

Treecreeper

Species focus

by Mike Toms



Treecreeper, by Steve Round

There are few British or Irish birds that appear quite so delicate as the Treecreeper. Small in size and easily overlooked, this woodland bird is an occasional garden visitor, most often seen feeding from the trunks or branches of larger garden trees, where its cryptic plumage blends in with the bark beautifully. If weather conditions are poor then Treecreepers may also be observed to take fat, fragments of peanut or small seeds from garden feeding stations.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT PREFERENCES

Two species of treecreeper are to be found breeding within Britain and Ireland. By far the more widely distributed of the two is the Eurasian Treecreeper, more commonly known as just Treecreeper – the term we will adopt in this article, and this is found breeding across Britain and Ireland. The Short-toed Treecreeper occurs as a breeding species on the Channel Islands and only very rarely do individuals reach mainland Britain.

Separating the two species is extremely difficult and relies mainly on differences in song, although there are also very slight plumage differences that can prove useful. Treecreeper has a longer, more stereotyped, song than its counterpart. There is some overlap in the European range of the two and, just to add to the confusion, some individuals produce songs that contain elements of both treecreeper species. However, there does appear to be a degree of separation in terms of habitat use in those areas where the two occur alongside one another. Short-toed Treecreepers tend to make greater use of deciduous broadleaf woodland,

seemingly squeezing Treecreepers into more coniferous blocks. Within Britain and Ireland, and in the absence of its competitor, the Treecreeper has itself been able to use deciduous woodland.

It is thought that the Treecreeper arrived in Britain and Ireland with the spread of coniferous woodland after the last glaciation. Being tied to deciduous woodland, the Short-toed Treecreeper failed to reach our shores before a rising sea level cut us off from the rest of Europe.

NEITHER SEEN NOR HEARD

The cryptic nature of the Treecreeper's plumage, with its complex pattern of browns, blacks, greys, whites and russets, makes this small bird particularly difficult to spot when foraging on bark. In flight, however, the flash of the silvery white underparts often catches the eye. The relatively long and slender bill, which has a curved profile, is used to probe cracks for insects and spiders, while the narrow and rather stiff tail provides support.

In addition to being hard to spot, the Treecreeper has a quiet call and a soft song, both of which are easily missed. The call, often delivered as a slow but regularly-paced series of *tsree–tsree–tsree* notes, has a distinct vibrato quality. Its high pitch means that this is one bird call that is soon lost to the human ear, as the ability to discern higher frequencies is lost with age. Male song is also of high frequency, though longer in duration and often ended with a slight flourish, which comes on the end of a 2–3 second tune of descending pitch.

TREECREEPERS IN THE GARDEN

As already mentioned Treecreepers are most likely to be encountered while they are foraging over bark. They may be seen to fly to the bottom of a tree trunk before slowly working their way upwards in a series of short and rather jerking hops. Most of the time the bird spirals around the trunk but on occasion individuals may be seen working a horizontal limb in an upside-down manner (see header photograph). Treecreepers have also been recorded feeding on small insects and spiders taken from walls, fences and even buildings.

Unlike the Nuthatch, which often forages over similar trees, Treecreepers virtually never feed by working their way down a trunk. Occasionally an individual may 'freeze' on the trunk, adopting a rigid posture and it is thought that this is an anti-predator strategy. I see them do this fairly regularly but they will also work their way around to the other side of a trunk in an attempt to remove themselves from your line of sight.

When it comes to providing food for visiting Treecreepers, hard fat smeared onto tree bark can work well during the winter months. Other individuals may be seen on mesh peanut feeders, either taking small fragments of peanut or invertebrates, or (occasionally) taking small seeds from bird tables.

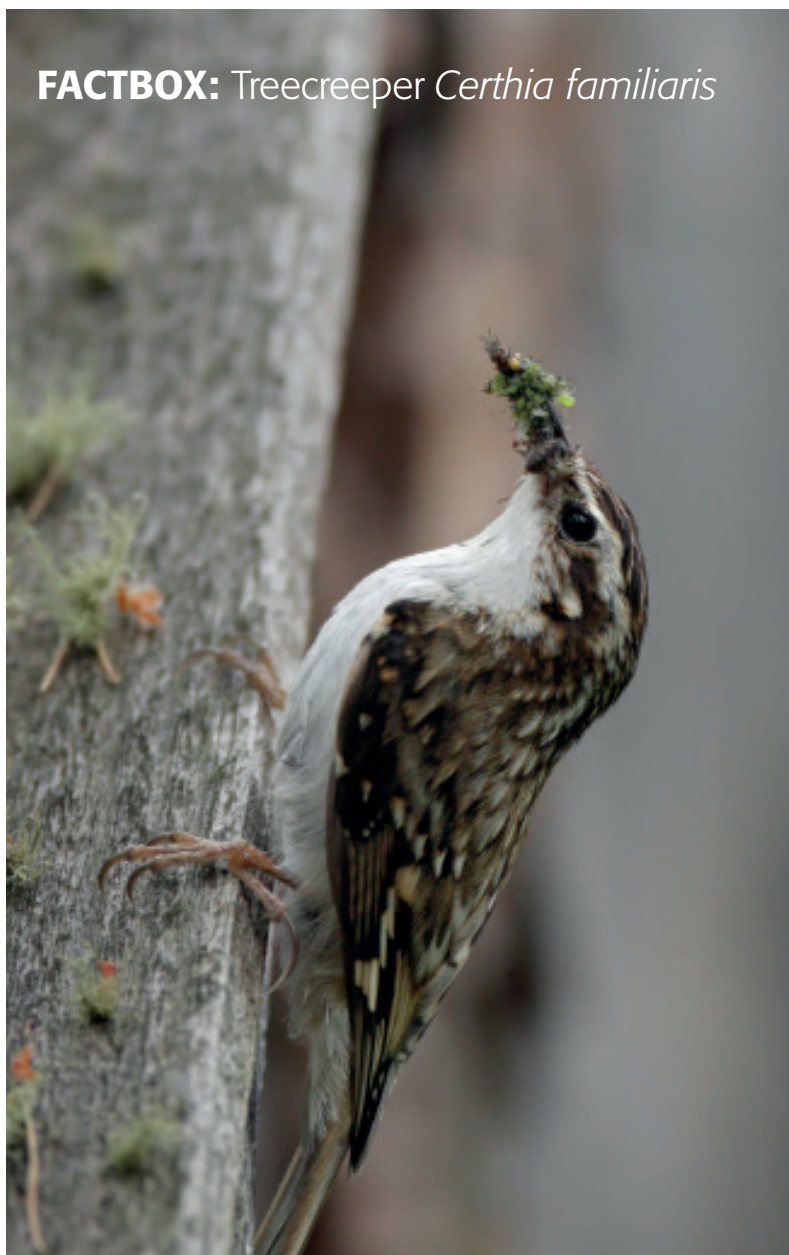
A number of Garden BirdWatchers have erected special Treecreeper nest boxes in their gardens, but the standard design for these appears to have a poor uptake rate. Home-made boxes, most closely resembling favoured natural sites, may be more successful. Most of the Treecreeper nests that I see each year are behind loose bark but a few involve the use of a small cavity of the type more typically used by nesting tits. I wonder if such cavities might be more widely used were it not for competition from the larger and more socially dominant tits. The fragile nature of loose bark can make Treecreeper nests vulnerable.

One relatively recent Treecreeper habit has been the use of Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) trees. The Wellingtonia, a native of western North America, was first introduced to Britain in 1853 and became very popular with wealthy landowners because of its reputation as being the biggest tree in the world. Wellingtonia bark is very soft and once the newly established trees had grown somewhat, Treecreepers discovered that they could excavate shallow cavities that could then be used for roosting.

BREEDING

Breeding Treecreepers occupy a territory of sorts, although only the area around the nest itself is advertised and defended by the pair. Consequently, a singing male Treecreeper is likely to have a nest within 50–70 m of any song perch. Most of the nest building is carried out by the female but the male often helps with the initial foundations. Most of the nesting material is made up of strips of bark, with

FACTBOX: Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*



Treecreeper, by Steve Round

Population:

Breeding: 204,000 breeding territories

Winter: currently unknown

Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

Diet: Insects and spiders also pine/spruce seeds in winter, from crevices in trunk, feeds going up tree

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 2 years

Max recorded lifespan: 8 years, 0 months and 18 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 5–6 eggs

Number of broods: 2

Incubation: 13–17 days

Young in nest: 15–17 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



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Treecreepers usually make their nest behind loose bark. The presence of nesting birds is sometimes revealed by nesting material poking out from under the bark, as in this instance.

additional grass, rootlets and moss, all placed on a base of wood chippings. The nest is then finished with a lining of feathers, hair, wool and fine strips of bark. Young Treecreepers usually don't have that much space within the confines of the nest and it can get a little crowded as the chicks approach the point of fledging.

After the chicks leave the nest they associate with their parents for perhaps another fortnight before moving away. The extent to which the young remain with their parents is influenced by whether or not the parent birds go on to make another breeding attempt. Second breeding attempts are fairly typical within Britain and the beginnings of these sometimes overlap the final stages of the earlier attempt, the male still feeding the young from the first nest while the female initiates her second clutch of eggs.

THE CHALLENGE OF WINTER

Being a small, largely insectivorous, bird means that the Treecreeper can find winter a challenging time. While our Treecreepers are resident, some of those from more northerly populations may move south in winter. Intensive research has revealed that British Treecreeper numbers and their survival rates are reduced by wet winter weather. Wet conditions, followed by an overnight frost can leave damp tree trunk cracks and crevices frozen over, trapping any insects below the layer of ice and out of reach of foraging Treecreepers.

Long-term monitoring data collected by BTO volunteers demonstrate that the UK Treecreeper population peaked in the early 1970s, having recovered from the particularly severe winter of 1962/63, before falling to a trough in 1980. Since then, populations appear to have been roughly stable, though with some peaks and troughs potentially linked to overwinter conditions. This pattern is repeated within the results generated from the BTO Garden Bird Feeding Survey, which involves some 250–300 GBW participants and which has been running since 1970.

THE TREE MOUSE

The manner in which the Treecreeper forages over bark has led some people to describe this bird as being 'mouse-like' in its habits. The association is more strongly made in the local West Country name for the species, which is 'Tree Mouse'. The Welsh name '*Dringwr Bach*', which means '*Little Climber*', also reveals something of the character of this bird.

Occasionally the species is noted feeding on the ground, a behaviour that may be more common than previously thought. There are even records of Treecreepers sunning themselves in the open, in the manner more often seen in birds like Blackbird and Robin. While it might not have bright, showy plumage or appear that often in our gardens, this little bird is certainly a welcome garden visitor and a firm favourite with most Garden BirdWatchers. ■

Treecreeper nest, by Mike Toms



Treecreeper, by Steve Round