



ROBINS *words and photo by Keith Wakerley*

At this time of year robins appear on our Christmas cards and are one of the commonest birds in our gardens. Their large eyes, colourful red breast and confiding nature have made them Britain's favourite bird and yet there is more to robins than their popular image suggests.

- Unlike most birds, robins sing almost all the year round, only falling silent when they moult in July and early August. They are also unusual in that both the males and females sing in winter. This is because each robin holds its own winter feeding territory with its song. During the breeding season only the males sing, switching from their subdued winter song to a louder, up-tempo song, delivered with gusto.
- At the end of winter, female robins either combine their territory with a neighbouring male to create a breeding territory or abandon their winter territory and move away in search of a suitable mate. When the female is nest building and egg laying the male may provide up to a third of her food. This courtship feeding is important because it allows her to produce a larger clutch of eggs and replenish some of the nutrients she lost through egg laying (a full clutch of eggs could weigh as much as 90% of the female's body



weight). Robins have such strong parenting instincts that they have been recorded feeding the chicks of several other species including blackbirds and song thrushes.

- Robins are fiercely territorial and the red breast that we find so attractive is actually an aggressive signal intended to intimidate any other robin that comes into their territory. Some robins are so aggressive that they will even attack a single red feather. For this reason, juvenile robins are brown and only acquire a red breast at their first moult. Up to 10% of males and 3% of females may die due to injuries sustained in fights.
- British robins are famously tame, appearing close by when we go into the garden or walk through woodland. We assume this is because they are friendly birds. The real reason is that they think we are pigs, or to be more precise wild boar. In their natural woodland home, robins follow wild boar and large herbivores so that they can feed on the invertebrates exposed by the activities of these animals.
- Robins frequently appear on our Christmas cards. This tradition goes back to 1840 when the penny post first began. To promote the service, customers were encouraged to send greetings cards to friends and family. The postmen, who delivered these cards wore red uniforms and were nicknamed 'robins'. Shortly afterwards, Christmas cards in which robins dressed as postmen with cards in their beaks appeared. This began the tradition of robins on Christmas cards that continues to this day.