

“SONG THRUSHES WILL HAPPILY SET UP BASE IN A GARDEN AND STAY THERE THROUGHOUT THE WINTER”



Make a welcome home for THRUSHES



This bird demolishes snails for breakfast, lunch and tea – what other reason do you need to encourage it onto your plot? asks Wendy Johnson



The rustle of leaves in my garden at this time of year usually means one of my two wildlife favourites is nearby. Either it's a squirrel rifling through the leaf litter for nuts hidden in the autumn or, more often, it's a blackbird scuffling through the shrubbery looking for food. Blackbirds and song thrushes are two related resident birds and prefer to feed on the ground rather than from tables or hanging feeders. When the weather gets a little warmer they can be spotted probing for worms on the grass.

Throughout winter almost any berry-bearing shrub or tree, such as hawthorn, rowan and cotoneaster, is helpful to thrushes; generally, the smaller the berry the better. Fruit trees are excellent, too. Windfall apples are especially appealing, and it's best to leave the fruit where it falls on the ground so that

blackbirds and song thrushes can nibble at them. I live very close to an orchard, which is a real hotspot for these lovely birds, but I don't have fruit trees in my garden so I sometimes help them in winter by putting halved apples on the grass.

Blackbirds and song thrushes will happily set up base in a garden and stay there throughout the winter so keep a regular look out – you could get to know them quite well. Just turning over a bit of a border or vegetable patch with a fork will also help hugely by exposing tasty morsels for them, and in turn prepare the soil for the growing season ahead, too.

Mistle thrushes are another of our resident thrushes. However, they're far less familiar and are actually declining as a breeding species; they're now on the amber list of conservation concern. It's easy to confuse mistle thrushes and song thrushes as they do look alike, but mistle thrushes are larger with white flashes on their underwings, have an undulating flight – like a

woodpecker – and a call like a football rattle. Mistle thrushes tend to only visit the largest of gardens, so if you have one and a large holly tree, or tree festooned with mistletoe, then a mistle thrush may set up a territory around it and fend off other thrushes from coming in. In a really harsh and tough winter, mistle thrushes can come to smaller gardens and eat apples from the ground. However, the likelihood is that anything speckled and thrush-sized in an average-sized garden is a song thrush.

Flying visit

Redwings and fieldfares are slightly less familiar to us as they are migrant thrushes. They come here for the winter, but in a month or so will be heading back to Scandinavia for the breeding season. You're most likely to see them in the countryside. In fact, cycling along quiet country lanes in north Norfolk recently, I was kept company by hundreds of redwings flitting through the hedgerows. Their speckly chests and flash of russet on their sides really brightened up a cold and drizzly ride! And it is in really cold spells that they abandon their fears and can come into gardens in their droves, taking halved apples from your lawn with relish.

TAKE ACTION!

Don't forget to take part in the RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch on Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 January. Simply spend one hour at any time during that weekend noting the highest number of each bird species seen at any one time in your garden, allotment or local park. Then submit your results to the RSPB at rspb.org.uk/birdwatch.