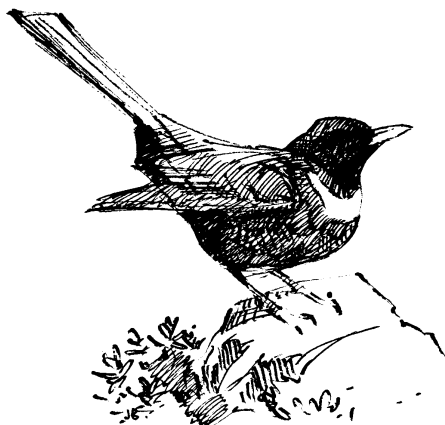


## RING OUZEL SPECIES ACTION PLAN



### SPECIES PROFILE

**Common name:** Ring ouzel (ring ousel).

**Scientific name:** *Turdus torquatus*.

**UK Biodiversity Status:** Conservation concern.

**Relevant Priority Habitats:** Calcareous grassland and upland heath.

**Statutory Protection:** Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981); EC Birds Directive; Annex II of the Berne Convention and Annex II of the Bonn Convention.

### BIODIVERSITY CONTEXT

The nominate race of ring ouzel *Turdus torquatus* is found only in Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia. There are approximately 47,000 pairs. It is a summer visitor to Scotland, with local and thinly spread populations in upland habitats. It spends the early part of winter in Southern Iberia, then moving to the Atlas mountains in Morocco.

The subspecies of ring ouzel *alpestris* is found in the rest of its European range, nesting in suitable conifer and conifer-beech forests on mountain areas. Some of these birds migrate to north Africa, but most are believed to move to lower altitudes or Mediterranean islands in winter.

A total European population is estimated to be 280,000 pairs.

There is no UK Biodiversity Action Plan for this species.

### OBJECTIVES

**Objective 1** Establish the current population and extent of this species in the Stirling Council Area.

Target By 2005, survey all sites with previous record.

Target By 2006, create plan for expanded surveys.

**Objective 2** Ensure the viability of the population in the Stirling Council Areas.

Target Identify exact habitat management areas to meet the requirements of species.

### CURRENT STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION

The ring ouzel is listed as of 'amber' conservation concern, based on a 27% decline in range in the UK between the two breeding atlases (1968-72 and 1988-91) (Birds of

Conservation Concern, 1996). In the world, its population is concentrated in Europe and thought to be of favourable status, although in many counties data is incomplete or unavailable.

The decline of ring ouzels across their range has continued since the nineteenth century. They were considered abundant in south-west England, Wales and northwards from the Peak district through Scotland and Ireland. In 1953 Baxter and Rintoul suggested the rate of decline in the previous 30 years threatened the ring ouzel as a breeding species in Scotland.

The population estimate in Britain (Gibbons et al 1993) was 5,500-11,000 pairs, and in Ireland, 180-360 pairs. However, this species had never been systematically surveyed. In Scotland, some upland areas in the South were surveyed in 1997, concentrating on areas that had apparent population declines and habitat change. This survey suggested the greatest declines were in Galloway and Ayrshire. In 1999 a national RSPB survey was undertaken. This indicated a further reduction with an estimated population of 6,155 breeding pairs.

There is limited survey data for the Stirling Council Area, in 1999 males were recorded in the Gargunnock hills, Balquidder area. Historical data lists ring ouzel as breeding in Dunipace and most of the high ground to the north and south of Stirlingshire, and in sparing numbers on the Campsie Hills in 1890s. In 1892 it was recorded breeding on Dumyat and the Gargunnock hills, and at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it is recorded as a summer visitor to the Ochils, Touch and Gargunnock Hills, as well as being found above Lake of Menteith, near Doune, above Kinlochard, Balquidder and Strathyre. Ben Lomond is also recorded as a breeding area.

## ETYMOLOGY, CULTURE AND FOLKLORE

The Latin name *turdus* means thrush, and *torquatus* ‘adorned with a neck chain or collar’.

The Gaelic name is *Gobha dubh a mbonaidh* – blacksmith of the rocks, or *Dubb chriega* – black one of the rocks.

Ouzel, or ousel, is the oldest English name for blackbird, reaching back to Old English. It was a common word until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was superseded by blackbird.

In 1590, it was mentioned in *Midsummer’s Nights Dream*: “The woosell (early modern English spelling) so blacke of hew/with orange-tawny bill”.

Scots names are Oswald or Oswat, meaning heather blackie or heath throstle. In some upland areas of Scotland the locals know the Ouzel as the harbinger of spring. In Stirlingshire it is known as ring blackbird or thruh, or rock blackbird. In nearby Lanarkshire it is known as Chackart, and heath throstle, heather or hedder black in Aberdeenshire. Folk in Kirkcudbrightshire call the ring ouzel the mountain blackbird.

## ECOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

Ring ouzels are summer visitors to Scotland, breeding in open moorland and fell with sparse and often stunted trees or scrub, usually above 250m in altitude, and up to 1200m in Scotland.

Arriving back between late March and mid May, nests are built by the female in small crags, gullies, scree and boulders, usually with heather cover less than 45cm tall. Proximity to closely cropped upland grasses allows adults to find earthworms, larvae, beetles and other invertebrates for the young. Frequently they use areas on steep slope close to burns. They are often faithful to the same site, and have been recorded using walls, quarries and mine-shafts, and in some rare situations forestry plantations.

Laying an average of four eggs in mid-April, generally one brood is common in Scotland. Incubation period is generally 13-15 days. Wet springs may contribute to larger clutch sizes in response to availability of earthworms. It is thought that the birds may travel 1-1.5km from nest sites to forage when feeding young. Nest failures are generally 20-30%, and usually due to desertion, and predation by foxes *Vulpes vulpes*, mustelids and corvids.

Many berry species are exploited for food, such as rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*, blaeberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, juniper *Juniperus communis* etc. The main food sources in spring and early summer are earthworms *Lumbricus* sp., other invertebrates and their larvae; soft fruits such as juniper, bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, blaeberry and rowan are eaten from mid-summer until autumn migration in September. This acts as a vector in seed dispersal in autumn and may contribute to opportunities for juniper regeneration. In their wintering grounds, juniper berries and invertebrates (especially moths Lepidoptera, grasshoppers Orthoptera and spiders Arachnids) have been identified as important.

## CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE AND FUTURE THREATS

Conservation measures to date have been restricted by a lack of knowledge of the biology of the species, population trends and information on migration and winter quarters. Suggestions for the decline include the following:

Changes in agriculture through:

### **Inappropriate levels of grazing:**

- Too high: increased grazing by livestock and red deer may contribute to ring ouzel decline. Whilst grazed areas can provide feeding areas if there is no invertebrate loss, grazing increases have reduced tall heather availability for nesting, and suppressed berry bearing shrubs such as rowan, juniper and blaeberry.
- Too low: A local effect is thought to occur as the short turf conditions provided by grazing sheep, deer and rabbits provide good feeding areas. Complete removal of sheep will affect this. Grazing by cattle may benefit ring ouzel feeding areas and as upland herds have been removed, rank, ungrazed habitats result.
- Shepherding: In some areas ring ouzel loss has been observed when winter feed-blocks have been used for sheep, resulting in the loss of heather. The supplementary feeding maintains sheep numbers on the hillsides in winter and lack of shepherding allows concentrations of sheep in feeding areas rather than an overall grazing pattern.
- Agricultural improvement of in-bye land: loss of heather and extensive improvement of unimproved grassland areas lead to loss of habitat mosaic ring ouzels require.

Drainage may lead to less earthworms available and residues from anti-parasitic agents used to dose livestock may remain in the manure and reduce invertebrates in pastures.

- Afforestation: Early forestry can be used by ring ouzels, but as canopy closes and ground vegetation changes it becomes unsuitable. In addition, trees may provide greater cover or nesting areas for predators such as foxes and crows.
- Recreational disturbance: There is conflicting evidence on the effects of this. Local disturbance may occur, but wider effects may be in more causal.
- Soil acidity: Pollution in the soil may be leading to less calcium rich food and resulting in thinner eggshells. In addition, there are fewer earthworms in acidic or peat soils than in pH-neutral or calcareous soils. Birds nesting in areas of higher acidity may fly further to find food, and place more energy demands, thereby increasing risk to predation and low food availability for young.
- Predation on nests can be as high as 20% in a typical year. Foxes, carrion crows *Corvus corone*, stoats *Mustela erminea*, weasels *Mustela nivalis* and magpies *Pica pica* are thought to be the principal predators. Some of the remaining core areas for ring ouzel coincide with intensive predator control on, for example, grouse moors. Predation is also known to occur by birds of prey. Habitat degradation can increase vulnerability of nests to predation.
- Factors in wintering/migration areas such as changes in habitat, drought, hunting, migration habitat changes (such as traditional sites) may also play a part.
- Climate change.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CURRENT ACTION

- Ring ouzel study group was formed in 1998; this promoted the 1999 RSPB survey, and current ongoing work on ring ouzel wintering quarters in Spain and Morocco.
- Breeding biology projects are underway in Glen Clunie, Aberdeenshire, Glen Esk, Angus and ecological data has been gathered for a PhD between 1998-2001 (Burfield, in preparation).
- Advisory sheet on habitat management for ring ouzel is available from RSPB.
- Sustainable upland management through agri-environment schemes.

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