overlap in wintering areas between *corburni* and the nominate race (*iliacus*), but most of the nominate race winters further east. Those *iliacus* present here in the winter appear to be drawn from the populations breeding in Finland and beyond into Russia. Some of the Fennoscandian birds are just passing through Britain, ultimately heading for wintering areas located as far south as the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Much of my birdwatching takes place on Norfolk's east coast and large flocks of newly-arrived Redwing are often evident, the birds feeding in farmland hedgerows on berries, particularly haws, or on the ground searching for soil-dwelling invertebrates. The peak in arrival of these flocks occurs during October, with the birds increasingly moving into

western Britain, western France and Iberia as we slip into November. Arrivals in Scotland reveal a similar pattern, though seemingly with the birds moving through more rapidly having fed up on Rowan berries.

The autumn migration of those breeding in Iceland sees a highly synchronized departure from the breeding grounds during October, the birds moving through northwest Scotland and Ireland. Interestingly, recoveries of ringed birds suggest that adult Icelandic Redwings tend to winter farther north, with the young birds being the ones that forge south to Iberia.

Movement appears to continue throughout the winter for both Redwing races. These small thrushes are particularly susceptible to bad weather (they were the second most-commonly reported avian casualty of the dreadful 1962/63 winter) and are forced to make hard-weather movements to escape freezing conditions. While their larger cousin, the Fieldfare, may be able to sit out bad weather, Redwings soon leave exposed farmland sites and move into woodland or gardens. Within woodland, they feed in a similar manner to Blackbirds, turning over the leaf litter in search of invertebrate prey. The large flocks also tend to break up and the Redwings become less obvious, feeding quietly as singletons or in small groups.

BERRY GOOD

The Redwings which appear in gardens or on farmland hedgerows are often seen feeding on berries. Work carried out by David and Barbara Snow in the Chilterns revealed that their Redwings had a clear preference for haws, taking these in preference to other berries. Part of this preference may be to do with the timing of berry availability and part with the size of the fruit. Observations made by David and Barbara revealed that Redwings, being small, struggle when trying to pluck and eat larger fruit, like sloes.

Other smaller fruits taken in the Chilterns included Buckthorn, Dogwood and Yew, with Holly becoming important later in the winter. One reason why Holly may only become important later in the winter is that the berries are harder to pluck early on, becoming easier only when they are really ripe. Holly is also important to some of the birds wintering in Iberia, where they have large expanses of Holly woodland virtually to themselves towards the turn of the year.

It is possible to improve the attractiveness of your garden for Redwing (and other berry-eating birds) by planting shrubs like *Sorbus*, *Cotoneaster*, Hawthorn and *Pyracantha*.

FACTBOX : Redwing

Common Name: Redwing

Scientific Name: *Turdus iliacus*

'*turdus*' = a thrush and '*iliacus*' = 'of the flanks'

Family: Turdidae

World distribution:

BREEDS: Europe and Asia

WINTERS: south to southern Europe

Habitat in Britain : Open woodland, farmland and gardens

Diet: invertebrates, with berries in autumn and winter

Population:

Breeding: 2–17 pairs annually

Winter: 650,000 individuals, though variable

Conservation Status: **RED**

Migratory Status: Winter visitor

BREEDING ECOLOGY:

Clutch size: 4–5 eggs

Incubation: 11–15 days

Young in nest: 10–15 days

Number of broods: 2

Age at first breeding: 1 year



Redwing by Jill Pakenham

Typical lifespan: 2 years

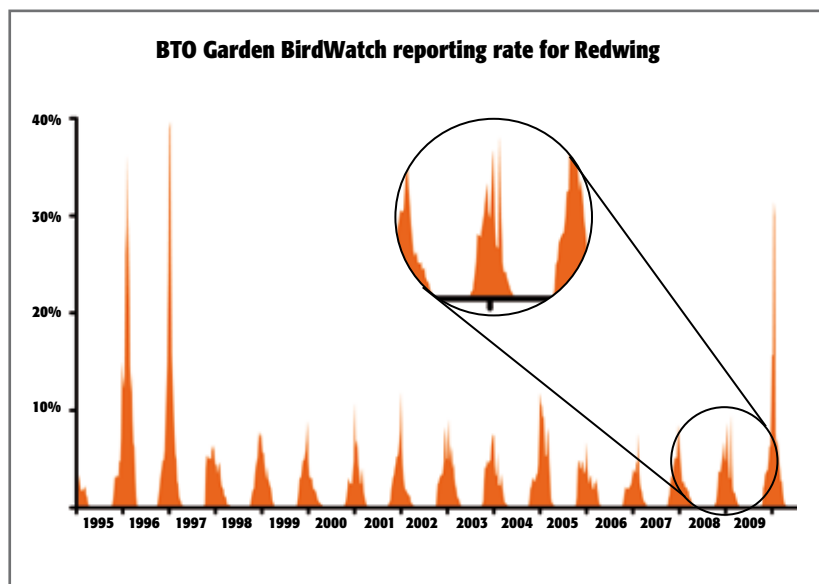
Maximum recorded lifespan: 11 years 10 months



Redwing by John Harding

PREFERENCES: We need to know more about the preferences that Redwings and other birds have for berries. This is where you can help. Watch which birds feed on the berries in your garden, and when. Of particular interest would be the use of specific garden cultivars of familiar shrubs or bushes.

www.bto.org/birdfacts



Although many birdwatchers think of the Redwing as just an eater of berries, it spends a lot of time searching for soil-dwelling invertebrates.

THE USE OF GARDENS

The nomadic nature of the Redwing is influenced by two factors: the availability of food resources and the weather. Clearly, access to food may be modified by the weather with, for example, hard frosts restricting access to soil-dwelling invertebrates. The influence of these two factors will operate over large distances, such that conditions in other parts of Europe may influence how many Redwings appear here. Once here, it

will be local conditions that determine how many of these birds turn to gardens. The BTO Garden BirdWatch reporting rate reflects this, with peak garden use varying between years and with clear influxes into gardens during particular weeks (see insert), when the weather conditions are such that the birds are unable to feed in the wider countryside.

BREEDING OUTPOST

While most of us regard the Redwing as a winter visitor, there are Redwing breeding in Britain most years. As you might predict for a northern breeder, those that do breed here tend to do so in the north of Scotland, beyond the Great Glen. The first certain breeding record was in 1932 (although it failed), with breeding recorded in most years since 1941. Peak breeding numbers in Scotland probably occurred during the early 1980s, with up to 80 territories noted, but now we are looking at perhaps as few as 4–6 pairs annually.

Redwings tend to breed in loose groups, for example the 17 pairs found breeding around Lairg in 1983. Of course, having breeding Redwings locally is not something that most Garden BirdWatchers will be fortunate enough to have. Instead we'll need to be content with seeing Redwings as winter visitors to our gardens. ■

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