



18 Song Thrush species action plan

18.1 Introduction

The Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* is a species with wide ranging habitat requirements, being found in both rural and urban situations, in gardens, parks, open farmland, hedgerows and woodlands. It has a close relationship with human habitation. It breeds in almost any habitat with trees or bushes for nesting. Nesting takes place over a long season with nests usually within 2 m of the ground. Two or more broods are raised, each consisting of an average of five eggs. Feeding occurs on open ground with the main prey item being invertebrates, particularly snails, in dry summer periods and late spring when berries and fruit have finished. The species is a partial migrant, with large numbers of continental breeders over-wintering in Britain and with many birds which breed in the UK wintering further south in Europe.

18.2 Current status

The Song Thrush is protected under the EC Birds Directive (EC/79/409) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981).

This is a common and widespread species, but one which is steadily declining throughout the UK. The decline began around the mid 1970s, with the most marked decline in cereal farming areas. There has been an estimated 73% reduction in farmland and 49%

in woodland habitats (*Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report, 1995*).

Locally in Hertfordshire, the species is also declining, with confirmed breeding in only 84% of tetrads between 1988-92, compared with 91% between 1967-73 (Smith *et al*, 1993). This small distributional decline probably masks a larger decline in breeding density and a continuation of this trend could see the bird disappear as a breeding species from some areas of the county.

18.3 Current factors causing loss or decline

Reasons for the decline are poorly understood, but may relate to a combination of the following factors (*Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report, 1995*).

18.3.1 Changes in farming practices

The switch from spring to autumn sowing of cereals and possibly the increased use of pesticides may have reduced the availability of food.

18.3.2 Severe winter weather

Prolonged cold weather may result in shortages of food supplies, which could particularly hit juveniles.

18.3.3 Hunting

Hunting in southern France may affect the part of the UK population which migrates south.

18.3.4 Use of molluscicides

These potentially have a major impact in farmland, gardens and public parks. They are used most in late spring, a time when snails form a major part of the diet.

18.3.5 Hedge management

The increase in mechanical hedge trimming and the change to lower, less bushy hedges may be partly responsible, as may be the loss of hedgerow trees which provide suitable song posts.

18.3.6 Other factors

Predation by corvids, Sparrowhawks and foxes and may also be partly responsible for the decline. However, these must be largely accepted as natural influences. Likewise, competition with blackbirds may be partly responsible, though there is no evidence for this.

18.4 Current action

RSPB and BTO have initiated surveys and research into the species ecology and the causes of the decline. The decline is not a result of reduced nesting success but is thought likely to be the result of reduced survival of over-wintering adults and juveniles. The reasons for this are still unknown, but this tends to rule out Magpie predation (as is often suggested), though the increased use of molluscicides are a possibility.

A national species action plan has been prepared by the RSPB, in collaboration with the JNCC and country agencies.

18.5 Song Thrush action plan objectives

Halt further decline of Song Thrush in Hertfordshire, maintaining population at 1996/97 levels as a minimum.

Return species to 1970 population levels by 2020.

18.6 Proposed actions

18.6.1 Policy and legislation

No action proposed.

18.6.2 Site safeguard and management

ST1. Promote better management of hedges to all landowners, including farmers, local authorities, schools and individuals with gardens, through existing work.

Action: CMS, FWAG, HMWT.

ST2. Local Authorities to review their hedgerow management with a view to improving the wildlife value of hedgerows under their control, by 2000.

Action: LA's.

ST3. Review, and aim to reduce, use of molluscicides in gardens, public parks, schools and in agriculture by 2000.

Action: LA's, MAFF.

18.6.3 Species management and protection

No action proposed.

18.6.4 Advisory

ST4. Disseminate results of national research and follow these up by advising landowners and the general public of the conservation requirements of this species.

Action: RSPB, HMWT.

ST5. Encourage people with gardens and schools to put out fruit during cold winter spells as food for Song Thrush amongst other species.

Action: BTO.

18.6.5 Research and monitoring

ST6. Undertake national research initiatives into the ecology of this species and links to agricultural changes and use of pesticides.

Action: RSPB.

ST7. Maintain the current level of monitoring in Hertfordshire of breeding Song Thrush populations through the national BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey.

Action: HBC, RSPB groups.

ST8. Initiate a 'wildlife in gardens' survey (see Chapter 10) to involve the wider public in monitoring the health of 'urban' species such as Song Thrush, by 2000. This can include the RSPB/BTO 'Garden Bird Survey'.

Action: RSPB, LA's.

18.6.6 Communication and publicity

ST9. Raise awareness of the plight of the Song Thrush and possible links between this and human activities by the publication of information leaflets, articles, press releases and events. A wildlife gardening leaflet (see Urban Action Plan, Chapter 10) could also promote this species.

Action: RSPB, BTO, LA's, Capel Manor, HMWT.

ST10. Organise a conference in 1998 to promote work on the bird species targeted through the local biodiversity action plan.

Action: HBC.