

How birds hedge their bets

Catherine Keena, Teagasc, and Niall Hatch, Bird-Watch Ireland, explain the fascinating and complex interaction between different bird species and hedgerows in farming landscapes

Catherine Keena
Teagasc Countryside Management Specialist

Of the 110 species recorded in the Irish Countryside Bird Survey during the breeding season, 55 use hedges. Of these, 35 bird species nest in hedges that provide cover from predators, both overhead and on the ground. Hedges also provide food, shelter, song posts, perching posts and corridors along which birds can move.

Nesting

A great many species of bird nest in hedges. They make up one of the most vital habitats that we have. A very good example is the Dunnock, a common bird in Ireland, which used to be known as the Hedge Sparrow, and for good reason. They love the security of hedges, as they can hide behind thorns and brambles where they are secure from predators like foxes, cats, hawks, squirrels and rats.

Another bird that uses hedges to nest is the Wren, one of our most common birds – there are more Wrens in Ireland than human beings. They nest quite deep down, building a ball of a nest tucked away in the vegetation. Another classic bird that nests in hedges is the Robin, which likes to nest quite low down in locations that provide good vantage points, but that are still quite secluded.

The Blackbird is one of our most common bird species, seen all over the country. They know they will be able to get the worms just below the hedges, which means that they don't need to travel very far to find food.

The same goes for the Song Thrush, which like the Blackbird, is another member of the thrush family, though

- Hedges cannot be cut from now until the 1 September because it is the bird nesting season.

Niall Hatch
BirdWatch Ireland

a bit shyer. They like cover more than the Blackbird does. Their lives revolve around snails!

Some birds like House Sparrows use hedges as conduits to get from point A to B. They nest in and around them, but also use them to connect up nesting areas.

Food

Ireland's hedges are a vital source of food for so many different species of birds, because they support so many different kinds of life. Berries are the most obvious, such as haws and rose hips. Blackberries on brambles are a real lifeline for birds in autumn. Robins love the elderberries and Blackcaps rely on ivy berries.

Insects are attracted to plants in hedges. In particular, many species of butterfly lay their egg on the leaves, which then hatch out into caterpillars and in turn become food for Blue Tits, Great Tits and Coal Tits.

The Goldcrest is Ireland's smallest bird, weighing just over 5g, less than the weight of a 20 cent coin. They spend their lives trying to glean small flies, spiders and other invertebrates from the underside of leaves.

Sparrowhawks come to feed on the Blue Tits, Wrens, Robins and other small birds – part of the cycle of life. Barn Owls use hedges as a very important conduit when hunting, flying along the edges of them looking for wood mice and pygmy shrews sheltering below.

Kestrels hover alongside hedges, waiting for a mouse to dash out from cover. Buzzards use hedges as vantage points to find rabbits at the edges.

Song perches

The structure of a hedge is very important from a bird's perspective. Male Blackbirds sing from the top of



Sparrowhawk

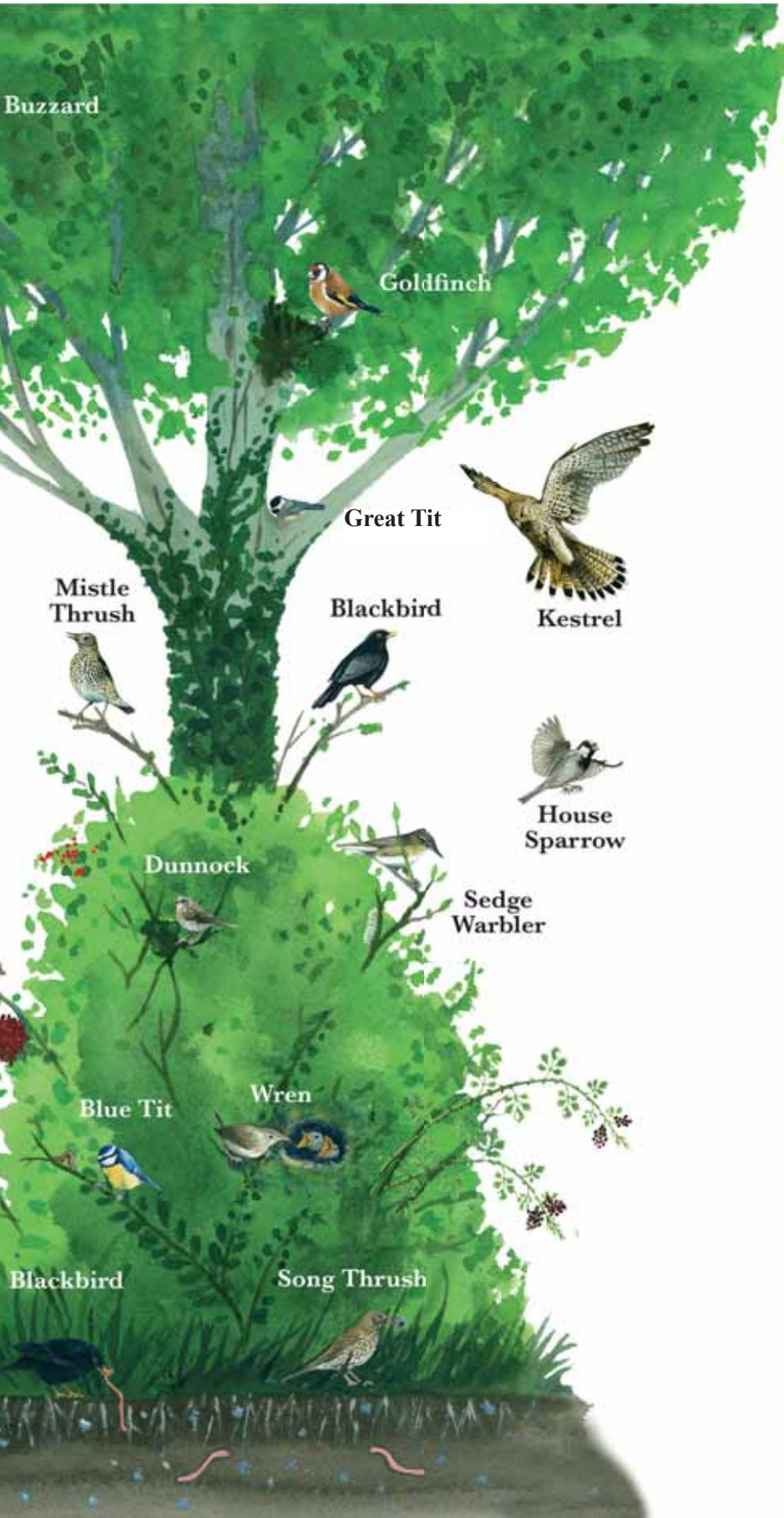


Robin



a hedgerow, using it as a song perch, and they want to be seen because they want to proclaim a territory. Very often, those hedges delineate the lines and edges of that territory.

So, bird territories are often divided up on the basis of where hedges are. Sedge Warblers, which normally nest inside reed beds and in dense grass-



perch on top of hedges, scanning the countryside with their keen eyesight, looking for any small rodents or birds they can feed on. Hedges provide a really good perch for them where they are secure from predators, can see danger coming and where nothing can really get to them.

Trees in hedges

It's not only the hedges themselves that are so important, it's the trees growing above them. Mistle Thrushes like to nest in tall trees, and love to have a hedge below them where they can find food and shelter, and where they know their chicks will be able to find berries in autumn after they fledge from the nest.

Finch species, such as Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch, will often nest in trees within hedges, such as willow, hazel or alder. They use the hedges as a larder, as shelter for their chicks and as a well-protected nest site.

Rare birds

The Yellowhammer nests in hedges – once very common, this colourful songbird has declined greatly in Ireland.



The Twite is a little Finch, which now only breeds in the northwest of Ireland, and hedges are essential for its survival.



land, use the tops of hedges as song posts, from where they perform song flights and then duck back into cover before predators come. Common Whitethroats do the same thing.

Perching posts

As well as using song posts in hedges, birds perch on the top of hedges for

many different reasons. Sometimes it is to keep watch over their territories, sometimes they are watching out for predators, keeping an eye out for danger while their vulnerable chicks and their mate are in a nest below them. Other times they are looking out for food.

Sparrowhawks and Buzzards