

ring ouzel



THE MOUNTAIN BLACKBIRD

Ben Macdonald goes in search of the elusive white-bibbed blackbird that haunts heather-clad hills.

Photo: Tim Melling



Ring ouzels pluck earthworms from grassy areas, much like their lowland blackbird cousins.

It was the blackbird with a twist. In my childhood, few birds captured my imagination so completely, or leapt so vividly from the page. Few birds eluded me and caused such consternation. It was the first bird for which I hunted, lost, got dispirited, then bounced back and hunted for again – and again. I chased them through North Yorkshire, the Lake District, Snowdonia, the Dales... Yet, that scaly white bib never appeared, that lonely song never sounded. Ring ouzels – the UK’s “mountain blackbirds” – were as far removed from the blackbirds in my garden as they could be.

They flew from North Africa and Europe to nest here each summer. They shunned humankind. No matter how high I climbed, no matter how haunting or remote the moor, the ouzel was wilder still. For years, I never climbed high enough to reach its lonely domain. It was a wilderness enigma – it sang in places many people never see. Ring ouzels are haunting birds of haunting places – and they haunted me.

MYSTERY OF THE MISSING BIRDS

They haunted the RSPB’s Chris Rollie, too. As area manager in Dumfries & Galloway, he had started to notice worrying declines in ring ouzel sightings on upland reserves by the 1990s – and he wasn’t the only one. “I realised that this decline was also being detected by colleagues across upland areas of the UK – but it was off the conservation radar, so to speak,” he remembers.

Chris began collating records from over 450 ring ouzel territories, and asked RSPB conservation scientist Innes Sim to survey the birds. In 1998 they formed the Ring Ouzel Study Group, an information-sharing network of professional and

OUZEL HEROES



Nick Baker
Ring Ouzel
Study Group /
TV naturalist

"In the summer holidays of 1979 my dad returned from an early morning clifftop ramble on the Isle of Wight. Excitedly, he described a bird he'd just seen for the first time; a blackbird etched with a silver filagree, with a clear white gorget around its throat. From that moment the ring ouzel became to me an enigma and legend.

"11 years later, I hitched 25 miles from my university campus in Exeter to a recommended ouzel haunt on Dartmoor. The murky and dimpsy conditions dashed my hopes of a sighting. But as moisture stealthily soaked me to the skin, I heard the plaintive, tri-syllabic simple song of a male somewhere among the long-deserted mine workings.

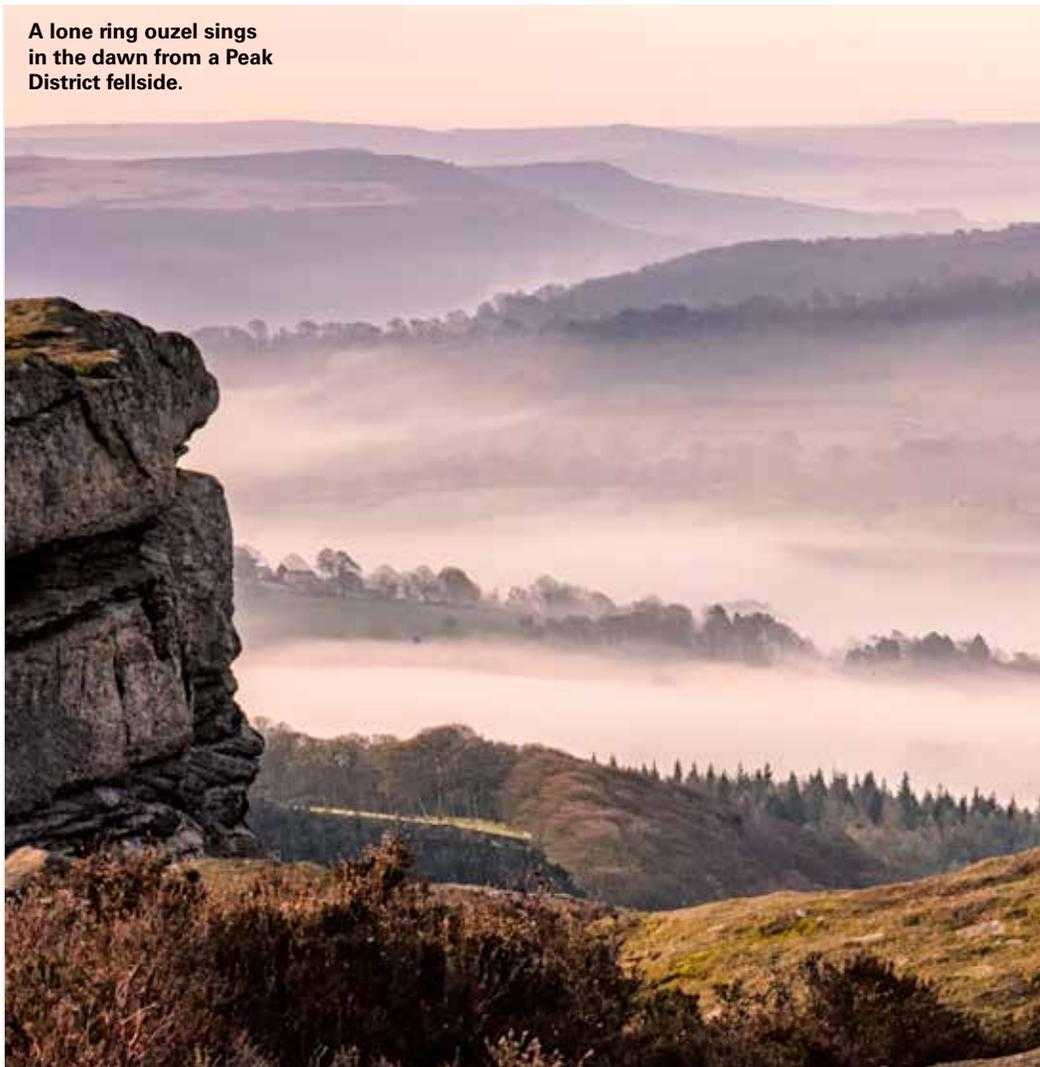
"This was my kind of bird.

A connoisseur's blackbird, about as unpredictable as a bird can get. I've since seen them many times at this spot on Dartmoor – I could even sit in the moorland pub beer garden and watch them tugging worms from the sheep-nibbled sward. Now, 20 years on, this beating wild heart of Dartmoor has vanished from many of its former haunts. I know because for the past six years I've been a professional ouzeller – working with the RSPB to try and understand why. It still hangs on, just; sadly more mysterious now than ever.

"Every spring, I impatiently await the handful of returning birds, willing them safely through their perilous journey from North Africa; wondering whether this will be the year the moor falls silent. They've not let me down yet, but with probably less than a dozen pairs left in this, their most southerly UK breeding ground, it's getting far too close for comfort.

"If we lose the ring ouzel from the moor, we lose a little bit more of its defining beauty, we lose the soundtrack to the most bleak, windswept and wild places, and we'll have failed yet another species."

A lone ring ouzel sings in the dawn from a Peak District fellside.



► volunteer ornithologists, including Nick Baker and Iolo Williams (see overleaf) across the UK and Europe, to put the birds back on the radar.

Innes admits that he knew very little about this white-banded blackbird when he started off. But he did share with it a love of the wilderness. Elusive, wary, enigmatic, these birds posed a challenge that he tackled with relish. "We identified a list of ouzel breeding sites across south Scotland," Innes remembers. They consulted local bird sightings and RSPB surveys. "It raised several questions in my head," Innes continues, "like why would a blackbird live in the mountains, why was it declining, and why wasn't more known about it?"

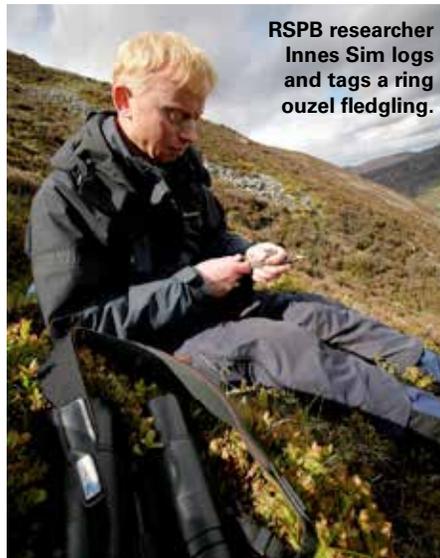
The team went to the mountains to find the birds – and they never looked back. Their work has entirely transformed our knowledge of the mountain blackbird, from a lonely enigma to one of the UK's best-studied birds.



These filigree-feathered birds have very specific requirements.



“Since the removal of sheep from a deep valley, ouzel numbers had plummeted. They nibble down the areas that ouzels need to feed.”



RSPB researcher Innes Sim logs and tags a ring ouzel fledgling.

OUZEL HEROES



Iolo Williams
Ring Ouzel
Study Group /
TV naturalist

“I first came across ring ouzels while walking with my dad in Snowdonia. I was about six or seven, and remember him pointing them out to me and telling me, in Welsh, that where he was from they were called “rock vicars” because of their white collars. I always thought this a wonderfully descriptive name.

“Ring ouzels are special to me, because you have to go to great lengths to find them. The population in Wales has declined but as a youth, I remember looking for them in isolated, heather-clad gorges and moorland quarries. It often took several hours to find these sites but when you saw a ring ouzel, especially a showy, singing male in early April, the effort was well worthwhile.

“My favourite ouzel moment was finding my first nest on the rugged Rhinog Mountains in north-west Wales. I was monitoring the population to help a national survey, and this particular pair had given me the runaround on a previous visit in low cloud. This particular day was sunny and calm (rare in upland Wales in spring!) and having found a great perch, I watched the female gradually make her way back onto her nest at the base of a precariously-positioned rowan tree. It was magical.”

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Surveys found that Glen Curnie, a steep glacial valley high in the Scottish Cairngorms, was a stronghold for the species, with a stable population and easy-to-find nest sites.

You have to be fit and hardy to work in Glen Curnie, up to 700m up on windswept moorland devoid of trees. “It’s frequently cold, wet and nearly always windy. Snow falls in May and sometimes in June,” Innes reveals. But the craggy, scree-flanked glen became a focal point for ouzel study and fledgling tagging, which has continued here every year since, yielding more information about their survival, habitat needs and dispersal.

Unlike any other British thrush, ring ouzels are summer visitors – and must raise two families during their short time on our island before they fly south again in July.

And its here in Glen Cunie, every summer, that one very special individual appears: a male, calling heartily from the heather, delighting the team of RSPB

conservationists who watch over him. The “Super Ouzel” (see page 59) is a champion among the species, having sired some 48 chicks in this little valley since he was tagged here as a fledgling himself. He has made the trip back to Morocco for seven winters running, so far.

By some talent or luck, this bird has beaten the odds. Glen Curnie’s fledglings have been logged in Spain, France and Morocco. Many don’t return. But we don’t know where they run into problems - whether in the UK or beyond. Is it food supply? Habitat?

“In 2013 and 2015 we also fitted GPS tags to breeding adults to discover more about their journeys to and from Morocco,” says Innes. “This work is likely to expand, under the ‘Birds Without Borders’ programme, to find out more about our migrant birds when they are outside their UK breeding grounds.”

GIVING OUZELS A HOME

Though these elusive birds haunt only the wildest, rockiest summits, ouzels share ►

Ring ouzels need dense cover for their nests, and grass for the worms to feed their chicks.



“We now have a much better understanding of their ecology, and what we can do to help them, but there is a lot more still to learn!”

► with their urban cousins a curious fondness for lawn! Just as our garden blackbirds do, they collect earthworms from grassy patches, amid boulders and scree. But they nest in tall stands of heather, often overlooking a steep slope. They need dense habitat to hide their chicks – but open grasslands to collect their food.

The Group’s studies have revealed how ouzels use the moorland landscape. They found that the number of breeding territories in any one year was positive, related to the proportion of heather within 100 metres of the territory centre.

Ouzels need a mosaic habitat – but it needs to be just right. Too much rank grass, and you have nowhere to feed. Too

little heather, and your nest is the perfect target for a fox or crow.

The team cast around for two kinds of sites – ones where things were going right, and where things were going wrong.

“At RSPB Geltsdale we noticed that, since the removal of sheep from a deep valley, ouzel numbers had plummeted,” Chris says. “Now, ouzels existed in the UK for many millennia before sheep came along, but these woolly conservationists, it seems, can be quite good at nibbling down the open areas that ouzels need to feed.”

As a result, the RSPB has introduced Exmoor ponies back onto the Geltsdale slopes. Closer to the wild horses that once roamed our island, it is hoped these gentle grazers will restore that balance of green

space and heather that the ouzels need to thrive.

At the same time, studies have focused on Glen Esk, a Tayside valley where ouzels are doing just fine. Intensive work here has shown that ouzels select areas where grass is far more dominant than heather. As Innes points out, “You need one or two good bits of heather to hide your family, but a lot of grass if you’re to find food for four hungry chicks for two weeks in a nest.” Getting that balance right is now a task the RSPB are tackling across their reserves and beyond.

OUZELS FOR THE FUTURE

In spite of the ouzel’s decline, large landscapes like Snowdonia and the Lake District are holding on to their ouzels well, and this gives us cause for hope. Today, around 5,300 pairs of these special birds still defy the odds to nest in the UK. But then again, it’s often the smaller details that put a smile on the face of the RSPB’s team. In the past five years, the ouzels at Innes’s Glen Clunie study have bounced back, by over 40%.

With a modest chuckle, Innes admits “we’re still working out why! To cut a long story short,” he says, “it looks like first-year survival is a key demographic

Super Ouzel pic to come

SUPER OUZEL

Meet the male ring ouzel the RSPB have been welcoming home for seven years...

In June 2008, a male ring ouzel chick was ringed at Glen Clunie. Every year since, LA43656 has flown to north Africa and back seven times, clocking over 31,000 miles to return to the glen each summer to breed. This is has done in style. He is now on his fourth "wife" and has reared 43 young in seven years, without a single breeding failure.

The secret of his success could be his unusual boldness. "He tends to alarm-call humans from a long distance away (most males stay quiet until the threat is close), and is very bold in defence of his nest," says Innes Sim. "When we come in to ring chicks, he'll come to within 3 m to scold you, and will even dive-bomb you to try to scare you off. He's a very protective father."

He was last seen on 19 June 2015, during his seventh summer and just before his eighth birthday. "He's special," says Innes, "and if he returns to breed this summer he will be the new UK longevity record-holder. So, fingers crossed he will make it back!"

At the time of going to press it's too early to tell whether he'll break the record, but you can follow progress at [xxxxxxx.org.uk/xxxxxxx](http://xxxxxxx.org.uk/)

SEE RING OUZELS

Breeding ring ouzels are mostly found in the uplands of Wales, northern England and Scotland. They're similar to blackbirds, but have longer wings and a lighter bodyweight, and can vanish in a flash.

You nearly always hear their harsh "chack chack" call before you see them. Their song has two components – a loud whistle repeated a few times, designed to carry long distances in remote valleys; and a softer, more complex song, very beautiful but rarely heard.

Ring ouzel breeding grounds include:

Scotland: Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Skye. North and West Highlands (try RSPB Abernethy). Moorfoot Hills in the Borders.

Northern England: Lake District (try RSPB Haweswater and Geltsdale), North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales and Peak District (try RSPB Dove Stone).

Wales: Snowdonia (try RSPB Lake Vyrnwy) and the Brecon Beacons.

South-west England: A fragile population still survives in northern Dartmoor.

Migrating ring ouzels can occasionally be seen far from the mountains. En route to their breeding sites in the UK and northern Europe, they pass across the UK on a broad front from late March to mid-May, with a peak in mid to late April. They can turn up anywhere with short turf for them to find worms and bushes nearby. Search inland, especially hills, downland and paddocks, and at coastal migration hotspots.

Find out more at ringouzel.info



Birders ascend into ouzel country, hoping to glimpse a nesting bird.



rate. So, when first-year survival is high the population tends to increase, and vice versa. Our trial management work at Geltsdale and Dove Stone is about trying to see if we can create ideal habitat conditions that will improve breeding success and post-fledging survival."

In the 20 years before 1991, there were zero scientific papers published on the ring ouzel. There have been over 18 published since – a great leap forward. "We now have a much better understanding of their ecology, and what we can do to help them. So, we think that is great progress, but there is a lot more

still to learn!" Innes says. That's the allure of studying one of Britain's shyest birds – one that gives up its secrets one at a time.

The battle to save the mountain blackbird will be a long one. But this band of experts is uniquely equipped to do so. Chris Rollie continues to chair the Study Group and lead on the species action plan, and has investigated their wintering areas in Spain and Morocco. "We're in a far better position these days and at an exciting stage of trial management on our reserves," he says. "We're using high technology to unpick their remaining mysteries."

But the science isn't all that spurs him onward. "Hearing their plaintive, tri-syllabic fluted whistle song, in the gloaming at the end of a long day in the field, absolutely tops it for me" he smiles.

For Chris and Innes, for me, for all of us, let us hope that the ouzel can continue to haunt us – for centuries to come.



Ben Macdonald is a conservation columnist and author of *Rebuilding Wild Britain*. Follow him on Twitter @WildlifeMac.