

# Diva in distress



● A male ring ouzel

● Innes Sim, research biologist and Graham Rebecca, conservation officer, setting up a mist net to catch ring ouzels in Cairngorms National Park, Scotland

Over the coming months, our hills, as the song goes, will be alive with the sound of music.

But these tuneful renditions will have nothing to do with the wailings of Maria Von Trapp.

For a true wild diva in serious trouble and scientists armed with MP3 players are heading into the hills to listen to these mournful songs to find out why.

The suffering songstress in question is the ring ouzel – a mysterious name for an equally mysterious bird.

Ring ouzels, or “rouzels” as they are nicknamed by birders, look like pimped-up blackbirds.

They are bigger and flashier – the males boast a dapper white neck crescent (explaining the “ring” part of their name) and they live in wilder environments than the garden blackbird we are so familiar with.

The ring ouzel is a striking and charismatic bird, as hinted at by Victorian naturalist Reverend J C Atkinson, who described the bird as: “A bold abusive freebooter in our gardens in North Yorkshire and other similar localities. He’s a beautiful bird and wary, except when seduced by strawberries and red currants.”

The bird’s call is immediately evocative of the wildness –

**This spring a team of scientists armed with MP3 players will set out to investigate whether the UK’s hills are still alive with the sound of music. They are searching for the mysterious mountain blackbird**

a harsh “chack, chack”, which is at odds with the sweetly melodic song of our garden blackbird.

You have to climb to find a rouzel and unlike blackbirds, they are a summer migrant.

Rouzels arrive at isolated high spots across the UK from March onwards after seeing out the winter weather in the sunnier climes of North Africa and southern Spain.

But something is going drastically wrong for the ring ouzel. Numbers have plummeted alarmingly.

Once relatively widespread across our uplands, just 7,500 pairs were found nesting when last surveyed in 1999.

The declines were so stark that the ring ouzel was added to the red list of the Birds of Conservation Concern in 2002.

What troubles scientists is they cannot pinpoint the reason for this decline.

Recent studies suggest there

has been a reduction in the survival rates of young rouzels and a fall in the amount of juniper berries which form a key part of their diet.

Hunting and changes in livestock grazing could also be having an effect.

Up-to-date information on ring ouzel populations is desperately needed, so in the coming weeks teams will head up into the hills to carry out only the second national survey of the bird.

The rouzel’s call plays a key part in finding out where and how many birds are out there.

And this is where the MP3 player comes in handy. The gadgets have been loaded with ring ouzel calls.

By playing these recordings

out loud, the survey members hope to attract inquisitive nearby male ring ouzels.

Watching the responses of the nosy males will help the team establish the breeding status of the birds in the area.

The survey is run by the RSPB, Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales.

Allan Drewitt, senior ornithologist with Natural England, says: “There is currently no accurate estimate of the ring ouzel’s population – this survey will tell us how many are left and where they are, and that gets us one step closer to understanding why they’re disappearing and how we can help bring them back.”

Innes Sim, an RSPB scientist who has studied the bird for 14 years in Scotland, says: “The ring ouzel has a beautiful song and it sings on some of our most wonderful stages, such as the highest mountains of Scotland, Wales and England.

“I have been studying these birds in Scotland since 1998 and I am deeply alarmed by its widespread and deepening disappearance: the hills would be lonelier without them.”

