

# City blackbirds in decline

**Scotland's most common and striking songbirds, the blackbird is disappearing from the nation's parks and gardens.**

The Scottish Terrestrial Breeding Bird report, published by NatureScot, shows that blackbirds in urban areas like Edinburgh almost halved between 1994 and 2023.

While blackbird numbers overall increased by 17% over the period, this is attributed to a 10% increase in woodland habitats and a 39% increase in the farmland population.

Blackbirds in urban areas including parks and gardens suffered a 48% decline.

It is thought the alarming loss over almost three decades could be driven by issues such as a loss of urban green spaces suitable for the species, the "tidying" of parks and gardens and climate change, which could influence soil moisture and affect the birds' feeding.

Simon Foster, NatureScot Trends and Indicators Analyst, said that the blackbird had suffered one of the most significant long term losses among all the urban species studied.

He said: "The data shows a modest long term increase in blackbirds in woodland sites and a rather stronger increase in farmland. However, in contrast, in urban areas there has been a much larger decline.

"We've lost nearly half of our urban blackbirds in that time (1994-2023), which is a large number when you consider this is

one of the most common species you can see in gardens.

“There is perhaps something happening in terms of habitat quality, whether there is a change across urban environments that’s not really suitable for them, not just in parks but also gardens.

“Looking at the trends it is clear that more action is required to understand what is driving these changes and make sure that green spaces are actually delivering for the species.”

He added: “Blackbirds need safe areas for roosting and feeding. We’re really good at tidying up the green space environment so there are fewer rough areas that form an important habitat for these birds. That could be something to look at – not just providing green spaces but the quality of it, not just for people but to support wildlife as well.”

The blackbird is one of Scotland’s most common birds, found all year round in most habitat types except the highest peaks. Studies have consistently placed them in the top five birds spotted in gardens.

The male is easily recognised by its black feathers and bright yellow beak and ring around the eyes, while females and juveniles have brown feathers and beaks. Its song is also distinctive.

The species even has its own registered tartan.

In addition to their long term decline in Scotland’s towns and cities, the species’ urban population also showed a 4% decline in the year 2022-23.

David Noble, Principal Ecologist for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which contributed data for the report, said: “Conditions are getting worse (for blackbirds) in urban and suburban areas.

“Loss of suitable habitat, drying out of soils and the cleaning up of parks and gardens, thinning of bushes and all that kind of thing will be something that really affects these birds.

“Blackbirds rely on having good moist soil and in a lot of parks where there isn't much canopy cover this contributes to loss of food.”

The report showed that, as well as the blackbird (-48%), the greenfinch (-82%), swift (-71%), collared dove (-47%) and starling (-31%) all suffered long term declines in urban areas, amid a variety of suspected drivers.

There were some winners among Scotland's urban birds, however. The report reveals an increase of 14% across all species, largely due to an increase until the mid-2000s, which was followed by a slow decline.

The best performing species long term included the jackdaw (+246%), magpie (+225%), goldfinch (+142%), woodpigeon (+134%) and great tit (+132%).

Foster added: “Some species are doing quite well in urban environments. We are seeing quite large increases in housemartin (131%) for example, which are struggling further south.”



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