

Blackbird



1. Life of a blackbird

1.1. Courtship

In February a young male blackbird found himself a small garden with plenty of bushes and trees. He would sing for days to let the local females know where he was living, and to signal the other males to stay away from his territory.

When he first saw his mate-to-be it made his feathers on his head and rump stand up. He stretched his head forward towards her with his bill wide open. She would stand there with her bill and tail almost vertical in response.

1.2. Nesting

The pair started to look for suitable places to build their nest and chose a thick bush. The female was better at nest building, so she built the nest, whilst the male brought materials to her. It took her about two weeks to build.

The nest was built in the shape of a bulky cup from used stems, grass, moss and small twigs, plastered with mud. The inside was lined with grass.

In March she laid four eggs, which were greenish in colour with dark markings. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger.

After 14 days the chicks hatched from their eggs.

1.3. Growing up

The chicks were completely naked and blind. Both parents were kept very busy finding food for the family and keeping them warm.

Two of the chicks died, one fell out of the nest and was eaten by a cat and the other died from starvation.

When the chicks were 14 days old they fledged. They crept and fluttered out of the nest and hid in nearby cover to avoid predators. Within a week they had learnt to fly. They would spend time experimenting with different sorts of food and exploring the territory. The male spent many hours keeping an eye on the chicks.

Three weeks after leaving the nest they were ready to leave the territory and find their own way in the world.

The female prepared herself for a second brood. It was a good year for food and they had three broods in total. The female had built such a good nest that they were able to use it for all three broods.

When the winter came, the pair separated and began the hard struggle to find food and survive the change in weather. If they survived they would probably join up again in the following year to raise more chicks.

1.4. Territory

Both male and female blackbirds are very territorial and can be very aggressive in defending their patch.

As autumn approaches, their need to defend a territory drops and they will often stray outside their boundaries if food is in better supply there.

Good territories are important as they provide a continual supply of food. If a blackbird cannot find a good territory, then it may die of starvation.

1.5. Bathing

On warm days blackbirds like to bathe in water, and after bathing they would spread out their feathers and spend time sunbathing.

They also like to bathe in ants, letting them run all over their body and squirting their ant fluids on them. It helped keep the parasites under control.

1.6. Survival

Blackbirds may be four years old when they die. A third of newly hatched blackbirds may die in their first year. Their biggest dangers are cold weather, starvation and disease. Often a cat or sparrowhawk will kill a blackbird. Squirrels will destroy a nest and eat eggs and young if they find them.

2. General data

2.1. Identification

Size	Larger than starlings
Appearance	<p>Adult males are a black colour with yellow bills and eye-rings. Females are a dark brown and at first you may not recognise them as blackbirds.</p> <p>Young blackbirds are also brown to keep them well camouflaged until they are experienced enough to take better care of themselves.</p>
Confusion	Unlikely
Sound	Blackbirds sing clearly, vary their tunes and have a wide repertoire of songs. They can even copy sounds such as ringing telephones.
When	<p>All year</p> <p>In the late summer or early autumn they moult and you may think that they are hiding.</p>
Where	Variety of locations including gardens, parks and near hedges.
Movement	<p>They will search among leaves for food, flicking the leaves aside with their bills and using their feet to scratch the leaves backwards.</p> <p>They hop around and make short flights. They are sprinters rather than long distance birds as they may need to fly quickly out of danger.</p> <p>You may see a blackbird running after another one if it has strayed into its territory, so they can sprint on the ground if they have to.</p>

2.2. Feeding

Favourites	Earthworms, berries, seeds
Habits	<p>Noisy feeders especially when they are looking under dead leaves for food.</p> <p>Usually they will hop and run in a straight line looking for earthworms to pop out of the ground. They move, pause to look and listen and then move again, or if lucky strike out and pull the earthworm out of the ground. Once they have found one they will stay in the same area to see if they can find more.</p>

Other

They will wade along the shallows of a garden pond in search of flatworms and water snails. They will even eat a small frog and tadpoles if the opportunity arises.

Sometimes they will let song thrushes smash open a snail and then steal the fleshy bit. They will also steal earthworms from them if they have them.

3. Useful words

3.1. Words used by the blackbird

See if you can find the following words in the word search.

Blackbird, plastered, noisy, berries, moult, repertoire, ivy

N	O	I	P	L	A	S	W	B	Q
O	O	N	L	E	M	O	U	L	T
I	T	I	A	B	O	O	R	A	W
F	Q	U	S	E	L	T	Y	C	D
T	U	T	T	Y	T	E	R	K	C
Z	S	D	E	F	K	H	L	B	F
K	B	E	R	R	I	E	S	I	T
R	E	P	E	R	T	O	I	R	E
M	R	S	D	V	N	V	B	D	Y
A	Y	R	T	B	Y	P	O	V	J

3.2. Unscramble the following words

ING TH BA	
M U R P	
RT AL IC VE	
KS CH IC	
ER NT WI	
QU R S I T	
CO ISE RE GN	
HT ST IG RA	
A E D K N	
AL MA RI TE	

3.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about blackbirds have a go at answering these questions.

What material is a blackbird's nest built from?

Why are blackbirds interested in song thrushes smashing snail shells?

As a young blackbird out of the nest but not yet able to fly, how would you keep out of danger?

List some of the dangers that young blackbirds face.

Why do you think male blackbirds are such good singers?

Describe how a blackbird moves when looking for earthworms.

Why are young blackbirds brown and not black?

Why is it important to defend a good territory?