

## Blackbirds



The blackbird is one of our best known birds and is present all year round in gardens and countryside throughout the whole of Britain. It is instantly recognisable not only by its appearance but by its swift movements as it runs across lawns, pausing briefly to feed before scuttling back to cover.

The name *blackbird* accurately describes the males, but females and young birds are brown, often with paler spots and streaks on their breasts which allows them to merge with their surroundings. Other features of adult males are the yellow ring around the eye and the bright orange-yellow beak, which contrast with the all-black feathers to make a most striking bird.

Although muted throughout much of the autumn and winter, the familiar song of the blackbird can now be heard with its melodic phrases with warbled endings. You will also once more hear the repetitive alarm calls made to warn off unwanted visitors to their territory.

At this time of year many birds may visit our gardens especially if we attract them with seeds, currents and fat to help them survive the cold weather. House sparrows, dunnocks, starlings and chaffinches busily engage in feeding but, interestingly, when a blackbird arrives it is invariably more concerned with chasing the other birds away rather than sharing the food. This reluctance to dine with other kinds of birds is nothing compared with their unwillingness to share with other blackbirds. As the weather improves and natural food becomes available once again, they enjoy a varied diet ranging from berries and insects to earthworms and apples. It is fascinating to watch them pull earthworms from the ground, and to probe the soil or turn over leaf litter looking for hidden insects.

The nesting season begins in early March although warm or cold spells can bring the breeding season forward or delay it. Surprisingly it starts up to two weeks earlier in gardens than in woodlands. Breeding ends in late July, although chicks are often found in nests well into August. Each season, blackbirds rear two or three broods and, in a good year, a fourth may be raised.

Built by the female, the nest is an untidy cup of grass, small twigs and other vegetation, plastered with mud and lined with fine grass. It is usually located low down in trees, shrubs and climbers, but may be found inside buildings and even amongst vegetation on the ground. In the nest the female lays her clutch of 3-5 greenish-blue, brown spotted eggs which she alone incubates, although the chicks are fed by both parents. The young become independent three weeks after leaving the nest, and leave the immediate area shortly after.

Blackbirds in Britain are mostly resident but some migrate to southern Europe for the winter. This is offset by large numbers of birds migrating from Scandinavia and other parts of northern Europe which increases the blackbird population in UK by an estimated 20 million. You may be able to spot the immigrants as their beaks are duller than those of resident birds.