

This facts sheet is to help you identify the birds you see on or around the canal. To help the SW Herts Narrowboat Project monitor wildlife around the canal we would be grateful if you would participate by noting the birds you see on your trip; there is a separate sheet to do this. We hope you enjoy doing this as well as learning a little about the wildlife you see. Don't worry, there won't be a test afterwards, but take a look at our website to see how your observations match others.

Blackbird: it's the male that gives this bird its name. the female is brown, with spots or streaks on their breast. They are about 10 inches [25 cms] in length with a wing span of 14-15 inches [35-38cms].



They build their nests in hedges and bushes with deep cover, out of vegetation like twigs and grass and bound together with mud. The female lays two or three clutches of eggs each year, 3-5 eggs at a time. The majority of eggs do not hatch for various reasons, often because the birds are disturbed during incubation and the eggs are abandoned. They are often eaten by cats, other birds such as crows and birds of prey.

Those eggs which do survive take about two weeks to hatch and the young birds are flying in another two weeks. The birds usually eat at ground level, feeding on insects and earth worms or fallen fruit such as apples. Berries, especially cotoneaster, are the blackbirds favourite food in the autumn.

Canada goose is a wild goose native to arctic and temperate regions of North America, having a black head and neck, white patches on the face and a brownish-grey body. It is a large goose which was introduced from North America and has spread over most of the United Kingdom. They usually stay in Britain all year round and eat aquatic vegetation, grass, roots, leaves and seeds. They can have a wingspan of more than five feet [1.5metres]. The adults build their nest, usually on the ground, with grass and other plant material and line it with feather down. The female typically lays 5 to 7 eggs, while the male aggressively guards the nest. The eggs take about a month to hatch and the goslings can swim straight away, accompanied by their parents. The goslings have yellow and grey feathers but after about one week they loose the yellow. By about ten weeks old they have grown their flight feathers and look like smaller versions of their parents.



Common Terns are sea birds, but have been seen on inland waterways in increasing numbers. They are about 12 inches [30cms] long, including a 3 inch [7-8cms] tail. Their wingspan is usually about 3 feet [90-92cms]. Their plumage is grey on top, pale

grey underneath and a white tail; they have black plumage on top of their heads and a narrow pointed bill which is mainly red, with a black tip. Their legs are orange-red. As summer continues, the dark feather shafts of the outer flight feathers become exposed, and a grey wedge appears on the wings. They are agile fliers, capable of rapid turns and swoops, hovering and vertical take-off. They are migratory birds, heading for warmer climes in the winter, heading north in the spring. They nest at ground level, close to water, and line their saucer-shaped hollow with whatever they can find.



The female lays one clutch a year of up to three eggs, which are camouflaged by their blotchy pattern. Both parents incubate the eggs which hatch in about three weeks and the chicks fly in another three to four weeks. The eggs and chicks are vulnerable to rats and foxes, and larger birds such as owls and herons. The female can lay a second clutch of eggs if the first are destroyed.

Coot: these are small [15inches, or 37cms long with a wingspan of 30inches, or 75cms] black birds with a white patch on the front of their face, and a white bill. They



have short, rounded wings and do not fly very well but can walk and run well on their strong legs and long toes, which they can use when fighting. They eat mainly plant material, but also small animals and eggs and larvae. They build their nests at water level, often looking as though they are floating, using reeds, bulrushes, sticks and leaves. The female can lay as many as 15 eggs at a time, and maybe two or three clutches a year. Both

parents incubate the eggs which take about three weeks to hatch. The proud father will lead the chicks into the water almost straight away. Coots are closely related to the moorhen.

Grey heron are about three feet [94cms] tall, with long legs and neck, a long beak and grey, black and white feathering. They have a wingspan to match: 6 feet or

1.95m. When they fly, they retract their neck so their head is almost resting on their back. They eat mainly fish, but also small birds such as ducklings, small mammals like voles and amphibians. They tend to wait motionless for their prey, or slowly stalk their victims, although they have been seen striding through shallow water looking for food. The herons' nests are built of sticks and can reach three feet [1metre] across; they form large platforms high in trees and close



to water. The female lays three or four eggs and they take about four weeks to hatch; the young spend about seven weeks in the nest before they fly.

Kingfishers are small, brightly coloured birds. They are shy and not often seen; but if you are fortunate to see one it will probably be skimming over the water, or perched on branches overhanging the canal where they wait for small fish to pass by under their chosen perch. They measure 6-7 inches [15-17cms] long and are predominantly blue on top and orange underneath, with red legs and feet. As they fly fast they appear as a flash of brilliant colour. Their bills are long for the size of their body and are sometimes used as weapons in fights for mates and territory. They are susceptible to freezing weather, but as they can rear up to three broods of young in a year, their numbers are replenished easily. They stay with the same partner, and make their nests in holes in river banks or similar. The female lays between three and six eggs in a clutch and both partners incubate the eggs.



Mallard duck is the most common duck in the UK. It is a large duck and has a long body and a long broad bill. The male has a dark green head, a yellow bill, a purple-brown breast and grey body. The female is mainly brown with an orange bill. They can grow to two feet [60cms] long, with a wingspan of over three feet [90cms]. Their life expectancy can be up to 20 years. They have a varied diet, including beetles, flies, dragonflies, worms, but is mainly plant matter, including seeds, roots and tubers. They usually, but not always, nest near water. The female lays between 8 and 13 eggs which take about four weeks to hatch. She sits on the nest while most



males will leave the females and join other males. The ducklings are capable of swimming as soon as they have hatched, but it takes between three and four months for their wings to become strong enough for them to fly.

Moorhen: these are closely related to the coot and are of a similar size, with a slightly smaller wingspan. Like the coot, they are mainly black, but have a white flash along their sides. They have a red frontal shield and their bill is red with a yellow tip. Their legs and feet are a striking yellow-green. Moorhens tend to be more solitary than coots and feed around the water's edge.



Moorhens will fight for its territory, using its feet and bill. Their nest is built among vegetation by the female, while the male gathers twigs, etc. Their eggs are laid in clutches of up to 20, and maybe three clutches a year. Incubation takes about three weeks and both parents are involved. They take to the water within a few days of hatching. Moorhens feed on both land and water and have a varied diet of leaves, seeds, berries, worms, snails and fish. They have been known to take other birds' eggs.

Mute swan is one of the heaviest flying birds, weighing between 20 and 26 pounds [9-12 kilos]. They may stand four feet [120cms] tall on land, with a wingspan of up to eight feet [2.4m]. They are white, with an orange black-knobbed bill. They build their large nest with waterside vegetation, usually in shallow water, or at the water's edge. They stay with their partners for life and often use the same nest each year, repairing or rebuilding it as necessary. They feed on a wide range of vegetation, both underwater plants which they reach with their long necks, and on land. They usually are territorial, but in some areas, where there is plenty of food, they can gather in a colony. Although swans can be 'tamed', usually by regular feeding, they are a formidable fighter and will even tackle something as large as a canoe if they feel threatened. The female will generally lay about six eggs, but can lay up to 12; these are laid every other day and incubation starts when the last egg is laid. The female sits on the nest for about five weeks and will swap with the male only when she wants to stretch her legs. The young, or cygnets, will take to the water when one day old. The parents will not feed their cygnets, but will help by paddling with their feet to release underwater plants to the surface. The cygnets will learn to fly when they have grown their flight feathers, at about four and a half months, usually about September.



Pigeons are common over most of the United Kingdom. Woodpigeon, Rock Dove, and Stock Dove are all similar birds and are included together for this listing. They grow to about 16 inches [42cms] long with a wingspan twice that size. Woodpigeons are generally grey with a pinkish breast and green, white and purple patch on the neck; their eyes are bright yellow and their legs are pink. The Rock Dove [Feral Pigeon] are similar, but can be seen with darker or lighter colouring. The Stock Dove is a few inches smaller than the others, and similar in colour. The male and female build platform nests in trees or buildings from twigs on which they lay 2 eggs in a clutch, three times a year. Incubation takes about 17 days and their young fly after about one month. They eat seeds and grain in the wild but will eat almost anything



that is put on a garden bird table. They drink more than other birds, probably because they do not get sufficient moisture from their food.

Song thrushes are smaller than the Mistle Thrush [9inches, or 23cms long with a wingspan of 13-14inches, or 33-35cms], and are less upright when standing. Their



backs and wings are brown and their breasts are paler with dark speckles. They build their nests in bushes or trees using twigs, grass and earth, then line them with soil mixed with saliva. They lay 2-4 clutches of 3-9 eggs each year which the female sits on until they hatch after two weeks. The young fledge in another two weeks. They eat worms, snails, insects and berries. They tend to feed under cover and usually fly low, from bush to bush. In recent years there has been concern for low numbers of thrushes, believed to be caused by the removal of hedgerows from

farmland, and bushes from woodland. The latest surveys suggest that the decline has levelled off, but you will still need to look hard for these birds.

Sparrow: it is easy to confuse the tree sparrow with the house sparrow and for the purposes of this exercise we will treat them as one. They are small birds [5-6 inches, or 14-15cms long with a wingspan of 8-10 inches, or 21-25cms] coloured chocolate brown with a white neck band or collar. The back and wings are shades of brown and their underparts are pale grey-brown.

They live in social groups and live mainly in woodland and hedgerows. They feed mostly on seeds and grasses, weeds and cereals such as barley and wheat. They also feed on insects like aphids, caterpillars, flies and small beetles. Both male and female help to build their nest, made with twigs and leaves and lined with down, moss and hair. Their eggs are laid in clutches of between 2 and 9 and the parents can lay up to three



clutches each year. They take about two weeks to hatch and the young will fly after another two weeks. The sparrow has been in serious decline in recent years.

Starling: these birds appear black at a distance, but close inspection reveals some wonderful iridescent greens and purples. They are slightly smaller than the blackbird at 9 inches [22cms] in length and a wingspan of 15-16 inches [37-42cms]. They are noisy and tend to fly in flocks, which can cause a problem with droppings! In flight, starlings have triangular wings and fly fast. When they come in to land they look a little like a Harrier jet aircraft. They lay one or two clutches of 4-9 eggs each year. The male and female take it in turns to incubate the eggs which take about two weeks to hatch. The young fly after about three weeks. They feed on just about anything, from



insects, worms and snails to berries and fruit, and can often be seen probing the ground with their strong beak, looking for grubs, slugs, etc.