

Blackbird singing in the dead of night



By Bill Naylor

A hen blackbird sunk low in its cupped nest, its upturned beak protruding over the rim, is often an enduring childhood memory. There are very few alternative names for

the thrush the Anglo Saxons called 'Blak byrd'. Shakespeare preferred Ouzel.

Surprising to some, the female is an earthy brown bird, with black only on the back and rump. The throat is cream, the chest mottled with a yellowish orange beak that fades after the breeding season. Females vary a great deal. Cinnamon and golden-brown varieties are not uncommon. Albinism and Leucism is more common than in other thrushes or British bird. Albinos have pink or red eyes and reduced visual ability. Blackbirds with partial white plumage and normal eyes are Leucistic.

Originally a woodland bird of the tree canopy, now living in densities ten times the size of its country colleagues, the suburban blackbird's strident flute-like calls ring out from rooftops and telegraph poles. It's a familiar bird in many countries, singing during the night and day across much of Europe. Sweden's national bird is also found in Africa, (Morocco) and Asia and as far as China and Russia. While most UK Blackbirds are resident, some overwinter in Ireland, and the resident population increases when a million Scandinavian birds overwinter here annually.

I'm not alone in the belief the blackbird is the finest avian songster in the northern hemisphere. The

Beatles even featured a singing blackbird on one of their records.

Since Roman time, thrushes were hunted for food in Europe and up until the 1940s in England. One novelty dish, the source of the popular nursery rhyme, was to imprison live blackbirds in a cooked pie, and when cut open it released four and twenty live birds.

Introduced blackbirds are well established in Australia and New Zealand, and have developed a different dialect to northern birds.

Blackbirds are omnivorous and also steal food from other birds. Lacking the technique for extracting snails from shells, they wait until a song thrush has done the heavy lifting before pilfering the contents. Earthworms are a major food, and they even catch frogs, small fish and mice.

Fights involving both sexes are common and deaths not unusual. Pairs remain together all year round or pair up again in spring. Males singing in January are usually young unmated birds. The well constructed bulky nest of dead grass, twigs and mud is often reused for a second or sometimes third brood. Three to five green-blotched eggs are incubated by the hen for 12-14 days. Older experienced birds can produce four broods totalling seventeen young in a single season. In July, nestlings often have green skin acquired from the large amounts of caterpillars they're fed. Fledging takes place at 14 days. Males are generally darker than females. The young male's brown beak and eye ring become yellow by winter, depending on the time they hatched. The longevity record is 20 years, but the average is three or four years.