

The Mistle Thrush



You may be wondering why I am writing about the Mistle Thrush in this December edition rather than the more familiar Robin, so commonly depicted on many Christmas cards. There is a link between the Mistle Thrush and Christmas and this link is mistletoe. The name, Mistle Thrush, derives from its love of mistletoe berries. Its Latin name, *Turdus viscivora*, means “the thrush that devours mistletoe”. Due to this association, the Mistle Thrush helps to spread the mistletoe’s seeds. The berry is very sticky and when the bird eats it, the seed either passes through its gut or sticks to its bill. With the latter, the bird wipes the seed on to a branch of a tree thus allowing it to germinate and produce the semi-parasitic plant that we are all familiar with. Mistletoe berries are only a small part of its diet and it will eat most other berries as well as worms, slugs and insects.

Mistletoe grows on trees that have a soft bark and these include poplar, lime, hawthorn and especially, apple. It is more prolific in the West Country and small amounts are commercially grown in the apple orchards of Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It is no surprise, therefore, that Mistle Thrush numbers are higher in these areas than in many other parts of the country. However, all is not well with this large thrush and numbers are declining in a startling way. Fewer of this species are now recorded in our gardens so if you do see one in your garden, you are very fortunate.

You are more likely to hear the Mistle Thrush before you see it. It has a call similar to an old-fashioned football rattle. It is larger than a Blackbird and noticeably larger than the well-loved Song Thrush. It has a cold, greyish-brown back and its brown breast spots are larger and bolder. When seen flying, you will notice it shows white under its wings as opposed to the soft orange colour under the wings of a Song Thrush. While the Song Thrush prefers the more secure surrounds of a garden, the Mistle Thrush is found in more open areas such as parks, and large gardens. It flies around, landing on tall trees and TV aerials making itself known with a loud “chack chack chack”.

Other interesting facts:

- ❖ Another name for the Mistle Thrush is ‘stormcock’ because it will sing from a high perch through bad weather during the winter months.
- ❖ The Mistle Thrush practices ‘resource feeding’ which means that it will fiercely guard a berry-laden tree from other birds.
- ❖ For the past 150 years, an annual mistletoe auction has been held in Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire and as a consequence, the town is often called “mistletoe town”.
- ❖ The majority of mistletoe sold in our shops now comes from northern France as England has lost many of its apple orchards.
- ❖ The berries of the mistletoe are poisonous to humans and some domestic mammals.

Do listen and look out for this bird during the winter months.



Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology’s (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nott’s. If you would like to help the BTO by recording the birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, please contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net

Photo: Peter Howlett/BTO