

# Il Giorno della Merla

**M**erla (female Blackbird) Day is an Italian tradition that falls on January 29, 30 or 31. It is said that if the sun shines on that day, a blackbird (a black bird) has a “party” and the weather warms up. However, if it is cloudy, the blackbird returns to its nest and the winter continues. This is a holiday very much linked to popular beliefs and Italian folklore.

We are in the thick of *i giorni della merla*, the days of the blackbird, when the coldest part of winter hits us between the last week of January and the first week of February. In January 2024 the weather was true to traditional predictions, with nights always around zero. The days were also been brilliantly clear with crisp, frosty mornings. This year, will we see the winter continue for very much longer?

There is a local legend about this, which was told to me in Italian. As a fun thing to do, I turned the Italian prose into English verse:

## BLACKBIRD DAYS

Snow upon snow fell on the whitebirds' nest –  
the winter had never been so cold.

Beneath the eaves the bitter chill compressed  
their little lives exposed, unconsolated.

\*

“If it carries on like this,” daddy bird moaned,  
“we'll nevermore see the spring again”.

“Our little ones will soon die,” the mother groaned,  
“so very soon, but who will know when?”

\*

The parents tried to pick a few crumbs of bread  
before they too were hidden by snow.  
Their feathered hearts were filled with iced-up dread.  
while a hard north wind began to blow.

\*

“We must decide now or die” the parents said.

“Let's move our nest near that chimney pot;



while I go and hunt for food you stay in bed  
and keep warm next to that cosy spot.”

\*

So all that day mummy bird and her three chicks  
kept by the stack which blew warmth and smoke.  
What clever birds they'd been to think of these tricks:  
free all-day heating for avian folk!

\*

But when the father returned, beak-full of food,  
he didn't recognize his wife and kids;  
the smoke had made all their feathers quite, quite dark-hued  
from their tails right up to their eye-lids.

\*

“No matter,” he said, “we'll rename ourselves.  
From now humans will call us 'black bird'  
and goblins and nymphs, sprites and wood elves  
throughout the land will spread this new word.

\*

And so it was that the birds survived the freeze  
and that now the whitebird is black;  
and I'm sure it's all, as everyone agrees,  
thanks to that useful chimney-stack!

– by Francis Pettitt  
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