

BACK TO BLACK

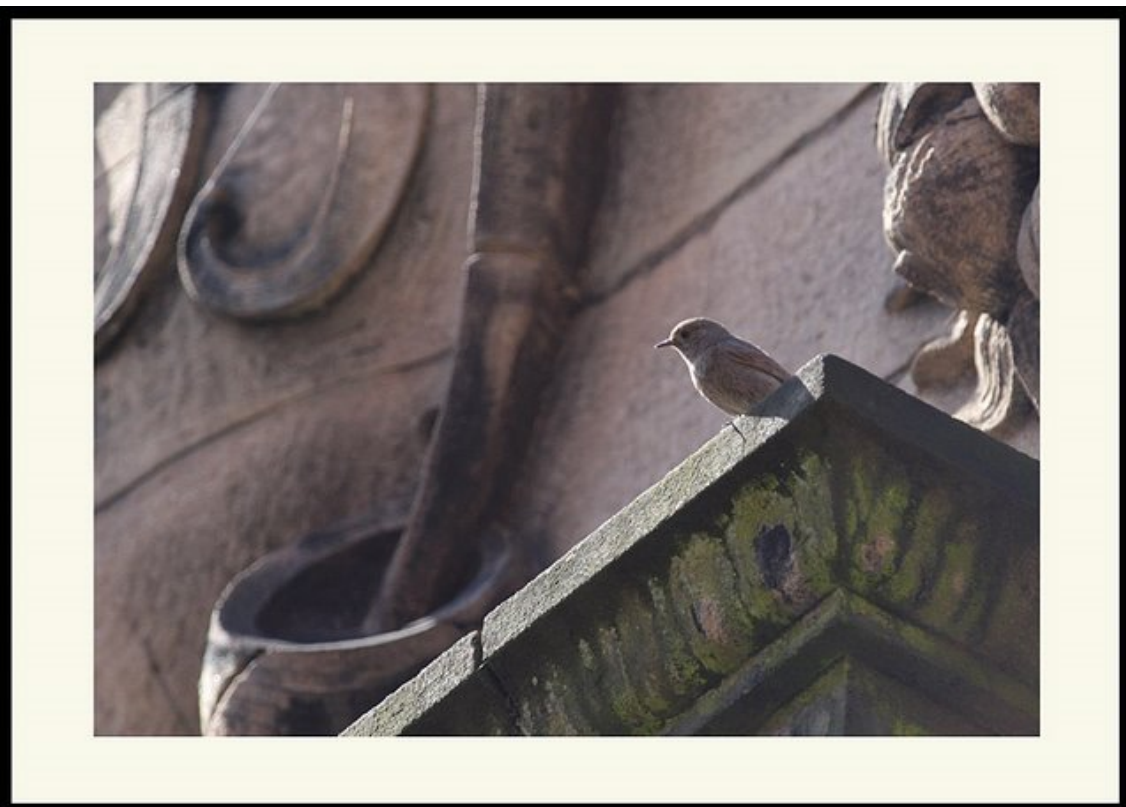
BLACK REDSTARTS IN GREATER MANCHESTER

by Ian McKerchar

All images taken in Manchester City Centre by Adrian Dancy



Above: A male Black Redstart displays his finest assets high above the streets of Manchester City Centre.



Above: A female Black Redstart not so high above the streets of Manchester City Centre.

Black Redstarts have been an exciting feature of Greater Manchester birding for many years now but rather than them being the migrant birds we are perhaps more used to elsewhere in the UK, Greater Manchester's monopoly on this species has most often been confined to breeding birds.

For many years, Black Redstarts in Manchester City Centre have been searched for during spring by county birders familiar with their distinctive song but having to compete with the city centre's heavy traffic and construction noise not to mention the general daily hustle and bustle can make this very difficult and early Sunday mornings have become a prerequisite for any such attempts. Their song, whilst distinctive enough, has occasionally been mistaken for a few other species, perhaps by birders not quite expecting such a variety of singing birds to be heard within the very heart of the city itself but once known, the song of Black Redstart is unmistakeable.

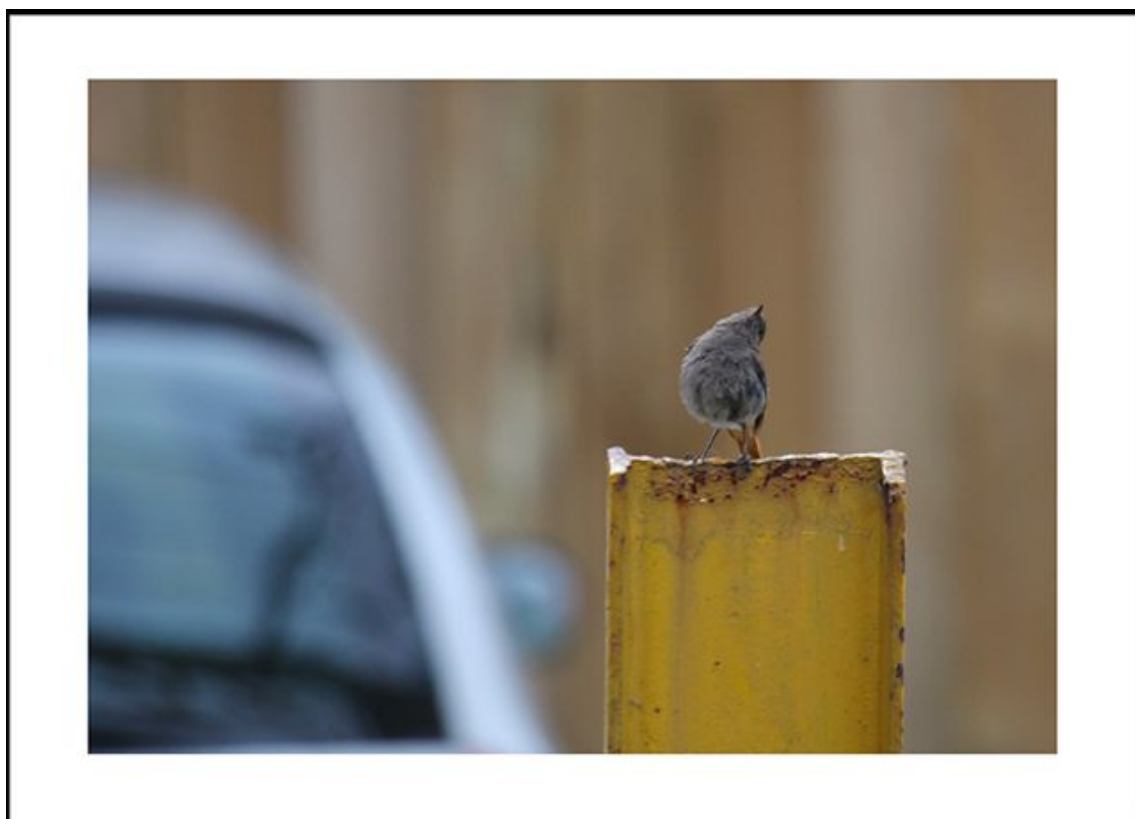
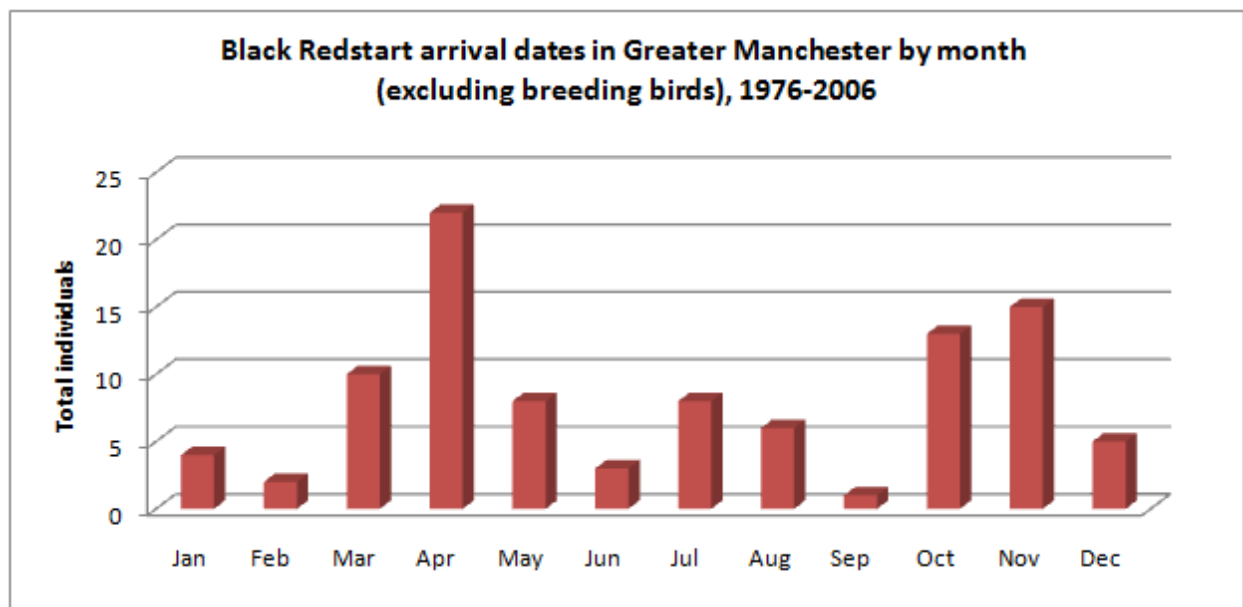
The song of Black Redstart can be found on this useful link [here](#).

It is a shame however that their breeding fortunes have occasionally met with fateful circumstances in previous years, including the building housing the breeding site of the Ashton-under-Lyne pair burning down and the general re-generation of the old, Black Redstart breeding site friendly buildings of Manchester City Centre into new apartment blocks devoid of such suitable breeding nooks and crannies. The latter disturbance saw the demise of the renowned Dale Street car park pair which provided years of enjoyment for birders, with both parents and young affording excellent views in what was then comparatively effortless viewing but Black Redstarts being the hardy souls they are, their relocation to other areas of the city centre was swift.

The first breeding record of Black Redstart for Greater Manchester occurred when a nest containing young was discovered on a demolition site in the centre of Manchester in late July 1977, two young were seen to fly from the nest on the 29th of July and during the next few days the parents could be seen feeding at least one young in the surrounding district.

During the first week of June 1981, no fewer than 5 male Black Redstarts were holding territories in the centre of Manchester but unfortunately breeding was not proven at any of the sites. This remains the highest density ever recorded in the county but perhaps concerted efforts to locate singing birds in the future could replicate this wonderful endeavour.

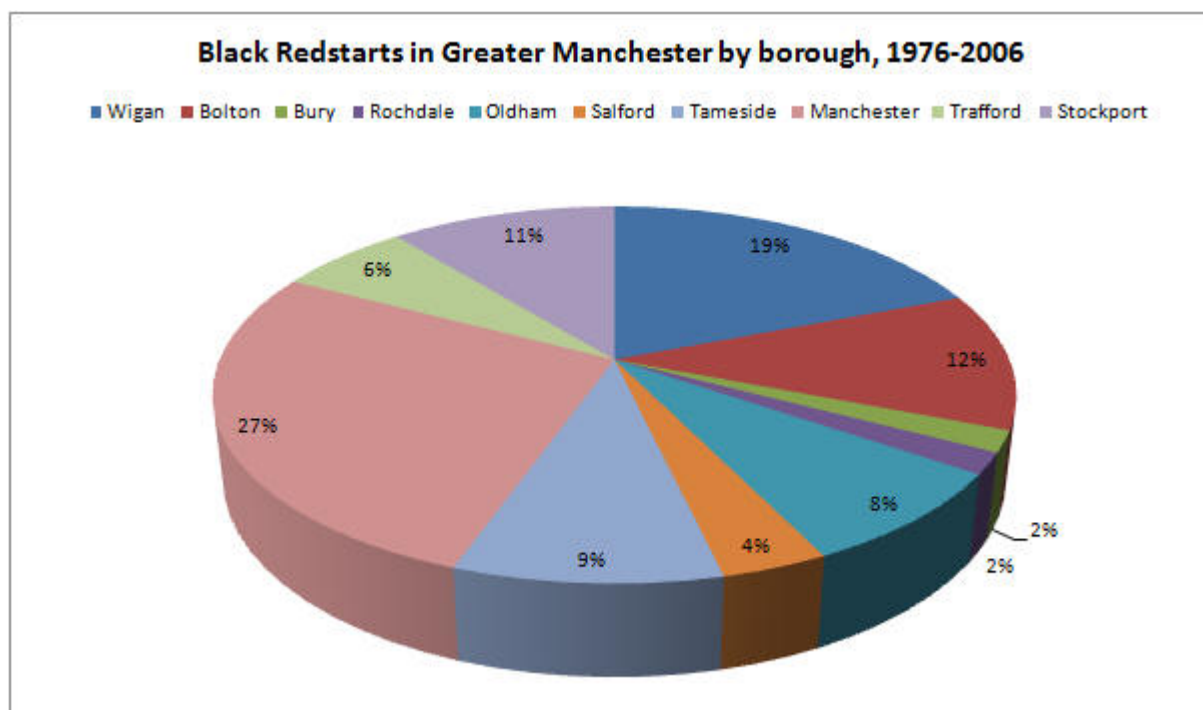
Black Redstarts do of course occur in the county as passage migrants and winter visitors and the table below represents records of such individuals but those records of breeding birds or of singing birds within breeding areas are not included.



Above: City centre Black Redstarts are often highly conspicuous and anything but shy!

All the 10 boroughs in the county have recorded Black Redstart but some of them have interesting analysis of their occurrences. Unsurprisingly, the city centre of Manchester achieves the highest proportion of sightings and that Wigan, the county's largest and most birder populated borough records the next highest density is no revelation either but Bolton coming in at third has an assortment of unusual records involving wintering birds in gardens! The most interesting record involved a first winter Black Redstart that was found wintering in a shed in Great Lever, Bolton on the 24th November 1993, the bird was fed on mealworms and stayed until the 20th March 1994 and a female in a Horwich garden in mid-March 1996 was the third such individual in three successive years for that area. Stockport's apparent large proportion of Black Redstarts is due in no small extent to the endeavours of a single observer at the rather

unassuming site of Adswold Tip and similarly, Tameside's decent proportion is largely due to individuals (both birds and observers!) at Audenshaw Reservoirs.



Above: Dodging traffic, pedestrians and birders across the streets of the city centre



Above: Here a male Black Redstart in Manchester City Centre's 'Northern Quarter' feeds a young bird, which already appears slightly larger than its parent!



Above: A breeding pair in Manchester City Centre's China Town feed their young high on the rooftops



Above: A wonderful portrait of a city centre juvenile. The bill shows the typical bright yellow gape sides for attracting the adults to poke food down it, the plumage is pristine and the shortness of the tail is equally evident here with the feathers still in growth.



Above: The greyiness of the plumage is obvious here again and there is some mottling evident on the underparts and a little on the mantle too.



Above and below: In these very young juvenile birds, yet again the yellow at the sides of the bill is easily the most striking feature.





Above: Another breeding success in Manchester City Centre's 'Northern Quarter', these two juveniles show a fondness for denim!



Above: Note the typically immaculate remiges of this juvenile and the rather rusty edges to the greater coverts and tertials. The dark terminal markings on all but the central pair of tail feathers are typical for a juvenile.

MALE BLACK REDSTARTS



Above: This portrait taken in late July shows the dark, solidly sooty black body plumage we expect from an adult male of this species.



Above: This male, also taken in late July, looks all the less attractive however, with a paler, much less solid grey/black plumage and conspicuously browner wing and although remnants of a pale wing panel do seem

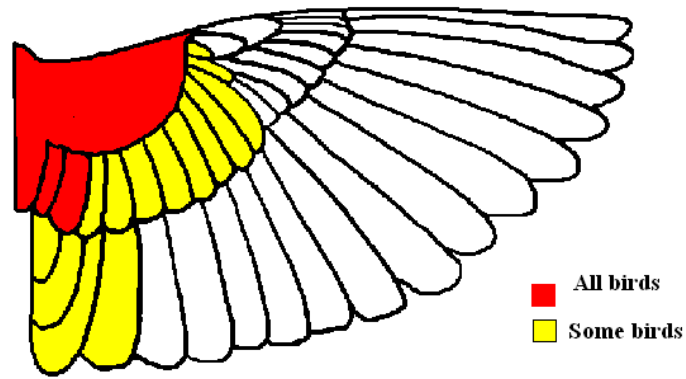
to be apparent in this image is this a true feature or is 'bleaching' of the feather shafts creating this impression? See below for a full discussion of this particular individual.



Above: The same male as above. This terrific image clearly exhibits the full extent of wear on this individual, the tertials are particularly worn almost to the shafts but all the remiges are worn and terribly faded and whilst the apparent white wing panel does appear to be made up of the very bleached looking feather shafts, the emarginated edges on P3 and P4 do seem to be pale, clearly this is difficult to call! The wear on this individual is not restricted to the wings though as we can plainly make out excessive wear on the mantle and back feathering and also the red feathering on the rump, in fact the whole bird looks incredibly dishevelled. The question though, if in fact it is answerable, is it an adult or 2nd calendar year (1st summer) bird? See below for some kind of answer!

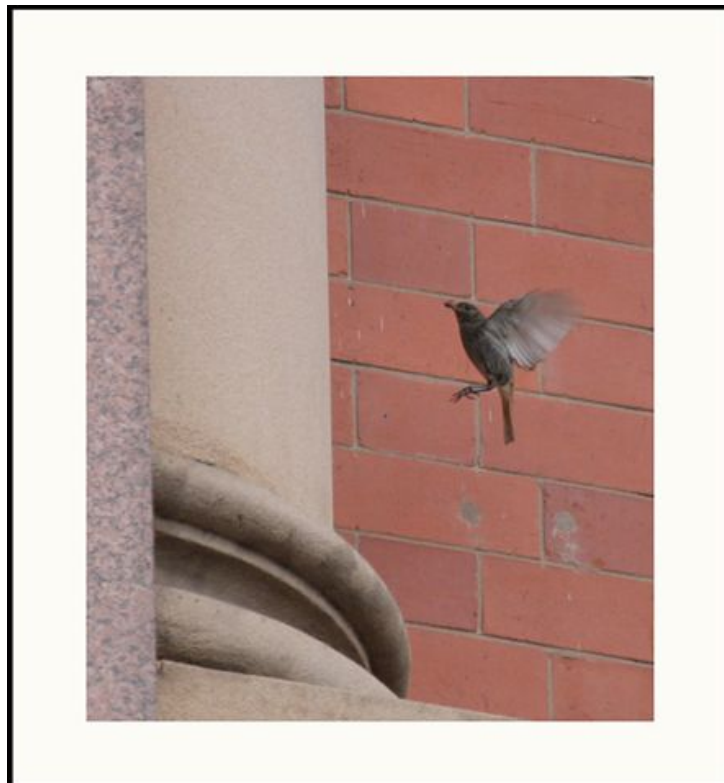
Adult Black Redstarts have a complete post breeding moult which is usually finished in October and obviously, the bird above does not appear to have begun any moult what so ever, clearly it is quite rightly putting all its energy into looking after its offspring and considering that the plumage is around one year old it's not surprising it looks so worn!

Juvenile Black Redstarts undergo a partial moult including lesser coverts and two inner greater coverts but it seems that some birds can moult all the greater coverts and more rarely tertials and inner secondaries, either way, all are usually completed in October. The image below demonstrates the extent of partial moult, indicating the replaced feathers.



Now the slightly complicated bit...

First year male Black Redstarts take on one of two morphs although some are intermediate, a rare *paradoxus* morph which resembles the adult male but for the retained juvenile wing or the commoner *cairii* morph which closely resembles the adult female plumage. As the *paradoxus* plumage wears to look increasingly like adult males but for their much browner wings and lack of white wing panel, going back to the very worn male in the photo above, could it be such a bird? My own personal appreciation and study of birds in such plumages in summer is restricted to two or three individuals and detailed information and photos of them is restricted to put it lightly, so after carefully studying those primaries there does at least appear to be remnants of a pale wing panel (especially considering the overall wear on the wing) which would indicate an adult male (?). Any further comments on this particular bird or experience with similar individuals would be greatly appreciated and should be sent to me [here](#). As for the *cairii* morph, these birds remain grey and female like throughout their first summer and can often be heard singing in this plumage.



Above: The male bringing food to the demanding young.



Above: The very worn male yet again. His drab appearance is evident here as is the wear on his wings and tail, the tertials on the right wing (our left in this image) are almost non-existent!



Above: Carrying a faecal sac away from the nest. Again, this is the same very worn bird as in the above images and its tail (which appears to be in better condition here) seems to show no dark in the tips of the outer tail feathers, so perhaps it is an adult after all as immatures might be expected to show at least some trace of dark in them?

FEMALE BLACK REDSTARTS



Above: Considerably less conspicuous due to its rather drab plumage, the red tail remains discernible at any angle.



Above: Gathering nesting material in early June.



Above: Black Redstart chicks are typically demanding and adults are kept very busy finding and delivering food.



Above: This female, in late-July, will provide nourishment for its young with an absolute beak-full!

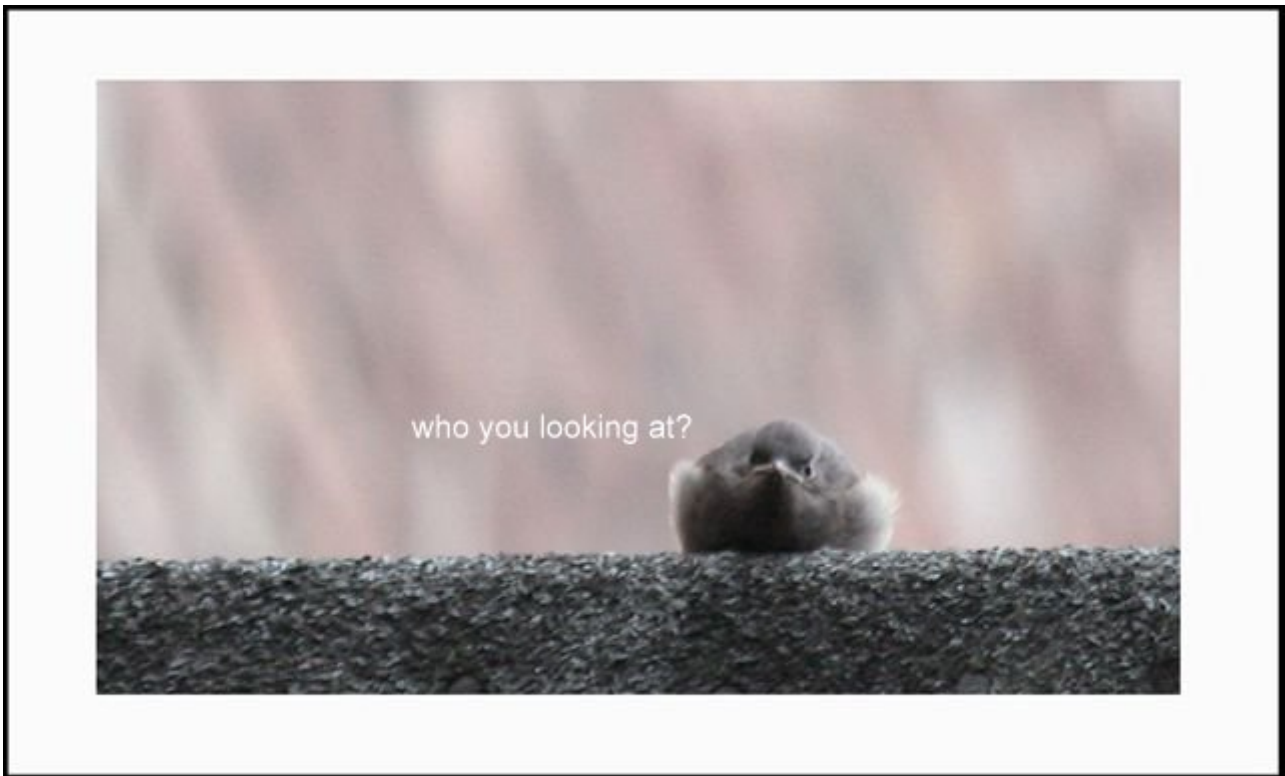
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Adrian Dancy for his huge effort in obtaining these excellent photographs and for his usual generosity in permitting me to utilise them here, they are of course copyright of the photographer. I am also indebted to Ian Woosey who assisted me with the essential collation of county records of Black Redstarts.

References

Svensson, L. 1992. *Identification Guide to European Passerines*. BTO, Tring.

[The freesound project](#)



A juvenile Black Red' giving the photographer some of his own medicine!

Ian McKerchar, August 2008

www.manchesterbirding.com