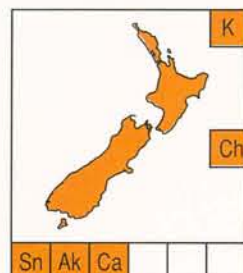


Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

BLACKBIRD *Turdus merula*

Abundant European introduction

25 cm, 90 g. Adult male *black with a bright orange bill*. Adult female *dark brown with paler throat and smudgy mottled breast*; bill brown and dull orange. Juvenile *rusty brown*, especially on head; pale streaks on back and wing coverts; brown barring on underparts; bill dark brown. Immature male (Apr–Jan) has brown wings contrasting with black body. *Long tail*. Feeds mainly on the ground; *hops* rather than walks. *Song a loud clear tuneful warble, mellower than Song Thrush and not repetitive*. Alarm call a persistent sharp ‘tchink-tchink’. **Habitat:** Forest, scrub, farmland with scattered trees or hedges, orchards, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Aug–Jan. [Sp 295]



THRUSHES

Muscicapidae

304 species worldwide; 2 introduced to New Zealand.

with spots and bright colours. Many have musical songs and harsh, staccato alarm calls. They often catch insects and earthworms on the ground, but also eat fruit from trees.

A big group of plump songbirds, mostly with brown or black plumage, but sometimes offset

295. BLACKBIRD *Turdus merula*

Plate 67

Size: 25 cm, 90 g
Distribution: Natural breeding range is Europe and northwestern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia south to India and Sri Lanka and east to southern China. About 1000 birds were introduced into New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies for sentimental reasons in 1862–75. They were liberated in both islands and established quickly, so that by 1900 they were distributed widely on the mainland and had colonised the Chatham and Auckland Islands. The species is now abundant throughout the mainland and offshore islands, and well established on the Kermadecs, Chathams, The Snares, Auckland

and Campbell Islands, and vagrants have reached the Antipodes Islands.
 Blackbirds are common in suburban gardens, parks, orchards, paddocks surrounded by hedges, exotic plantations, scrub and native forest, reaching at least 1500 m. The only places they are uncommon are on offshore islands with intact native bird and forest communities, such as on Little Barrier and Kapiti. In Eurasia, some birds migrate, but there is no evidence of regular long-distance movement in New Zealand; the maximum movement of a banded bird is only 90 km, from the Orongorongo Valley to Levin.
Population: Probably the most widespread

species within New Zealand, and especially abundant in parks, suburban gardens, orchards and farmland hedgerows where there is a mix of dense cover and open spaces.
Breeding: Males establish territories in April; usually the same territory is used by the same pair year after year. Most eggs are laid from late August to late December, but occasionally as early as June or as late as February. Pairs quickly replace nests that fail, and so most pairs nest 2–5 times each year and raise 2–3 broods, sometimes in the same nest. The female takes over a week to build the nest at the start of the season, but as little as 3 days later in the season. The nest is a substantial cup of twigs, grass, roots and moss, bound together with mud, and roughly lined with grass and leaf skeletons. It is usually built in the fork of a shrub or hedge 1–10 m above the ground, but occasionally nests are built on a ledge on a bank or in a shed.

summer and early autumn, Blackbirds may sing a soft, warbling subsong while remaining hidden in a shrub or hedge. Alarm notes are an anxious, repeated ‘tchook’, especially given when a bird is flushed from cover, and a persistent, repeated ‘tchink’ when a predator is being mobbed.

Feeding: Diet is a mixture of invertebrates and fruits. The main invertebrates eaten include worms, beetles, amphipods, caterpillars, millipedes and spiders. Small fruits of native and introduced shrubs and weeds are eaten whole, but flesh of larger fruits is pecked from ripe fruit in trees or from fallen fruit. Blackbirds can cause considerable damage to commercial crops of berryfruits, grapes, pipfruit and stonefruit, and tomatoes. They also spread weed seeds into native forests and crops, but in some native forests they help to disperse seeds of fleshy-fruited understorey plants.

They lay 2–3–4–6 eggs (28 x 21 mm, 6.5 g) at daily intervals. The eggs are bluish green to greenish brown, and are densely freckled with reddish brown. The female starts incubating before the clutch is completed, and incubation takes 13–14 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, which fledge at 13–15 days old. The young remain near the parents and are occasionally fed for several weeks after fledging. Young can breed at 9 months old. The oldest Blackbird recorded in New Zealand lived 15 years, but in Europe the record is over 20 years.

Most food is taken on the ground, especially close to cover or from closely mown lawns. When they are searching for insects, leaves are flicked aside with the bill and occasionally scratched away by the feet, but when hunting worms the bird usually takes a few hops, and then stops with head cocked before moving a step or two to catch the worm and pull it from the ground.

Behaviour: Blackbirds defend their territory for 8 months from April to January, but during the autumn moult they often congregate (but do not flock) at good sources of food such as orchards or mast-fruiting kahikatea forests. The territorial song of the male, heard mainly in July–January and delivered from an elevated perch, is loud, fluent and mellow, with notes running into each other. In late

In the hand: Adults can be sexed in the field, but juveniles are difficult; young males tend to have brownish-black upperparts, not olive-tinged as in young females. In autumn, adults moult wing and tail feathers, and so have feathers missing or have fresh feathers, whereas young birds do not moult their primaries until over a year old, and so have very worn primaries by the next breeding season. In the first winter male, the worn, brown primaries contrast with the black body feathers acquired in a partial moult in the autumn.

Reading: Bull, P.C. 1946. *Emu* 46: 198–208. Bull, P.C. 1953. *Notornis* 5: 149–156. Flux, J.E.C. 1966. *Notornis* 13: 142–149. Gurr, L. 1954. *Ibis* 96: 225–261.