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Country diary: The sound of water, up in the trees

Inkpen, Berkshire: The winter thrushes - fieldfares and redwings - have been the backdrop to the winter, but now they are preparing to leave



Fieldfares and redwings ready to set off for the north. Photograph: Rebecca Cole/Alamy

Nicola Chester

Wed 6 Mar 2024 05:30 GMT

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There have been shenanigans, frights and startles in the night. The flimsy fence dividing Nightingales Field in half has come down and the (non-electrified) electric tape is ribboning in the wind. Some of the fence posts have popped up out of the sodden ground, leaving glinting wells of water.

I cannot fathom what's happened. But the horses are settled and not injured, and I know today - even though I can't yet see it - that the spring grass is growing. Neither horse comes to nuzzle my pockets for treats; they are grazing with a new focus.

As I fix the fence between the baleful, far-seeming and romantic tones of a mist thrush on one side, and the warmer, repeated phrases of a song thrush on the other, another sound comes into my consciousness. One that has been the soundtrack to this winter, like the backdrop of running water. As the morning fog begins to lift and a lemony light permeates, the sound crystallises, as if being sucked into the uppermost reaches of the ashes and oaks. It is the sound of a rushing stream, a babbling brook, though one made by restless avian voices, high in the treetops.



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Last month, these upright winter thrushes - fieldfares and redwings - fed systematically across plough and playing fields like a well-spaced army. Pulling a worm, hopping some paces, picking a beetle, hopping again, all travelling in the same direction until they reached the end of the field, then travelling back in the same manner. But now, it's time to go.

The burbling stream of aerial chatter meandering through the twiggy heights is the early spring equivalent of swallows gathering on autumn wires. Yet these harbingers of the winter-spring are congregating to head north for their summer.

The mist thickens to rain. As it falls and hisses on the boggy field, the birdsong is absorbed back into it. As I tug the winter-swollen five-bar gate shut, I spot several fallow deer slots pushed into the mud as they made a great leap over this more obvious barrier than the flimsy fence.

Country diary is on Twitter at [@gdncountrydiary](#)

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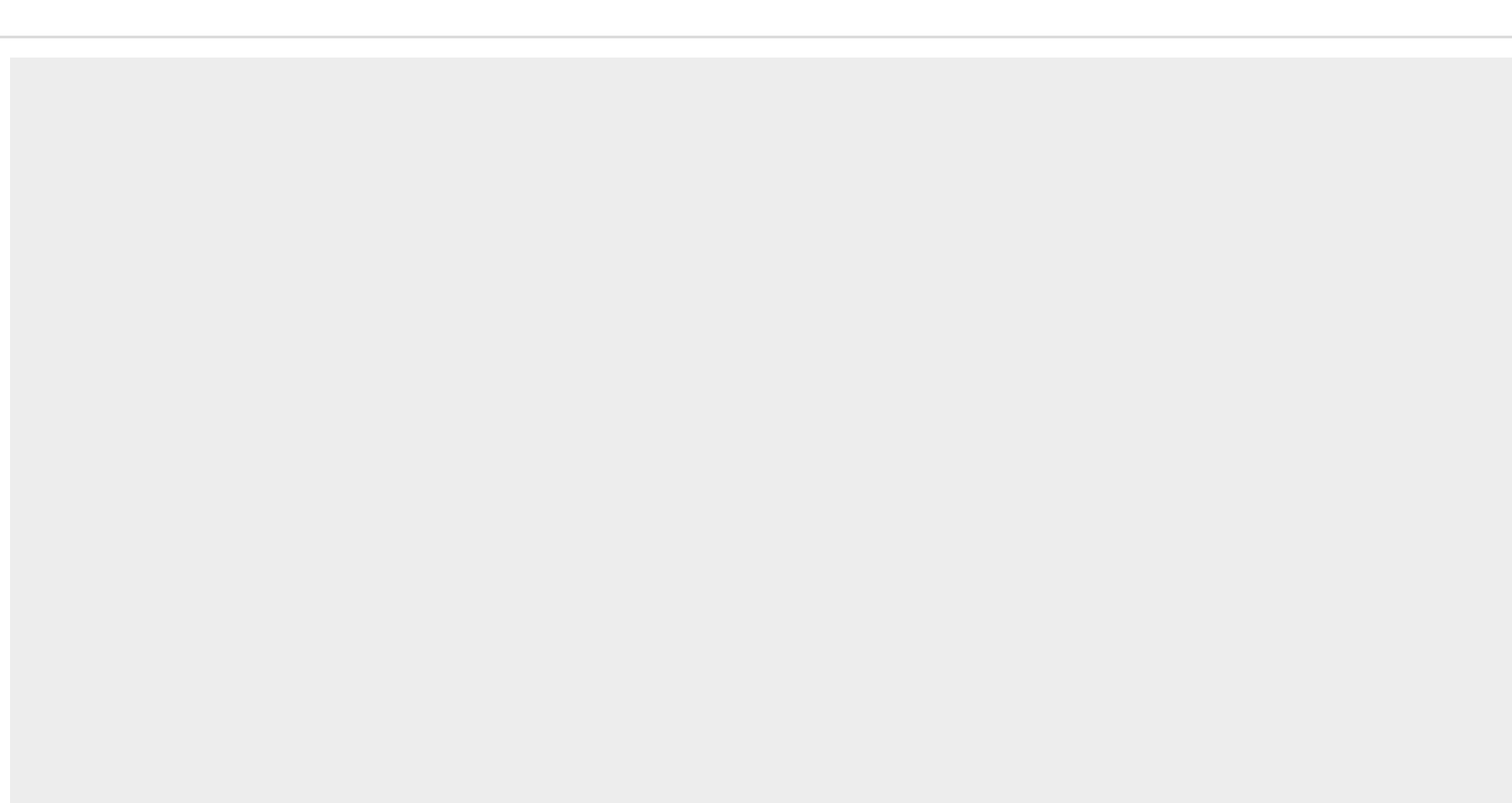
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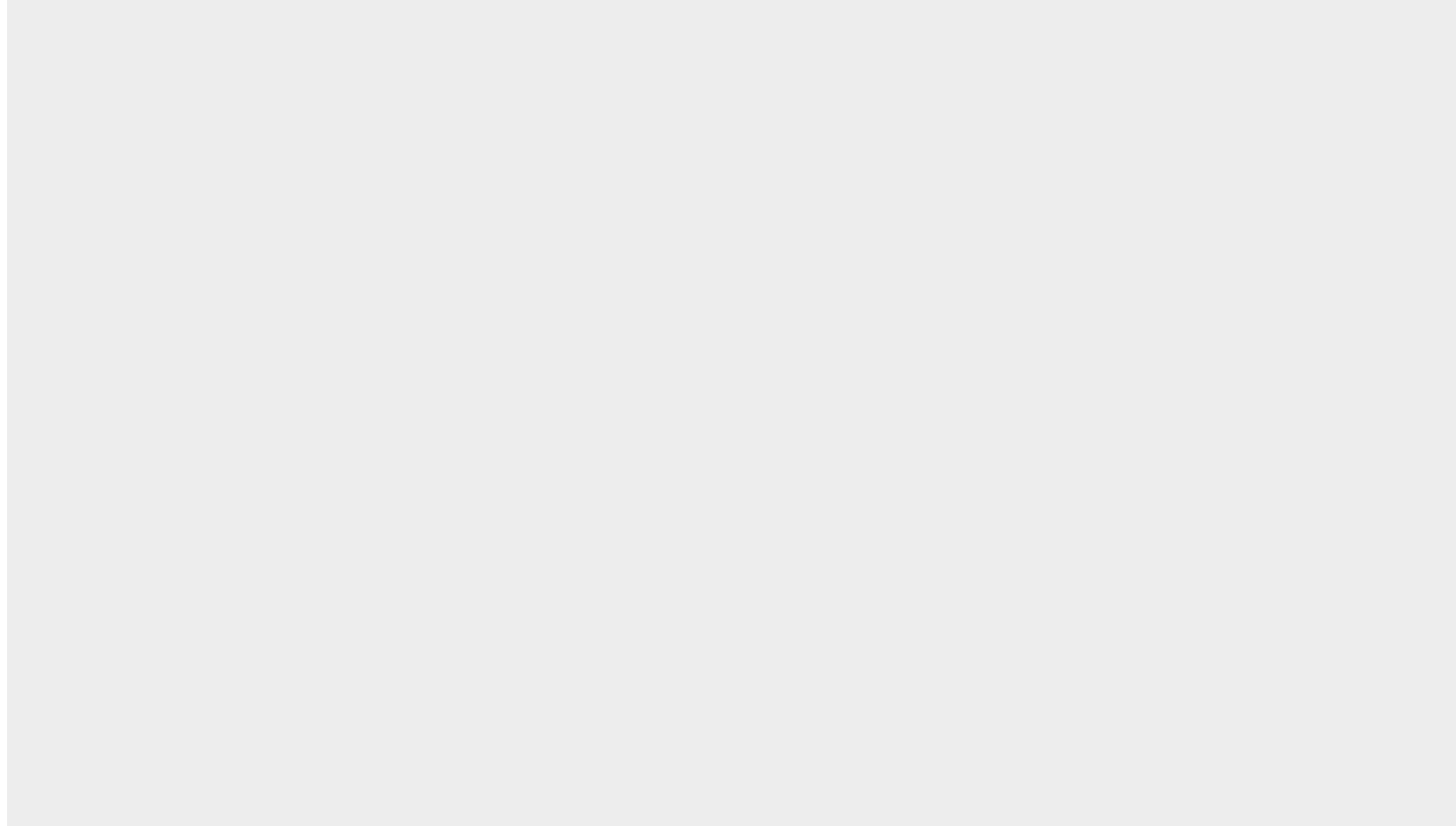
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