

The Song Thrush

I hear the thrush, and I see
Him alone at the end of the lane
Near the bare poplar's tip,
Singing continuously.
Edward Thomas



As I write this in early March our local Song Thrush seems to be singing almost all day. He sings from the top of the alder tree, just downstream from our garden, and starts at dawn continuing for most of the morning and then sings at intervals for the rest of the day. As I am sure you know, the Song Thrush repeats most of his phrases – twice, three times or more - piu piu piu toodle-eet toodle-eet toodle-eet pee pee pee swirrup swirrup. This makes him easy to identify though sometimes a more complex phrase is not repeated and this can catch you out!

The Song Thrush is really a bird of the woodlands. Last March we spent a few days in the Forest of Dean and Song Thrushes there were abundant – singing every 100 yards or so along the tracks, and often 3 could be heard singing from any one spot. They also frequent gardens, but much of our agricultural landscape is no longer to their liking.

As they often perch in very conspicuous places when they sing, and as their favourite landscape is the same as that populated by Sparrowhawks, I am curious as to how they avoid being captured as soon as they first sit up on that exposed branch to sing. Survive they must do however, although the population in parts of the UK is falling. Agricultural intensification, land drainage and a dry climate are not to their liking and they are decreasing in the eastern parts of the UK. However you will not be surprised to hear that they are doing fine in Wales!

It is interesting to compare the Song Thrush with its close relative the Blackbird. Blackbirds will often hold a much smaller territory than Song Thrushes – I can remember suburban streets with a Blackbird singing from every other roof. This means that they will generally be more common than Song Thrushes, whose territory can be as large as several hectares.

However, it is the difference in singing behaviour that intrigues me. We have a Blackbird pair in our garden and so far this spring I have not heard the male singing at all. It is the same every year – they pair up and start breeding without a whisper of song. Sometimes the male sings a little later in the spring, but it's a half-hearted affair. Not like those suburban Blackbirds on the roof tops, which can be true non-stop virtuosos. And that leads me to believe that our Blackbird doesn't sing because there is no competition. The territory and the pairing-up seems to be established in the winter. It's a done deal by the time spring arrives.

So why is the Song Thrush different?? I don't know. There is no other Song Thrush within hearing distance but it is possible that he does not have a mate and is singing primarily to attract one. (Bird song has two main purposes – establishing a territory and attracting a mate).

Rosemary Royle