

# Stay Home

Carol Mitchell



This has become the 2020 slogan and so, to obey it, we will 'stay home' and look at our own national treasure – the Robin. It is difficult to think of any other bird which has become so embedded in our folklore and one whose image has adorned such a variety of items, even to appearing on a limited edition badge produced for the London 2012 Olympics. A vote in the 1960s saw the Robin adopted as the national avian icon and, even as recently as 2015, in a poll conducted by the urban birdwatcher, David Lindo (a regular writer in the RSBS's *Nature's Home* publication), the Robin was still the favourite with 34% of the vote.



Legend holds that there are two main myths on how the Robin acquired

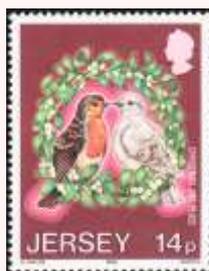
its red breast. One relates that the Robin plucked a thorn from the Crown of Thorns worn by Christ during the crucifixion and, as the bird did so, a drop of Christ's blood fell onto the Robin staining its breast red. The second fable is that the breast was scorched red whilst the bird was conveying water to parched souls condemned to hellfire. Both versions portray the Robin as being associated with good deeds as do most of the subsequent creations of tales, poetry, nursery rhyme and song. Bizarrely, there are even carvings on gravestones depicting a Robin which was believed to signify that the deceased was a friendly and sociable person.

The authorship of 'Who killed Cock Robin?' is lost in the mists of time but the Sparrow with its lethal bow and arrow together with its victim are depicted in a stained glass window in

Buckland Rectory near Cirencester. However, the nursery rhyme 'Little Robin Redbreast' sees the bird enjoying a better fate by escaping the talons of a cat and challenging its feline pursuer to 'Catch me if you can'.

The Robin's association with humans is evidenced frequently by gardeners as the bird has an uncanny knack of knowing that there are rich rewards for it when freshly turned soil appears. A Devonian myth has it that, if a Robin finds a dead human, it will cover the corpse's face with leaves and moss as a mark of love for the human race. This may well stem from the story of *Babes in the Wood* where a Robin covered the faces of the dead children.

The popularity of the Robin increased hugely in the Victorian era because the first postmen wore a red uniform and were nicknamed 'Robins' and, with the newly-introduced



tradition of sending Christmas cards, the bird itself was frequently illustrated carrying a card like the real postie!! The association with winter continued during World War II with a government poster campaign entitled 'The North Wind may blow' showing a Robin wrapped in a blue striped scarf on a snow-covered bare twig and he is exhorting folk to 'save coal, gas and electricity for the very coldest weather'.



There is something distinctly idiosyncratic about the West Country and it's

(almost) fixation with the Robin as there is a plethora of yarns - both nice and nasty!! The nice ones first: if a Robin was the first bird to be seen by a maiden on Valentine's Day, it meant that she would marry a sailor and, for anybody, on seeing the first

Robin of the New Year, it was believed that any wish made would come true. But there was a sting in the tail of this tale in that, if the bird flew away before the wish was uttered completely, then the result would be twelve months' bad luck.



Now the not-so-nice and mostly to do with the home: when a Robin hopped over the threshold it was an omen of future debt and any Robin

entering the house was a bad portent usually of death, especially if the bird warbles its call. If anyone from a farmhouse stole an egg from the nest, all the milk produced on the farm would be sour. Bearing in mind how popular the greetings cards are, the really odd one is about Christmas cards on Dartmoor where elderly hags warned about receiving cards portraying a Robin as being bad luck and, if they received one, they would destroy it immediately. However, they were not above sending just such Robin cards to people they disliked!!

But stay home the Robin does as, except for the very far north of Scandinavia, it is sedentary in its range and it also believes and practises social distancing very strictly, being an aggressive defender of its territory. However, there is one notable exception. We are back to the West Country again and the moderate biome of the Eden Project. The Robins which have found their way through the open roof panels do not quarrel but tolerate each other even during the courting season but this has to be the exception which proves the rule!!



# Stay Home (2)

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Our European Robin was described by Carl Linnaeus in 1758 in his *Systema Naturae* under the binomial name *Motacilla rubecula*, the latter being a diminutive derived from the Latin *ruber* 'red'. The genus *Erithacus*, from ancient Greek, was introduced by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier in 1800 so giving the bird its current binomial name *Erithacus rubecula*. But it was known simply as 'Robin' or 'Robin Redbreast' as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century it became popular to give human names to familiar creatures and 'Robin' was originally a diminutive of 'Robert'. (Perhaps that is why 'The red, red robin comes bob, bob, bobbing along' according to the 1920s song). Actually, the breast feathers are more orange than red but orange as a colour was unknown in Britain until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the fruit was first imported. The male and female have similar plumage and are the same size between five and five and a half inches long with a wingspan of eight to nine inches and weighing nine to thirteen ounces. (For the metrically minded length 12.5 -14cm, wingspan 20-22cm, weight 16-22g).



The song changes during the year: it is a fluting warble in the breeding

season and, although both the male and female sing during the winter, it is a far more plaintive version than in the summertime, probably pleading for food in the inclement weather. During the breeding period, the males are very vocal in the dawn chorus and start singing about an hour before sunrise and continue to some half an hour after sunset. Disturbingly, in urban areas where artificial light predominates, the poor throat is kept busy even during the night. And most gardeners will have heard the disapproving beak clicking when disturbing the Robin's feeding on the freshly dug worms.

The female moves a short distance away from the nesting site during the winter (social distancing!?) to find better foraging territory but the male keeps to its own home range throughout the year – once hard won, he would be reluctant to concede any part of his domain.

When it comes to building a nest, the Robin could give us lessons in being adaptable to any situation for, as well as building in conventional natural places, nest have been recorded in barbecues, bicycle handlebars, discarded kettles and watering cans, flower pots, hats and even in the bristles of an upturned broom. The actual nest is composed of leaves, moss and grass with sheep's wool and feathers to line it. In the U.K. the breeding season normally begins in March and they are industrious parents laying and rearing two or three clutches of five to six eggs, dependent on the weather conditions. The eggs are creamy beige with patches of reddish-brown especially at the larger end of the egg. When the juveniles fledge they do not resemble their parents – just a mottled brown all over until some three months later when junior develops some orange feathers under its chin which gradually extend over the later summer to look like a recognisable Robin.

The down side to growing up is the high mortality rate in the first year or so of life so the adolescents only have an average life expectancy of about fourteen months which may be caused by a severe winter or being attacked by other birds if they stray into another's patch. However, once past its first year, it can expect to live longer and the record is a remarkable 19 years.



With the affection in which the bird is held, it is no surprise that several sports organisations are nicknamed 'The Robins'. For association football teams these include Bristol City (from 2019), Crewe Alexandra, Wrexham, Swindon Town and Cheltenham Town and the latter two even incorporate the image of a Robin in their actual badge design. Given the somewhat robust sport of Rugby League, it seems to be a strange choice of name for Hull Kingston Rovers but, for this team, the Robin symbolises agility in darting swiftly around the field. However, there are no prizes for guessing the colour of all those teams' strip!!



## Stamp News



After our Chairman wrote his report, the following was announced..... The **Autumn Stampex** which was scheduled for 30th Sept to 3rd Oct has been postponed because of the ongoing coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic. It will be replaced by an online, virtual Stampex event. According to the Philatelic Traders' Society, the virtual event will allow online visitors to shop for stamps, meet society members and attend Stampex talks. To sign up for the newsletter for this virtual stamp show, visit the webpage [www.stampexinternational.co.uk/signup.html](http://www.stampexinternational.co.uk/signup.html).