



Thorndon Birdlife

November 2024

The Blackbird (*Turdus merula*) is a species of the thrush *genus* and is one of the most common and familiar birds. It is particularly numerous in gardens turning over leaf litter, but can be found almost everywhere in the UK apart from the highest ground. Also known as the Eurasian blackbird (especially in North America, to distinguish it from the unrelated New World blackbirds or simply the blackbird where this does not lead to confusion with a similar-looking local species). It breeds in Europe, Western Asia and North Africa, and has been introduced to Australia and New Zealand. It has a number of subspecies across its large range; a few former Asian sub-species are now widely treated as separate species. Depending on latitude, the common blackbird may be resident, partially migratory or fully migratory. The adult male of the blackbird (*Turdus merula*) the nominate subspecies, which is found throughout most of Europe, is all black except for a contrasting yellow eye-ring and bill and has a rich, melodious song often performed from a high perch, this is a particular feature of summer evenings; the adult female and juvenile have mainly dark brown streakier plumage. This species breeds in woods and gardens, building a neat, cup-shaped nest, bound together with mud. It is omnivorous, eating a wide range of insects, earthworms, berries, and fruits, they also like to clean up under garden bird feeders.



Above: Female

Below: Male



Both sexes are territorial on the breeding grounds, with distinctive threat displays, but are more gregarious during migration and in wintering areas. Pairs stay in their territory throughout the year where the climate is sufficiently temperate. This common and conspicuous species has given rise to a number of literary and cultural references, frequently related to its song. "Blackbird singing in the dead of night" The Eurasian blackbird is the species immortalized in the 1968 Beatles song "Blackbird."

Earthworms are a favourite for blackbirds. They are able to hear movement just beneath the ground's surface and hunt by cocking their head, listening carefully. They also eat other insects, caterpillars, fallen fruit and berries, foraging on the ground and in the undergrowth. Look and listen for blackbirds flipping fallen leaves as they search for food beneath. They sometimes use good hearing and a bit of thievery to obtain an easy meal. Blackbirds eat small snails, but are unable to open larger snails by themselves. But if a Eurasian blackbird hears a Song Thrush hammering on a snail shell, it may swoop in and steal the snail after the Song Thrush has extracted it.

Common and widespread across the UK, the blackbird population is currently stable, although it has seen periods of decline in the 1970s and 1980s but breeding numbers have increased in the UK since the mid-1990s. There are an estimated 55 million blackbird pairs in Europe. Only the female incubates, but once the eggs have hatched, the male helps feed the chicks. Blackbirds are socially monogamous: 80% of the couples stay together for life.

One of the biggest threats is lack of food availability, particularly when the weather is dry. Leaving mealworms and ground feeder mix out on bird tables and planting bushes that attract caterpillars to your garden are great ways to help blackbirds.

They are an extremely charismatic species that have colonised gardens very successfully; analysis of Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data estimated that around 30% of the UK's blackbird population now breeds around human habitation, although BBS data suggest that numbers in London are still falling.

The typical lifespan for a blackbird is three years. However, the current longevity record for this species is 14 years and nine months.

In recent years and particularly since 2020, birdwatchers have reported fewer birds being seen in their gardens, especially in London. This recent decline has been linked to the appearance of the Usutu Virus, a new mosquito-borne virus in the UK which is often fatal to Blackbirds. The Usutu Virus (USUV), originally discovered in the 1950s in Africa and present in Europe for the past three decades, is carried and transmitted by mosquitoes. *Culex pipiens*, or the common house mosquito, is one of the main culprits – the species is native to the UK and is ornithophilic- meaning bird-biting.

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