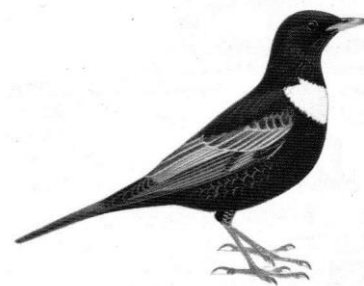


The Ring Ouzel

A bird of mountains and mystery, the Ring Ouzel is a hard bird to see. If you are very lucky you may just get a glimpse of a male bird singing his haunting three-note song from a stunted rowan tree growing out of the side of a waterfall, in a rocky gully on a high mountain side. Try to get closer and he will be away. A bird whose habits are as unlike its close relative, the Blackbird, as you can imagine – it migrates to North Africa in the winter, is very shy of humans and lives in very remote places.

However, it does share a liking for worms with its cousin – picking them out of moorland turf rather than manicured lawns. All over the UK they are declining – this is thought to be because they require a mixed habitat – overgrown gullies to nest in and open turf to feed. Overgrazing has given them fewer places to safely nest whilst increasing forestry in the last century and a milder climate has meant that the Blackbird is now penetrating further upslope and providing competition.



In Wales, Ring Ouzels breed mainly in the Brecon Beacons and Snowdonia. So why, you may ask, am I writing about them in PP? Well, the answer is simply that you can see Ring Ouzels here on migration. Usually they pass through in ones and twos – on two occasions I have seen single birds in the vicinity of Marloes Mere and true to their secretive nature, once seen, they flew off never to be seen again. But this year was different – there were actually “flocks” of Ring Ouzels – up to 9 at St David’s Head, 3 on the large lawn by the pink house at St Justinian’s and 4 at Pencarnan camp site, as well as smaller numbers down here on our local headlands and islands. This provided the novel opportunity for a photograph which actually had more than one Ring Ouzel in it – an unusual occurrence. (See <http://pembsbirds.blogspot.co.uk/> for 20th April)

When you look in a bird book, Ring Ouzels appear to be a Blackbird with a white collar. In reality, they look somewhat different. The underparts have some silver scalloping and the wings have a distinct silver sheen which is very obvious in flight. The female is a less strongly coloured version of the male.

Many people mistake a Blackbird with a white patch in its plumage for a Ring Ouzel but if it’s hopping around on your lawn then it’s a definitely a Blackbird! Blackbirds, and other “black birds” have a tendency to produce white patches in their plumage – there was a famous all white Jackdaw on Skomer at one time, and recently there has been a nearly all-white Magpie around the Fishguard area. This can be due to partial albinism or to leucism and is surprisingly common in a wide range of birds.

Rosemary Royle

PS There is an excellent article on Ring Ouzels in the latest RSPB magazine “Nature’s Home” - well worth a read.