

FULL OF EARLY PROMISE!

DAVID GLUE

*British Trust for Ornithology
The National Centre for Ornithology
The Nunnery, Thetford
Norfolk, IP24 2PU, United Kingdom*

The early breeding season promised much but BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, describes how weather extremes provided challenging conditions for many UK nesting birds.

¡TÁNTAS PROMESAS TEMPRANAS!

El temprano inicio de la temporada reproductora prometía mucho pero el biólogo investigador del BTO *David Glue* describe cómo los altibajos meteorológicos pusieron las cosas difíciles a muchas aves reproductoras en el Reino Unido.

Year 2003 demonstrated the inherent dangers of attempting to foretell nature's fickle timetable. By the close of a dry, sunny February, BTO surveyors reported egg-laying by thrushes, corvids, Starlings and Egyptian Geese, among others. This was an optimistic start.

STONECHATS PROFIT AS BARN OWLS HIT BY SPRING DROUGHT

Spring blossomed in March, with a remarkable 40-day long, essentially rainfree, warm spell for many parts. Early clutches were started by Woodlark on 9th (Thetford Forest, Norfolk) and Stonechat on 16th (East Dorset). There was a surge in egg-laying among grebes, Grey Herons, dabbling duck and thrushes in the third week, with reports of clutches laid by Woodcock (Wilts), Dipper (Gwynedd) and Long-eared Owl (Derbys) by the month's end.

April maintained the warm theme with daytime temperatures 2°C above the norm (warmest April since 1987). However, brood losses of Robins, Song Thrushes and Pied Wagtails were attributed to sharp night frosts under clear skies. It was another dry month,

posing nesting problems for some species. Corvids struggled, notably Rook and Chough, with deferred egg-laying and small broods, as baked turf yielded few soil invertebrates. Fortunately, the flagship pair of Chough frequenting The Lizard (Cornwall), hatched three young for a second successive year, although one chick was taken by a gull.

Large areas of tinder dry heath, moor and forest were destroyed in spring fires, the worst since 1997. Known occupied nests of Curlew (Peak District), Twite (North Staffs), Shorteared Owl and Hen Harrier (Cumbria, Lancashire) were lost in blazes. Breeding owls stuttered, as retarded vegetation, notably grasslands, led to a crash in some key small rodent prey populations, notably Field Vole and Wood Mouse. The BTO Barn Owl Monitoring Programme reported lightweight hen birds in poor condition, as well as many cases of non-breeding, and small broods.

Southeasterly continental winds in April assisted the prompt return of some Swallows, Sand Martins and Pied Flycatchers, with cases of each completing clutches by the end of the month. Ironically, the bulk of these species, and

some other migrants, were subsequently delayed by adverse cyclonic weather in North Africa and Iberia.

TITS AND PIED FLYS FALTER IN CHILLY MAY DOWNPOURS

Temperatures see-sawed in May, to the detriment of many breeding birds. Damaging prolonged tropical deluges arrived by mid-month. Flash floods and swollen water courses caused locally heavy losses among upland plovers, Merlins and Ring Ouzels, inland colonies of Blackheaded Gulls and Common Terns, streamnesting wagtails, Kingfishers and Reed Buntings (especially along the Severn-Trent complex).

Sharp frosts across much of the UK affected nesting tits, flycatchers, finches, and warblers. Those monitoring nestbox schemes reported a poor year for tits generally. Both Blue Tits and Great Tits survived the winter in strength, boosted by bumper beech mast. Their high densities probably contributed, in part, to small clutches. Damp and chill, which restricted caterpillar prey, led to many partial or complete brood losses. Andy Gosler (Edward Grey Institute, Oxford), described the worst ever season for Great Tits at Wytham Woods (barring times of excessive Weasel predation) in some 50 years of study, with small broods of young comprising skinny bundles of feathers weighing just 14–15 g (20–21 g being the norm).

Seabirds, as ever, enjoyed mixed success. Many, notably Kittiwakes and certain auks, were slow to return in strength to breeding ledges, but persisted successfully. Little Terns reached all-time high numbers in Wales, while Arctic Terns and others endured another disastrous year on Shetland, attributed to a lack of sandeels and over-fishing.

PROLIFIC PEREGRINES FLY EAST AS AVOCETS GO WEST

A warm subtropical airflow crossing the UK during much of June, created generally improved nesting conditions. Melodious Warbler (Co Durham), Serin (Beds) and Common Rosefinch (North Yorks) sang strongly but failed to attract mates. Elsewhere, Bittern, Golden Oriole, Firecrest and Marsh Warbler were more successful at fresh haunts. Avocet bred for the firsttime in Wales (Gwent levels). More sur-

prising was the successful pair, inland at Upton Warren (Worcester), well away from the usual coastal brackish water.

The UK's newest gannetry, comprising five nests, was established on The Noup, Westray (Orkney). Peregrine bred as far east as Lincolnshire, while suburban pairs nested atop Battersea Power Station (Central London), Chichester Cathedral (Sussex), Gloucester city hospital and Nottingham Trent University, to the delight of the public. Meanwhile, motorists on the M25, as well as M40, were entertained by increasing numbers of hunting Common Buzzards and Red Kites, nesting nearby.

NIGHTJAR AND QUAIL ENJOY MIDSUMMER SCORCHER

Regular warmth in July, with above average day and night temperatures, initially helped late breeding birds. Follow-up checks of nestboxes revealed welcome replacement broods of Nuthatches and Pied Flycatchers, while Swifts eventually fledged families of two and three young, following early losses.

Searing 'High Summer' heat midmonth, with temperatures exceeding 30°C, brought mixed fortunes. Quail summered widely, with family groups noted in grasslands on airfields, golf courses and an allotment, as well as in cereal fields. Corncrake profited, notably on sympathetically managed wetlands in the Western Isles of Scotland.

Torrid, steamy heat in early August, boosted aerial and aquatic invertebrate prey, fuelling late second broods of Nightjars, Reed Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers, while some seed-eaters raised third families. Heatwave and severe drought, as stifling tropical temperatures clipped the magical 100°F mark for the first time in UK, finally took its toll on normally heat tolerant, breeding birds. Just as roads melted, rails buckled and humans wilted, so baked mud nests of House Martins crumbled, broods of Swallows in farm outbuildings perished, clutches of Great Crested Grebes and diving ducks, exposed by falling water levels, fell prey to dehydrated Fox and Badger.

From mid-August, nesting activity among hitherto persistent resident and migrant insectivores and seedeaters slowed. The full results from BTO nest recorders, ringers and surveyors for 2003 are eagerly awaited.