

WINTER THRUSH SURVEY – KNEPP ESTATE (2013)

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This report attaches to the map of the Southern Block.

INTRODUCTION

Winter Thrushes being surveyed here comprise of Fieldfare, Redwing, Song Thrush and Blackbird. All are strong seasonal migrants, but many are resident in parts of their breeding ranges.

Our mild winters, compared to continental Europe, attract large numbers of Fieldfare, Redwing and Blackbird. British Song Thrushes (race *clarkei*) however show little seasonal movement unless prompted by harsh weather and will then leave for Ireland, France and Iberia. By the same token, in similar conditions, birds of this race will arrive in the UK from the near continent.

The findings of this survey supplement a BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) Survey I carried out, and relies upon online data submission for analysis by the BTO. Complete data being analysed by the BTO is therefore only accessible online.

3 visits were made – 15th Jan, 6th Feb and 25th Feb. This site was a randomly chosen site and not a BTO Core Site, and therefore had no specific visit requirements.

The attached map illustrates the BTO Survey Route, and highlights a refinement of significant observations for future reference at Knepp. Observations away from the BTO route represent significant sightings of (largely ground feeding) flocks of winter thrushes (predominantly Redwings and Fieldfares).

Further, these additional observations were made en route to the BTO Route. A wider survey of the land area was not made and therefore the absence of observations in much of the land block is NOT significant.

AIM

The survey has a dual purpose. The BTO is conducting a Winter Thrush Survey in order to gather data and fill a knowledge gap in the activity and feeding behaviour of these species during the winter period.

Whilst carrying out the BTO survey, I was able to record numbers of thrushes and frequency patterns (on and away from the BTO Route), in order to try and build a picture of populations and annual habitat use by these species at Knepp, and therefore establish the ultimate importance of the Estate for these wintering birds.

METHOD

A route of approximately 1 km was chosen for the BTO survey route. The specific route chosen was selected for a range of suitable habitats, namely open pastoral land, woodland, scrub and pond margin.

The route was walked at different periods over the winter months, around mid morning. Observations of thrushes were noted and placed on the BTO online map using markers. For each marker (representing a species) the number of individuals was noted along with habitat, behaviour and when possible the food material being taken.

The BTO will collate this data with that from other observers around the country to in order to increase our understanding and therefore conservation of these birds.

For the purpose of the Knepp Estate, I was able to relay some of the findings along with other random observations from the Southern Block.

RESULTS

BTO Survey Route.

Blackbird:

Away from the pastoral habitat of New Barn Bottom (NBB), this was the most frequent thrush. Single birds or pairs were seen at frequent and regular intervals along the route, with a total of 37 cumulative sightings over the 3 visits.

Their activity tended to be ground feeding alongside or under scrub and bushes associated with the tree line.

Song Thrush:

This species was relatively scarce, especially contrasted with its status here at Knepp in the breeding season. Only 5 individuals were counted away from NBB (which held 3 more individuals in with mixed flocks) and these birds were observed flying out from bushes.

Redwing:

Observations were completely restricted to the NBB area, where birds were in large groups, either ground feeding, or resting in tree canopies and bushes. An accumulated 80 sightings were made.

Fieldfare:

This species was also only recorded in the NBB area, ground feeding in flocks, or resting in nearby tree tops. 55 accumulated sightings.

Surrounding Areas.

- 15th Jan. Ca.300 Winter Thrushes in a field outside the Estate, close to Brookhouse 4. Predominantly Redwings and Fieldfares with a few Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Starlings.
- 6th Feb. ca.40 Fieldfare ground feeding in Dial Post 1.
ca.60 Redwing ground feeding in water-logged ground in Brookhouse 8.
- 28th Feb. 8+ Redwing in Waterworks Field.
5 Blackbirds along hedge in adjacent Dial Post 1.
ca.400 Winter Thrushes on parkland in front of Castle Residence.
These were almost entirely Fieldfare with just a few Redwing and Starling mixed in.

COMMENTS

It is early to draw conclusions, though the following notes could be made. Firstly, it was a poor year generally for migrant winter thrushes especially Redwings and Fieldfares. The conditions were predominantly mild and very wet with a near or complete lack of berries on bushes which would normally be a favourite food source for these species.

The alternative food source of worms and other invertebrates explains the feeding locations of those birds observed. Fairly close cropped pasture where the ground was disturbed and broken by cattle or horses was most favoured. This type of habitat at New Barn Bottom was clearly the most favoured location, being the only site that I observed large numbers of birds on every visit.

Blackbirds were tending to feed on the ground close to, or under bushes, where maybe snails and other invertebrates might be more common. Their numbers compared to that of Song Thrushes was interesting, especially following my casual observations during the previous summer, whereby Song Thrushes seemed relatively common. This suggests 'resident ' Song Thrushes may well have migrated away during this winter.

It is likely that many of the Blackbirds observed were migrants and it would be interesting to compare their numbers during the breeding season. The BTO Route appeared to provide ideal habitat for wintering Blackbirds based on the number of observations.







For all species, it will be interesting to see whether in subsequent years, patterns begin to emerge, especially regarding favoured locations, relative to food sources.

Finally, after the large flock of Fieldfare observed on the parkland adjacent to the castle flew off from the site, I was able to inspect the ground closely where they had been feeding. Though not witnessing the food material being pecked at on the ground (despite careful watching), the grass was riddled with wormcasts, presumably therefore their food source, and the reason for attracting such huge numbers of thrushes.

References:

BTO Birdfacts

Key to symbols on map:

-  BTO survey route
-  Sightings of Blackbirds
-  Sightings of Song Thrushes
-  Sightings of Redwings
-  Sightings of Fieldfares
-  Mixed flocks, predominantly Redwings and Fieldfares.

