

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

SONG THRUSH *Turdus philomelos*

Abundant European introduction

23 cm, 70 g. Warm brown above, buff-white below, with *breast boldly spotted dark brown*. Bill yellowish brown with yellow gape; legs pinkish brown. Sexes alike. Juvenile similar but more yellowish buff, spotted and streaked paler above and smaller spots below; bill dark brown with prominent yellow gape. Feeds mostly on the ground, where it hops and runs. Hammers snails open on a regular 'anvil'. Song a loud string of repeated clear-cut musical phrases, each separated by a brief pause: 'chitty-choo chitty-choo, oo-eee oo-eee . . .' Song perch usually high and conspicuous. **Habitat:** Forest, scrub, farmland with scattered trees or hedges, orchards, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Aug–Feb.



[Sp 296]



THRUSHES

Muscicapidae

304 species worldwide; 2 introduced to New Zealand.

with spots and bright colours. Many have musical songs and harsh, staccato alarm calls. They often catch insects and earthworms on the ground, but also eat fruit from trees.

A big group of plump songbirds, mostly with brown or black plumage, but sometimes offset

296. SONG THRUSH *Turdus philomelos*

Plate 67

Size: 23 cm, 70 g
Distribution: Natural breeding range is Europe, western and central Asia. Several hundred birds were introduced into New

Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies in 1862–78. They were released in both main islands and spread quickly, so that by 1900 they were well established. Now they are

found throughout the mainland and offshore islands, and have colonised the Kermadecs, Chatham, Antipodes (breeding not confirmed), The Snares, Auckland and Campbell Islands, and have also reached Lord Howe, Norfolk and Macquarie Islands.

song of the male, heard mainly in April–December and delivered from an elevated perch, is an energetic, bold and varied string of repeated musical phrases, each of which is clear-cut with a brief pause between phrases: 'chitty-choo chitty-choo, oo-eee oo-eee . . .' Sometimes Song Thrushes are mimics, incorporating phrases borrowed from other species. The alarm note is a rapidly repeated 'chuk' or 'chip', and the flight call is a thin, high-pitched 'seep'.

Song Thrushes are found in a variety of habitats from sea level to subalpine scrub at 1600 m, including suburban gardens, orchards, exotic plantations, scrub and forest, although they are scarce in virgin native forest and on islands such as Little Barrier and Kapiti where original forest and bird communities are largely intact. In Eurasia, some migrate, but there is no evidence of regular long-distance movement in New Zealand.

Feeding: Diet is a mixture of invertebrates and fruits. The main invertebrates eaten include snails (garden, mud, marine, flax and native landsnails), insects, worms, amphipods, millipedes and spiders. Small fruits of native and introduced shrubs and weeds are eaten whole, but flesh of larger fruits is pecked from ripe fruit in trees or from fallen fruit. They can cause damage to commercial crops of berryfruits, grapes, pipfruit and stonefruit, and tomatoes. They also spread weed seeds into native forests and crops. Most food is taken on the ground, especially close to cover or from closely mown lawns. When feeding on snails, they carry the animal to a favourite rock and then bash the snail against the rock with a flick of the head until the shell breaks and the animal comes free; such 'anvils' can be surrounded by the remains of 20+ snails. When hunting worms, the bird usually runs a few paces or takes a few hops, and then stops with head cocked before moving a step or two to catch the worm and pull it from the ground.

Population: Widespread and one of the most common birds in New Zealand; especially abundant in farmland hedgerows, orchards, parks and suburban gardens.

In the hand: Adults can be sexed reliably only in the breeding season, when the female has a brood patch. Song Thrushes have a conspicuous yellow gape, even as adults, and so this cannot be used to age birds. In autumn, adults moult their complete wing and tail feathers, but first-year birds moult only some of the smaller wing feathers, and so in winter there is a contrast between the large triangular buff tips of the 5 outer greater coverts and the smaller tips of the 5 freshly moulted inner ones. The tail feathers of adults have blunter ends than in first-year birds, and in adults the primary coverts have less contrast between the tip and the outer webs. In spring, the primaries of first-year birds are more worn than in adults and the contrast in the greater coverts is still clear.

Breeding: Males establish territories from April; often the same territory is used by the same pair year after year. Most eggs are laid from early August to late December, but occasionally nests are found as early as May, or as late as February. Pairs quickly replace nests that fail and so most pairs nest 2–5 times each year, and raise 2–3 broods, rarely in the same nest. The female takes 1–2 weeks to build the nest, and then it is often left for a few days before she lays 2–3–4–6 eggs (27 x 20.5 mm, 6 g) at daily intervals. The eggs are a clear greenish blue with small black spots. The nest is a substantial cup of twigs, grass, roots and moss, bound together with mud and smoothly lined with mud or a mixture of rotten wood and saliva. It is usually built in the fork of a shrub or hedge 1–5 m above the ground. The female starts incubating when the clutch is complete, and incubation takes 12–13 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, which fledged at 13–15 days old. The young remain with the parents and are occasionally fed for several weeks after fledging. Young can breed at 9 months old. The oldest Song Thrush recorded in New Zealand lived over 10.5 years, but in Europe the record is over 13 years.

Behaviour: Song Thrushes defend their territory for 9 months from April to January, but during the autumn moult they become secretive and inconspicuous. The territorial

Reading: Bull, P.C. 1946. *Emu* 46: 198–208. Flux, J.E.C. 1966. *Notornis* 13: 142–149. Nye, P.A. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 248–249.