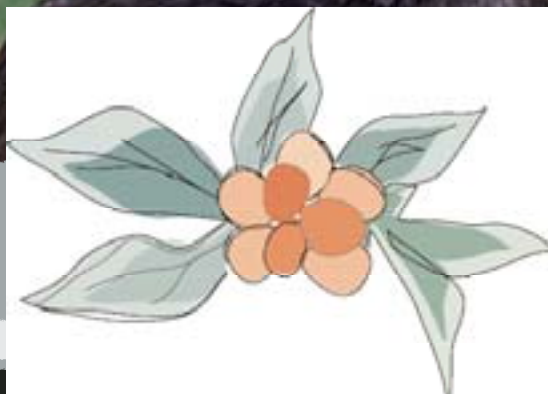


Blackbird



Aims of the Blackbird Action Plan

- Promote the blackbird as a 'flagship' bird species for Lambeth, to help raise awareness of all wild birds in the Borough, and the conservation of habitats used by birds.
- To assist national, regional and London programmes monitoring the general health of wild bird populations by using the blackbird as a readily identifiable and culturally significant species.

A) What is the blackbird?

The blackbird (*Turdus merula*) is one of Britain's commonest and most recognisable birds. The male blackbird has an unmistakable velvet-black plumage and contrasting bright orange-yellow bill and eye ring. Female blackbirds are brown with dark spots and streaks on the breast, and a brown bill.

Traditionally birds of woodland and heath, blackbirds readily adapted to farmland, gardens and urban sites. They prefer areas with plenty of bushes, shrubs and trees, and nearby open ground and short grass, but often along berry-bearing hedges and open fields. Blackbirds are found across the UK in gardens and countryside and from coasts to hills, apart from the higher peaks. Blackbirds have a very mixed diet, feeding on insects, worms and berries.

Blackbirds have a mellow song, calls include 'chink, chink', and a clattering, ringing alarm. It is a resident British species found the year round. Blackbird territory varies depending on habitat, and can be as small as 0.2 ha. Blackbirds are relatively short-lived birds, living on average 3-4 years, but a few reach an advanced age - the oldest known was 20 years and 3 months.

B) Blackbirds in Lambeth

There are thought to be annually about 10-15 million wintering blackbirds in the UK with about 4.7 million breeding pairs. Lambeth, like London, has its fair share of wintering blackbirds and breeding pairs. They are found in gardens, parks and open spaces, woodlands and school grounds right across the Borough. It is difficult to provide exact blackbird numbers for the Borough, but it must rank in the hundreds or possibly even approach or pass the 1,000 mark.

The Blackbird is listed as 'Green' in terms of its national population status; on a European basis, the blackbird is categorised as Category 4 – 'Secure'. This is probably its status in Lambeth as well.

C) Why do we need an Action Plan for the blackbird?

Although at first glance the UK blackbird population seems to be in a rather healthy situation, but the long-term trend for the species is classed as 'shallow decline'. Recent survey analysis shows a long-term decline in blackbird abundance, but recent increases suggest populations may be recovering. Blackbird mortality is high especially during the breeding season, with over half of all deaths between March and June. It is known many factors are responsible for these high mortality rates and may be contributing to the population decline.

Because the decline in national blackbird populations has been greatest on farmland, it is thought that changes in agricultural practice, particularly driven by government and EU policies, have encouraged farmers to remove hedgerows (which provide nesting places for blackbirds), to drain damp grassland and increase the use of pesticides, all of which could reduce invertebrate food. In contrast, blackbird populations remained stable in private gardens where such practices do not apply, and the number of chicks that fledge per garden nest is higher than in other habitats.



Blackbird (Turdus merula): male blackbird feeding young at nest. Copyright: Jens-Peter Laub/ardea.com

Starvation is one of the blackbird's greatest enemies. Changes or reduction in food supply for a bird living at break-neck speed, defending territory from other birds and heavily dependent on seasonally determined food has catastrophic effects. We can help blackbirds by avoiding the use of garden chemicals which eliminate insect and berry/seed bearing plants, and by planting shrubs that provide high-energy and nutrient-rich berries and seeds. Heavily ornamental or plant-deficient landscaped gardens are extremely unpopular with blackbirds and other birds.

Blackbirds are very vulnerable to predation as they spend a significant amount of their time feeding on the ground or patrolling and defending territory, which makes them vulnerable to predators. The main predator of blackbirds is the domestic cat, but foxes and predatory birds like sparrowhawks also take blackbirds when the opportunity arises. However, there is little direct evidence to show cats are a major cause of regulating or driving down blackbird numbers.

Blackbirds are like many other wild birds vulnerable to the effects of disease, often when they are malnourished, under stress (e.g. during and after breeding) or when food availability is low. Other important causes of blackbird death include being struck or run over by traffic, accidents caused by flying into windows or becoming trapped, e.g. inside buildings, under garden or bridge netting, etc.

Compared to 10-20 years ago there is no doubt the British blackbird population suffered a worrying decline, even though relatively moderate. Between 1994 and 2003 there was a 19% drop in national blackbird populations, with this decline beginning back in the mid-1970s.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)'s London Bird Project showed that blackbird was the most widespread species of bird, occurring in 91.5% (early winter) to 97.9% (late winter) of all sites surveyed. However, it showed that blackbird numbers declined by 21% in London between 1994 and 2000 which mirrors the situation seen in the UK (-21%) over roughly the same period. Therefore, although still popular and seen in many places, blackbird numbers may have dropped and this does give cause for concern

D) What is the legal status of the blackbird?

Blackbirds and their nests are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird. It is an offence under the same legislation to intentionally take, damage or destroy the eggs, young or nest of a blackbird while it is being built or in use. It is therefore essential to ensure blackbird nests are not destroyed if hedge trimming or tree felling has to be carried out in the breeding season.

E) What will the Blackbird Action Plan do?

Objective 1. We will raise local people's awareness of and interest in blackbirds as a 'flagship' bird species for the Borough of Lambeth and an indicator of wild bird population health in Lambeth and Greater London. Blackbird distribution, abundance and population health will be included in local bird surveys which will be commissioned and completed by the end of 2008.

F) Who is involved in the Blackbird Action Plan?

1. Partnerships

The Lead Partner for the Lambeth Blackbird Action Plan is Lambeth Council's Parks and Greenspaces Business Unit (Lambeth Parks).

The Lead Community Partner would be the Central London Local Group of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and/or British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

Other Partners include the London Wildlife Trust, Greater London Authority, London Natural History Society and the Council's Grounds Maintenance Contractor.

2. Contact for information

For more information on the Lambeth Blackbird Action Plan, including copies of this plan in paper or electronic format, please contact:

Dr Iain Boulton, Environmental Education Officer

Lambeth Parks & Greenspaces

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Tel: 020 7926 6209; Fax: 020 7926 6201; email: iboulton@lambeth.gov.uk

3. Further information and advice

Further advice on the blackbird, its ecology and conservation, and the management of habitats to protect and support blackbird and other British bird species, can be found on the following websites.

- DEFRA (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/>)
- RSPB (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/>)
- RSPB Blackbird Facts (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/b/blackbird/index.asp>)
- London Wildlife Trust (<http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/>)
- Greater London Authority (http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=1572)
- "Wild About Gardens" (<http://www.wildaboutgardens.org/>)
- British Trust for Ornithology (<http://www.bto.org/>)

