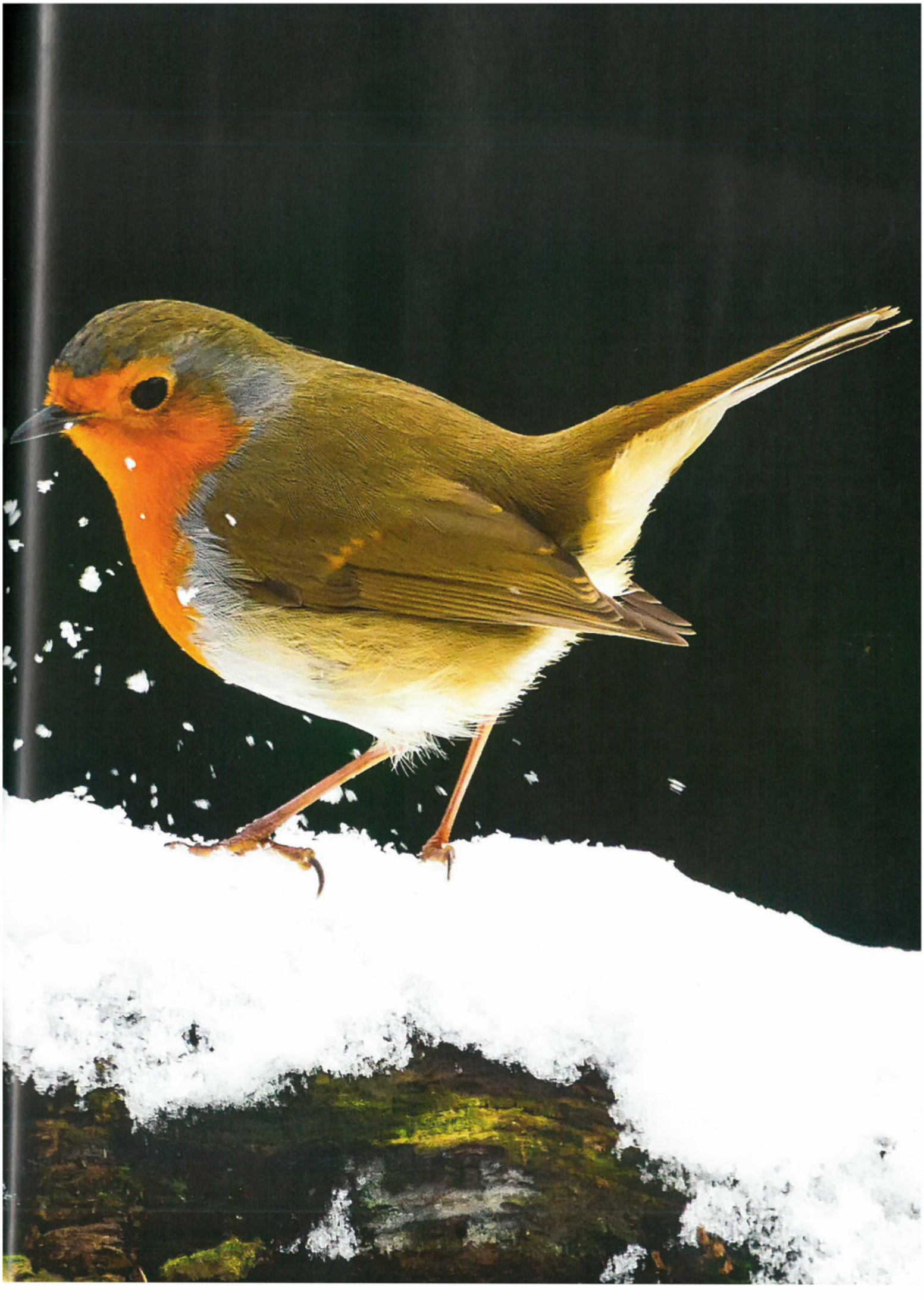
Above: **Watch out: despite its long-held reputation for compassion, our native robin is a fierce little bird.** *Right:* **No snowy scene would be complete without one of Britain's familiar bright-eyed robins**

Who killed cock robin?

Referred to by Chaucer as 'Robert redbreast' and long a cheerful symbol of Christmas, the sweet-songed robin is so combative it will attack its own reflection, reveals Ian Morton

AS is so often the case, it began with legend, when the robin's bold frontal display was interpreted as blood. The compassionate little bird had perched on the shoulder of Christ on the cross, singing a melody to console him and trying to pull out the thorns of the crown that pierced his brow, thereby covering its face, neck and breast in gore. This tale goes way back. It was related in the 6th century, if not sooner, by Kentigern, Bishop of Cumbria (COUNTRY LIFE, *May 27*), who is remembered there with six churches dedicated to him and four more in Scotland, including Glasgow Cathedral. Also known as Mungo, St Kentigern was famed for bringing back to life by prayer a robin so tame it was fed by hand—it had been killed by boys jealous of the affection it enjoyed.

The notion of the blood-stained robin was established and, in his late-14th-century poem *The Parlement of Foules*, Chaucer referred to 'Robert redbreast'—the first recorded example of a bird given a human name (and hence of anthropomorphism) in the English language. Also well established was the belief in the robin's sympathetic ➤



Above: **In such affection as the robin is held, it's small wonder it has long been a popular choice for seasonal designs.** *Right:* **It was the Victorian greeting card that indelibly linked the bird to Christmas**

nature. *Babes in the Wood*, an anonymous ballad first published in Norwich in 1595, based on a traditional tale and subsequently incorporated into pantomime, ended with the lines: 'No burial these pretty babes/Of any man receives,/Till Robin Redbreast painfully/Did cover them with leaves.'

> 'The robin was never short of sympathisers, nor of symbolic significance'

Perhaps it was inevitable, or at least appropriate, that the friendly robin became a symbol of Christmas—even if the widespread public association emerged only because of the red-coated Victorian postman and the advent of the seasonal greetings card. 'Come in, Robin postman, and warm theeself awhile,' says Jemima, the cook in Anthony Trollope's 1860 novel *Framley Parsonage*. Trollope was just in time. The postman's uniform was changed to blue in 1861, but 'robin redbreast' was installed for the duration.

According to a 2015 public poll, the bird is our unofficial national bird, earning one-third of the vote. Although, in a more disturbing recent survey of five to 16 year olds, 23% couldn't identify it—an appalling indictment of how many youngsters have lost touch with the natural world.

But red, really? No blood was ever the colour of the robin's front, which is more accurately described as tawny, rusty-red or orange-red. The Anglo-Saxon word was *ruddock*, the etymological barrier being that, before the fruit was brought to western Europe in about 1500, our language had no word for 'orange'. As a result, we adopted the French word, first recorded here in 1512. Anything described before then that was vaguely red acquired the description based on the Old English *rud*. At that time, the robin was also known as the ruddock among country folk. The red deer is a further survival.

Other legends supposed a scorched, rather than a bloodied appearance, acquired when the kindly robin was carrying drops of water to tortured souls in purgatory, when fanning the embers of a dying fire in the Bethlehem stable—as Joseph searched for wood—or trying to help a burning wren that had stolen fire from Heaven. The robin was never short of sympathisers, nor of symbolic significance. Old hedgelayers believed that a visiting robin was the friendly spirit of a previous craftsman come to offer approval when the pleaching was properly executed.

Indeed, robin and wren were closely associated in folklore. A Lancashire rhyme had it that 'the robin and wren are God's cock and hen, the spink and the sparrow are the diel's bow and arrow' (the spink was a chaffinch). The link with the dirge *Who killed cock robin?* ('I, said the sparrow,/with my bow and arrow'), first seen in print in 1744, is clear. The house sparrow was cherished in ancient Egypt, because it gathered the souls of the recently dead and carried them up to Heaven. In Greece, the bird was sacred to the goddess Aphrodite and represented true and spiritual love. In contrast, our medieval culture regarded it as a harbinger of death, especially if it entered a house. In Kent, the son of the house was advised to kill the bird—otherwise, he or one of his

parents would shortly die. Even to dream of a sparrow presaged a sad future. Little wonder that the bird was invested with the role of the robin murderer.

For country folk, the similar hedge sparrow or dunnock at least offered a useful barrier against witches: its eggs strung across the hearth discouraged evil hags and other unpleasant spirits from entering via the chimney. Its sweet warbling was welcome by day, but, despite being called the Irish nightingale, during the dark hours, its song became the cries of infants that had died unbaptised and were searching for their parents. According to both Chaucer and Shakespeare, the dunnock was 'lecherous'.

Ignoring established literary opinion, ornithologist Rev Francis Orpen Morris's popular *History of British Birds* of 1851 declared its 'humble behaviour and drab, sober dress' to be a model for human conduct, but 20th-century research unveiled the fevered multiplicity of the breeding habits of both sexes. The old poets were clearly better acquainted with genuine countryside knowledge than the stuffy Victorian cleric.

Nevertheless, the reputation of the robin has never faltered. It is forever a welcome ➤

Below: **Unfazed by cold weather, the robin is one of the few birds to sing throughout winter.** *Right:* **Why hello, may I join you?**

‘The robin is forever a welcome companion to the gardener’

Frosty feast: a robin tucks into bright cotoneaster berries, red to the bird's ruddock

companion to the gardener and is untroubled by human proximity, even when breeding. They sometimes choose an odd, but charming nesting site close to home, such as a plant pot, a discarded Wellington boot, an empty pan or kettle in the garden shed or a cosy nook within the engine of dormant machinery.

Nonetheless, despite the sentiment these birds invite, robins are aggressive when necessary. Males defend their territory throughout the year, will fight intruders to the death and are known to be so combative that they attack their own reflections. In some areas, up to a tenth of robins are killed by another of their own species. The typical lifespan of the British robin is only two years (a bird killed in Poland was said to be 17 years old and the age of a robin found dead in the Czech Republic was recorded at 19), yet successful breeding ensures a thriving UK population estimated at 6.7 million individuals.

Robins do not mate for life, yet will remain together for the breeding season, when two or three broods may be produced. Both sexes are charmingly tuneful and this is one of the few songbirds to vocalise through the winter months, when their song is more plaintive. In the breeding season, the male sings from an hour before dawn to half an hour after sunset, emitting a ticking note when alarmed.

As well as heralding Christmas, the robin is a symbol of comfort for those who have lost a loved one. Many modern testimonies by the bereaved tell of visits by the bird at significant times and places. It has always been extremely unlucky to harm the bird or its nest and eggs. It was long said that, if a robin died in your hand, that hand would shake thereafter, a belief given credence by C. A. Federer in *Notes and Queries* (1868).

In Norse mythology, the robin was sacred to Thor, the god of thunder, and the wren was sacred to his Celtic equivalent, Taranis, who protected it with lightning. It was sanctified by Taliesin, bard to the Welsh kings, and known in Scotland as Lady of Heaven's hen. Traditionally, ill fortune attended anyone who harmed a wren, an old poem recording 'Dick took a wren's nest from his cottage side, And ere a twelvemonth passed his mother dy'd'.

The wren fell from grace in Christian mythology, accused of attracting attention to St Stephen's hiding place when he was being hounded by pursuers, with fatal results. For centuries, his saint's day, December 26, was devoted to hunting and killing wrens in most western European countries. In Ireland, the bird was also blamed for revealing the position of an Irish force to Viking marauders and was likewise pursued.

Although live wrens are no longer sought, the ritual harassment is said to persist in places, an unhappy and undeserved postscript to a season dignified by its beloved ruddock-breasted associate.

Seeing red: robins in numbers

- Robins have been around for a long time, with fossil evidence for them from 120,000 years ago. The bird was classified as *Melophilus rubecula* by Carl Linnaeus in 1758 and is one of nine global sub-species. 'Our' robin is known to ornithology as the European robin, *Erithacus rubecula*, is distributed throughout Europe and ranges north into Scandinavia, south to Algeria and west to the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Azores

- British and Irish robins remain mainly resident, although small numbers of females migrate to southern Europe. Russian and Scandinavian robins escape harsh winters by migrating south-west and some make it to Britain, identifiable by greyer upper feathers and duller orange breasts
- Attempts in the 19th century to introduce the European robin to North America, Australia and New Zealand failed to establish breeding populations. The American robin, a larger pinkish-red-breasted bird in the thrush family and unrelated to the Old World robin, is one of North America's most abundant avian species