



NOVEMBER AND BEYOND – WINTER VISITORS

November: shorter days, bare trees, no flowers and little birdsong... but that's enough of the downsides, as we welcome many thousands of winter visitors to our fields, trees, gardens and waterways.

As a consequence of a winter that is relatively milder than most of mainland Europe, large numbers of different bird species come here for the winter; some of the most obvious species are perhaps the 'winter thrushes', with resident populations swollen by continental visitors.

Whilst **Song Thrush** and **Mistle Thrush** numbers may increase, particularly in hard winters, increases in overall numbers are generally small.

Britain's large breeding population of **Blackbirds** (*right*) rarely visits mainland Europe in winter, but their numbers are swollen by birds from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, some from as far as western Russia. So, while it is extremely difficult to say whether the Blackbird you see is native or not, the other two winter thrushes – Fieldfares and Redwings – are much easier to identify as visitors.



Fieldfares (*below left*) and **Redwings** (*below right*) breed widely across northern Eurasia, and move westward to warmer climates for the winter. Most of the birds we see are from Scandinavia, Finland or northwest Russia, but some could come from much further east.



And they are coming; Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers website has been reporting sightings from mid-October, albeit not yet in last year's record-breaking numbers.



Another bird arriving here for the winter is the **Starling** (*left*) which, whilst not a thrush, can often be seen feeding in mixed groups with thrushes. Although numbers arriving here have declined over recent years, large numbers of visiting Starlings can still swell the resident population, and help form the spectacular murmurations often seen later in the winter.

So, while you are out and about in the countryside this winter, keep an eye out for these special birds that have flown many miles to get here and, if the weather turns cold for a length of time, look in your gardens: the bird on your cotoneaster berries may be a winter visitor!

Another (potential) winter visitor is the **Waxwing** (*below left*) – or, more accurately, Bohemian Waxwing, to differentiate it from the other species of Waxwing, Cedar and Japanese.



Described by Birdwords as *'The silky-plumaged Waxwing, as well turned out as a Parisian lady leaving a beauty parlour, with its black eye-shadow, hair-dried crest and wings duly waxed'*, its summer diet is mainly insect-based (mosquitoes, midges, etc.), but in winter it is mainly fruit-based, and therefore dependent on good supplies of berries for survival. Breeding across much of the Northern Hemisphere, Waxwings are known to move to western Europe for the winter. When berry crops in Southern Scandinavia are good, Waxwings will overwinter there; in bad years, they fly further west and can arrive in Britain, sometimes in spectacularly large numbers.

BTO ringing results indicate that many come from Finland and European Russia but birds may also come from central Siberia.

So, over the next few months, keep an eye out for these beautiful birds, and perhaps monitor social media for reported sightings, particularly on Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers' website and Facebook page. Waxwings can be very mobile, with individual birds and flocks constantly moving from berry-laden trees and bushes in one spot to another, not always close by the first; paradoxically, Rowans and Cotoneasters in supermarket car parks are some of the most-favoured spots.



If we are indeed fortunate to experience a 'Waxwing winter', we could see large numbers and sizeable flocks, although whether we see a repeat of February/March 1996 remains to be seen. A flock of c. 500 birds, including a single Cedar Waxwing (a North American resident species) which turned out to be only the second ever recorded sighting in the UK, spent a month touring Nottingham, occasionally crossing the Trent into Wilford, watched by crowds of birders from around the country; at times there were so many that traffic was brought to a halt.

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Sources

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The Birds of the Western Palearctic. D W Snow and C M Perrin

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