

= Common blackbird =

The common blackbird (*Turdus merula*) is a species of true thrush . It is also called Eurasian blackbird (especially in North America , to distinguish it from the unrelated New World blackbirds) , or simply blackbird where this does not lead to confusion with a similar @-@ looking local species . It breeds in Europe , Asia , and North Africa , and has been introduced to Canada , United States , Mexico , Peru , Brazil , Argentina , Uruguay , the Falkland Islands , Chile , South Africa , Australia and New Zealand . It has a number of subspecies across its large range ; a few of the Asian subspecies are sometimes considered to be full species . Depending on latitude , the common blackbird may be resident , partially migratory , or fully migratory .

The male of the nominate subspecies , which is found throughout most of Europe , is all black except for a yellow eye @-@ ring and bill and has a rich , melodious song ; the adult female and juvenile have mainly dark brown plumage . This species breeds in woods and gardens , building a neat , mud @-@ lined , cup @-@ shaped nest . It is omnivorous , eating a wide range of insects , earthworms , berries , and fruits .

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 .

= = Taxonomy and systematics = =

The common blackbird was described by Linnaeus in the 10th edition of his *Systema Naturae* in 1758 as *Turdus merula* (characterised as *T. ater* , *rostrum palpebrisque fulvis*) . The binomial name derives from two Latin words , *turdus* , " thrush " , and *merula* , " blackbird " , the latter giving rise to its French name , *merle* , and its Scots name , *merl* . About 65 species of medium to large thrushes are in the genus *Turdus* , characterised by rounded heads , longish , pointed wings , and usually melodious songs . The common blackbird seems to be closest in evolutionary terms to the island thrush (*T. poliocephalus*) of Southeast Asia and islands in the southwest Pacific , which probably diverged from *T. merula* stock fairly recently .

It may not immediately be clear why the name " blackbird " , first recorded in 1486 , was applied to this species , but not to one of the various other common black English birds , such as the carrion crow , raven , rook , or jackdaw . However , in Old English , and in modern English up to about the 18th century , " bird " was used only for smaller or young birds , and larger ones such as crows were called " fowl " . At that time , the blackbird was therefore the only widespread and conspicuous " black bird " in the British Isles . Until about the 17th century , another name for the species was ouzel , ousel or wosel (from Old English *osle* , cf . German *Amsel*) . Another variant occurs in Act 3 of Shakespeare 's *A Midsummer Night 's Dream* , where Bottom refers to " The Woosell cocke , so blacke of hew , With Orenge @-@ tawny bill " . The ouzel usage survived later in poetry , and still occurs as the name of the closely related ring ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*) , and in water ouzel , an alternative name for the unrelated but superficially similar white @-@ throated dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) .

Two related Asian *Turdus* thrushes , the white @-@ collared blackbird (*T. albocinctus*) and the grey @-@ winged blackbird (*T. boulboul*) , are also named blackbirds , and the Somali thrush (*T. (olivaceus) ludoviciae*) is alternatively known as the Somali blackbird .

The icterid family of the New World is sometimes called the blackbird family because of some species ' superficial resemblance to the common blackbird and other Old World thrushes , but they are not evolutionarily close , being related to the New World warblers and tanagers . The term is often limited to smaller species with mostly or entirely black plumage , at least in the breeding male , notably the cowbirds , the grackles , and for around 20 species with " blackbird " in the name , such as the red @-@ winged blackbird and the melodious blackbird .

= = = Subspecies = = =

As would be expected for a widespread passerine bird species , several geographical subspecies are recognised . The treatment of subspecies in this article follows Clement et al . (2000) .

T. m. merula , the nominate subspecies , breeds commonly throughout much of Europe from Iceland , the Faroes and the British Isles east to the Ural Mountains and north to about 70 N , where it is fairly scarce . A small population breeds in the Nile Valley . Birds from the north of the range winter throughout Europe and around the Mediterranean including Cyprus and North Africa . The introduced birds in Australia and New Zealand are of the nominate race .

T. m. azorensis is a small race which breeds in the Azores . The male is darker and glossier than *merula* .

T. m. cabrae , named for Ángel Cabrera , Spanish zoologist , resembles *azorensis* and breeds in Madeira and the western Canary Islands .

T. m. mauretanicus , another small dark species with a glossy black male plumage , breeds in central and northern Morocco , coastal Algeria and northern Tunisia .

T. m. aterrimus breeds in Hungary , south and east to southern Greece , Crete northern Turkey and northern Iran . It winters in southern Turkey , northern Egypt , Iraq and southern Iran . It is smaller than *merula* with a duller male and paler female plumage .

T. m. syriacus breeds on the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey south to Jordan , Israel and the northern Sinai . It is mostly resident , but part of the population moves south west or west to winter in the Jordan Valley and in the Nile Delta of northern Egypt south to about Cairo . Both sexes of this subspecies are darker and greyer than the equivalent *merula* plumages .

T. m. intermedius is an Asiatic race breeding from Central Russia to Tajikistan , western and north east Afghanistan , and eastern China . Many birds are resident but some are altitudinal migrants and occur in southern Afghanistan and southern Iraq in winter . This is a large subspecies , with a sooty @-@ black male and a blackish @-@ brown female .

The Asian subspecies , the relatively large *intermedius* also differs in structure and voice , and may represent a distinct species . Alternatively , it has been suggested that they should be considered subspecies of *T. maximus* , but they differ in structure , voice and the appearance of the eye @-@ ring .

= = = Similar species = = =

In Europe , the common blackbird can be confused with the paler @-@ winged first @-@ winter ring ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*) or the superficially similar European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) . A number of similar *Turdus* thrushes exist far outside the range of the common blackbird , for example the South American Chiguanco thrush (*Turdus chiguanco*) . The Indian blackbird , the Tibetan blackbird , and the Chinese blackbird were formerly considered subspecies .

= = Description = =

The common blackbird of the nominate subspecies *T. m. merula* is 23 @.@ 5 to 29 centimetres (9 @.@ 25 to 11 @.@ 4 in) in length , has a long tail , and weighs 80 ? 125 grams (2 @.@ 8 to 4 @.@ 4 oz) . The adult male has glossy black plumage , blackish @-@ brown legs , a yellow eye @-@ ring and an orange @-@ yellow bill . The bill darkens somewhat in winter . The adult female is sooty @-@ brown with a dull yellowish @-@ brownish bill , a brownish @-@ white throat and some weak mottling on the breast . The juvenile is similar to the female , but has pale spots on the upperparts , and the very young juvenile also has a speckled breast . Young birds vary in the shade of brown , with darker birds presumably males . The first year male resembles the adult male , but has a dark bill and weaker eye ring , and its folded wing is brown , rather than black like the body plumage .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The common blackbird breeds in temperate Eurasia , North Africa , the Canary Islands , and South Asia . It has been introduced to Australia and New Zealand . Populations are sedentary in the south and west of the range , although northern birds migrate south as far as northern Africa and tropical Asia in winter . Urban males are more likely to overwinter in cooler climates than rural males , an adaptation made feasible by the warmer microclimate and relatively abundant food that allow the birds to establish territories and start reproducing earlier in the year .

Common over most of its range in woodland , the common blackbird has a preference for deciduous trees with dense undergrowth . However , gardens provide the best breeding habitat with up to 7 @. @ 3 pairs per hectare (nearly three pairs per acre) , with woodland typically holding about a tenth of that density , and open and very built @- @ up habitats even less . They are often replaced by the related ring ouzel in areas of higher altitude .

The common blackbird occurs up to 1000 metres (3300 ft) in Europe , 2300 metres (7590 ft) in North Africa , and at 900 ? 1820 metres (3000 ? 6000 ft) in peninsular India and Sri Lanka , but the large Himalayan subspecies range much higher , with *T. m. maximus* breeding at 3200 ? 4800 metres (10560 ? 16000 ft) and remaining above 2100 metres (6930 ft) even in winter .

This widespread species has occurred as a vagrant in many locations in Eurasia outside its normal range , but records from North America are normally considered to involve escapees , including , for example , the 1971 bird in Quebec . However , a 1994 record from Bonavista , Newfoundland , has been accepted as a genuine wild bird , and the species is therefore on the North American list .

= = Behaviour and ecology = =

The male common blackbird defends its breeding territory , chasing away other males or utilising a " bow and run " threat display . This consists of a short run , the head first being raised and then bowed with the tail dipped simultaneously . If a fight between male blackbirds does occur , it is usually short and the intruder is soon chased away . The female blackbird is also aggressive in the spring when it competes with other females for a good nesting territory , and although fights are less frequent , they tend to be more violent .

The bill 's appearance is important in the interactions of the common blackbird . The territory @- @ holding male responds more aggressively towards models with orange bills than to those with yellow bills , and reacts least to the brown bill colour typical of the first @- @ year male . The female is , however , relatively indifferent to bill colour , but responds instead to shinier bills .

As long as winter food is available , both the male and female will remain in the territory throughout the year , although occupying different areas . Migrants are more gregarious , travelling in small flocks and feeding in loose groups in the wintering grounds . The flight of migrating birds comprises bursts of rapid wing beats interspersed with level or diving movement , and differs from both the normal fast agile flight of this species and the more dipping action of larger thrushes .

= = = Breeding = = =

The male common blackbird attracts the female with a courtship display which consists of oblique runs combined with head @- @ bowing movements , an open beak , and a " strangled " low song . The female remains motionless until she raises her head and tail to permit copulation . This species is monogamous , and the established pair will usually stay together as long as they both survive . Pair separation rates of up to 20 % have been noted following poor breeding . Although the species is socially monogamous , there have been studies showing as much as 17 % extra @- @ pair paternity .

Nominate *T. merula* may commence breeding in March , but eastern and Indian races are a month or more later , and the introduced New Zealand birds start nesting in August (late winter) . The breeding pair prospect for a suitable nest site in a creeper or bush , favouring evergreen or thorny species such as ivy , holly , hawthorn , honeysuckle or pyracantha . Sometimes the birds will nest in sheds or outbuildings where a ledge or cavity is used . The cup @- @ shaped nest is made with grasses , leaves and other vegetation , bound together with mud . It is built by the female alone .

She lays three to five (usually four) bluish @-@ green eggs marked with reddish @-@ brown blotches , heaviest at the larger end ; the eggs of nominate *T. merula* are 2 @. @ 9 × 2 @. @ 1 centimetres (1 @. @ 14 × 0 @. @ 93 in) in size and weigh 7 @. @ 2 grammes (0 @. @ 25 oz) , of which 6 % is shell . Eggs of birds of the southern Indian races are paler than those from the northern subcontinent and Europe . The female incubates for 12 ? 14 days before the altricial chicks are hatched naked and blind . Fledging takes another 10 ? 19 (average 13 @. @ 6) days , with both parents feeding the young and removing faecal sacs . The nest is often ill @-@ concealed compared with those of other species , and many breeding attempts fail due to predation . The young are fed by the parents for up to three weeks after leaving the nest , and will follow the adults begging for food . If the female starts another nest , the male alone will feed the fledged young . Second broods are common , with the female reusing the same nest if the brood was successful , and three broods may be raised in the south of the common blackbird 's range .

A common blackbird has an average life expectancy of 2 @. @ 4 years , and , based on data from bird ringing , the oldest recorded age is 21 years and 10 months .

= = = Songs and calls = = =

Within its native Northern Hemisphere range , the first @-@ year male common blackbird of the nominate race may start singing as early as late January in fine weather in order to establish a territory , followed in late March by the adult male . The male 's song is a varied and melodious low @-@ pitched fluted warble , given from trees , rooftops or other elevated perches mainly in the period from March to June , sometimes into the beginning of July . It has a number of other calls , including an aggressive seee , a pook @-@ pook @-@ pook alarm for terrestrial predators like cats , and various chink and chook , chook vocalisations . The territorial male invariably gives chink @-@ chink calls in the evening in an (usually unsuccessful) attempt to deter other blackbirds from roosting in its territory overnight . During the northern winter , blackbirds can be heard quietly singing to themselves , so much so that September and October are the only months which the song cannot be heard . Like other passerine birds , it has a thin high seee alarm call for threats from birds of prey since the sound is rapidly attenuated in vegetation , making the source difficult to locate .

At least two subspecies , *T. m. merula* and *T. m. nigropileus* , will mimic other species of birds , cats , humans or alarms , but this is usually quiet and hard to detect .

= = = Feeding = = =

The common blackbird is omnivorous , eating a wide range of insects , earthworms , seeds and berries . It feeds mainly on the ground , running and hopping with a start @-@ stop @-@ start progress . It pulls earthworms from the soil , usually finding them by sight , but sometimes by hearing , and roots through leaf litter for other invertebrates . Small amphibians and lizards are occasionally hunted . This species will also perch in bushes to take berries and collect caterpillars and other active insects . Animal prey predominates , and is particularly important during the breeding season , with windfall apples and berries taken more in the autumn and winter . The nature of the fruit taken depends on what is locally available , and frequently includes exotics in gardens .

= = = Natural threats = = =

Near human habitation the main predator of the common blackbird is the domestic cat , with newly fledged young especially vulnerable . Foxes and predatory birds , such as the sparrowhawk and other accipiters , also take this species when the opportunity arises . However , there is little direct evidence to show that either predation of the adult blackbirds or loss of the eggs and chicks to corvids , such as the European magpie or Eurasian jay , decrease population numbers .

This species is occasionally a host of parasitic cuckoos , such as the common cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) , but this is minimal because the common blackbird recognizes the adult of the parasitic species and its non @-@ mimetic eggs . In the UK , only three nests of 59 @, @ 770 examined (0

@. @ 005 %) contained cuckoo eggs . The introduced merula blackbird in New Zealand , where the cuckoo does not occur , has , over the past 130 years , lost the ability to recognize the adult common cuckoo but still rejects non @-@ mimetic eggs .

As with other passerine birds , parasites are common . 88 % of common blackbirds were found to have intestinal parasites , most frequently *Isospora* and *Capillaria* species. and more than 80 % had haematozoan parasites (*Leucocytozoon* , *Plasmodium* , *Haemoproteus* and *Trypanosoma* species)

Common blackbirds spend much of their time looking for food on the ground where they can become infested with ticks , which are external parasites that most commonly attach to the head of a blackbird . In France , 74 % of rural blackbirds were found to be infested with *Ixodes* ticks , whereas , only 2 % of blackbirds living in urban habitats were infested . This is partly because it is more difficult for ticks to find another host on lawns and gardens in urban areas than in uncultivated rural areas , and partly because ticks are likely to be commoner in rural areas , where a variety of tick hosts , such as foxes , deer and boar , are more numerous . Although ixodid ticks can transmit pathogenic viruses and bacteria , and are known to transmit *Borrelia* bacteria to birds , there is no evidence that this affects the fitness of blackbirds except when they are exhausted and run down after migration .

The common blackbird is one of a number of species which has unihemispheric slow @-@ wave sleep . One hemisphere of the brain is effectively asleep , while a low @-@ voltage EEG , characteristic of wakefulness , is present in the other . The benefit of this is that the bird can rest in areas of high predation or during long migratory flights , but still retain a degree of alertness .

= = Status and conservation = =

The common blackbird has an extensive range , estimated at 10 million square kilometres (3 @. @ 8 million square miles) , and a large population , including an estimated 79 to 160 million individuals in Europe alone . The species is not believed to approach the thresholds for the population decline criterion of the IUCN Red List (i.e. , declining more than 30 % in ten years or three generations) , and is therefore evaluated as Least Concern . In the western Palaearctic , populations are generally stable or increasing , but there have been local declines , especially on farmland , which may be due to agricultural policies that encouraged farmers to remove hedgerows (which provide nesting places) , and to drain damp grassland and increase the use of pesticides , both of which could have reduced the availability of invertebrate food .

The common blackbird was introduced to Australia by a bird dealer visiting Melbourne in early 1857 , and its range has expanded from its initial foothold in Melbourne and Adelaide to include all of south @-@ eastern Australia , including Tasmania and the Bass Strait islands . The introduced population in Australia is considered a pest because it damages a variety of soft fruits in orchards , parks and gardens including berries , cherries , stone fruit and grapes . It is thought to spread weeds , such as blackberry , and may compete with native birds for food and nesting sites .

The introduced common blackbird is , together with the native silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) , the most widely distributed avian seed disperser in New Zealand . Introduced there along with the song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) in 1862 , it has spread throughout the country up to an elevation of 1 @, @ 500 metres (4 @, @ 921 ft) , as well as outlying islands such as the Campbell and Kermadecs . It eats a wide range of native and exotic fruit , and makes a major contribution to the development of communities of naturalised woody weeds . These communities provide fruit more suited to non @-@ endemic native birds and naturalised birds , than to endemic birds .

= = In culture = =

The common blackbird was seen as a sacred though destructive bird in Classical Greek folklore , and was said to die if it consumed pomegranate . Like many other small birds , it has in the past been trapped in rural areas at its night roosts as an easily available addition to the diet , and in medieval times the conceit of placing live birds under a pie crust just before serving may have been

the origin of the familiar nursery rhyme :

Sing a song of sixpence ,
A pocket full of rye ;
Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie !
When the pie was opened the birds began to sing ,
Oh wasn 't that a dainty dish to set before the king ?

The common blackbird 's melodious , distinctive song is mentioned in the poem *Adlestrop* by Edward Thomas ;

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by , and round him , mistier ,
Farther and farther , all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire .

In the English Christmas carol *The Twelve Days of Christmas* , the line commonly sung today as " four calling birds " is believed to have originally been written in the 18th century as " four colly birds " , an archaism meaning " black as coal " that was a popular English nickname for the common blackbird .

The common blackbird , unlike many black creatures , is not normally seen as a symbol of bad luck , but R. S. Thomas wrote that there is " a suggestion of dark Places about it " , and it symbolised resignation in the 17th century tragic play *The Duchess of Malfi* ; an alternate connotation is vigilance , the bird 's clear cry warning of danger .

The common blackbird is the national bird of Sweden , which has a breeding population of 1 ? 2 million pairs , and was featured on a 30 öre Christmas postage stamp in 1970 ; it has also featured on a number of other stamps issued by European and Asian countries , including a 1966 4d British stamp and an 1998 Irish 30p stamp . This bird ? arguably ? also gives rise to the Serbian name for Kosovo , which is the possessive adjectival form of Serbian *kos* (" blackbird ") as in *Kosovo Polje* (" Blackbird Field ") .

== = Species information == =

" BBC Science & Nature ? Blackbird , with song clip " . Retrieved 26 December 2007 .

" Birds of Britain ? Blackbird " . Retrieved 27 December 2007 .

" Madeira Birds ? Information on subspecies *cabreræ* " . Retrieved 27 December 2007 .

" RSPB ? Blackbird , including video and sound clips " . Retrieved 27 December 2007 .

Ageing and sexing (PDF ; 5 @. @ 3 MB) by Javier Blasco @- @ Zumeta & Gerd @- @ Michael Heinze

Feathers of Common Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)

== = Sounds and videos == =

Audio recordings of Blackbird on Xeno @- @ canto .

Blackbird videos , photos & sounds on the Internet Bird Collection . Retrieved on 2007 @- @ 12 @- @ 27

Other Blackbird songs on Sonatura

Video of bird eating mealworms

== = Images == =

" ARKive ? Blackbird still images " . Retrieved 27 December 2007 .