

The Status of the Black Redstart in the West Midland Bird Club Region

A joint survey undertaken by the West Midland Bird Club and regional BTO 2016/17
Jim Winsper and Steve Davies

Introduction

This survey has been undertaken as a combined effort between the West Midland Bird Club and appropriate counties in the regional network of the British Trust for Ornithology. The aim of the survey is to provide current information concerning the regional status of the Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*. The area covered in this survey is that known as: 'The West Midland Bird Club Region'. Hereafter referred to as the Region, it covers the counties of Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and the West Midlands Metropolitan County. The duration of this survey was 14 months commencing on January 1st, 2016 and ending February 28th, 2017. This incorporated the first winter period of 2016, the spring arrival, breeding period and autumn departure of birds in 2016 and the full, uninterrupted winter period commencing December 1st, 2016 and ending February 28th, 2017. A 25-year period between this survey and the last meaningful WMBC published study of the Black Redstart in our Region (Winsper 1987-1991) was reason enough in itself to update our information.

It was vital to the success of this survey that adequate coverage of the Region was completed. To ensure that this happened, a completion date for the survey was left open-ended. Inadequate coverage over any period of time would render the information gained as insufficient evidence on which to form an accurate opinion of the status of this species.

There were no illusions with regard to the task at hand in finding Black Redstarts in our Region. Recent BTO estimates (Musgrove et al. 2013) rather sum things up in offering a maximum of just 44 breeding pairs in Britain. A guesstimate of pairs that may have been undetected in this assessment can be added to this total but the proverbial 'needle in a haystack' sprang to mind when embarking upon our search.



Fig. 1. Female Black Redstart December 28th, 2016 - Worcester Cathedral and surrounding area.
Present from November 12th, 2016 to January 25th, 2017 at least - Photograph Craig Reed

A brief history of the Black Redstart in our Region

The earliest regional records to be documented in the West Midland Bird Club's *Annual Report* (the then Birmingham Bird Club) comprised single passage birds as one-off sightings on each occasion in 1935, 1936 and 1937. Breeding was first recorded in the Report in 1943, but true colonisation of the Region did not commence until 1958 (Harrison & Harrison 2005). From thereon there was an annual presence with intermittent breeding. The number of breeding birds has fluctuated throughout this entire period, as might be expected of a bird at the edge of its breeding range.

Black Redstarts prefer to nest in man-made structures that are often located in dense industrial areas or old, undeveloped areas of towns and cities. Such areas have, in the past, contained many derelict buildings or buildings that have not been renovated and therefore vacated. Under such circumstances the birds can be difficult to detect. Add to this the constant structural changes that take place in inner city areas that can displace birds, then further reasons for fluctuating breeding numbers become evident.

A regional status concept for each species was first introduced into the Club's *Annual Report* in 1995 (Bowley 1995). In this first instance the Black Redstart was accurately categorised as being a *scarce summer resident, passage migrant and winter visitor* and at the commencement of this survey this category remained as the accepted status.

Given the Black Redstart's regional history, it may have appeared rather unlikely that our findings in this survey would prompt any change to the bird's historic status. However, certain aspects within this categorisation may well have changed, and it was the aim of this survey to find out if this had been the case.

Some facts at hand that were worthy of consideration on commencement of the survey:

- 1982 WMBC '*The Birds of the West Midlands*'. From the period mid-1970s. Estimates indicate a range of between four and 11 pairs breeding in the Region.
- 1988-1991 BTO '*The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*' estimates a fluctuating UK breeding population of between 80 and 120 territory holding males/probable pairs.
- 1990 WMBC '*Annual Report*' '*1987-1991 Black Redstart Survey*' estimates a fluctuating breeding population from within and in close proximity to Birmingham city centre where up to six breeding pairs are known to have been present during this period.
- 2005 WMBC '*The New Birds of the West Midlands*' estimates a range of between five and 15 pairs breeding in the Region - not too dissimilar to the figures from 1982.
- 2007-2011 BTO '*Bird Atlas*' estimates a UK breeding population of between 19 and 44 pairs - a marked decline from the estimates of 1988-1991.
- 1986 BTO '*The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland*' suggests a possible 500 wintering birds in Britain and Ireland.
- 2007-2011 BTO '*Bird Atlas*' suggests that since the 1986 '*Winter Atlas*' the number of occupied 10km squares during the winter period has increased by over 50% in Britain.

Two points that stand out from the above information are:

1. The marked difference between the breeding estimates of the 1988-91 and 2007-2011 BTO Atlases.
2. The estimated occupancy increases by wintering birds in 10km squares between 1986 and 2011.

Planning

Information sheets providing guidelines on species identification, ageing and sex, together with survey methods and instructions, were supplied to all volunteers as well as being available in downloadable format on the WMBC website. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork every observer was allocated an area to cover. Once a thorough coverage of each area had been completed then each observer was encouraged to be as mobile as possible, covering as much suitable habitat as they felt able to do. Our approach to the recording of breeding birds was simplified by our previously accumulated knowledge of what constitutes prime habitat. Pre-planning meant that such areas were specifically targeted, with many areas of historic importance being visited throughout the period. Areas that were identified as being suitable and potential breeding habitat were also covered. This practice was carried out in all four counties. Thanks to the effort by all involved, this approach has resulted in what we consider to be adequate and representational coverage of the Region.

Fieldwork does not necessarily equate to finding birds. When surveying an area of land, we must evaluate the importance of a nil count and, after taking this into consideration, we are happy that our overall findings offer a true and realistic assessment of the birds' current regional status. Records of wintering and passage birds are largely not within the realms of precise survey work as they can turn up just about anywhere during these periods, unlike those studies carried out for breeding birds in well recognised habitat. Records of these birds are much more likely to arise from general birdwatching activities. However, in the case of wintering birds, the chances of locating them can be enhanced by visiting known breeding areas during the winter period, especially those where an expanse of water is involved on site or nearby, inner city canal systems being a prime example. Other suitable or favoured wintering areas may include reservoirs and quarries, particularly those that include building structures on site. In towns and cities - large churches, cathedrals, towers and other similar prominent structures were certainly felt worthy of investigation and these types of localities/habitats were targeted in our fieldwork plan.

It was realised that the overall development of passage and winter records would be greatly assisted by the access to general observation records that may come from a variety of sources, and this proved to be the case. An awareness of the survey was made available through the WMBC publications, WMBC News and Website. This filtered into the regional birding community and produced a very positive response with birders from across the Region submitting their findings. Social media networks and blogs also proved of great value in gaining information. All in all, our fieldwork strategy, together with a general desire by the birding community to record the presence of Black Redstart in our Region, ensured that we achieved our aim.

The following contributions by members of the survey team offer an insight to their approach, findings and summary of the areas that they covered.

Fieldwork and observations summary – Steve Davies

A couple of years ago Keith Wimbush asked me whether the BTO were planning any future survey projects on the Black Redstart. I replied that they were not but that this could be an opportune time to maybe organise something within the Birmingham and West Midlands Region. I quickly contacted Jim Winsper who, as with Keith amongst others, had previously surveyed and reported on the status of Black Redstarts in the Region many years ago. Jim agreed that this would indeed be a worthwhile

project. It proved even more opportune considering that the West Midland Bird Club had recently changed its logo to feature a fine graphic of a male of the species that had been designed and painted in electronic format by Jim himself. Jim kindly and enthusiastically agreed to take the lead in the project with help from local BTO and WMBC members, in a joint project.

My own fieldwork contributions included the following sites:

- All railway stations and suitable surrounding habitat from Worcester Shrub Hill to Smethwick Galton Bridge and Smethwick Galton Bridge to Wolverhampton.
- Worcester Cathedral.
- Sixways Stadium area and Shire Business Park Worcester.
- Ricoh Arena and area, Coventry.
- Also, all railway station areas along the Midland Metro Line.

Travelling between the frequent railway and Metro stations by train/tram, which can sometimes be a leisurely journey, provided an opportunity to check out track side habitat - old and derelict buildings, where they still exist, and any potential song posts. Disembarking at each station/stop offered the chance to investigate the station itself and any suitable surrounding areas. Rejoining the next or later train/tram gave me ample time to search each stop-over, and so the procedure was repeated. While my results in this particular effort amounted to nil Black Redstart sightings, the exercise proved to be effective in arriving at this important figure, while at the same time providing further evidence of urban development. These journeys also offered extensive coverage of areas that may not otherwise have been accessible.

In other aspects of my survey, many of my visits were of around an hour's duration with lists of other species taken to add interest. These lists were submitted to BTO's *BirdTrack*. It was interesting to find numerous species in areas I would not normally birdwatch! Unfortunately, I found none of the target species. A bird was located at Worcester Cathedral that remained at this location for a lengthy spell during the winter period 2016/17. This bird was found by another observer and I did not pursue this so as not to duplicate the effort, several records were submitted for this bird. As far as suitable habitat for breeding is concerned, I found that much of the previously rundown and derelict industrial buildings had been refurbished and now probably unsuitable for breeding Black Redstarts. This, I fear, is most likely the case for many of the areas where they were found breeding in the past.

Fieldwork and observations summary – Keith Wimbush

During the course of the survey period, I visited certain parts of Stoke-on-Trent, a group of towns with a tremendous social history attached to it, with the ceramics industry being the most notable employer during the majority of the 20th century and, to a considerably lesser degree, during the 21st century. The geography of this area is probably one of the most diverse within the West Midlands recording area. Although certain areas have become redeveloped or are in the active process of being redeveloped, the rate at which this is being done would seem to be much slower than in other industrial areas within the Midlands. The areas of Burslem, Fenton, Longport, Tunstall and Westport in particular, are areas which have seen the least amount of recent development and which still hold both breeding and overwintering potential for the species. Not only are the areas still rich in old and unoccupied industrial buildings, but there are numerous open areas containing spread out, well established vegetation, which would suggest excellent foraging potential and quite capable of sustaining successful breeding, particularly along the small network of canals which were established in Victorian times to support the movement of ceramics. There are some excellent canal-side habitats which, in the long term, could benefit from the introduction of nest boxes. Certain areas of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the adjacent town to Stoke-on-Trent, remain undeveloped to a lesser extent and could support over-wintering or breeding birds.

My efforts were concentrated within those areas of Stoke-on-Trent previously mentioned. During the months of January, February and March, visits were paid once every fortnight and generally during the morning hours, usually within half an hour of first daylight and on days when weather conditions were favourable. During April, May and June, I increased my visits to once a week and, once again, visits were made a short time after daybreak, in the hope that any singing birds could be identified, and their status researched. During July, August and September, visits were continued weekly with a view to identifying any signs of breeding or early passage. Visits during October remained on a weekly basis, together with the first two weeks of November, again with a view to identifying any post breeding dispersal or individuals on passage. The last two weeks of November and the whole of December were subjected to fortnightly visits, during which time other less favourable areas were checked within the Stoke-on-Trent environs.

Staffordshire boasts a large county area and I have no doubt there will undoubtedly be other suitable areas with the capability of providing breeding opportunities and supported by foraging oases. I would also suggest that it probably attracts more migrant individuals which go undetected. Redevelopment of old industrial habitat would appear to be the key to determining whether or not this species has any prospect of becoming a regular breeder, but then this would seem to be a common denominator in the declining status of Black Redstart within the UK. We can only hope that it will continue to be an attractive option for passage birds.

This short-term survey has certainly provided some very interesting results and perhaps a further survey soon, may provide some interesting statistics which can be correlated with this survey and the last survey conducted 25 years ago.

Fieldwork and observations summary - Humphrey Miller

I had no success in finding Black Redstarts at any time during my participation in the survey, but nevertheless found the experience most enjoyable. The survey areas that I covered are, in chronological order:

1. Winter 2016: Lode Lane Industrial Estate, Solihull: Three visits in January/ February

Black Redstarts have in recent years been found on business estates in Hartlebury and Coleshill, so a small estate was selected, about two miles from home, and close to the Grand Union Canal, various playing fields and Olton golf course. Only very common species were found, most notably small numbers of Black-headed Gulls flying over from nearby fields. The only other species recorded on all three visits were Magpie and Robin.

2. Spring 2016: Digbeth area, Birmingham: Three visits in May

This is a historic area for successful breeding of Black Redstarts, but three morning visits drew no sound, let alone a sighting. There are still plenty of old run-down industrial buildings – the kind of habitat associated with successful nesting – and also railway arches, both functioning and ruined, but in recent years the area has started to become gentrified and modernised.

High spots included singing Blackcaps by the canal and in the gardens between Moor Street station and Albert Street, with a Common Chiffchaff also found at the latter site. Two pairs of Canada Geese, one with two young, and a pair of Moorhens were found by the canal. Mallard was also seen in this habitat. A tiny nature reserve in the shadow of Moor Street station has a feeder, popular with a small local population of House Sparrows. Collared Dove was a surprising sighting, near the city council depot in Montagu Street. Other species seen on all three visits were Wood Pigeon, Magpie, Carrion

Crow, Wren, Common Starling, Blackbird, Robin, Dunnock, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and the two inner-Birmingham staples Lesser Black-backed Gull and Feral Pigeon.

3. Late autumn 2016: west Warwickshire farms: Two visits in November/ December

Following Jim's information that farmyard manure heaps had been a useful source of sightings, I elected to look at the farms in a quadrilateral having as its boundaries the M42 in the north, the A435 Alcester Road in the west, the A3400 Stratford Road in the east and the A4189 from Redditch to Henley-in-Arden in the south.

Nine farms were visited in all, with the most noteworthy species seen being Redwings and one or two overflying Common Buzzards. Common Chaffinch occurred more frequently than in the urban sites. Three of the farms were at the end of cul-de-sacs or along roads which I had never travelled, so it was a pleasant novelty to visit them, despite the lack of any even moderately uncommon birds.

Fieldwork and observations summary – Paul Bateman

I would like to reiterate much that has already been said. My survey area covered the canal network around central Birmingham, large stretches of which have been redeveloped and as such have become very sterile areas particularly for our target bird. One bird was seen on my patch at the end of March but not by me. Along the route there were a small number of disused buildings and the sighting was near to one of these. There were few breeding/feeding areas, and these were not contiguous and much of the redeveloped areas have been greened-up using ornamental evergreen shrubs that are of no use to Black Redstarts. My highlights were a canal-side Common Sandpiper and two Common Whitethroats singing from brambles on the edge of Birmingham city centre.

Jim Winsper

There is certainly a common theme running through the above observer comments; that of redevelopment and regeneration of inner-city areas. This is reflected in many instances with the outcome being applied to much of the thinking on which we have based our findings for this report. At whatever rate this regeneration is taking place, the removal of old, derelict and disused buildings will certainly impact upon the Black Redstart as a breeding bird in our Region. The same situation clearly applies to other UK cities, hence a realistic assessment of the apparent national decline in breeding numbers as reflected by the results of this survey.

Reported Sightings

It should be stressed that the following list consists of Black Redstart reports. All reports of category A species must be validated at County Recorder level.

Black Redstart reports for the period January 1st, 2016, to February 28th, 2017 involving seasonal status assessment for each county.

Staffordshire - 4 winter individual reports - passage birds = 3 spring and 1 autumn individual reports - breeding reports 0 - total reported birds 8

Warwickshire - 1 winter report - passage bird reports 0 - breeding reports 0 - total reported birds 1

Worcestershire - 2 winter individual reports - passage birds = 5 spring and 2 autumn individual reports - breeding reports 0 - total reported birds 9

West Midlands - 0 winter reports - passage birds = 12 spring individual reports - breeding = 3 possible breeding individual reports - total reported birds 15

Total number of birds reported at regional level during the entire survey period = 33

Breeding evidence for the period April through to end of October 2016

Three possible breeding reports in West Midlands - confirmed breeding in the entire Region = Nil records/birds

The three reported birds that have been categorised as possible breeding refer to single occurrences of singing males in Birmingham and Wolverhampton city centres and a third bird singing in Ladywood, Birmingham central. The birds in Birmingham and Wolverhampton centres remained on site for a brief period, after which, nothing more was heard or seen of them. Both were reported as occupying suitable breeding habitat. With this in mind, some thought must be given to the fact that males may reduce or even cease their singing activities upon the clutch hatching. From this point they enter a 'quiet period' of some two weeks, through the fledging period, resuming full song again after dispersal from the nest. The bird at Ladywood remained on site in suitable breeding habitat from June 28th to July 6th inclusive. The bird sang intermittently and in short bursts during this period and was watched on three occasions. Despite extending my search beyond the immediate area I was unable to relocate the bird beyond the last recorded date when it was watched flying off. I identified the bird as being a 1st summer male, having distinctly grey plumage and showing traces of emergent darker feathers on face, throat and breast, together with a faint emerging pale wing panel – Jim Winsper.

Defining breeding evidence

The criteria used to establish breeding status is that produced and in current use by the British Trust for Ornithology. All reports for possible, probable and confirmed breeding had to relate to individuals in potentially suitable nesting habitat.

For a full list of breeding evidence related categories, non-breeding, possible breeder, probable breeding and confirmed breeding, visit: -

<https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdatlas/methods/breeding-evidence>

For the purpose of this survey the definition of winter and passage status is as follows:

Wintering is defined as:

- a bird being present in an area throughout and beyond the month of December and preferably including the following months of January and February.
- all records in January and February.
- birds found in December but departing the entire area before the end of that month could also be regarded as late passage birds and therefore omitted from winter records.

Spring Passage is defined as

- birds being present in an area during the months of March, April and May but no longer being present thereafter.

Autumn Passage is defined as

- birds being present in an area during the months: - October through to late December but no longer being present thereafter.

The Black Redstart can be triple-brooded, and late third broods can result in fledglings and accompanying adults being present in their breeding territory or adjacent suitable habitat until the end of October.

One record that stands out as being probably the most exciting find during the survey period was a bird of the Eastern race *P. o. phoenicuroides*, non-breeding status normally in north-east Africa, Arabian Peninsula, and south-west and southern Asia. This was a Regional first for this race that was found in Worcestershire on December 6th and stayed for a brief spell before moving into



Fig. 2. Black Redstart of the Eastern race *P. o. phoenicuroides*. A regional first for this race that was found at Ripple Pits, Worcestershire on December 6th, 2016 where it remained for a brief spell before moving into Gloucestershire - Found by Rob Prudden and photographed by Andy Warr. (This photograph was taken by Andy in Gloucestershire)

Gloucestershire. This bird was one of probably four birds present in the UK during our survey period. Some records for this race involved sightings from locations in close proximity and inevitably refer to the same bird. Other records refer to regional sightings that may have been the result of a single bird's UK movements, therefore, duplication of some records is not beyond the realms of possibility. Nevertheless, the simultaneous multi-occurrence of this race in the British Isles is remarkable. The on-line site 'BirdGuides' www.birdguides.com offers an account of the recent occurrence of this race in Britain that provides a very informative review. British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) also

provides a thorough account of this race being new to Britain – *British Birds* April 2016. Vol. 109. 191 – 248

Irrespective of the aims and intentions of a survey, it comes as little surprise that any thoroughly worked project will reveal associated information that is worthy of mention. This applies to the following findings that certainly enhance this report. The news that a Black Redstart had been trapped and ringed on February 16th, 2016 was a welcome addition to our survey findings and a further project highlight. During a ringing session being carried out by the Brewood Ringing Group at Lower Drayton Farm near Penkridge, Staffordshire, courtesy of Ray Bower the landowner, ringer Paul Hopwood trapped, photographed and provided the biometrics of the bird.

The following images and added information on the bird provide some interesting facts and thoughts. Figs 3 to 6 appear to show the bird as having a predominately overall solid grey tone to its plumage, indicating an immature male. However, Fig 7, taken from a different angle and therefore offering an alternative light source, offers a more-brown hue to the bird's head, mantle and back, more in keeping with an immature female. This is a perfect example of how a different light source can depict the same bird in varying colour/shades of plumage. It also presses home the fact that it can be extremely difficult to differentiate between sexes of juvenile and immature birds, up to first-summer plumage. Interestingly the bird was caught again at the same location on February 26th and seen again approximately two weeks after this date before departing the area.

Biometrics when caught on 16th were: - wing length 87 mm; weight 17.3 grams. When caught for the second time some 11 days later the bird weighed 17.7 grams.



Figs 3 to 6 *Paul Hopwood*

Bearing in mind that there can be an overlap in plumage colouring between both sexes during 1st and part second calendar year birds, then based on these contrasting images of the same bird our decision is to offer the description for this individual as being: A first-winter bird, sex undetermined but showing some apparent male characteristics - per Paul Hopwood and Jim Winsper.

Some consideration should be given to defining the use of 'immature' when referring to male birds. Sexual maturity is gained at the age of one year when males can breed and successfully reproduce, thus attaining the status of adult. At this age their plumage is undeveloped, and they can closely resemble their female partners.

Feather abrasion is clearly evident in figs 8 and 9. This is the result of wear and tear created through the bird's physical movement and/or by exposure to all forms of weather conditions. Abrasion can result in pale fringes to feathers and this too is evident in these images. Other than the fringing, the feathers on our bird are rather monotone and lack any contrasting pattern or colour, other than the bird's tail. This suggests that these are the feathers attained when moulting from juvenile into immature plumage during the bird's first moult in late summer/early autumn of its first year. These post juvenile feathers enable the bird to endure extreme journeys and weather conditions such as it might encounter throughout its first full winter. Depending upon its time of hatching, which could be as early as May or as late as September (taking into account early breeding or late third broods) this bird could be from six to nine months old. It is however, categorised as a 1st winter bird. There is also the possibility that the feather abrasion is the result of the bird having



Fig.7 Paul Hopwood



Figs 8 and 9 Paul Hopwood

taken a long and arduous journey such as that undertaken by migrant birds from continental Europe as opposed to the possibility of British bred overwintering birds.

A recovery of this bird at a much later stage in its life would provide fascinating detail.

Summary and conclusion

Perhaps the most interesting fact that arises from our findings is, that to the best of our knowledge, breeding did not take place anywhere within the Region. Given the assessments from the BTO's '*Bird Atlas 2007-2011*' this should come as little surprise; a decline in UK breeding numbers is well documented. Why this should be the case becomes very evident when visiting the areas that were once considered as prime breeding habitat and breeding territory and witnessing the many changes that have taken place in these areas over the past two or three decades. In and around Birmingham, whole areas have been demolished, rebuilt, renovated and thoroughly regenerated. Another change in habitat is revealed where suitable derelict buildings that once formed part of an extensive block or chain of similar habitat, are now, in the main, isolated structures, and this may well be a contributory factor to their loss of appeal as breeding sites.

Understanding what constitutes the perfect breeding site will also help in explaining the loss of suitable habitat. In most instances the Black Redstart will choose a nest site that is located well inside a derelict or disused building, sometimes several metres from the bird's entrance point. Even then, the nest site location is dependent upon the buildings internal structure. Lack of a suitable ledge on which to place the nest, preferably located close to a ceiling, can be a deterrent from using the entire building, no matter how suitably derelict it appears from the outside. The Black Redstart can be triple brooded but, in any event, a new nest is built and a new location chosen with each brood. If nest location sites are plentiful, the same building may be used for each brood. These findings concerning nest location are recurrent throughout my studies here in Birmingham and abroad, both in man-made and natural environments. As inner-city regeneration increases, it becomes an ongoing and worsening situation as far as the birds are concerned. Any future planning to accommodate breeding Black Redstarts in new or refurbished buildings must take all of these facts concerning nest location into consideration. Whether birds will be attracted to new buildings, even if efforts are made to accommodate them, is probably unlikely if the interior is occupied and cannot be explored, but this remains to be seen. How we can replicate their breeding requirements in new and refurbished buildings is something to be investigated and open to discussion if we are to retain the Black Redstart as a breeding species in our towns and cities.

The old Typhoo Tea factory in Digbeth, Birmingham central fig. 10, has been closed as a functional workplace since 1978 and remains in a derelict state today. This building, as it stands, typifies the preferred breeding habitat of the Black Redstart, with many openings that access the interior together with the adjacent canal wharf with associated vegetation and stack from which the male can sing. This building had plenty of observer coverage throughout the survey period, but any presence of the target species went undetected. A multi million-pound plan to refurbish the entire building and surrounding land has had planning permission granted, with work set to commence in the very near future; this being a typical example of inner-city development.

Birds that winter in our Region either as winter visitors or over-wintering birds are largely nomadic, except that is, for birds that find the perfect niche, the bird using Worcester Cathedral for a lengthy period being a good example. In the main these wintering birds are continental migrants and their abundance is reflected in the huge increase in occupied 10km squares, as reported in the BTO '*Bird Atlas 2007-2011*'. Clearly, as our breeding population declines, the possibility of British post-breeding birds over-wintering, reduces. When checking the national on-line bird sighting facilities, it became obvious that as well as the wintering birds that used our Region, there were others located

simultaneously in neighbouring counties and beyond. The suitability of the British Isles as a wintering region for Black Redstarts appears to have been enhanced by the warming climate, frequent and prolonged spells of severe weather being a thing of the past. The entire British ecology together with a favourable winter climate is proving to be a very suitable environment for wintering birds.



Fig. 10. The old Typhoo Tea factory, Digbeth, Birmingham 07/04/2017 –*Jim Winsper*

It would appear that passage birds can turn up just about anywhere, from hill tops such as Bredon Hill and the Malvern and Clent Hills, agricultural land, industrial complexes, urban environments and domestic gardens. Two habitat locations/features that hosted a total of eight birds, almost a quarter of all birds found in the survey, are horse paddocks and large manure heaps, both with an obvious link. The manure heap can obviously generate a micro-climate that is an attraction to a variety of insects and invertebrates and, as a consequence, an attraction to birds. Active paddocks and stables with their associated manure and manure heaps provide the same attraction.

Both sexes and all age groups were found during the survey period from a wide variety of locations. Determining age and sex is not necessarily a straightforward practice unless faced with a full-plumaged male bird; a bird in excess of its second calendar year and showing distinctly black plumage with a full white wing panel. Females with developed plumage can share similar plumage/colour traits to both immature female and immature male birds. Immature male birds can offer a slightly greyer overall appearance than females at any age. This toning is intensified in male birds as black feathers begin to emerge during their second calendar year, especially so in the second half of the year, becoming distinctly black/grey with every moult from thereon.

Taking into account the prior comments regarding plumage, age and sex, the descriptions of all birds involved in reported sightings in the survey are as follows:

- Birds defined as being in adult plumage, both male and female = 12
- Birds without definition of sex but described as being in either juvenile or immature plumage = 14
- Birds that were recorded without age, sex or plumage detail = 7.

These unaged, unsexed birds could equate to any descriptive category but for the purpose of the survey shall remain simply as Black Redstart, this being in keeping with the aims of this project in gaining an overall assessment of the numbers of birds using our region, descriptive notes being of added benefit. In the event that any of the reported birds in this survey remain unverified, it is inevitable that others will have been missed. We have to strike a sensible balance when assessing numbers of birds and we are happy that this has been achieved. Even though our total of birds, in all categories, is respectably high, it is possible that this overall figure might well be below the actual number using or passing through the region, especially given the simultaneous sightings in neighbouring counties.

In recent times the breeding population of Black Redstarts in the West Midland Bird Club's Region has dwindled, with no breeding records as far as we are aware for this survey period. While the future may see birds using the region to nest, it is difficult to imagine that regular breeding will ever reach the numbers of pairs that have been present in the past. As previously mentioned, historically the recording of breeding Black Redstarts in Britain has placed great emphasis on a fluctuating population, which typically reflects the occurrence pattern of birds that breed on the outer limits of their geographical range. However, in recent times, the dynamics of this fluctuation have changed. Fewer summering birds are now involved, so much so that a figure of zero breeding birds in our Region has become the bottom-line norm. The continued removal or total renovation of old buildings has now reached an extent that breeding birds are far less or, no longer attracted to the area. My following conjecture arises from the decline in breeding Black Redstarts in and around Birmingham city centre coinciding with the colonisation and continued population growth of breeding *Larus* gulls in the same area. In raising this point, I have no proof that the Black Redstart has been directly put off from using this one-time stronghold because of the presence of gulls. The coincidental timing of these events is, however, worthy of note. The large concentrations of Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* together with lesser numbers of what appears to be an increasing population of Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus*, offers a large and perhaps threatening presence in many areas.

Conversely the wintering population of Black Redstarts in our region appears to be increasing, and this is in keeping with the National trend. This is highly likely to be the result of a warming climate that provides a suitable winter environment. These conditions might prove to be attractive to post-breeding continental passage birds moving through the British Isles en route to traditional wintering grounds elsewhere. The birds are quite likely to be tempted to linger, or even stay to winter here, rather than move on.

Proven breeding has only occurred on two occasions in the entire region since a pair was confirmed as having bred in Birmingham city centre in 2003. The only other records of confirmed breeding in this 14-year period to date have involved one pair on each occasion in 2009 and 2010. With this information at hand, together with the knowledge that the British and regional passage and wintering population is increasing, the species' annual status could now be revised from that previously mentioned to: *Rare summer resident and scarce, though increasing, passage migrant and winter visitor*.

Perhaps further supporting evidence over a greater period of time might be desirable before making such a change. However, evidence suggesting a national decline in breeding birds and an increase in

wintering and passage birds is supported by the findings of this survey. Given what we know, a change in status of the Black Redstart in our Region is worthy of consideration.

Clearly this survey has been a worthwhile project that has justified the effort by achieving our aim. The findings of this survey have highlighted a changing set of circumstances that in turn have enlightened our understanding of the target species regional annual population.

Jim Winsper

With contributions from: Steve Davies, Keith Wimbush, Humphrey Miller and Paul Bateman

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