

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

SONG THRUSH

Turdus philomelos

A widespread species that occurs almost anywhere there are trees, hedgerows and bushes, primarily in farmland, woodland and scrub habitats, as well as in large gardens and parks. Adults feed on berries, seeds and invertebrates (particularly snails, slugs and caterpillars) and chicks on a variety of invertebrates.

Ref 1/S9	Tranche 1	Species Action Plan 9
Plan Author:	Natural England and Norfolk County Council	
Plan Co-ordinator:	Communities and Nature Topic Group	
Plan Leader:	RSPB	
Date: 13 Dec 98	Stage: Original plan	
1 October 2007	Revised	

1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- The song thrush is a widespread resident of the British Isles. It is a partial migrant and a winter visitor. Some continental birds fly to Britain to spend the winter and some resident breeding birds spend the winter further south in Europe, in northern Spain and Portugal.
- The song thrush occupies a range of British habitats, but changes to farming practices in the last 50 years mean that some of its most suitable habitats are now much less favourable.
- Song thrush numbers remained stable until the mid 1970s, after which they declined steadily, with an estimated reduction of 73% in farmland and 49% in woodland habitats between 1971 and 1995.
- Recent trends have been more encouraging, and suggest that the decline may now be reversing. Baker *et al* (2006) have estimated that the UK population of song thrush in 2000 was approximately 2,288,000 birds. The Breeding Bird Survey of 2004 (Raven, Noble, and Baillie, 2005) indicated that song thrush numbers had increased by 23% over the last ten years; however, they still showed a 51% decline over the last 36 years.
- The song thrush is protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981).

Norfolk Status

- Norfolk has a relatively high density of song thrushes, with particular concentrations in north-west Norfolk, mid-Norfolk and south Norfolk. Density is only noticeably lower in Breckland.
- By extrapolating from the data in the Norfolk Bird Atlas (currently available up to the end of the 2006 breeding season and gathered over the seven summers since 2000), the Norfolk population is estimated to be 5,000-5,500 breeding pairs. This is based on the fact that the species was recorded in 88 per cent of the 1,317 tetrads covered up to the end of 2006 (out of a county total of 1,480) and that the average number of pairs per occupied tetrad is four (Moss Taylor, pers. comm.).

- Although there is considerable variation from year to year, data from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey suggest that there was a 35 per cent increase in the Norfolk song thrush population between 1994 (the start of BBS) and 2005. It is interesting to note that the population in the East of England showed a significant decline of 18 per cent over the same period.

2. CURRENT FACTORS OF CONCERN IN NORFOLK

The factors affecting the song thrush population are poorly understood but may include the following:

- Changes in farming affecting food supply and the availability of nest sites, particularly: the switch from spring to autumn sowing of cereals (and loss of spring-time tillage); the reduction in hedgerows, field margins and grassland; the move to larger fields; field drainage; and the increased use of pesticides, including the widespread use of molluscides on potato and brassica crops.
- Increased use of molluscides and herbicides in gardens
- Reductions in woodland humidity and the area of damp ground, as a result of wind penetration and field drainage along the woodland edge.
- Reduced shrub layer in woodland as a result of grazing and forestry management.
- Reduction in the areas of appropriately managed scrub, such as scrub edge and scattered scrub features.
- Changes in rainfall patterns, leading to drying and reductions in the availability of soil invertebrates. The recent MONARCH (Modelling Natural Resource Responses to Climate Change) report highlighted the vulnerability of the song thrush to climate change (Berry *et al.*, 2007).
- Hunting in southern France and the Iberian Peninsula. (However, the Norfolk population is largely sedentary, so this is not thought to be having a significant impact on local numbers.)

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- Little action was taken for the species until census work by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) in Thetford highlighted its decline.
- Direct and indirect advice to land managers is provided by the regional RSPB Farmland Conservation Officer and relevant advisory literature distributed throughout the county.
- Wildlife gardening information from the RSPB and NWT has been made widely available to the public (including information about the careful use of slug pellets), and promoted through events such as "Wild about Norfolk".
- A postcard identification scheme was run by Norwich 21 in 2003/4. The scheme helped to highlight the plight of the song thrush, particularly among school children.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- In England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, increase the BBS index to 115% of the 2003 level by 2010. In Wales, maintain populations at the current (2003) level.
- Maintain the percentage of occupied BBS squares at the 2003 levels in the UK and all four countries.

Norfolk

- Increase the BBS index from the 2003 level of 0.72 to 0.83 by 2010 (115 % increase).
- Maintain the percentage of occupied BBS squares at the 2003 level of 0.67.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Ensure that the results of ongoing research on the causes of decline are taken into account in agriculture schemes, woodland schemes and policy.	Consider prescriptions to benefit song thrush under Entry Level Stewardship and other incentive schemes operating in Norfolk.	NE	RSPB
5.1.2	Promote the uptake of sensitive farming options under existing incentive schemes to benefit song thrush.	Use HLS/ELS/OELS to restore nesting cover in: scrub and woodland understorey; and on grazed grassland in arable-dominated areas and on damper soils in summer.	NE , FWAG, RSPB	
5.1.3	Consider persuading the European Commission to ban or discourage hunting in France.	No action proposed.		
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	No national action	No action proposed.		
5.3	Species Management and Protection			
	No national action	No action proposed.		
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.1	Ensure landowners and managers are aware of the presence, legal status and conservation requirements of this species, and appropriate methods of habitat management.	Ensure landowners and managers are aware of the presence, legal status and conservation requirements of this species, and appropriate methods of habitat management.	NE, RSPB	
		Encourage the recipients of school ground improvement grants to introduce measures to benefit song thrush.	NCC	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Investigate the relationship between agricultural changes and the use of agrochemicals with the decline of this species, using information from BTO and other sources.	Encourage research on this topic by local organisations such as the School of Biological Sciences (UEA) and BTO.	NE, BTO, RSPB	UEA
5.5.2	Promote research on the effects of woodland design and the management of woodland margins, especially on farmland, in aiding the successful breeding of song thrush.	Encourage research on this species by local organisations such as the School of Biological Sciences (UEA) and BTO.	NE, BTO, RSPB	UEA
5.5.3	Encourage adequate monitoring annually of national breeding song thrush populations through the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey.	Promote volunteer participation in the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey by recruiting new volunteers to empty grid squares.	BTO	NNNS
5.5.4	Encourage research on the ecological requirements of this species to help identify the causes of population decline.	Encourage research on this topic by local organisations such as the School of Biological Sciences (UEA) and BTO.	NE, BTO, RSPB	UEA
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	Produce publicity material and information for the general public to raise awareness of the song thrush and the possible links between population changes and human activities.	Prepare articles for the local media, dealing with the impacts of human activities on song thrush numbers, the results of recent research, and ongoing conservation action. Undertake publicity at local events (eg, Wild about Norfolk) to promote garden planting and management techniques favourable to the song thrush.	NWT, RSPB, BTO, NE NWT, RSPB, BTO, NE	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
		<p>Encourage local participation in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch (http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/) and the BTO Garden Birdwatch Survey (www.bto.org/gbw).</p> <p>Include this species in NWT's "citizen science" surveys, as part of the HLF-funded Natural Connections project.</p>	RSPB, BTO NWT	
5.7	Links with Other Action Plans			
5.7.1	None given	This plan should be considered in conjunction with the Norfolk action plans for spotted flycatcher and churchyards & cemeteries.	Communities and Nature Topic Group	

Abbreviations

BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
FC	Forestry Commission
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
NCC	Norfolk County Council
NE	Natural England
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
NNNS	Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society
NWT	Norfolk Wildlife Trust
UEA	University of East Anglia

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE FOR GARDENERS

(adapted from the *Norfolk Wild File*)

- Avoid using chemicals, such as slug pellets, in the garden.
- Create a woodpile to encourage insect larvae and snails, located near to a thick shrub or hedge to offer protection to song thrushes while they feed.
- Avoid cutting hedges during the breeding season (March to August). Song thrushes often nest in garden hedges and as they can double brood, they may have eggs or young quite late in the season.
- Where possible, leave hedges uncut for several years. Hedges such as hawthorn can be a valuable source of winter berries but will not yield fruit if they are cut every year. Don't cut the hedge in one go, but stagger it so that some cover is retained until re-growth occurs.
- In severe winters, when the ground is hard, leave raisins, currants and apples for song thrushes to feed on.
- Participate in the surveys organised by BTO, NWT, RSPB and other organisations.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE FOR FARMERS AND WOODLAND MANAGERS

(adapted from the RSPB CD, "Farming and birds: Management advice for farmland species and habitats in England).

What Do Song Thrushes Need?

Nesting Habitat

- Song thrushes will nest in woodland with a thick edge or understorey of shrubs or bramble, as well as in tall, thick hedgerows on the farm. They start nesting early, so woodland and hedgerow management should be completed by the end of February.

Summer Food (Invertebrates)

- The bulk of the song thrush diet is earthworms and snails, particularly when insect larvae and berry crops are not available. Therefore, damp ground where these food sources are readily found is essential. Pesticides that are active against ground invertebrates should be avoided where possible.

Winter Food (Fruit and Invertebrates)

- Hedgerow fruit is an important part of the diet in the autumn. Berries generally develop on second-year growth. Sympathetic hedgerow management will ensure a supply of berries into the winter.

Priority Action

- Maintain or restore damp areas of grazed pasture or woodland. Damp habitats through the summer are essential for chick survival.

- Avoid management of hedgerows between March and August to protect nesting song thrushes. January and February are the ideal months, after the berry crop has been eaten.

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KEY REFERENCES

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Taylor, M., Seago, M., Allard, P. and Dorling, D. (1999). *The Birds of Norfolk*. Pica Press.

WEBSITES

www.birdsofbritain.co.uk/bird-guide/song-thrush.htm

www.bto.org/birdtrends (for recent trend analyses in the Wider Countryside report)

www.bto.org/bbs/results/bbsreport.htm (for BBS reports)

www.farmwildlife.info

www.garden-birds.co.uk/birds/songthrush.htm