

WINTER THRUSHES

Throughout winter months the migrating thrushes, fieldfare and redwing are present in the west Dorset countryside. Fieldfare arrive mostly from Scandinavia or Russia during October. Redwing come mainly from Iceland. Both species are particularly sociable, spending the winter feeding in flocks. Fieldfare stick to rural areas, as they forage in fields for invertebrates. Redwing feed on hedgerow berries, especially hawthorn and holly. Interestingly, a flock of redwings will descend onto a line of berry-bearing holly trees to strip one tree at a time before moving on to the next. Redwing will often forage in woodland, turning over leaf litter as they seek out invertebrates hiding beneath. During extreme cold weather, fieldfare will venture into gardens in search of berries and windfall fruit. Fieldfare will aggressively defend a food source. I once observed about one hundred fieldfare on a crab apple tree during heavy snow. The following day only one bird maintained a presence on the berries, keeping all other thrushes at bay.

The fieldfare is larger than a blackbird, has a typical blue-grey head with yellow beak. The breast is darkly speckled and the bird displays a distinct white rump in flight. It adopts an upright stance when on the ground foraging, as it moves forward with purposeful hops. The redwing is more like a song thrush, but smaller. It wears a distinct pale stripe above the eye and has characteristic red patches on flanks of the breast. The redwing does not actually have red wings as its name suggests, but reveals these red body patches as it raises its wings.

Both birds constantly keep in touch with contact calls. In the case of the fieldfare, this is commonly described as a 'chacking' call, sounding like a coarse cackle or chuckle. The redwing contact call is much more discreet, sounding more like a high-pitched, wispy 'tseep'.

In flight, fieldfare flocks can be distinguished by their scattered untidy configuration, while redwing fly in unison in a more compact formation.

During March, on a clear evening, these birds will take off at dusk, migrating overnight back to their breeding grounds in the north, arriving by dawn the next morning.

361 words

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