

A BTO Garden BirdWatch factsheet

Song Thrush/Mistle Thrush



Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush are two species that may be confused by garden birdwatchers. Both have brown backs and speckled breasts, and both feed on lawns and in berry-producing bushes. Gardens are an important habitat for these species, whose numbers have been in decline, and so the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) wants to help householders to distinguish these two birds with greater confidence.

Song Thrush

Turdus philomelos

Smaller than a Blackbird. General appearance of warm tones. **Call:** A diagnostic 'zit' likened to the single click of a spinning bicycle wheel. **Song:** Repeated series of notes 'seoo, seoo, seoo, tidic, tidic, tidic, tew, tew, tew, tew.' The repetition of the three notes resulted in the old English name of 'thrice cock'. However, not all Song Thrushes can count and birds are often heard to utter more than three notes in a row.



The spots on the upper breast are shaped like upside-down hearts or arrowheads. Note how they become more rounded and slightly elongated on the belly and flanks.

Key features:

Tail is the same colour as the rest of the upperparts and lacks the white outer tail feathers seen in Mistle Thrush. The underwing ('armpit') is a rusty-buff colour and this colour may extend onto the flanks of the bird. The tips of the wing feathers are edged with orange-buff. Both sexes are similar in appearance.

These two thrushes are unlikely to be confused with other birds. However, some female Blackbirds can be quite pale and show some streaking to the upper part of the breast. Look at the leg colour; in Blackbird the legs are dark or reddish-brown – in Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush they are pale. Redwing is a similar size to a Song Thrush but has a strong head pattern, with a pale cream stripe above the eye.



Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Larger than a Blackbird. General appearance is of cold tones, the bird sometimes appearing rather grey.

Call: A diagnostic dry rattle, akin to that made by old-fashioned football rattles.

Song: Similar to that of Blackbird, but uttered in much shorter phrases and has a more desolate tone. Often heard singing very early in the year.

The bird on the front cover is a Mistle Thrush

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.

Key features:

Pale outer edges to tail is a diagnostic feature of Mistle Thrush. Tail colour tends to contrast with the slightly paler rump and lower back. The underwing ('armpit') is white. The tips of the wing feathers are edged with white. Both sexes are similar in appearance. Often adopts a very upright, alert posture when on the ground.

Photographs: Peter Howlett, Amy Lewis and Jill Pakenham



Garden thrushes

BTO Garden BirdWatch results show that Song Thrush is the more commonly reported of the two thrush species in British gardens. During the winter, Song Thrush is (on average) reported from one in five gardens, compared with one in twenty for Mistle Thrush.

Song Thrush is the more numerous of the two, in terms of our breeding population, with roughly one million breeding pairs, roughly five times the size of the Mistle Thrush population.



Make your garden count

The BTO is the UK's leading bird research organisation. Over 30,000 birdwatchers contribute to the BTO's surveys and collect information that forms the basis of conservation action in the UK. The BTO maintains a staff of 100 at its offices in Norfolk, Stirling and Bangor, who analyse and publicise the results of project work. The BTO's investigations are funded by government, industry, conservation organisations and its supporters. The BTO is a Registered Charity No 216652 (England & Wales), No SC039193 (Scotland) and a Company Limited by Guarantee No 357284 (England & Wales). Registered Office: The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

BTO Garden BirdWatch is the only nationwide survey of garden birds to run weekly throughout the year, providing important information on how birds use gardens, and how this use changes over time. The project is funded by participants' contributions and is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the World. Participants receive the quarterly magazine *Bird Table*, access to GBW Online and the expertise of the BTO's Garden Ecology Team. For more information, please visit www.bto.org/gbw

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