

Enigma thrush



Little is known about Ring Ouzel, an enigmatic summer visitor that breeds in the uplands, says TV presenter and author **Nick Baker**. In order to address this, a number of concerned conservationists formed a unique study group dedicated to researching this mysterious bird.

Every year a small migration occurs – nothing that really makes the headlines or causes much of a stir, just a handful of individuals moving toward the small town of Penrith in the Lake District. Here they congregate initially in a curry house and then linger around a bar or hotel or two before departing. It's a short stop-over; a diverse group, some breeders, some non-breeders of both genders and of all age categories, but what they do have in common is a real passion. They all

have a soft spot for Ring Ouzel, a species that is nearly as enigmatic as the group of humans driven to understand its ways.

Peering between the plates piled high with poppadoms and naan bread at the faces gathered around the curry house table, you might be mistaken for thinking this was the social gathering of the local parish council, and not a collection of some of the toughest and most determined conservationists in Britain (and from further

afield). This is the Ring Ouzel Study Group, a 'conservation club' with an origin as somewhat maverick as their ambition is serious.

Far from the crowds

Both the problem and the charm of Ring Ouzel is that it is a bird that keeps itself to itself. Our only summer migrant thrush, it winters in the arid Atlas Mountains of Morocco,



Ring Ouzel numbers have fallen dramatically in Britain and Ireland, though it is thought that the species is relatively stable across the rest of its European breeding range, suggesting that the decline in British breeding ouzels is due to factors in Britain. However, the Ring Ouzel Study Group has said that European data are lacking and there is an urgent need for good-quality surveys.



MAIN PHOTO: JOHN DICKENSON. INSET: MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



Juvenile Ring Ouzels lacking the bright white breast crescent are more easily confused with the closely related Blackbird.

the same interest or indeed sponsors, and it requires a special kind of grit and determination to spend any appreciable amount of time in its company.

The accidental result of this is that when we started compiling bird atlases, we could say as far back as *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1968-72) that this species was in trouble and in a long-term decline. Good firm figures, however, were lacking.

For the 1988-91 atlas things didn't get much better. At least numbers were given this time, with an estimate at between 5,500 and 11,000 pairs. But that is quite an error margin, and with a noted 27 per cent contraction in range, alarm bells were ringing.

These numbers, or rather lack of them, were pointing to a real ouzel-shaped hole in our understanding of British birds. We simply didn't have the information we needed to get its undoubted demise taken seriously.

ANDRÉS MIGUEL DOMÍNGUEZ (WWW.BIRDMAGENCY.COM)

“Cut off from the main British birding populus, this is a hardcore species that for many a birder requires hardcore tactics to get close to”

where it stuffs itself with juniper berries, before heading north to its breeding grounds. After touching down on our shores the birds silently drift to their secret, lofty thrones – Ring Ouzel primarily nests above the tree line, in wild, windswept, barren rocky terrain.

This is a hardcore species that for many a birder requires hardcore tactics to get close to. By its simple choice of breeding habitat it is quite cut off from the main British birding populus, and even lucky members of the public that bump into one while out summer hill walking may not really fully appreciate what they've seen – at a distance and to the untrained eye it resembles Blackbird.

None of these qualities really lends itself to study. The bird is quite a subtle one. Lacking the obvious panache of an eagle or other raptor, it doesn't attract



Female birds are duller than the males, without the yellow bill and often with a less obvious breast crescent.

ANDRÉS MIGUEL DOMÍNGUEZ (WWW.BIRDMAGENCY.COM)

Earthworms make up the bulk of the species' diet in summer, while in winter the birds eat juniper berries.



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

KEN HUTCHINSON



These 12-day-old chicks will shortly be leaving the nest. You can see the full series of photos from eggs to fledging on the Ring Ouzel Study Group website at www.ringouzel.info.

Cause for concern

It was this worrying state of affairs back in 1995 that prompted an internal RSPB memo from a concerned staff member – with the support of many other colleagues – pointing out that Amber listing was simply not good enough for this bird; the system clearly didn't work for some species. Compare this, for example, with all the effort that was going into the conservation of

the Song Thrush, a bird that still had a population of around a million pairs and had suffered a mere 2 per cent contraction in range.

Something had to be done, and quickly. As always, it was knowledge that was required. So rather than sit back and wait for the system to react – which may not have happened quickly enough for the ouzel – or indeed watch this beautiful, iconic denizen of our wild

uplands slip away to the point that it was too late, the Ring Ouzel Study Group was formed in 1998 (it met in Brampton back then).

Chris Rollic – the original author of that memo, ouzel study group chair for ever and loyal 'daddy' to all us 'ouzellers' – along with a select bunch of equally concerned colleagues, including the late Ian Appleyard, famous to us birders as having published a monograph of these birds in the Yorkshire Dales but to the rest of the world as an Olympic skier – gathered as a group of renegades on a fact-finding mission. Encouraged by the RSPB to redress the massive gap in our understanding of this bird, they set about walking the hills, scrabbling through mountains of both rock and paper records, compiling and honing our understanding of this species.

Since that original memo a lot has changed. There have been two national surveys of the species, one in 1999 and the other 2012, two PhD studies detailing the bird's ecology, and it has been Red listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern. The work of the Ring Ouzel Study Group continues, and its voluntary members are still trying to understand that one thing which hasn't changed: the fact that Ring Ouzel is still declining. ■

A summer visitor to Britain's uplands, Ring Ouzel can be seen on passage at other locations, such as this bird on Scilly in October 2005.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



MORE ABOUT RING OUZELS

- There are 6,200-7,500 pairs of Ring Ouzel in Britain. The latest figures from the *Bird Atlas 2007-11* show that the number of occupied 10-km squares has fallen by 44 per cent across Britain and Ireland since 1968-72. It is a summer visitor, with birds arriving in March and April and leaving again in September. It winters in the Mediterranean region.
- The Ring Ouzel Study Group was formed in 1998 and today numbers some 40 members. Its aims are to provide a forum for the exchange of information, to influence research and conservation action, and to facilitate and co-ordinate monitoring of the species. It also has a form for reporting any sightings.
- For more on all aspects of Ring Ouzel identification, see bitly.com/bw249RingOuzel.

To find out more about the group and the species, go to www.ringouzel.info.