

'LITTLE' BLACKBIRDS & THRUSHES

WHO? Blackbird (Resident, Common), **Song Thrush** (Resident, falling numbers), **Mistle Thrush** (Resident, not so common), **Redwing** (Winter not common), **Fieldfare** (Winter, not common), **Ring Ouzel** (Rare Migrant Mar/Apr Sep/Oct. Norfolk Coastal areas +Summer moorland).

QUICK HINTS: (This is not to replace bird identification books but to point out MAIN I.D. POINTS, and introduce you to bird folklore.) Right place? Right season? Right shape? Right noise? What to look for when you only have a glance...

NOTES: 1st two in gardens; next three mostly in fields, parks, playing fields; last more near marsh or remote coast.

Blackbird: [*Turdus merula* = AS. *Blac* + *brid*. Blackie (North Riding; Scotland); Amsel (German); Black Uzzle, Ouzel, Ouzel Cock, Zulu (Craven + UK + Gloucs), Ewesley (Numberland) – for all, see Ring Ouzel below); Merle (French), Merula, Mesula (from Latin)=(Scotland); Woofell; Colley;]

When: PARTIALLY RESIDENT; some migration in Spring and autumn. So the summer blackbirds in your garden may not be the same as the summer ones.

Where: Common: in gardens, fields, farmland, moors, woodland, suburban gardens, parks... almost anywhere. Winter roost – they need scrub, preferably evergreen to survive the night. Thick ivy on a wall; fir trees, yew, will form dormitories of grumbling birds who don't usually like each other's company.

Colour: Male & Female different: Male: Glossy black; orange beak (that *Thomas Hardy* calls 'crocus'), eye-ring and legs. Female: dull dark brown, paler below, throat and breast. Bill dull yellow. Juv: lighter brown than fem. Speckled; bill dark.

Shape: Medium size. Male smaller than female; flat crown. Large eye; long, square-ended tail.

Action: Runs over lawn. Stops, listens for insects. Sunbathes: wings spread, feathers fluffed, beak open. (To disturb parasites and gain VitD. Also 'anting' allows ants to crawl over it and remove parasites.

Flight: low and quick; swoops into cover. Undulates over long range, flurries of wingbeats.

Song: Male only: a beautiful songster with a rich, deep flutey voice, often from the top of a tree or roof. A CONSIDERATE OFFICE DICTATOR, IT PAUSES BETWEEN PHRASES for SECRETARY TO KEEP UP! It gets better as it gets older. Starts singing as gets warmer: February to March. Song rising high twitter at the end.

Call: Many: a 'chook, chook, chook,' or annoyed 'Chink, chink, chink' at dawn and dusk, and to frighten cats, etc.. A chuckle. A raucous yell especially at dusk. A continuous series of shrieks if disturbed (alarm rattle) 'brouhaha'. A tiny series of thin twitters if it is perched nearby and talking to you that sound as though they come from some little bird.

Seen: often in pairs. Males chase each other out of territory. Females chase males away from food. Hops fast.

Interesting Facts:

- A GROUND FEEDER & SHRUB BREEDER!
- They flick up their tails often as they land.
- Males' bills reflect their health: the healthier, the more yellow carotenoids are spared to colour it: the better mate. If ill, the carotenoids are used for its immune system and it can go brown in days.
- 'The Ouzel Cock so black of hue With orange tawny bill...' (Bottom: *Midsummer-Night's Dream: Shakespeare*)
- *Ouzel: Spenser*
- 'The Black Bride' in 'Boke of St Albans' (1468): partly by *Dame Juliana Berners, prioress of Sopwell Priory, near St Albans*
- *Blak Byrd* or *Black Ouzel: Turner* (1544). Also two names from *Willughby, Merrett, Bewick*.
- It is omnivorous: throws leaves away in woodland to look for insects: worms, caterpillars, beetles, snails, small fish, newts. All sorts of scraps. IT IS THE RUSTLER FOLLOWING YOU! But disturb it: it shriekes and shrieks, flying low, wings looking like a cloak, to the nearest undergrowth.
- It also pulls up moss on the lawn, so a gardener's friend. You just have to rake it up.
- 'If it sings before Christmas, it will cry before Candlemas': very early nesters could lose their young.

- However, only 18% died in 1962-63 Winter when thrushes had 57% mortality. More flexible feeders.
- St Kevin (Irish saint) C7th: praying in the temple of the rock, Glendalough, blackbird flew into open hand and laid her eggs there. The Saint held his hand out until the eggs hatched and brood flown!

Song Thrush: [*turdus philomelos*. Thrustle (countryside, Midlands + North of England; Thirstle (Devon, Cornwall, Shropshire); Thrush, Thrusher (Berks); Thrushfield (Shrops); Whistling Thrush, Whistling Dick (Thames Valley); Garden Thrush, Throggie (Cheshire) Trush Drush (Somerset); Dirsh (Somerset); Drush (Dorset); Grey Bird (Sussex, Devon, Cornwall); Mavis, Mavie (E. Anglia, Ireland, Scotland); ...]

When: PARTIALLY RESIDENT; some migration in Spring and autumn. Falling numbers. Migrates in from continent in winter; others fly south to Africa.

Where: in gardens, on the lawn, fields, farmland, woodland, suburbia. Berry bushes.

Colour: Male & Female: alike. Dark brown above; pale warm buff upper breast, whiter below, with well-spaced small arrow-shaped spots. Pale sandy brown underwing. Juv. Pale spots on back as well as below.

Shape: Smaller than blackbird. Well-proportioned; large head. Compact and slightly dumpy when on branch.

Flight: Stays close to cover and if disturbed, flies fast and low straight into bushes. Quick undulating wingbeats.

Song: Sweet and loud, full-toned clear notes, high-pitched repeats and ornaments. IT REPEATS EACH PHRASE 3-4 TIMES. A considerate dictation! **Mimic:** listen for lapwing, redshank, nightingale, great tit (depending on where it lives) + variety of human sounds, bells, phones etc.! Early in the year, sings from aerials or treetops.

Call: 'tick-tick-tick' – a frustrated tutting if flushed. Soft 'tsip'.

Seen: Runs in short bursts across the lawn and then, head-tilted, it listens. It uses leaf-litter, scrubbing about. It's the snail-cracker using a stone or paving as an anvil repeatedly. Look for snail shells round it. DO NOT USE PESTICIDES – IT PARTICULARLY KILLS THRUSHES, DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY.

Interesting Facts:

- Mavis = via Fr. Mauvis – could be Celtic origin via Brittany. (particularly in E.Anglia). In Scotland, it is Mistle Thrush
- Decline: between 1969-1994 = 73%;
- Adrian Stokes: 'The Suburban Song Thrush' sings in 'houses gaunt But for the bird-chant pressing out To penetrate and sublimate the brick.'
- Anglo-Saxon riddle Poem in 'The Exeter Book' C8th or earlier: 'An old evening poet, I bring to men bliss in the cities. When I cry out in a voice of varying pitch, they sit quiet in their dwellings, listening.'
- Robert Browning: 'That's the wise thrush: he sings each song twice over, lest you should think he never could recapture the first fine careless rapture.'
- Shakespeare: 'Thrustle with her note so true.'
- Skelton: 'Mavis with her whistell'.
- Ted Hughes; 'Thrushes', 1960.
- The older the bird and the season gets, the more mature his song gets.
- Its mud-lined nest in low thick bushes, shrubs or mature hedge – so don't cut them until after breeding season!
- Only 20% of chicks survive to breed. 2% of fledglings die each day after leaving nest.

Mistle Thrush: [*Turdus vicivorus* Storm Thrush...; *viscum* = mistletoe + *voro* = devour. Aristotle used the name as it ate Mistletoe in the Medeterranean area (but not in UK). AS = thysce (Thrush). Hollin Cock = holly (Yorks), Holm Thrush = holm oak – like holly leaf, Holm Cock, Holm Screech (Cornwall, Devon, Dorset) Muzzel Thrush (Roxburgh), Mizzly Dick (N.Humber); Squawking Thrush (IOW); Screech, Skirlock (Derbys), Skrike, Skirte (South England); Gawthrush (NHants); Jay, Jay Pie (Wilts), Jercock, Chercock (WestmInd); Stormcock, Storm Screech (Herefds); Jeremy Joy (January Joy); Size – Big Mavis, Big Felt, Bull thrush (Hants), Horse Thrush (N.hants); Corney Keevor, Crackle, Bunting Thrush, Butcher Bird, Felfit (E. Sussex); Fulfer (Norfolk); Hillan Piet (Aberdeen); Fen Thrush, Marble Thrush (Nhants); Norman Thrush, Stone Thrush, Wood Thrush (Dumfries)]

When: Resident, not so common.

Where: Open woodland with glades. Look up tree-lined tracks by fields. Or in open fields with trees round it. On parks and playgrounds. Not normally in gardens unless large and with many berry bushes.

Colour: Pale brown (washed-out) overall. Greyer than Song Thrush, more blotchy on breast. White breast with long / large round spots which can merge into a blotch. WHITE TIPS TO TAIL. Pale panel on wing and cheek. White underwing. At a glance rather like a small cuckoo!

Shape: Larger than Song Thrush. TALL UPRIGHT AND THIN LOOK WITH BEER-GUT. SMALL HEAD.

Flight: Strong, direct. Heavy undulating, swooping flight with bursts of wingbeats to top of tree. High, distant.

Song: Male only: a beautiful songster with a rich, deep voice, often from the top of a tree or roof. SINGS IN STORMS OR UP-COMING STORMY WEATHER. Sings very early in the year. IMPATIENT DICTATION – GOES FROM ONE SHORT PHRASE TO ANOTHER WITH HARDLY A PAUSE. Mournful, afternoon.

Call: Dry football rattle. Worse when alarmed. Quite a ventriloquist.

Seen: Hops heavily and runs. Often alone or maybe two together. Aggressive. It will adopt a berry tree and defend it, aggressively, lifting its wings to show its white patch. Only a full flock of fieldfares can strip it.

Interesting Facts:

- Omnivorous: insects, worms, snails, slugs, all berries, especially holly, ivy, hawthorn, yew, rowan, juniper.
- 'They can speak 7 languages'...?
- It builds a cup-nest in a branch fork or by the trunk.
- Fearless in defence of nest against Rooks & Jackdaws, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk.

Redwing: [*Turdus iliacus*. Little Red Winter Thrush... Redwing Mavis; Redwing Thrush, Red Thrush (Midlands); Redwing Throlly (Yorks); Wind Thrush (Somerset); Windle, Windle Thrush (Devon); Winnard Felt (Nhampton); Little Feltyfare (E. Lothian); Pop, Swine Pipe]

When: Winter bird, not common: from late October to March. Spends summer in Scandinavia.

Where: In flocks across fields, they move methodically across, or near roost trees. They will visit parks and playgrounds, liking short grass, but not normally lawns. They will visit berry-trees in bad weather and forage in leafmould.

Colour: Pale eyestripe, red flanks and underwing. Stripes, not spots on breast. Light yellow almost white eyebrows and down cheek from bill. M&F alike.

Shape: Smallest thrush, only 8 ½", short tail.

Flight: only slightly undulating and fast like a starling, flicking wingbeats. Well-known for singing a thin twitter at night when migrating low overhead. Disturbed flocks move to nearby hedge or tree.

Song: Roosting musical babble; also gentle 'churr' + lilting warble. Descending and mournful.

Call: fly in soft twittering flocks, very vocal, 'seep' (like intake of breath) as arrive in October. Thin 'Tuk-uk-uk' alarm call.

Seen: Flocks with Fieldfares and other thrushes. Runs and stops when feeding, sociable – stays in flocks.

Interesting Facts:

- Charming
- 1678: Willughby/Ray: Ornithology – first mention.
- Turner: 'Wynghruthes' (Weingaerdsvogel = vineyard bird Ger. Vindrossel = Denmark) became 'Wind' Thrush in UK – the winter winds.
- If a predator, such as sparrowhawk, appears. It does not fly away, but crouches down in leaf-litter and freezes.
- They return to different migration sites each year.

Fieldfare: [*Turdus pilaris* Blue-grey Winter Thrush... AS. Felde= field + fare = the traveller over... Feltyfare, Feldefare (Midlands); Fellfare(N.hants); Fildifare (Shrops); Feltflier (Scotland); Filer (Yorks, Lancs); Felfaw (Yorks); Felfit, Felt, Cock Felt (N.hants); Velverd (Wilts), Velde Bird (Herts); Hill Bird: from colour – Blue Back (Lancs, Shrops); Blue Bird (West country); Blue Tail (Midlands), Blue Rump (Herts), Blue Felt, Big Felt (Ireland); Pigeon Felt (Berks, Bucks, Oxon): its cry – Jack Bird, Screech Bird, Screech Thrush (Stirling); Also – Snow Bird (Shrops); Syorm Bird (Nfk), Storm Cock (Shrops, Scotland) also used for Mistle Thrush.]

When: 'The Bird of Winter', not common. Winter migration from Scandinavia; late October to March.

Where: Uncommon: fields in mixed flocks with thrushes and redwings. Good roosting trees nearby. They spread out across the field and 'WALK IT' methodically from one side to the other. Feeding/watching...

Colour: Slatey, ash-grey head, back-panel and rump. Black tail; red-brown velvety band across back. Looks all-blue-grey when flying. Underside whitish, with streaks and chevrons (Vs) down flanks, and upper chest stained rusty ochre. A white nick on shoulder of wing. M+F alike.

Shape: One of the bigger thrushes, especially compared to the Redwing that often feeds with it. It STANDS TALL & ERECT. Smart, distinctive plumage. Fairly long tail.

Flight: Generally slow with fast flaps and irregular glides, flies high, loose flocks (like wind-blown autumn leaves). Sings as flies, in flock and when disturbed.

Song: Harsh single note sound: 'shuk'. Quite different from other thrushes as random phrases.

Call: They chatter together through trees and bushes. Loud alarm. 'shack-shack' in flight. Harsh overall.

Seen: In mixed flocks on winter fields – blend in well.

Interesting Facts:

- 'The frosty feldefares': Chaucer in *'The Parlement of Foules'*.
- John Clare: *'The Shepherd's Calendar'* (March): *'flocking fieldfares, speckled like the thrush, Picking the red haw from the sweeing bush That come and go on Winter's chilling wing And seem to share no sympathy with Spring.'*
- Matthew Arnold (lived near the Wordsworths (Westmorland)): *'Hollies... with scarlet berries gemmed, the Fell-Fares' food.'*
- Omnivorous: insects + hawthorn, rosehips, rowan, etc. they move after the food supply across the fields. Can dig through snow to feed. Loves apples but only visits gardens in hard weather.
- Breeds in Scandinavia WHERE THEY ARE THE MOST ABUNDANT BIRD LIVING IN THEIR OWN SUBURBIA. Nesting in sight of each other, stacked like cakes on a baker's counter, and feeding together.
- Their defence is extraordinary: when a predator arrives to take the eggs and young, gradually, the whole flock takes to the sky; then, one by one, each bird dives at the predator and poops directly on its preened feathers like a hailstorm of gooey bombs for several minutes. The bird leaves never to return. Uric acid can compromise the waterproofing which can kill it (think of your car and pigeons!). It is the only European bird to activity as an army.

Ring Ousel: [Migrating Blackbird... AS. = osle; Ring Blackbird; Ring Thrush; Heath Thristle; Hill Chack (Orkney); Moor Blackbird; Mountain Blackbird (Yorks, Scotland); Tor Ouzel (Devon); Crag Ousel (Craven); Craigie Easlin; Flitterchack (its alarm call= Orkney); Cowboy (it whistles with the cows= Tipperary); Ditch Blackie (E. Lothian); Michaelmas Blackbird (migration = Dorset); Whistler (Wicklow); Round-berry Bird (?rowan-berry? Connemara)]

When: Rare **Summer Migrant** Mar/Apr + Sep/Oct by coast: the 'high' summer in the 'high' areas.

Where: Norfolk Coastal areas (e.g. Burgh Castle, Cart Gap, dunes) + Summer moorland : otherwise – mountains and moorland often above 250m. Also south Dorset. Seem to be breeding in Shetland and Orkneys.

Colour: Striking dark 'scaly'-pattern on plumage + large 'gorget' of white (a white napkin tucked under its chin). Not like the white patches seen on blackbirds. Pale sheen to wings as feathers edged in white. No yellow eye-ring, yellow bill with dirty brown tip.

Shape: Smaller than blackbird.

Flight: slow, steady flight; will 'play' in the thermals. Wings have large fingers.

Song: Three or four repeats of clear, fluty mournful piping notes: 'chew-chew-chew' + twitters in between.

Call: Many: a 'pink, pink, pink,' A chuckle. A raucous yell especially at dusk. Flight call: soft quick 'tack'

Seen: often in pairs. Much shyer than blackbird; will fly far away if disturbed.

Interesting Facts:

- Huge number of names for a rare bird, but they reflect its territory.
- Omnivorous: insects, then rowan-berries, blaeberrys, cranberries, bird-cherries, elder when ripe.
- They feed like Blackbird looking for worms, but will continue in high winds and driving rain.
- Not good news by the house in Orkney – someone would die or move away.