# Usutu virus significantly threatens blackbird populations across southern England



A recently emerged mosquito-borne disease, the Usutu virus, is posing a significant risk to blackbird populations in the UK. First detected in the country in 2020, the virus has rapidly expanded through southern England, raising alarms among scientists and conservationists. Data indicates that this spread corresponds with a notable decline in blackbird numbers, as concerns regarding the virus's impact on these cherished songbirds mount.

The Usutu virus originates from Africa and has been known to cause severe mortality in various bird species, particularly in blackbirds. Symptoms in affected birds may include lethargy, weakness, and loss of coordination, culminating in seizures and death. As the disease has progressed, a direct correlation between its presence and declining blackbird populations has been observed. This troubling trend has prompted institutions like the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to initiate special monitoring projects, encouraging the public to participate in counting and observing blackbirds in their gardens. Their initiative, dubbed the Blackbirds in Gardens project, aims to gather data on how blackbirds use urban green spaces and assess the potential effects of the Usutu virus on their numbers.

The BTO has stated that individuals with gardens and an interest in local wildlife can contribute valuable data by recognising and reporting sightings of blackbirds. This survey is part of the broader Vector-Borne RADAR initiative, collaborating with organizations such as the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), the UK Health Security Agency, and the Zoological Society of London. Dr Arran Folly from the APHA highlighted the unexpected persistence and expanded range of the Usutu virus, indicating that climate change may be facilitating the rise of mosquito populations and the diseases they carry within the UK.

The recent risk assessment published by the UK government outlines a low risk of the Usutu virus to human health, with a strong emphasis on monitoring both bird and mosquito populations. They recommend enhancing public awareness around mosquito bite prevention and continuing surveillance for any human cases. Despite this low risk, the potential impact on wildlife—particularly on susceptible species—remains a pressing concern.

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a key factor in the virus's spread across Europe. Researchers point to rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns as drivers that might allow mosquito populations, including the primary vector Culex pipiens, to flourish in previously unwelcoming environments. The Royal Horticultural Society has conveyed the need for public involvement in reducing mosquito breeding grounds, which can be achieved by eliminating standing water on private properties.

Public health advice on mosquito bite prevention highlights standard precautions such as using insect repellent and wearing long clothing. However, the focus on protecting wildlife from the Usutu virus requires a community effort, as local observation and reporting can significantly aid ongoing research and monitoring efforts during this critical time for blackbirds in the UK.

As the threat from the Usutu virus becomes clearer, it underscores the intricate connections between climate, wildlife health, and public awareness. Conserving blackbirds not only contributes to biodiversity but also enhances the natural beauty of gardens across the nation, making it a priority for both individuals and conservation organisations alike.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4
2. Paragraphs 5, 6
3. Paragraphs 5, 6
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5. Paragraphs 2, 4
6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraph 2

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/nature/2055485/anyone-blackbirds-garden-asked-scientists-take-action-now> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hairs-risk-assessment-usutu-virus/hairs-risk-assessment-usutu-virus> - The UK government published a risk assessment on Usutu virus, a mosquito-borne flavivirus first recognized in Europe in 2001. The virus was detected in wild birds in the UK in August 2020, with subsequent detections in Greater London between 2021 and 2023. The assessment indicates a low risk to the general UK population and recommends monitoring bird and mosquito populations, raising public awareness on mosquito bite prevention, and continuing surveillance for human cases.
3. <https://www.gardenwildlifehealth.org/portfolio/usutu-virus/> - Garden Wildlife Health provides information on Usutu virus, a flavivirus transmitted to birds by mosquitoes. The virus was first detected in wild Eurasian blackbirds in Greater London in late summer 2020. Symptoms in infected birds include lethargy, weakness, loss of coordination, and seizures. The virus has also been known to infect mammals, including bats and humans, though these are incidental hosts. The primary vector in Europe is Culex pipiens s.l., which is present in Great Britain.
4. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/wildlife/blackbird-usutu-virus> - The Royal Horticultural Society discusses the threat of Usutu virus to blackbird populations in the UK. First identified in South Africa, the virus has spread to Europe, causing significant mortality in blackbirds. The RHS emphasizes the role of climate change in facilitating the spread of the virus and provides guidance on how the public can help, including minimizing standing water to reduce mosquito breeding sites and reporting unusual behavior or deceased blackbirds to Garden Wildlife Health.
5. <https://aphascience.blog.gov.uk/2020/12/01/usutu-virus/> - The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) reports on the detection of Usutu virus in wild birds in Great Britain. The virus, which causes lethal disease in certain bird species, particularly blackbirds, was first identified in Austria in 2001 and has since spread across Europe. The APHA highlights the role of migratory birds and mosquitoes in the virus's spread and emphasizes the importance of surveillance and monitoring to understand its impact on UK wildlife.
6. <https://www.cdc.gov/usutu/prevention/index.html> - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides information on preventing Usutu virus, which is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. The virus has been found in parts of Africa and Europe. The CDC recommends using insect repellent, wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, treating clothing and gear, and choosing lodging with air conditioning or screens on windows and doors to prevent mosquito bites.
7. <https://dwhc.nl/en/ziekten/usutu-virus/> - The Dutch Wildlife Health Centre offers insights into Usutu virus, a mosquito-borne flavivirus affecting birds, especially blackbirds. The virus causes large numbers of deaths in certain species of European wild birds. Clinical signs in infected blackbirds include apathy, lack of flight-response, ruffled feathers, and uncoordinated movements. Post-mortem findings often include enlarged liver and spleen. The virus is transmitted by mosquitoes, and humans and horses are considered incidental hosts.