SPECIES FOCUS

Blackbird

Blackbirds have remained one of the most familiar garden birds throughout the 25 years of Garden BirdWatch, but we are still finding out new information about this everyday species. By **Robert Jaques**.

Blackbirds have been one of the most frequently-reported birds throughout the history of Garden BirdWatch. Over 97% of GBW gardens record the presence of at least one Blackbird and nearly five million pairs are thought to breed in Britain, making this one of our commonest birds. The BTO's long-term monitoring shows there was a national decline in Blackbird numbers between the 1970s until the mid-90s, possibly driven by declines in farmland populations. However, the overall numbers showed some recovery in the 1990s and 2000s, and for the last 15 years, the population has remained broadly stable. GBW records have remained steady since 2002, with nearly all gardens recording Blackbirds in the spring, dropping to around 70% of gardens in the autumn when birds make an annual movement into the wider countryside to take advantage of natural foods.

Preliminary results from last year's large-scale Gardenwatch survey, run in partnership with BBC Springwatch and the Open University, revealed that Blackbirds were observed using garden resources, such as natural foods, nesting places and water, more than any other species, showing how well they are adapted to garden habitats.

A DIVERSE DIET

Earthworms and other invertebrates make a large part of a Blackbird's diet during the summer months. Blackbirds have also

Blackbirds have been known to take newts, frogs and small fish from ponds.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SARAH KELMAN/BTO, EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO, JOSIE LATUS/BTO, GRAY IMAGES/BTO

been known to prey on larger animals, including newts, small fish, frogs and their tadpoles, snakes and lizards, nestling birds and even the carrion of their own species. It has been suggested that Blackbirds are more likely to turn to these less conventional foods during periods of drought when access to ground invertebrates is limited. Young are fed soft-bodied invertebrates at first, with adult insects being introduced into the diet later in development.

Blackbirds have also been reported to rob the hard-earned food of Song Thrushes. When Song Thrushes open snail shells using their "anvils", Blackbirds will pay attention and wait for the smashing sounds to stop before swooping in to steal the extracted snail.

AN URBAN POSTER BIRD

Due to their abundance in both urban and rural settings Blackbirds have featured regularly in research looking at how urban living affects birds. We know that Blackbirds in towns and cities are likely to begin breeding earlier in the year, perhaps due to the warmer temperatures in built up areas meaning invertebrates are active for longer. The steady supply of food, both as invertebrate prey and in garden feeders, may mean town Blackbirds need to travel less, and research has confirmed that urban Blackbirds are less likely to migrate. City-living individuals have shorter wings, on average, probably due to this reduced requirement to travel large distances.

One study showed that Blackbirds seem to actively choose to nest close to street lights, possibly because this protects them from mammalian predators that don't like well-lit areas.

As well as being warmer, cities also have more artificial lights and are noisier than the countryside. Light pollution is assumed to be bad for wildlife, but one study showed that Blackbirds seem to actively choose to nest close to street lights, possibly because this protects them from mammalian predators that don't like well-lit areas. The same study found that city birds laid their eggs almost a week earlier than rural individuals, and were more likely to successfully rear chicks. Blackbirds have also been shown to respond to noise levels, with urban individuals producing a different quality of song, shifting frequencies so their song isn't lost in the increased background noise.

City living can be stressful and unhealthy; urban Blackbirds have been found to have shorter telomeres, the protective caps on the ends of chromosomes which are linked to ageing and disease when shortened. This implies that the convenience of urban living, such as warmer temperatures and reliable food, comes with a downside of consequences for their health. However, there is some evidence that urban Blackbirds have evolved to deal with these stressful environments; tests have shown that urban birds in stressful situations produce less corticosterone, the stress hormone, compared to birds from natural forest habitats. This may be a case of individual birds getting used to dynamic, noisy human environments, but there may also be a genetic component, with birds that get less stressed by urban environments being more likely to breed successfully, and producing offspring that are less susceptible to stress. ■

FACT FILE

Above: adult female
Below: juvenile
Bottom: adult male.

Blackbird

Turdus merula

POPULATION
4.9 million pairs (2009).

CONSERVATION STATUS
Green-listed bird of least conservation concern.

MIGRATION STATUS
Resident and partial migrant.

DIET
Soft-bodied invertebrates and insects, fruits and seed.

LONGEVITY
Typical lifespan: 3 years.
Maximum recorded lifespan: 15 years 2 months and 5 days.

BREEDING ECOLOGY
Clutch size: 3–4 eggs.
Number of broods: 2 to 3, 4 in exceptional years.
Incubation: 13–14 days.
Fledging period: 14–16 days.
Age at first breeding: 1 year.
Egg length: 29 mm.

HABITAT
Woodland, scrub and towns.

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