

## The Ring Ouzel

A few weeks ago I happened to mention to a friend that we had seen a Ring Ouzel in the garden. They had never heard of a Ring Ouzel so I thought this would be a good opportunity to explain what it is.

First of all, what is an Ouzel? Well, ouzel (or ousel) is the old English name for the blackbird, as in this little poem from *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The ousel-cock, so black of hue  
With orange-tawny bill  
The thristle with his not so true  
The wren with little quill  
The finch, the sparrow and the lark  
The plain-song cuckoo grey  
Whose note full many a man doth mark,  
And dares not answer nay.



A Ring Ouzel is our upland form of Blackbird. The male looks very like a Blackbird but has a very distinct white crescent on its breast, hence the “ring” in the name. It also has silvery feathers in its wings which makes it look quite pale in flight. The female is a browner version of the male. (Note that a few white feathers on the breast do not turn a Blackbird into a Ring Ouzel – it is just a leucistic Blackbird!)

One of things which makes the Ring Ouzel so different from a Blackbird is the fact that it lives and breeds only on high ground – a typical spot would be a small steep valley on a mountainside with a stream tumbling down the hillside and a few rowan trees to perch on and sing from. They are very timid and flighty and hard to see on their breeding grounds.

So what was one doing in our back garden? Well, Ring Ouzels are migratory, and every spring a few birds pass through our area and are seen primarily around the coastal headlands. The spring of 2016 was particularly notable as a flock of 9 birds stayed for several days around St Justinians – a more typical sighting is of a single distant bird sitting on a fence or feeding on the grass, which quickly moves on.

The bird in our garden was a female (which are less often seen) and she was feeding on the lawn. She had probably walked in from the field which immediately borders the lawn, as they like to be in very open situations. Unfortunately she was very quickly seen off by the resident Blackbird.

Ring Ouzels are not doing well in the uplands – there are many reasons for this but one interesting reason is that Blackbirds are moving uphill. Blackbirds are doing very well in the lowlands and in order to find new territories they are spreading up the hills, where they out-compete the more timid Ring Ouzels.

*Rosemary Royle*