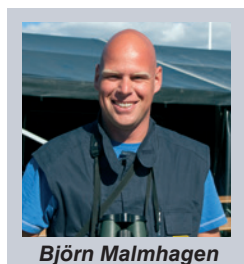


RING OUZEL PHOTO GUIDE



ROBERT PEKKARINEN

1 Ring Ouzel (Utö, Finland, 2 May 2008). Adult males like this are welcome finds for any spring migration watcher. Note the overall uniform tone to the dark brownish-black feathering and the fresh appearance of the wing feathers, which would be more worn-looking in a younger bird at this time of year. The light scaling towards the rear of the underparts is notable, as is the two-tone yellow and black bill with just the tip and nostril area dark. The clear lack of moult contrast in the greater coverts clinches the bird as an adult.



Björn Malmhagen

Early spring produces the first migrant Ring Ouzels, with robust but shy males and females appearing on open lowland ground on their way to the rocky uplands of their breeding territories, seemingly larger and more vigorous than their Blackbird relatives. However, many birders struggle to age and sex the birds, particularly first- and second-summerers. *Björn Malmhagen* looks at the minutiae of the species' immature feathering to enable you to identify individuals with confidence.

Birdwatch

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Ring Ouzel is one of the first migrants to arrive in Britain in spring, and is always an exciting find. Its identification is relatively straightforward, but ageing and sexing birds is more problematic. Males are reported more frequently than females, but do they really occur more often? Opinions also differ on the ID characters, so let's take a closer look.

Ring Ouzel is a species that provokes a lot of interest, whether encountered in the field or discussed in photos. Over the years there has been much debate on how best to age and (perhaps above all) sex the species.

This article aims to sort out which traits are useful to making as accurate an identification as possible. The focus is on spring birds, but most of it will be applicable to autumn birds, too.

Start with age

As is often the way with an ID conundrum, it is best to start by deciding what age we are dealing with. Ring Ouzel

moult strategy is fairly straightforward. Adult birds moult all their feathers once a year after the breeding season, which means that they have the same generation of feathers from autumn through to the following spring.

Young birds perform a partial moult before autumn migration which includes body feathers and some wing feathers, but usually not the tertials. This means that immatures exhibit a moult contrast during both autumn and spring, and consequently it is possible to identify these as first-calendar-year in the autumn and second-calendar-year in the spring.

The moult contrast is usually in the greater coverts. Most commonly, between three and five of the innermost greater coverts are new, in contrast to the outer unmoulted juvenile coverts. This contrast can sometimes be surprisingly difficult to see, so careful study and an awareness of the potential for wide variation is needed. Moult strategy means that both juveniles and adults are

freshest in autumn and most worn in spring.

Continue with gender

Even if you aren't completely certain of the age, it is now time to proceed to sex. As usual with any tricky ID problem, you have to weigh up as many characters as possible (see the table opposite and images) to reach an accurate conclusion.

In short, we can say that males in general are darker with a more distinctive white chest band and yellowish beak. Most birds should not present any major problems as to sex in the field. But as always there will be a degree of variation and some individuals may cause concerns.

I have found some skins of females clearly approaching the appearance of males. At the same time, however, I would say that you should not worry too much about this, as the vast majority of individuals should be easy to sex without difficulty.

One important thing to consider is how the bird's colour varies with the light. I have on several occasions seen photos of the same individual where on one image it looks almost black

and in the next picture in a different light it looks more or less brown. These include the image of the adult male on page 40 (photo 4), which in other images appeared dark brown.

Autumn birds

As Ring Ouzels only moult once a year, identification follows the same basic principles in autumn as in spring. The big difference is that all birds are fresher in the autumn, which means that they are also more clearly fringed, giving a slightly different impression of the background colour, generally making it look lighter. ■

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Jan Bolding Kristensen in the Zoological Museum in Copenhagen, who very generously allowed him to go through the collection of Ring Ouzel skins. Thanks also to all the photographers who supplied images of birds in the field. This article was first published in the Swedish Club300 magazine *Roadrunner* in issue 2012/2 – our thanks to editor Magnus Corell for permission to reproduce it here, to author Björn Malmhagen for his help and to Ian Lycett for translating the original text from Swedish to English.



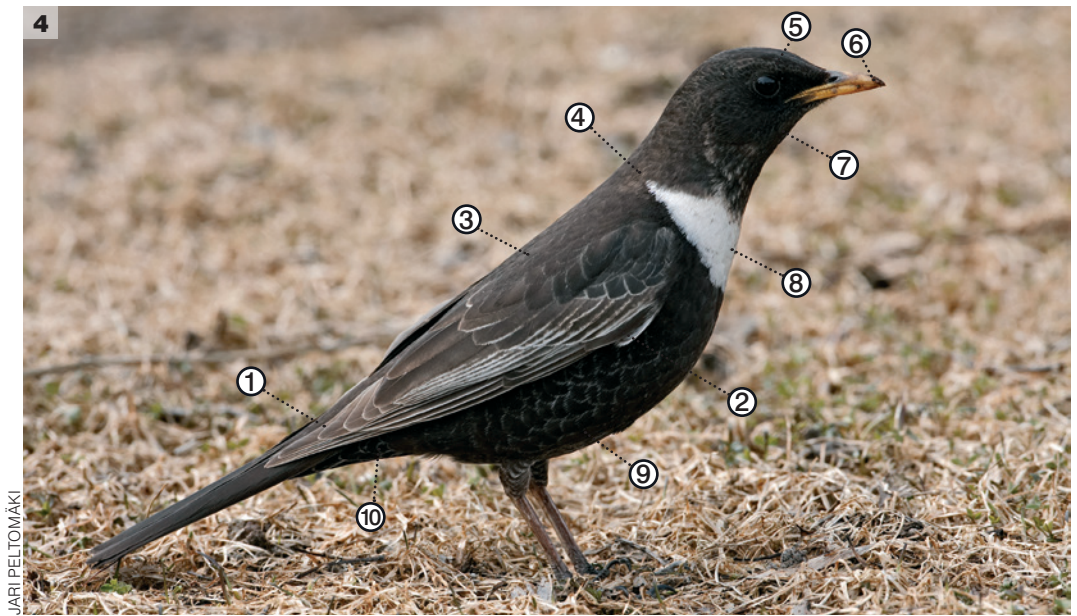
2 and 3 Ring Ouzel (male *alpestris*, Bohinj, Slovenia, 12 June 2010). Typical *Turdus torquatus alpestris* is a particularly distinctive subspecies in adult male plumage, but the form is genetically identical to nominate. Note the broad pale edges and shafts to the underpart feathers and the much more silvery appearance of the wings due to the broad white fringes of both the remiges and coverts. There are four accepted records of this form in Britain, but detailed photos of the belly feathers and undertail coverts, preferably in the hand, are needed to confirm a record.

FIELD IDENTIFICATION

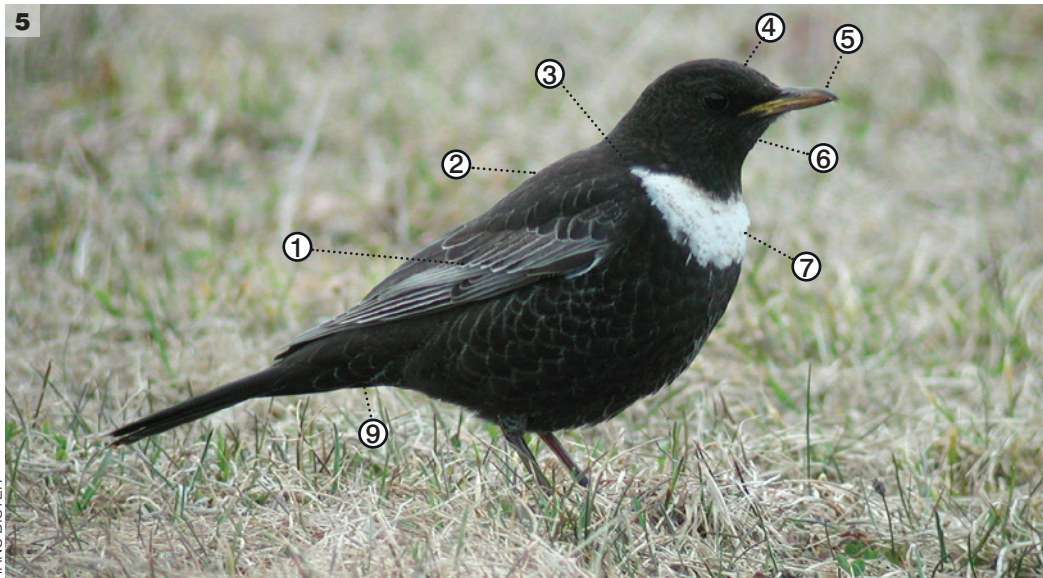
Key: age is denoted here by calendar year (cy), so a bird termed 2cy is in its second calendar year.

Ring Ouzel	3cy+ male	3cy+ female	2cy male	2cy female
Greater coverts	No moult contrast, all coverts of the same generation and length. Dark black-brown with rough silver outer edges. Colouring between inner and outer coverts often differs and can be perceived as moult contrast.	No moult contrast. Brown-black to brown with blurred diffuse lighter outer edges. Colouring between inner and outer coverts often differs slightly and may be perceived as moult contrast.	Moult contrast in central coverts – normally 3-5 post-juvenile coverts which contrast with the outer juvenile coverts. Juvenile coverts have a broader and more continuous light cream outer edge that often ends in a small teardrop spot on the tip.	Moult contrast in central coverts – normally 3-5 post-juvenile coverts which contrast with the outer juvenile coverts. Juvenile coverts like those of 2cy male.
Wing feathers	Black-brown and relatively fresh. Often little contrast with the tertials, coverts, back and so on. Clear greyish wing panel.	Dark brownish-black and relatively fresh. Often little contrast with the tertials, coverts, back and so on. Wing panel generally less prominent compared with the male, but the variation is large.	Brown-black to brown and often clearly worn. The contrast with the darker new coverts and back is often clear. Shows an obvious wing panel like adult male; however, this is generally slightly less silver in colour.	Brownish-black to brown and often clearly worn. The contrast with darker new wing coverts and back often clear. Shows an obvious wing panel like adult female; however, it is generally somewhat less distinct.
Tail	Dark blackish-brown and fresh. Undertail coverts dark black-brown with weak light fringes.	Brown-black and fresh. Undertail coverts brown with obvious light fringes.	Brownish-black and often clearly worn at the tips. Undertail coverts as per adult male, with generally somewhat clearer fringing.	Brownish-black and often clearly worn at the tips. Undertail coverts as per adult female, with generally somewhat clearer fringing.
Bill	Deep yellow beak contrasting with the darker portions around the beak tip and upper mandible. Could be almost entirely yellow.	Yellowish with larger darker areas than the male. Upper mandible and tip often almost completely dark.	Same as for adult male, but generally with larger darker sections.	Same as for 3cy+ female, but generally darker – some lacking any yellowish areas.
Head	Dark blackish-brown to brownish-black background colour. Mostly uniformly dark throughout without clear contrasts.	Dark brown to brown with slightly lighter forehead and crown. Often a little more mottled than in male and regularly shows diffuse dark lores.	Same as for 3cy+ male, but generally slightly lighter in base colour.	Same as for 3cy+ female, but generally slightly lighter in base colour.
Throat	Dark coloured as the head without (or with only very diffuse) streaking.	Same colour as the head and often with lighter streaking.	Evenly dark coloured in the same shade as the head and usually with diffuse lighter streaking.	Dark and with obvious lighter streaking.
Breast band	Well defined and almost entirely white with a hint of diffuse (hard to see) brown fringing. Typically extends up to the back in the form of a spike.	Less well defined than male. Obvious brown fringing, which means that it is perceived as dirty brown-beige (some reminiscent of 2cy male). Band does not usually stretch as far up towards the back and is not 'sharp' as in a male.	Same as for 3cy+ male, but with greater level of brown fringes.	Same as for 3cy+ female, but generally with stronger brown fringing.
Back	Evenly coloured dark blackish-brown. Usually uniformly coloured with only light fringing.	Dark brown to brown with slightly lighter fringes, giving a somewhat scaly appearance.	Same as for 3cy+ male, but generally somewhat lighter in base colour.	Same as for 3cy+ female, but with stronger brighter fringing.
Underparts	Dark blackish-brown like the rest of the bird. Usually uniformly coloured with only weak lighter fringing.	Brown-black to dark brown with clearly lighter fringing. Colour often slightly darker than the rest of the bird.	Same as for 3cy+ male, but generally with slightly more prominent fringing.	Same as for 3cy+ female, but with well marked, brighter fringing.

4 Ring Ouzel (third-calendar-year+ male, Lumijoki, Finland, 25 April 2006). Characters: 1) relatively brown primaries, though fresh and wide toward the tertials; 2) post-juvenile greater coverts with broad white fringes; 3) dark black-brown back with weak fringing; 4) white breast band reaches far round towards the back and ends in a pointed wedge; 5) dark, evenly coloured head (darker crown and forehead); 6) predominantly yellow bill; 7) dark unstreaked throat; 8) distinctive pure white chest band; 9) dark black-brown body with weak fringes; 10) dark and only narrowly fringed undertail coverts.



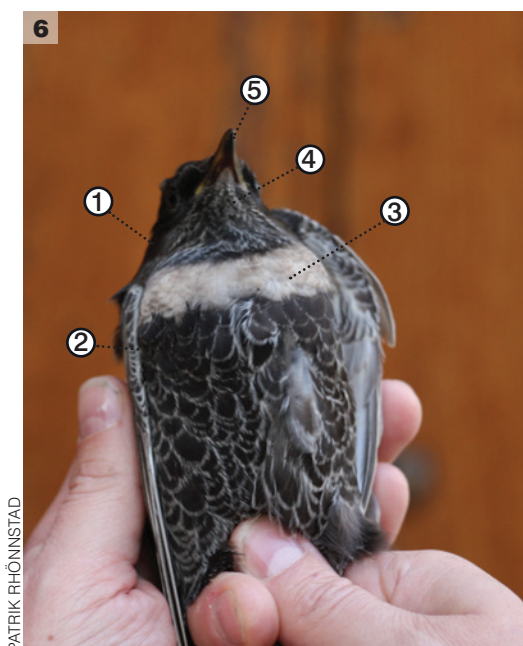
JARI PELTOMÄKI



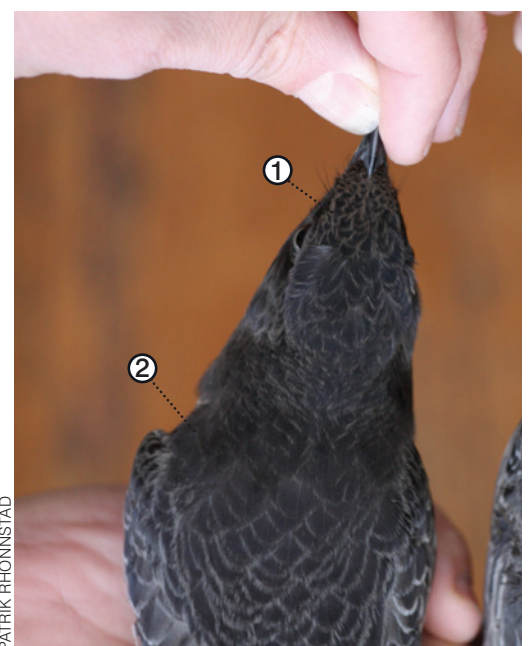
5 Ring Ouzel (second-calendar-year male, Stockholm, Sweden, 18 April 2006). Characters: 1) moult contrast in greater coverts – note the difference in length, wear and appearance; 2) dark black-brown back with weak fringing; 3) breast band in a wedge; 4) dark, uniformly coloured head; 5) darker bill, though can be clearly more coloured on a 2cy; 6) dark, lightly streaked throat; 7) distinctive white breast band has pale brown fringing; 8) dark black-brown body with weak fringing; 9) dark and only narrowly fringed undertail coverts.

HANS BISTER

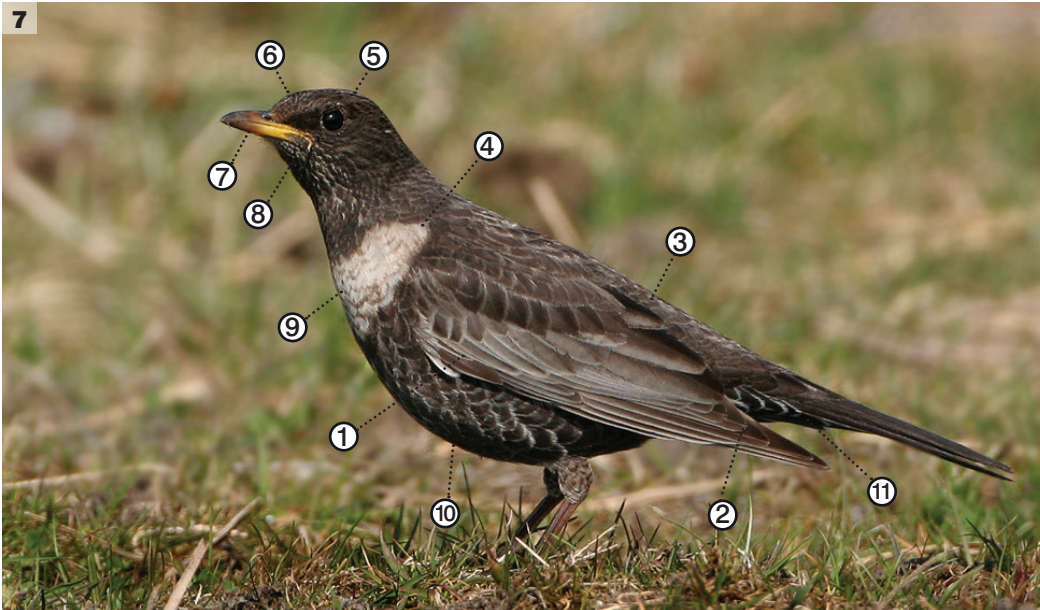
6 Ring Ouzel (first-calendar-year male, Heimøya, Norway, 2 October 2011). Characters: 1) uniformly dark, black-brown base colour both above and below. Note especially the blacker crown feathers and compare with 1cy female; 2) relatively distinct and narrow fringing both above and below; 3) breast band more cream coloured than pure white, due to fine brown-fringed feathers (which will, however, wear away towards spring, and breast band will then appear a cleaner white); 4) throat with clear hints of lighter streaking, which, however, will darken towards spring; 5) bill predominantly dark, but with a hint of lighter elements showing through.



PATRIK RHÖNNSTAD



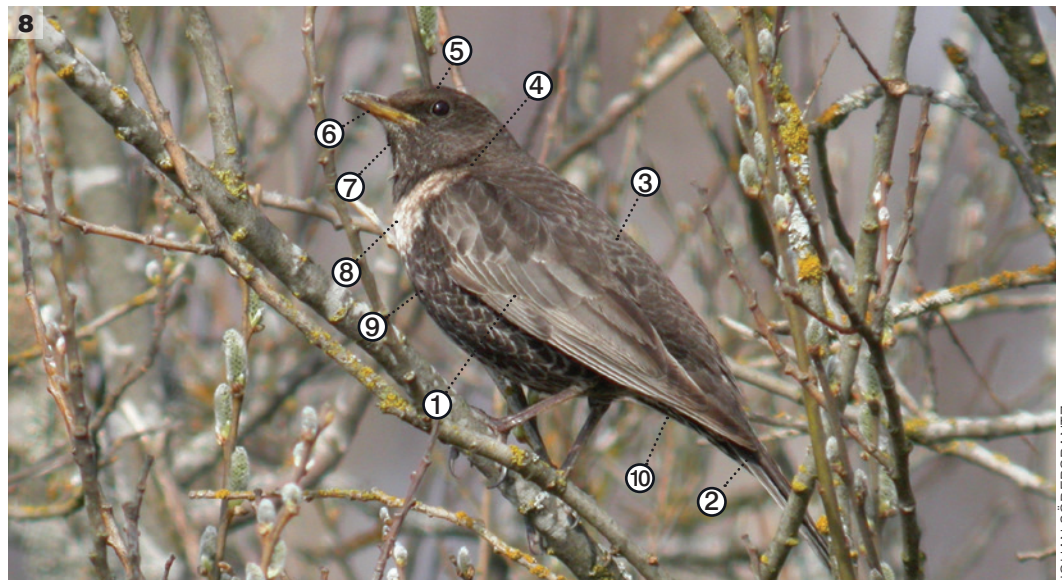
PATRIK RHÖNNSTAD



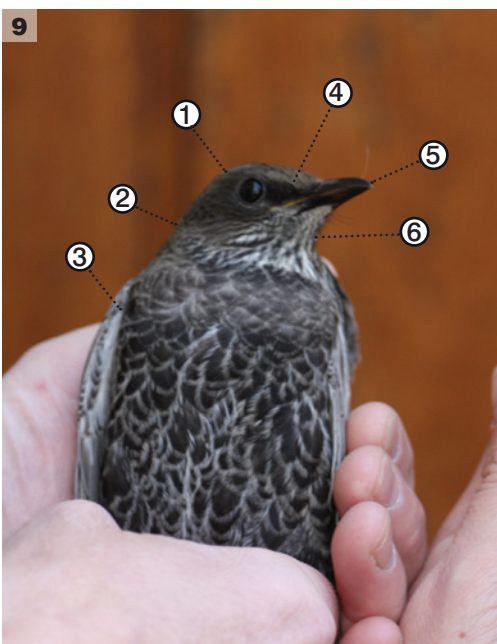
7 Ring Ouzel (third-calendar-year+ female, Friesland, The Netherlands, 22 April 2008). Characters: 1) adult greater coverts without obvious white outer edges; 2) relatively brown wing feathers, though fresh and wide toward the tertials; 3) dark brown back with a slightly scaly appearance; 4) breast band with blunt termination; 5) dark brown head; 6) brighter forehead and crown; 7) bill most yellow towards base and lower mandible; 8) weakly streaked throat; 9) diffuse breast band with clear brown fringes – looks a bit ‘dirty’; 10) brown-black body with obvious fringing; 11) undertail coverts with broad fringes.

ALBERT NOORLANDER

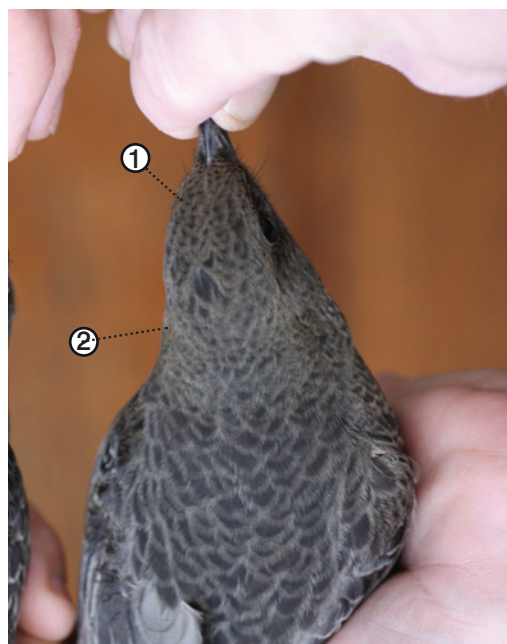
8 Ring Ouzel (second-calendar-year female, Gästrikland, Sweden, 12 April 2005) Characters: 1) moult contrast in the greater coverts – note the difference in length, wear and appearance; 2) brown-tinted and clearly worn primaries; 3) brown-toned back giving a scaly appearance; 4) breast band with blunt termination; 5) brown-tinted head with lighter forehead; 6) bill drab and most deeply coloured at base of lower mandible; 7) clearly streaked throat; 8) diffuse breast band with clear brown fringing – looks ‘dirty’; 9) brownish-black belly with obvious fringes; 10) undertail coverts with broad fringes.



JOHAN SÖDERCRANTZ



PATRIK RHÖNNSTAD



PATRIK RHÖNNSTAD

9 Ring Ouzel (first-calendar-year female, Heimøya, Norway, 2 October 2011). Characters: 1) brown-black to brown base colour with the nape lighter than the body and back; 2) fringing relatively broad, especially on the head and neck; 3) breast band only very lightly marked; 4) prominent darker lores against an otherwise lighter head; 5) bill in principle completely dark; 6) throat predominantly light.

10 Adult males

Spring birds

Adult females



BJÖRN MALMHAGEN

Second-calendar-year males

Second-calendar-year females

11 Second-calendar-year+ males

Autumn birds

Second-calendar-year+ females



BJÖRN MALMHAGEN

First-calendar-year males

First-calendar-year females

FINDING YOUR OWN RING OUZEL

RING Ouzel is an anticipated but declining migrant every spring, with often good numbers entering the country beginning in the south from mid-March to mid-May. It can be found locally on territory in selected rocky upland and moorland areas in the north and west of Britain, reasonably easily located by call, song and sight, though it is nowhere near as habituated to humans as

its familiar Blackbird relative.

Come late August, the first birds can start appearing in the lowlands, and often pass through the same inland, tree-lined golf courses, playing fields and parks annually, particularly during September.

Into October, the species can be expected at all the regular east coast migration hot-spots from Shetland south,

and can be involved in falls of Scandinavian passerines if the right weather conditions are involved. Here they will also actively seek out open grass, but may also merely fly through, sometimes in numbers.

The occasional bird is also found in winter, generally in the south, and the odd straggler can accompany late flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare as they invade.