

# Identification of Northern Ring Ouzel and Southern Ring Ouzel

Roy Slaterus

**R**ing Ouzel *Turdus torquatus* is one of six thrush species regularly encountered in the Netherlands and north-western Europe. Generally, its identification does not pose many problems as no other species has a blackish plumage with a white or whitish breast-crescent. How to separate the subspecies of Ring Ouzel is, however, more challenging and less widely known. The aim of this paper is to offer a simple but helpful guide to Ring Ouzel subspecies identification in a European context.

## Taxonomy

Ring Ouzel is found only in the Western Palearctic. Three subspecies are recognised (eg, Clement & Hathway 2000, Shirihai & Svensson 2018, Fairbrother & Hutchinson 2020). The nominate subspecies *T t torquatus* (Northern Ring Ouzel, hereafter *torquatus*) breeds in Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia and north-western Russia. It winters mainly in southern Spain and in the Atlas mountains in North Africa. In the Netherlands, it is a fairly common migrant in spring and autumn.

A second subspecies is found as a breeding bird mostly in mountains in central, southern and eastern Europe: Southern Ring Ouzel *T t alpestris* (hereafter *alpestris*). Breeding has been reported as close to the Netherlands as eastern Belgium and neighbouring parts of Germany (eg, Keller et al 2020). It also winters in the Atlas range, as well as in some parts of the Mediterranean. Compared with *torquatus* its migration peaks slightly earlier in spring and autumn (eg, Jenni 1994, Anger & Förschler 2019). It has never been recorded with certainty in the Netherlands and all previously accepted records for Britain have been reviewed and removed from the British list (Stoddart 2015). However, given the close proximity of its breeding range and its migratory behaviour, *alpestris* should be considered a potential vagrant to these countries, or perhaps even a scarce but overlooked visitor.

A third subspecies occurs on the edge of Europe: Caucasian Ring Ouzel *T t amicornum*. It breeds and winters in the Caucasus in south-western Asia. The identification of this taxon is outside the scope of this paper.

## Ageing and sexing

The moult strategy of Ring Ouzel is rather simple. Adults have a complete post-nuptial moult in late summer. At the same time, young birds undergo a partial post-juvenile moult, not involving flight feathers, tail feathers, primary coverts and a varying number of outer greater coverts. There is no pre-nuptial moult in winter (Demongin 2016, Shirihai & Svensson 2018). This means that by spring the plumage may look faded and worn, with much of the pale feather fringing lost.

From autumn to spring, first-year Ring Ouzels are most easily separated from adults by carefully examining their greater coverts. A moult contrast between fresh inner coverts and retained outer ones – the latter often being somewhat shorter and browner – indicates that a bird is a first-year. The absence of such a moult limit is typical of adults. Another useful feature to age Ring Ouzels is the shape of the tail feathers. These are quite narrow and pointed in first-year birds and broader and more rounded in adults. In rare cases, first-year birds retain all of their juvenile greater coverts; these birds are easily aged, because the innermost juvenile greater coverts are characterised by a pale spot along the shaft tip. Such birds can even show pale-spotted retained median coverts.

The sexes are often separable after the post-juvenile moult. In general, males have a darker plumage with a more conspicuous breast-crescent than same-aged females but the differences can be slight and certain birds may be difficult to sex.

## What to look for?

In order to increase my chances of finding a Southern Ring Ouzel in the Netherlands, I have recently started looking at Ring Ouzels in more detail. My descriptions below are based on my field experience with *torquatus*, on studying many online photographs of both *torquatus* and *alpestris* and on information provided by Malmhagen (2013), Stoddart (2015), Demongin (2016), Shirihai & Svensson (2018) and van Duivendijk & Guyt (2022).

I have described and illustrated a total of 16 Ring Ouzel plumage groups (table 1-4, figure 1-4). They represent first-year and adult males and

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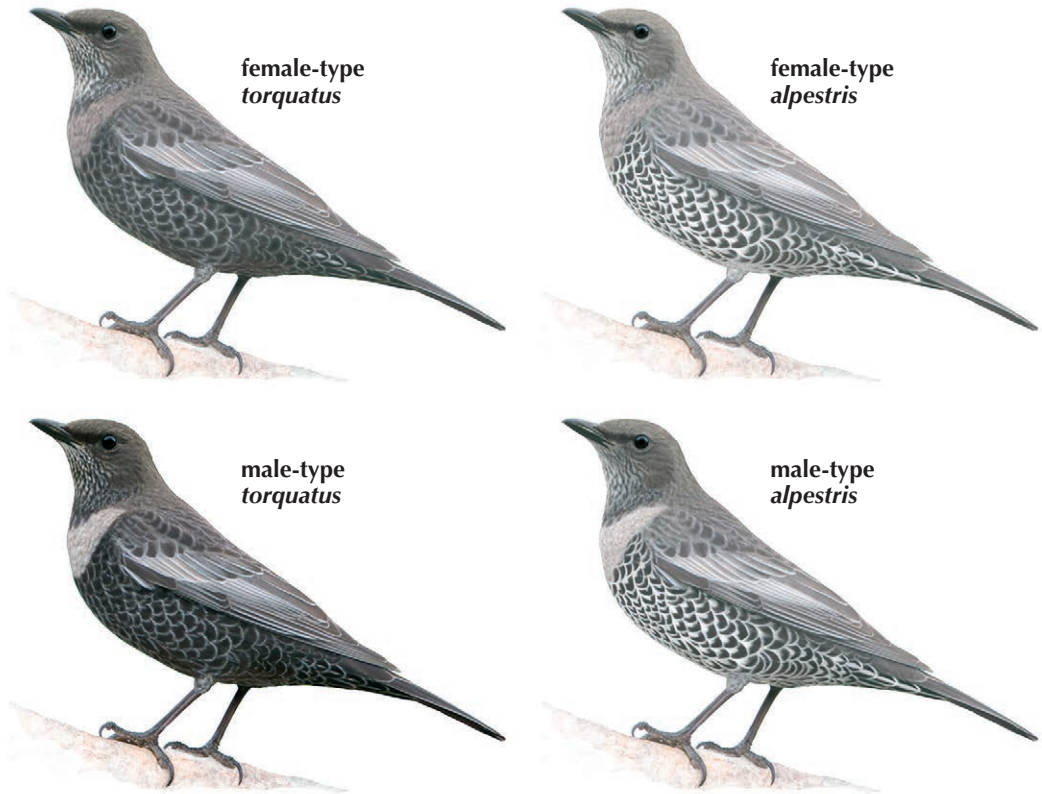


FIGURE 1 Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus*, first-year in autumn (Roy Slaterus)

TABLE 1 Plumage and bill characteristics of first-year Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* in autumn

autumn	first-year <i>torquatus</i> female-type	first-year <i>torquatus</i> male-type	first-year <i>alpestris</i> female-type	first-year <i>alpestris</i> male-type
Moult limit in greater coverts	present	present	present	present
Head and upperparts	quite dark	quite dark	quite pale	quite dark
Breast-crescent	indistinct	whitish but smudged	indistinct	whitish but smudged
Pale markings on throat	very striking	quite striking	very striking	quite striking
Bill	darkish	darkish	darkish	darkish
Pale fringes of flank and belly feathers	quite striking	quite striking	very striking	very striking
Centre of flank and belly feathers	no white visible	no white visible	much white visible	much white visible
Internal markings on undertail-coverts	limited / quite extensive	limited	quite / very extensive	quite / very extensive
Outer greater coverts	quite pale	quite pale	quite pale	quite pale

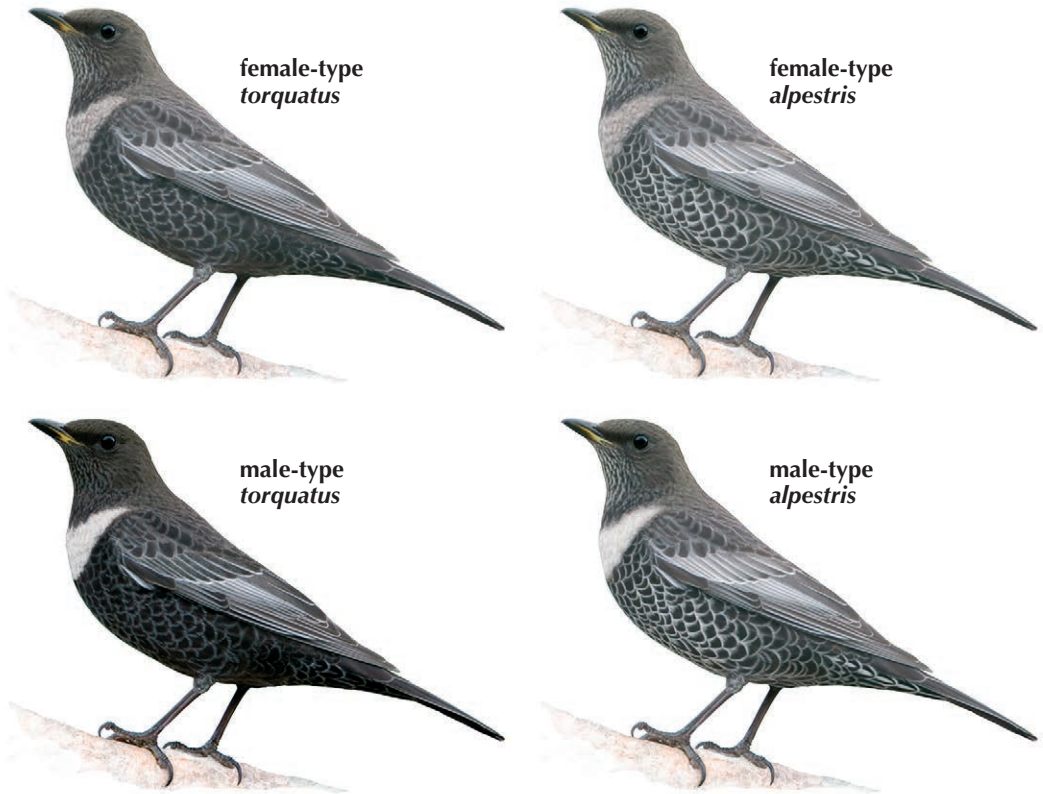


FIGURE 2 Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus*, adult in autumn (Roy Slaterus)

TABLE 2 Plumage and bill characteristics of adult Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* in autumn

autumn	adult <i>torquatus</i> female-type	adult <i>torquatus</i> male-type	adult <i>alpestris</i> female-type	adult <i>alpestris</i> male-type
Moult limit in greater coverts	absent	absent	absent	absent
Head and upperparts	quite dark	very dark	quite dark	quite dark
Breast-crescent	whitish but smudged	almost uniform white	whitish but smudged	almost uniform white
Pale markings on throat	quite striking	absent / indistinct	quite striking	quite striking
Bill	quite some yellow	quite some yellow	quite some yellow	quite some yellow
Pale fringes of flank and belly feathers	quite striking	indistinct	very striking	very striking
Centre of flank and belly feathers	no white visible	no white visible	little white visible	little white visible
Internal markings on undertail-coverts	limited	limited	quite extensive	quite extensive
Outer greater coverts	quite pale	quite dark	quite pale	quite pale

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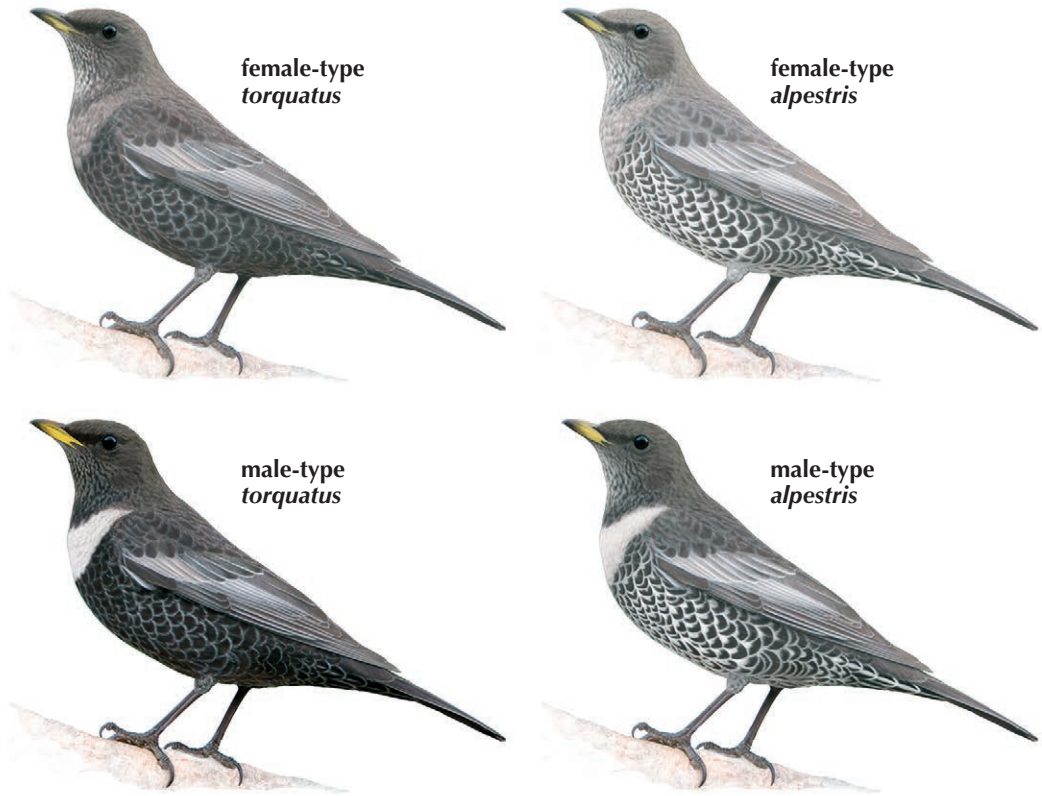


FIGURE 3 Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus*, first-year in spring (Roy Slaterus)

TABLE 3 Plumage and bill characteristics of first-year Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* in spring

spring	first-year <i>torquatus</i> female-type	first-year <i>torquatus</i> male-type	first-year <i>alpestris</i> female-type	first-year <i>alpestris</i> male-type
Moult limit in greater coverts	present	present	present	present
Head and upperparts	quite dark	very dark	quite pale	quite dark
Breast-crescent	indistinct	almost uniform white	indistinct	almost uniform white
Pale markings on throat	very striking	absent / indistinct	very striking	quite striking
Bill	quite some yellow	much yellow	quite some yellow	much yellow
Pale fringes of flank and belly feathers	quite striking	quite striking	very striking	very striking
Centre of flank and belly feathers	no white visible	no white visible	much white visible	much white visible
Internal markings on undertail-coverts	limited / quite extensive	limited	quite / very extensive	quite / very extensive
Outer greater coverts	quite pale	quite pale	quite pale	quite pale

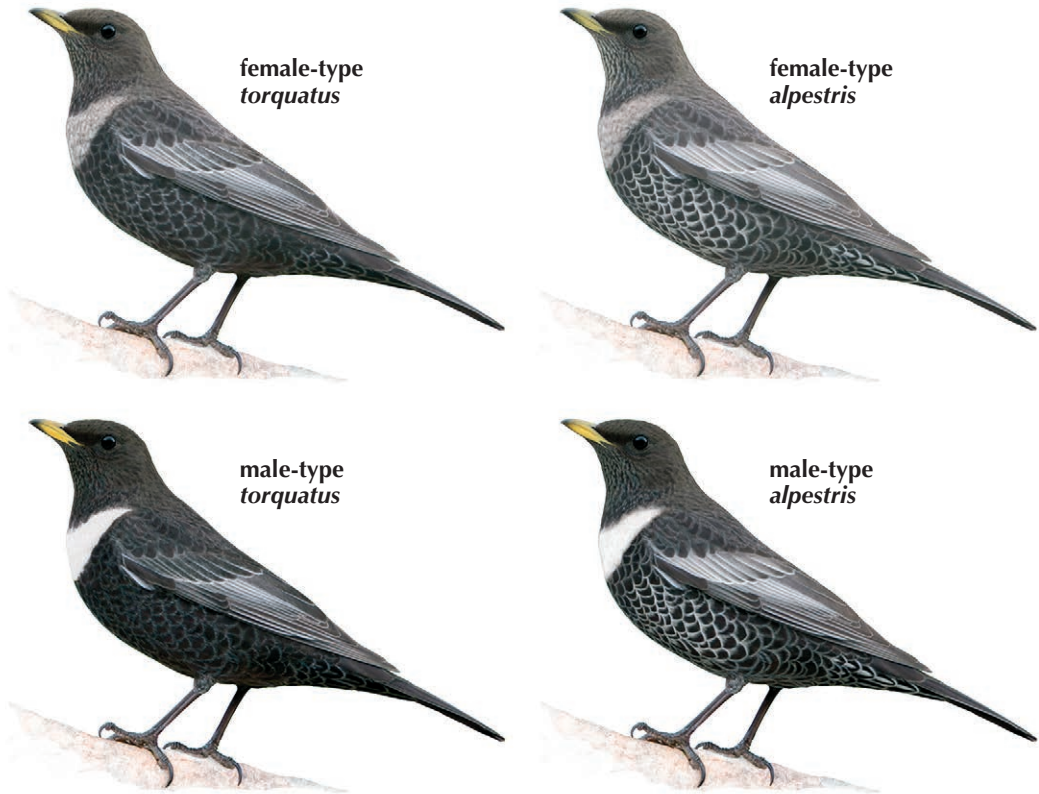


FIGURE 4 Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus*, adult in spring (Roy Slaterus)

TABLE 4 Plumage and bill characteristics of adult Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* in spring

spring	adult <i>torquatus</i> female-type	adult <i>torquatus</i> male-type	adult <i>alpestris</i> female-type	adult <i>alpestris</i> male-type
Moult limit in greater coverts	absent	absent	absent	absent
Head and upperparts	quite dark	very dark	quite dark	very dark
Breast-crescent	whitish but smudged	pure white	whitish but smudged	pure white
Pale markings on throat	absent / indistinct	absent / indistinct	quite striking	absent / indistinct
Bill	much yellow	much yellow	much yellow	much yellow
Pale fringes of flank and belly feathers	quite striking	indistinct	very striking	very striking
Centre of flank and belly feathers	no white visible	no white visible	little white visible	little white visible
Internal markings on undertail-coverts	limited	limited	quite extensive	quite extensive
Outer greater coverts	quite pale	quite dark	quite pale	quite pale

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**376** Southern Ring Ouzel / Alpenbeflijster *Turdus torquatus alpestris*, adult male-type, Păltiniș, Transylvania, Romania, 2 April 2007 (Matthieu Vaslin). Similar to first-year *torquatus*, so establishing age is essential. **377** Southern Ring Ouzel / Alpenbeflijster *Turdus torquatus alpestris*, first-year female-type, La Yesa, Valencia, Spain, 26 October 2020 (Yanina Maggiotto). Easily identified as *alpestris* by pale centre of flank and belly feathers. Throat typically paler than breast-crescent in first-year females.





**378** Northern Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus torquatus*, first-year male-type, Île de Sein, Brittany, France, 20 October 2017 (Matthieu Vaslin). Well-marked bird reminiscent of adult *alpestris* but moult limit in greater coverts, pointed tail feathers, striking breast-crescent and thin markings on undertail-coverts indicate first-year male-type *torquatus*. **379** Northern Ring Ouzel / Beflijster *Turdus torquatus torquatus*, adult male-type, La Yesa, Valencia, Spain, 6 December 2017 (Yanina Maggioletto). Note dark outer greater coverts (except for pale fringe) typical of adult male *torquatus*.



females of *torquatus* and *alpestris* in autumn and spring. They do not form a complete picture of the variation shown by Ring Ouzel, as birds with one or more characters intermediate between two groups are often found. Particularly, the distinction between males and females is not always easy. Therefore, I use the terms male-type and female-type in this paper.

A key feature of *alpestris* is the presence of white at the base of the flank and belly feathers (dark in *torquatus*). This is very striking in first-year birds, giving them a unique black-and-white pattern to the underparts. In adult *alpestris*, however, much less white is visible at these feather bases; under normal field conditions, it can even be hard to detect any white here. Still, the white scaling is obvious due to the broad white fringes of particularly the flank feathers. The undertail-coverts normally show a greater amount of white as well, with a broad white shaft-streak being typical for *alpestris* and (mostly) absent in *torquatus* (van Duivendijk & Guyt 2022). Also, the wing panel – formed by the white-fringed outer webs of the secondaries and greater coverts – usually stands out more than in *torquatus*.

#### Final remarks

Well-marked first-year *torquatus*, showing prominent pale fringes to the flank and belly feathers and a more than average amount of white in the undertail-coverts, could be mistaken for adult *alpestris*. Therefore, ageing should always be the first step in Ring Ouzel identification. The differences between fresh inner greater coverts and retained outer ones, typical of first-year Ring Ouzels, can be surprisingly hard to see (especially in *alpestris*, which on average has paler and more uniform greater coverts than *torquatus*). Also, determining the shape of the tail feathers can be difficult on a shy Ring Ouzel. Obtaining a series of good photographs from different angles will thus make life much easier. But knowing what to look for is what will really make the difference.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank James Lidster and Peter de Vries for their help with gathering information, Magnus Robb for reading a draft and offering some valuable comments

and Yanina Maggiotto and Matthieu Vaslin for the use of their beautiful photographs.

#### Samenvatting

DETERMINATIE VAN BEFLIJSTER EN ALPENBEFLIJSTER Van Beflijster *Turdus torquatus* komen in Europa twee ondersoorten voor. Nominaat *T t torquatus* broedt in Noord-Europa en overwintert vooral in het zuiden van Spanje en in het Atlasgebergte in Noord-Afrika. De ondersoort *T t alpestris*, Alpenbeflijster, broedt hoofdzakelijk in berggebieden in Zuid-, Midden- en Oost-Europa en overwintert in het Middellandse Zeegebied en in het Atlasgebergte. Ondanks de nabijheid van de broedgebieden en het trekgedrag is deze ondersoort nog nooit met zekerheid in Nederland vastgesteld. In dit artikel worden de belangrijkste uiterlijke verschillen tussen beide ondersoorten beschreven en geïllustreerd aan de hand van 16 kleedgroepen. Hopelijk draagt dit bij aan de bekendheid en de herkenning van Alpenbeflijster in Noord-Europa. Omdat een sterk getekende eerstejaars *torquatus* gemakkelijk kan worden verward met een volwassen *alpestris* is leeftijdsbepaling een belangrijke eerste stap bij de determinatie.

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