

## The Redwing Invasion

As you are reading this at the end of March or the beginning of April, I hope that the weather will feel a little more spring-like. (Though thinking about it, “spring-like” can mean anything from gales and thunderstorms to balmy barbecue weather, and cold, overcast miserable spells which often coincide with the Blackthorn flowering, hence the term “Blackthorn Winter”). I am writing this at the beginning of March as the snow falls outside the window. At the last measurement we had 3½ inches and the daffodils, flowering as they always do for St David’s Day, are looking very sorry for themselves, all bent down under the weight of snow. This is the most snow I can remember in our 15 years in Pembrokeshire, and I see that the snow depth record was at St Athan, not all that far away. Meanwhile there was no snow at all at Port Talbot – how bizarre!



We have been putting some extra food out for the birds in this inclement weather, including some apples from store, and at lunchtime I was amazed to see the snowy lawn covered with about 50 feeding birds. A careful scan through revealed mostly Redwings (up to 45), with a few Fieldfares and two Mistle Thrushes together with resident Blackbirds and Song Thrush. Also a few Starlings – an unusual treat as, although big flocks feed in the fields around us, we hardly ever see them up close. As the afternoon progressed we had phone calls and emails from people in Marloes, Broad Haven and St Ishmaels saying they had flocks of Redwings in their gardens and the Pembrokeshire Bird Blog revealed that there were large numbers feeding along the tideline in the Cleddau and in woodlands in the Gwaun Valley.

It is very likely that these birds were fleeing the intense cold and snow in Eastern England and after Pembrokeshire there was nowhere else to go. A sea crossing to Ireland was made impossible by Storm Emma so they were “stuck between a rock and hard place” and desperate for food. In the early part of the winter they often feed on berries in hedgerows but as the winter progresses and these supplies run out they feed mainly on the ground in open fields. This is obviously not possible when the ground is frozen or covered in snow. I was relieved to see that after several hours of feeding some of the birds were able to perch up on the apple trees and have a preen, obviously feeling sufficiently fed.

Redwings are a common winter visitor in the UK, though many of these birds do not stay and will pass through to the continent. They are always a delight to see – they are small thrushes with a strong creamy line over the eye and a large rusty patch on the side of the breast, which actually goes up under the wing into the “armpit”. They have a rather “cute” little face with a steep forehead and bill which is often up-tilted. They breed in the forests of Scandinavia and Russia, also in Iceland, and just a few pairs breed each year in northern Scotland.

Rosemary Royle

### A Redwing footnote

Subsequent to writing the article opposite it has become clear that many Redwings did not make it. There have been several reports of dead Redwings on paths and tracks - one report mentioned 6 dead birds on a morning walk, and a friend of ours found 10 on the track by Marloes Mere. If we are seeing this many in obvious places, how many more little corpses must there be on the fields and beaches? And of course, in the sea, as many birds will have tried to escape the weather by flying towards Ireland or France. I think these poor birds were already in poor condition by the time that they arrived here - there had been freezing weather for quite a while in the east of the country which is where many Redwings and Fieldfares spend the winter.

Other birds were suffering too - there were numerous reports of Snipe and Lapwing in gardens, looking for some soft soil to probe into - this Snipe was photographed by Richard Neale in his garden.

