

Song thrush



1. Life of a song thrush

1.1. Courtship

In February a female song thrush was attracted to a very fit young male bird, who had the most wonderful voice. He would sing for days to let the local females know where he was living and warn the other males to keep away.

He would try to impress her by first running in front, throwing back his head, opening his bill and depressing his tail. He would then circle clockwise around her, depressing his tail and holding his head up almost vertically.

1.2. Defending a territory

Another song thrush had the cheek to land in the adjoining tree and start singing. Her mate responded with an appropriate song. This did not deter the intruder who flew into the owner's tree and flittered around.

That made her mate angry, and he fluffed out his feathers and dropped down to the grass below. The second bird accepted the challenge and followed. They moved around each other twittering away. The defender attacked the intruder and they both beat their wings fiercely against each other. They fluttered a few feet into the air still attacking each other.

Then every so often they would take a rest and lie horizontally on the ground. Then off they would go again. Finally her mate got the upper hand or should I say upper wing and pinned the intruder to the ground. He managed to escape and decided that retreat was a good idea and flew away.

1.3. Nesting

The pair started to look for a suitable place to build their nest and in the end found a hawthorn bush in some scrub at the bottom of a garden. The nest was built by the female in the shape of a cup not far from the ground. She used twigs, grass and moss lined with a smooth layer of mud to build the nest.

When the nest was ready, she laid four eggs. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger. Occasionally she would have a rest and her mate would take over the egg sitting duties.

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

1.4. Growing up

The pair were both kept very busy finding food for the family.

When the chicks were 13 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 them how to prepare and eat snails. They also taught them songs and how to keep safe from predators. They spent many hours keeping an eye on the chicks.

The chicks quickly became independent and made their own way in the world.

As there was plenty of food the female prepared herself for a second brood.

1.5. Winter separation

When the winter came the pair 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.

1.6. Dealing with chicks' droppings

One of the jobs the parents had to do was to deal with the droppings from the chicks. If they had time they would pick the droppings up and fly them well away from the nest. However, when they were busy it was easier to just swallow the droppings.

1.7. Dealing with dead chicks in the nest

Sadly one of the chicks died after a few days. The male picked it up in his bill and carried it away from the nest. He probably dropped the dead chick over the neighbouring field.

1.8. Survival

Both parents were two years old when they died. Only two of the chicks survived their first year.

The main dangers song thrushes face are cold weather, starvation and disease.

Grey squirrels are a nuisance in destroying song thrush nests and eating eggs, as are crows and magpies. Often sparrowhawks and cats will catch a young song thrush and eat it.

2. General data

2.1. Identification

Size	Just a bit smaller than blackbirds.
Appearance	Medium brown upperparts and small black spots all over a buff breast and flanks. Orange under wings which can be seen in flight.
Confusion	With a mistle thrush which is bigger
Sound	A distinctive musical song. Happy singing during the day and at dusk when most of the other birds have given up for the day
When	Secretive during breeding season. Easier to see in winter.
Where	Wide variety of places. Look in gardens, parks and hedges.
Movement	Hopping or running in straight lines when on grass and looking for earthworms. Will pause to watch for movement and then run or hop on again. As soon as they see an earthworm poking up out of the surface they will grab it. Strong and direct flight, unlike the mistle thrush's which is undulating.

2.2. Feeding

Favourites	Earthworm and snails. Slugs, but before eating them will wipe them on the grass or bare earth to remove the slime. Caterpillars, other insects, when necessary, and fruit and berries, in particular yew berries.
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Habits	<p>Grip a snail by the lid of the shell and keep bashing the shell on a stone until the shell breaks and they can get at the body. Wipe the snail on the ground to clean away any pieces of shell and then eat it.</p> <p>The stone is called a thrush's anvil.</p>
Other	<p>Sometimes a blackbird will steal their food</p>

3. Useful words

3.1. Words used by the song thrush

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

Song, thrush, hawthorn, anvil, dusk, duties, flitter, intruder

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

3.2. Unscramble the following words

A L N I S	
CAL SI MU	
O I E C V	
SS RE P IM	
CK CLO SE WI	
ND GR OU	
ME UM DI	
AM ON CH PI	
G L U S S	
S DR PI OP NG	

3.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about song thrushes have a go at the following questions.

As a young song thrush, how would you get the meaty part of a snail from its shell?

List some of the song thrush's favourite foods.

As a parent song thrush how would you deal with a chick's droppings?

How would you get rid of a dead chick from your nest?

Describe how you would move when looking for earthworms.

List a few predators that you would want to watch out for.

As a male song thrush how would you try to impress a female?

If you were a male song thrush and you landed in a tree occupied by another male song thrush how would you expect him to react?