Female Blackbird, by Philip Croft / BTO

Blackbirds in Gardens

Hugh Hanmer takes a look at the initial findings from the Blackbirds in Gardens Survey, which is now being extended for a second season.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the Blackbirds in Gardens survey in 2024. This survey was part of the wider Vector-borne RADAR project (**www.vb-radar.com**), which is helping us to understand, and potentially mitigate, the impacts of Usutu virus on the UK's Blackbird population. Between June and October around 2,250 participants submitted almost 20,000 15-minute surveys from across the UK, with a small number of individuals also taking part in the Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands. On average, participants submitted five weeks of recording, with one in 10 participants submitting surveys every week across the recording period. Thank you so much for your efforts.

BLACKBIRD REPORTING

Blackbirds were reported at least once from the majority (93%) of participating gardens, but this reporting rate changed over the survey season with over 90% of gardens reporting Blackbirds at the start of the

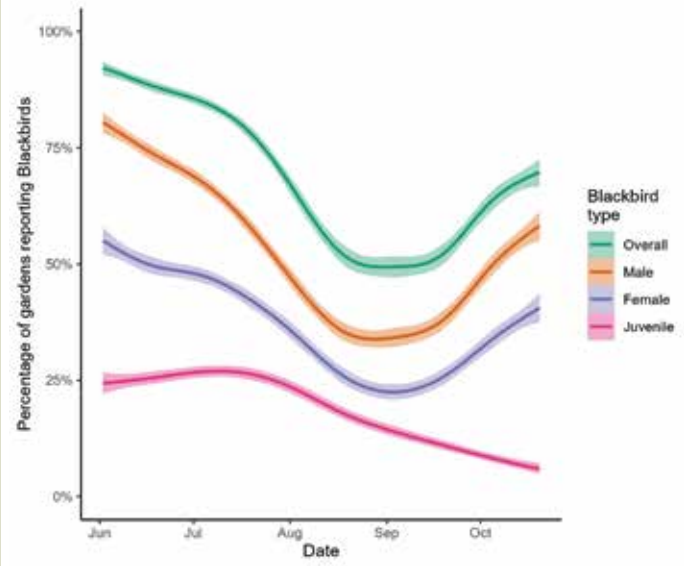
survey in early June, compared to only around 50% in late August/early September. Similarly the average maximum count per survey was two individuals at the start of the survey, dropping to zero in early September before recovering to one individual later in September.

This dip in recording during the late summer/early autumn is common amongst garden birds, including Blackbirds, and coincides with the post-breeding moults of adults and the post-juvenile moult and dispersal of juvenile birds. Adults replace all their feathers during this period, while young birds replace all but the main flight feathers on the wing, so they tend to hunker down out of sight where they are safer from predators. Birds start to move back into gardens later in the autumn as the weather gets colder and invertebrates become scarcer.

Understanding these patterns will help us provide better advice on what you can do for Blackbirds breeding in and around your garden. This natural behaviour, alongside the arrival of migrant Blackbirds from elsewhere in Europe in late autumn/winter, is why many of you will have seen more Blackbirds in your gardens since the end of the survey. We'd like to especially thank those who took the trouble to record 'no Blackbirds', as we understand how much harder it can be to submit a zero result compared to a positive count, especially over multiple weeks. It is all valuable data though, knowing what Blackbirds avoid is as important as knowing what they favour.

Preening male Blackbird, by Philip Croft / BTO

Change in percentage of gardens from which Blackbirds were reported over the survey. Each line represents a different age or sex class, with the green line showing records of any Blackbird, shaded areas indicate how confident we are in each trend.



REGIONAL PATTERNS IN REPORTING

This overall pattern of garden use masks considerable regional and habitat differences in reporting and counts. Blackbirds were rarer in more southern and more urban gardens, with the effect being most obvious in London – where Blackbirds were only reported from two-thirds (60%) of participating gardens overall.

Blackbirds were more common in gardens in the north, with weekly reporting from North West England, in particular, not dropping below 50% at any point. Although we expect Blackbirds, along with most other garden birds, to be naturally scarcer in more urban areas, this strong pattern around London is believed to be related to the spread of Usutu virus, which was first detected in London and mirrors patterns observed in your long-term Garden BirdWatch observations. Blackbirds were also more common in larger, greener, wilder gardens, especially those with ponds, underlining the importance of more wildlife-friendly approaches to gardening.

We will be using data from both the Blackbirds in Gardens Survey and Garden BirdWatch to help us untangle how Usutu virus, the weather, habitat and other factors potentially drive the observed regional patterns in garden use by this familiar species.

BLACKBIRD ACTIVITY AND BEHAVIOUR

Alongside counts designed to aid comparisons with the longer-running BTO Garden BirdWatch dataset, participants in the Blackbirds in Gardens Survey also recorded the timing of their surveys and maximum counts of males, females and juveniles, together with documenting some behaviours and activities to get a better understanding of how they actually use gardens, and what resources are important to them.

Blackbirds were seen throughout the daylight hours but most people did their surveys and saw Blackbirds in the morning, between 06:00 and 11:00. Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, adult males were recorded more often than females or juveniles. This may be because male Blackbirds are behaviourally bolder than females and juveniles, leading to them being more obvious and active earlier and so recorded more often. It may also be because the adult male is the more readily identifiable of the age and sex classes.

Juvenile Blackbirds were reported from only around a quarter of gardens, with reporting rates highest in June and July before dropping off as these young birds moulted into adult type plumage and dispersed into other sites and habitats. This low reporting of juveniles, even at the peak of fledging in the early summer, may reflect a poor breeding season, or it could simply be that gardens represent poor foraging habitat for young birds, which are taken elsewhere, such as urban greenspaces to learn how to find food. Juveniles were more commonly recorded in rural gardens, from the countryside into large villages/small towns, and more generally in the Midlands, Northern England and Scotland, which might suggest a better breeding season in some areas compared to others. To help us understand better how juvenile Blackbirds use gardens we plan to start the survey earlier in the 2025 breeding season than was the case in 2024.

Of the recorded behaviours, territorial chasing was commonest in early morning and in the first half of the survey, but could happen at any time of day or across the survey period. Afternoons tended to be quieter, with most birds recorded as looking for food. Interestingly, while Blackbirds commonly foraged for natural food throughout the day, their use of supplementary food, while starting at a similar level in the morning, tended to drop off through the day, perhaps suggesting that birds were using it as an initial 'top-up' but found enough natural food through the rest of the day.

TAKING PART IN 2025

We are repeating the survey in 2025, starting earlier in the spring (April) and ending in September. We are especially interested in recruiting more participants from in and around major urban areas across the country to see how these compare to both London – where the decline started – and the wider countryside. Please note due to limited staffing capacity we are unable to process data submitted to us on paper.

We look forward to both returning and new people taking part and helping us learn more about how our Blackbirds are doing! ■

Hugh Hanmer is a Senior Research Ecologist at BTO, working primarily on urban birds and the factors that shape their populations. He previously organised the Tawny Owl Calling Survey, to which many of you contributed.

Pattern in Blackbird reporting by time of day. Green line shows recording of any Blackbird, while the other colours show the main behaviours they displayed.