

Sightings of Ring Ouzels reported to the Ring Ouzel Study Group 2012 -2018

The records submitted to the Study Group have been reviewed and a summary of the findings follows. This may help to put an individual's record into a broader context. There is an accompanying map which initially may appear to show a random distribution - but patterns soon begin to emerge...

Records

Approximately 900 sightings were sent to the Ring Ouzel Study Group during 2012 to 2018. Records are typically of 1–3 birds with a maximum count of 150 ouzels over a four-hour period at a single site in Sussex which is quite exceptional. This was part of the Autumn migration although 60% of sightings overall are during Spring.

Distribution map

This map indicates the number of times that a record has appeared within a 10 km square. Where an ouzel has been sighted in a square there are commonly 1-3 records over the whole of the seven years. Higher numbers of records tend to be centred on breeding areas, especially those which are well-visited such as the Lake District, Peak District and Snowdonia. There are also notable clusters in the Southwest and Southeast which are on migration routes.

Although Scotland has a much larger breeding population of ouzels than the rest of the UK it is not well represented by these records. Presumably this reflects ouzels tending to occur in less accessible areas with fewer visitors.

Sightings on the coasts will be of migrating ouzels and there is also a band which follows the high ground from the Wessex Downs, through the Chilterns and on towards Cambridge. This ridge seems to be favoured for a Stop-over by migrating ouzels.

On the other hand, there are areas where ouzels are seldom reported such as much of Lincolnshire, the Vale of York and central Durham. These are low-lying, well-cultivated areas and this may reflect ouzels' preference for higher ground.

Feeding

Usefully, some of the records received include comments on feeding. In the Autumn ouzels are seen to feed on Hawthorn and Rowan in particular, whereas in the Spring they usually feed on the ground taking earthworms and grubs. There are also several records of ouzels taking Ivy berries in the Spring.

Gardens and open spaces

There are more ouzels reported using gardens during Spring than throughout the remainder of the year. This might reflect food shortages faced by returning ouzels. During Spring there is a higher proportion of rural gardens frequented by ouzels, particularly gardens with

an adjacent paddock or field. (The presence of livestock may result in there being more invertebrates available.) In Autumn there seems to be a shift towards using urban gardens.

There are a small number of sightings in open spaces such as caravan parks and recreational places. Presumably the short grass provides an opportunity for foraging.

Interactions between Ring Ouzels and other bird species

Where ouzels are found feeding amongst groups of other thrushes there doesn't seem to be any interaction. However, near to human habitation ouzels tend to be dominated by other thrushes, presumably because the latter are being territorial. On only one occasion was an ouzel noted to "chase all the other birds in the garden".

Stop-over sites

A number of specific sites are visited by migrating ouzels regularly, year on year. The majority of birds seem to stay for 2-5 days but it can be as long as twenty days for an individual ouzel. Escarpments and other features raised above the surrounding land, such as the Berkshire Downs, are favoured for stopping over. Presumably these provide food resources and possibly also shelter from the elements and predators.

Over-wintering ouzels

Each year we get one or two records which indicate that an ouzel has stayed in the UK throughout the winter. Perhaps they were less fit to complete the journey south to the usual wintering grounds in southern Spain or the Atlas Mountains in NW Africa. Presumably they link up with returning ouzels in the Spring. (Ring ouzels are amongst the earliest of returning migrants often reappearing in the middle of March.)

Coverage

For many years the most reliable information came from coastal observatories although ouzels passing through inland areas were recorded locally. It is only recently that this data has become more accessible and records are now submitted electronically through the BTO's BirdTrack and also the BirdGuides website. These tools are mainly used by dedicated Birders who may introduce an element of bias because they may be selective in the areas which they choose to visit. Indeed, it is for this very reason that we are able to confirm Stop-over sites.

The sightings submitted to the Ring Ouzel Study Group website complement the above records because they often come from people visiting areas for other reasons. For this reason, we are keen to continue to receive sightings to build up a more complete picture of migration routes and of continued occupancy of breeding areas. Happily, one observer has even confirmed ouzels breeding in an area where we thought that they had been lost.

James Anderson