

Birds in the Backyard

Black redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

This small bird is an Old World flycatcher, wrongly classified initially as a member of the thrush family. Found in western Europe and north of the Mediterranean all year, it winters in parts of Africa and in the Arabian and Indian peninsulas. The subspecies that winters in the Indian peninsula breeds in the Himalayas. Adult males of this species (see photo) are black above, have a black throat and breast, and are rufous below. Females are brown but with the tail like that of the adult male. Subadult males have dull plumage like the females and also show different song characteristics than adult males. Since song in this species, as with many others, is used in the context of territory defense by males, song as well as plumage can be used by adult males to assess the threat of territorial intrusion by other males. Delayed maturation of plumage in males is also seen in other species and we will examine that in another issue.



The black redstart may also be able to discriminate between their fledglings based on calls, which allows for brood division: division of labour with each parent preferentially feeding a specific chick in the nest. They nest in holes or cavities in rocky areas. Individuals are usually solitary in winter. They show characteristic jerky tail movements and make quick flights from their perch to catch insects.

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