

Mistle Thrush



1. Life of a mistle thrush

1.1. Name

They are called mistle thrushes because they used to be seen eating mistletoe berries. But now they eat more yew and holly berries – perhaps they should be called holly thrushes or yew thrushes.

1.2. Courtship

In February a young male mistle thrush would sing for days to let the local females know where he was living and warn the other males to keep away.

1.3. Nesting

The pair started to look for a suitable place to build their nest and in the end built it high up in the fork of a yew tree. It was built by the female in the shape of a cup from twigs, grass, moss, roots and leaves lined with a smooth layer of mud and fine grass. The male did help with the finding and carrying of materials for his mate.

When the nest was completed, she laid four eggs. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger. Occasionally he would take over the egg sitting duties and give her a rest. There were lots of crows and magpies in the area and they are well known for stealing and eating eggs if they are hungry.

After 14 days the chicks hatched from their eggs. They were completely naked and blind.

1.4. Growing up

The female kept them warm with occasional help from the male. Both parents were kept busy finding food for the family.

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 experiment with different foods, and the parents taught the chicks songs, how to make sounds like a football rattle and how to keep safe from predators. The pair spent many hours keeping an eye on the chicks.

They quickly became independent and in July joined a small flock to move around the countryside looking for food.

As the food supply was good, the female prepared herself for a second brood.

When the winter came they separated and began the hard struggle to find food and survive the change in weather. If they could survive the winter they might be reunited in the spring to raise more chicks.

1.5. Resource guarding

During the winter the male mistle thrush found a small group of holly trees, full of berries and these were worth defending. It did not matter who tried to pinch the berries, he would warn them off with one of his famous rattle calls, and if they did not back off he would try to chase them away. This is called resource guarding; it makes sure the food is available just for the mistle thrush and is important in helping it survive the winter. In fact mistle thrushes that successfully practise resource guarding generally have bigger and earlier clutches than those birds that do not do it.

1.6. Territory

Both female and male mistle thrushes are very territorial and can be very aggressive and fearless in defending their patch. Good territories provide them with food and security.

1.7. Survival

Mistle thrushes might live to two years in age. Half of a brood might die in their first year.

The greatest dangers are cold weather, starvation and disease. Grey squirrels are a nuisance in destroying nests and eating eggs, as are crows and magpies. Often sparrowhawks and cats will catch a young mistle thrush and eat it.

2. General data

2.1. Identification

Size	Larger than blackbirds
Appearance	They have a very upright stance, grey-brown upperparts and large black spots all over their whitish breast. There is a touch of white on the tips of the tail feathers.
Confusion	With song thrushes which are smaller.
Sound	<p>Blackbirds and song thrushes are champion singers, but when it comes to volume mistle thrushes win hands down. If you have ever heard a football rattle, then that is just what their alarm call sounds like. You won't mistake or forget it when you hear it.</p> <p>They will sing during stormy conditions and you will often find one high up in a tree.</p>
When	All year
Where	<p>Mistle thrushes prefer places where there are tall trees for nesting and to sing from, and short grass for feeding.</p> <p>Woodland, gardens and parkland.</p>
Movement	<p>Their flight is strong but sometimes undulating as they close their wings at regular intervals.</p> <p>On the ground they are very upright and will feed away from cover. They get around by hopping or running.</p>

3. Staying alive

3.1. Feeding

Favourites	Earthworms, insects, slugs, snails, fruit and berries, in particular yew and holly berries.
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4. Useful words

4.1. Words used by the mistle thrush

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

Mistle, thrush, yew, rattle, stormy, flock, resource, guarding

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

4.2. Unscramble the following words

O O S R T	
L L O Y H	
ON CH PI AM	
ING UN AT DUL	
FE DE ND	
R P E C T	
LU VO ME	
RA LE TT	
TI ES DU	
RV IV E SU	

4.3. Understanding and problem solving

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

How did mistle thrushes get their name?

If you were a blackbird in winter and saw a mistle thrush sat in a holly tree full of berries, how would you expect the mistle thrush to react if you tried to eat some of the berries?

Do you think that resource guarding is selfish?

List a few predators that mistle thrushes should watch out for.

What does a mistle thrush's alarm call sound like?

List some of the mistle thrush's favourite foods.

Why do you think young mistle thrushes join flocks?