

Richmond upon Thames

Species Action Plan

Song Thrush



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“From one-two decades ago it was possible to listen to half a dozen thrushes, now it is rare to hear more than one. The tendency... has been towards a greater artificiality, it saves for trouble and makes for prettiness to cut down decaying trees. To drape them in ivy and make them beautiful in decay would take some thought and care.”

(W.H. Hudson on West London Song Thrushes, Birds in London, Dent & Sons, 1928)

1. Aims

- The overall aim of this action plan is to prevent further decline of the song thrush in Richmond Borough and to contribute to an overall strengthening of the population of song thrush throughout London.

2. Introduction

The song thrush is a common and widespread species throughout the United Kingdom. Both sexes are alike, with adult birds having warm brown back and upper parts and distinctive blackish-brown spots on the yellowish-white lower throat and breast. At around 20-23cms the song thrush is the second smallest of the six thrush species regularly occurring in the U.K. and the smallest of the three resident species. In Richmond Borough it is only likely to be confused with the significantly larger mistle thrush and, in the winter, with the slimmer redwing.

The song thrush has a most distinctive loud and proclaiming song, which has endeared it to generations. This is heard throughout the day but most regularly before dawn and after sunset. The clearly uttered lively phrases and repetitions make the song thrush one of the most beautiful of our native songbirds. Breeding territories (typically around 0.2 – 2.6 hectares) are often established in late winter, making the song thrush one of the first birds to herald the approach of spring. In mid-January the suburban dawn chorus is often dominated by the calls of this species.

Song thrushes can potentially be found in any habitat where there is a mixture of woodland, bushes and hedgerows, a preference that often brings this species into parks, allotments and gardens. Song thrushes nest low down in any suitable cover, but typically in shrubs, amongst creepers on walls or on the ground amongst thick vegetation. Song thrushes feed primarily on worms, slugs, snails and fruit.



The song thrush may be either a resident, a partial migrant or a passage migrant to the U.K. Some of our breeding birds are considered fairly sedentary, particularly those dwelling in gardens, but half the adult breeding population and two-thirds of first-year song thrushes are considered to be migratory, wintering in north-west France, northern Spain and Portugal to the Balearics. In addition, considerable numbers of nocturnal travelling song thrushes cross the North Sea each autumn to overwinter in the U.K from Scandinavia, Germany and Russia.

3. Current Status

National status

The song thrush has been in more or less continuous decline over the last 30 years. In 1970 the Common Bird Census (CBC) estimate of the U.K. population was just over 3 million breeding pairs, which represented a significant recovery following a harsh winter in 1962/63 that had reduced the population to just over 2 million pairs. However, since 1970 the CBC estimate has steadily dropped to just over 1.1 million breeding pairs [RSPB03]. RSPB research shows that between 1972 and 1996 there was a 66% decline in song thrush numbers on farmland and 39% decline in woodland habitats. There has however been a slight recovery in the last decade, with song thrush numbers from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) showing an 18% increase nationally between 1994 and 2003 [BBS04].

Regional status

National trends of decline seem to have been reflected within the London area. However, while the last decade has brought some relief to the national figures, the BBS figures for London indicate a significant 29% decline in the population between 1994 and 2003 [BBS04].

These figures are further supported by other indicators around the London area. For example:

- Ringing totals for this species (Dartford Ringing group) fell from 146 in 1987 to 18 in 1996 [LBR96].
- In 1997 there were 38 territories on Wimbledon Common (down from 45 in 1996).
- London Bird Report figures in the late 1990's indicated recent declines. As can be seen from Table 1, song thrushes became slightly less widespread across London sites between 1994 and 1998, showing signs of decreasing abundance in those squares where it was still found, although this trend appeared to slow towards the end of the period.

Table 1: Measures of change for song thrush found in London BBS squares (standard areas of recording based on the National Ordnance Survey grid) from D. Coleman [LBR98].

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Percentage of squares recorded	68	71	73	60	60
Mean count on survey in squares where it was recorded	2.6	2.9	2.3	2.1	2.0



Local status

The exact status of the song thrush in Richmond Borough needs to be determined, although it is likely to occur and breed wherever there is suitable habitat, including gardens. Some attempt has been made to informally determine song thrush numbers at a number of specific sites within the borough:

- 26 reported territories on Ham Lands (May 2005)
- 13 reported territories in Richmond Park (2004)
- 6 reported territories on Barnes Common (Spring 2004)
- 32 singing males along a 3.5-kilometer stretch of the Crane Corridor (January 2005) and 23 reported territories (April 2005). (Note that the January figures in this case may include additional wintering birds.)

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Species

Although the exact reasons for the steady decline of the song thrush are not yet fully determined, there are several factors whose combination may be sufficient to explain the downward population trend. Recent work by the BTO [RGB04] suggests that survival rates of fledglings and first year birds may particularly drive population changes. Birds at these stages in their cycle are particularly vulnerable to most of the following pressures.

4.1 Habitat loss

During the breeding season song thrushes need nest sites low in dense vegetation. Over-management of suitable habitat, including reductions in shrub cover or removal of hedgerows, are likely to be detrimental to song thrush numbers by reducing the supply of suitable nest sites and exposing nests to predators. While habitat loss has been most significant in agricultural areas (note that there is a significant amount of farmland within West London, to the west of Richmond Borough) there is anecdotal evidence that a reduction in urban shrub cover may well be affecting song thrush populations throughout the London region [LBP04]. As our opening quote from D.H. Hudson in 1928 suggests, this issue is not a new one.

4.2 Food supply

Research indicates that a number of combined factors may be affecting the regular food supply of song thrushes, leading in turn to pressures on fledgling birds in particular (about half of all song thrush fledglings die within their first 45 days, and two-thirds within 70 days [RGB04]) as well as possibly affecting the number of broods (song thrushes on intensive arable farmland make only 2-3 nesting attempts per year, compared to 4-5 attempts for birds in a stable population [RSPB02]):

- Greater use of pesticides in the countryside and in gardens has reduced available food. Note that the reduction in song thrush numbers in agricultural areas has resulted in gardens becoming an increasingly important habitat. Certain molluscicides such as slug pellets not only reduce the number of available slugs, but are also known to be toxic to song thrushes.
- Periods of cold, snowy weather in winter and hot, dry weather in summer lead to difficulties for song thrushes in locating sufficient earthworms and soil-dwelling invertebrates.
- Changes to habitat such as land drainage have reduced foraging habitat.
- Cropping methods and rotations have led to a decline in organic matter in the soil, which in turn leads to a reduction of song thrush food supply.

4.3 Other factors



Several other factors have been suggested for declining song thrush numbers, although it seems unlikely that these are as significant as habitat loss and food supply decline (although none of these can be categorically ruled out):

- **Increased predation by corvids, sparrowhawks, foxes and cats.** Research has however indicated that magpie and sparrowhawk numbers on 250 study farms across lowland Britain are not connected to song thrush numbers [RSPB02]. Further, the proportion of song thrush nests that are predated has actually fallen during the last 30 years [RSPB02].
- **Hunting in Southern Europe.** This could potentially affect song thrush breeders who migrate to hunting areas in the winter but the precise effect is hard to quantify.
- **Increased competition from blackbirds.** This has been suggested as the blackbird is a more aggressive thrush species sharing the habitat and food supply of the song thrush [SIM89]. However, BBS data [BBS04] shows similar trends for the blackbird population over the period 1994 to 2003 (slight national increase, significant London decrease) suggesting that this is unlikely to be a major population driver.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Song thrushes and their nests are fully protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), which makes it an offence intentionally to kill, injure or take any wild bird. It is an offence intentionally to damage or destroy the eggs, young or nest of a song thrush while it is being built or in use. It is therefore essential to ensure nests are not destroyed if hedge trimming or tree felling has to be carried out in the breeding season.

The song thrush is a priority U.K. BAP species.

The song thrush is a Red List species (high conservation concern) in Birds of Conservation Concern: 2002-2007 [GWN02].

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the species

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 6.

Until CBC results indicated that the song thrush was in decline it was assumed that the national song thrush population was relatively stable. The high profile of the song thrush as a familiar and widespread species has resulted in considerable focus on numbers throughout the U.K. Examples of activities are listed below:

5.2.1 National research

The RSPB and the BTO are currently undertaking research into the ecology of the song thrush and into causes of song thrush declines. The RSPB has prepared a plan for this species, which is in the UK BAP.

The song thrush is currently abundant enough to be fairly accurately monitored across the U.K. using the Breeding Bird Survey.

As there are indications that this species is increasingly seeking refuge in gardens, useful ongoing information about this species can be obtained from national surveys such as the BTO/RSPB Garden Birdwatch.

5.2.2 Local census work



Local data on song thrush numbers can be extracted from all the main national surveys, and may indicate trends without providing comprehensive local information.

In addition to national work, song thrush numbers have been studied on a local basis in many parts of the U.K., often as part of local SAP activities. Good examples of this type of activity can be found in the Cambridgeshire [CSAP] and Lancashire [LSAP] song thrush SAPs.

In London in 1998 the Borough Councils of Haringey and Islington joined forces and asked residents to take part in a survey of the song thrush. The two nature conservation teams produced a leaflet explaining why the survey was taking place and gave details of what people could do in their own gardens to help the song thrush. This covered the provision of appropriate food, as well as encouraging "wild" habitat, deterring cats and suggesting alternatives to slug pellets.

In Richmond Borough, informal monitoring of song thrush numbers has been undertaken at several specific sites. Information about song thrush numbers can also be extracted from a number of "standard walk" surveys being conducted in the borough (Bushy Park, Richmond Park, Ham Lands, Barnes Common, Crane Valley).

5.2.3 Information dissemination

As well as pushing the plight of the song thrush in national media, the RSPB has produced an advisory sheet containing guidance for landowners.

See Section 5.2.2 for an example of dissemination from Haringey and Islington.

A song thrush pledge concerning the use of molluscicides was selectively distributed in Richmond and Kingston Boroughs in 2001.

6. Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this species. Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Note that where a partner is identified as Richmond Biodiversity Partnership (RBP), this indicates that all active organisations within the group will be consulted, in particular FOBC, FORCE, RBGK, LWT, TRP, WWT.

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
STR01 - Contact relevant organisations to request data on song thrush in Richmond Borough.	2006	Working group	BTO, RSPB, LNHS, GIGL, RBP, SDBWS, WCC
STR02 - Collate existing data and identify areas of Richmond Borough where baseline data for this species are still needed.	2006	Working group	
STR03 - Identify what techniques are being used to monitor song thrush across London.	2006	Working group	LA
STR04 - Establish appropriate survey techniques for conducting easily repeatable song thrush population monitoring.	2006	Working group	
STR05 - Establish a system of record data transfer to GIGL	2006	Working group	GIGL
STR06 - Recruit volunteers and provide any necessary training.	2007	Working group	RBP, SWLEN



STR07 - Co-ordinate an ongoing borough-wide song thrush survey	2007	Working group	RBP
STR08 - Use song thrush monitoring data to identify areas of potential song thrush habitat where improvements could be made to boost local populations.	2008	Working group	LA, RBP, TCV
STR09 - Liaise with relevant land managers and provide information on habitat management techniques sympathetic to song thrush.	2008	Working group	LA, RBP
STR10 - Contribute to management plans for areas within Richmond Borough with existing or potential for song thrush populations.	Ongoing	Working group	LA, RBP
STR11 - Lobby for safeguards within the planning framework to ensure that survey and mitigation are included whenever song thrush populations might be affected.	Ongoing	LA	Working Group
STR12 - Provide a local press release to highlight issues concerning song thrush conservation in Richmond Borough.	Annually	Working group/LA	SWLEN
STR13 - Organise a series of song thrush walks in areas of local song thrush habitat.	2007	Working group	RBP

Relevant Action Plans

Local Plans

Broad-leaved Woodland HAP, Veteran Trees/Ancient Parkland HAP

London Plans

London Plans include Woodland, Heathland Habitat, Wasteland Habitat, Churchyards and Cemeteries, Private Garden, Parks, Squares & Amenity Grassland, Woodland Audit, Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees Audit, Heathland Audit, Churchyards and Cemeteries Audit, Railway Linesides Audit, Farmland Audit, Private Gardens Audit, Parks, Amenity Grasslands and City Squares Audit, Urban Wastelands Audit and Hedgerows Audit

National Plans

UK Song Thrush SAP, available from <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/>

Key References

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- [BTO04] R.Robinson, *Where have all the Song Thrushes gone?*, BTO News, Number 252, May-June 2004.
- [CSAP] *Song Thrush Species Action Plan for Cambridgeshire*, available at <http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/environment/countryside/biodiversity/partnership/baps/urban.htm>
- [GWN0] R.D.Gregory, N.I.Wilkinson, D.G.Noble, J.A.Robinson, J.Hughes, D.Procter, D.W.Gibbons and C.Galbraith, *The population status of birds in the United Kingdom*,



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- [LBR96] D.A. Coleman (1996) *The Breeding Bird survey in London*, London Bird Report 1996, Published by the London Natural History Soc.
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- [LSAP] *Song Thrush Species Action Plan for Lancashire*. Lancashire's Biodiversity Partnership, available at <http://www.lbap.org.uk/HTML/Species/Songthr.htm>
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- [RSPB02] *Song Thrushes Wildlife Information Leaflet*, RSPB, 2002.
- [RSPB03] *The State of the U.K.'s Birds 2003*, RSPB/WWT/BTO, 2003.
- [SIM89] E. Simms, *The Song Thrush*. Shire Natural History, 1989.

Abbreviations

BBS - Breeding Bird Survey	RBP - Richmond Biodiversity Partnership
BTO - British Trust for Ornithology	RBGK – Royal Botanic Gardens Kew
CBC - Common Bird Census	RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
FOBC - Friends of Barnes Common	SDBWS - Surbiton District Bird Watching Society
FORCE - Friends of the River Crane Environment	SWLEN – South West London Environment Network
GIGL - Greenspace Information for Greater London	TCV- The Conservation Volunteers
HLR – Ham Lands Ranger	TRP – The Royal Parks (Richmond & Bushy)
LA - Local Authority (London Borough of Richmond upon Thames)	WCC - Wimbledon Common Conservators
LNHS - London Natural History Society	WWT - Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
LWT - London Wildlife Trust	

Working group: includes representatives from FOBC, FORCE, HLR, TRP and WWT.

Contact

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