

## Fieldfare

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The Fieldfare edges onto the British Red List on the most tentative of pretexts. Its British breeding population has declined in recent years from a handful of pairs to but one or two. Yet these two toehold pairs of Fieldfares, and their status, do not reflect the meaning of this bird in British lives.

In his tender, wonderful *Bird Therapy* my friend Joe Harkness recounts his elation when two Fieldfares (Britain's entire breeding population, I like to imagine) visit his garden, driven by ice and snow. Joe's joy comes not from the beauty of the birds, though beautiful they certainly are, nor from their rarity, for *per se* they are not rare at all (globally they are listed by BirdLife International as being of Least Concern). His joy comes from their shining wildness, perceived — this once — in a place of domesticity. For Fieldfares are not birds of small gardens. Nor, despite their name, are they birds of dull, tamed British fields.

Rather, Fieldfares are birds of the lead and iron, late October sky which bears them from the north. As they come — these fierce-faced Valkyries — they drop their welly-squelch calls to earth. Next they themselves materialise from the cloud, stroking the wind with their too-large wings, stalling and guiding their fall with their black square tails. Like that the Nordic summer, the green sandpiper's song, the shrill whine of midges and the crane's yell fall to the sad mud and the autumn-tousled grass of Britain. In the being of a bird.

They stay with us, the winter long, a million of these messengers of Wotan. They skip and chatter through the fog-wet hawthorn hedgetops as you walk. They strip sea buckthorn bushes in the dunes, cold yellow bills and warm-flushed speckled chests glowing in the orange berries' fiery light.

This spring, in April, Fieldfares moved in waves above my morning dog walks, their voices urgent for the taiga. In the wake of their wings they dragged the winter sky, the cloud, the cold, leaving a warm space to be peopled instead by African voices. The taiga called the Fieldfares home, to sing with Serafina Pekkala, and each to claim a towering spruce from which to shout in anger at the soft-pawed coming of the marten and the wolf.