

MILD CONDITIONS BENEFIT BREEDING OWLS

DAVID GLUE

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

BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, presents the fieldworkers' view of the breeding activity since autumn 2003.

LAS BENÉVOLAS CONDICIONES METEOROLÓGICAS BENEFICIAN LA REPRODUCCIÓN DE BÚHOS Y LECHUZAS

El biólogo investigador del BTO *David Glue* presenta la visión del ornitólogo de campo de la reproducción desde el otoño de 2003.

During the course of the breeding season, a number of BTO members, nest recorders and ringers contact us to let us know how the season is progressing. Nest records from 2003 are being collated and readied for formal analysis. These observations contribute to the following report.

Unseasonal nesting, mainly from October through to February, often involving grebes, ducks, doves and some finches, has long been an occasional feature. Increasingly, it appears that nesting attempts during the 'non-breeding' season by a range of species, including some waterfowl, owls and thrushes, may be a more regular event and worthy of a careful eye. This apparent trend, in tandem with increased numbers of certain insectivorous species overwintering (notably warblers), is due primarily to increasing winter temperatures, although the increase in supplementary feeding during the winter, may also have played a role.

Winter temperatures may also be influencing breeding ranges. In 2003, extralimital nesting attempts by Avocet (Wales), Peregrine (Lincs) and Gannet (Orkney) stole the limelight, but range extensions on a local scale emphasized the speed of change currently among the UK's avifauna. Buckinghamshire, for example, noted

first-time successful breeding in the modern era by five species — Little Egret, Raven, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Dartford Warbler.

BARN OWL AND FINCHES PROFIT FROM LATE SUMMER HEAT

Overall, BTO nest recorders charted a below-par breeding season for many species in 2003 (especially compared to 2002). This was notable for many resident insectivores and most migrant songbirds, with mixed fortunes for many raptors, waterfowl and gamebirds (*BTO News* 250, 251).

Thanks to consistent dry summer heat, it appeared to be a more productive year for certain resident seed-eaters (including Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch). Triple-brood successes were reported among Tree Sparrows and Yellowhammers during Indian Summer warmth in September, paralleling events of the hot dry summer of 1976. A warm November, with daily temperatures 2°C above normal, helped Great Crested Grebe, Grey Heron, diving duck and doves that were tending late families.

The BTO Barn Owl Monitoring Programme also noted a welcome late upturn in fortunes. A very poor breeding season had been reported for 2003, with lightweight females and non-breeding pairs a feature. A number of Barn Owl clutches, laid from July–August 2003, were reported, from North Lincs and Cambridge to Norfolk and East Sussex (*pers comm* Peter Beaven, Colin Shawyer), with clement weather aiding foraging parents with broods during November and early December.

TAWNY OWL AND WARBLERS AMONG YULETIDE STARS

Many insectivorous summer visitors, including flycatchers, Redstarts and some species of warbler, prematurely vacated the increasingly parched UK countryside in autumn (in contrast to 2002). Healthy populations of Cetti's Warbler and Dartford Warbler had shown further gains. Some House Martins and Swallows successfully raised late broods into October, as far afield as Shetland and South Hams (Devon).

These were replaced by an impressive spectrum of vagrant insectivores, chiefly warblers. An influx of scarce eastern vagrants reached unprecedented levels, notably Yellow-browed Warbler and Pallas's Warbler and Hume's Leaf Warbler. Many were assisted by stiff easterly airstream in mid October. Other migrants lingered well into the winter, helped by an absence of sustained mid-winter cold spells.

Given ongoing warmer winters, other species may join established populations of Blackcap and Chiffchaff in the UK's winter gardens and countryside. Meanwhile, balmy episodes in December, culminating in the warmest Christmas break in a decade, led to regular reports from Garden BirdWatch observers of Woodpigeon and Collared Dove bringing young to feeding stations. Less unexpected were clutches started by Mallard (several sites), Pheasant (Oxon), Tawny Owl (Cheshire) and Blackbird (Co Kerry).

TROPICAL AIR TRIGGERS FALSE SPRING HOPES

Frequent spring-like -spells in January, with temperatures 1.2°C above long-term average, led to further nesting attempts. Most were located in warmer suburbia alongside man, with regular food supplies. Doves dominated, but other species included Mallard and Blackbird (several sites), Muscovy Duck (window box — Okehampton, Devon), Robin (garden plant centre — Newbury, Berks) and Mistle Thrush (lamp standard — Liverpool city).

Two nestbox checks provided remarkable revelations. Ring-necked Parakeets (Burnham, Bucks) were actively egg-laying mid month, while Blue Tits in south Kent were found with four downy young. Bubble-wrapping the box and supplying live food for the parents saved the day. Further nest-building, cavity claiming and song was depressed prematurely as January closed with a raw blast of arctic air, snow, blizzards, thunder and lightning, as temperatures dipped to -7°C at Carter Bar in Cheviot Hills on 28th. Temperatures recovered in spectacular style and the UK was blanketed by a warm southwesterly airstream of tropical Atlantic origin in first week of February, with record temperatures.

An unprecedented influx to southcoast counties of over 40 House Martins, some Swallows and Wheatears caused a stir. Doves and thrushes were prompted to start laying, Long-tailed Tit, Starling, Rook and Raven to repair and line nests. By St Valentine's Day an impressive 17 species were reported with active nests. Colder weather in the second half of February failed to offset an abnormal start, with vegetation some 2–3 weeks advanced, but wintery chill in March appeared to slow nesting operations. This is perhaps no bad thing, with 2003 and other recent years, demonstrating how New Year warmth and early spring heat are not necessarily the prime ingredients for a highly productive breeding season.

THE NEST RECORD SCHEME (NRS)

The NRS plays a vital role in monitoring changes in the breeding performance of the UK's birds.

This is one survey in which anyone can participate. Each nest record details a single breeding attempt at a nest. Observers record visit date, nest contents, location and habitat on standardised nest record cards or a new computer program IPMR (Integrated Population Monitoring Reporter). Nest recorders are encouraged to visit the nest on at least two occasions, preferably during both the egg and the chick stages, to give an estimate of hatching/fledging success.

Productivity tables are produced for the annual *Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside* report www.bto.org/birdtrends/index.htm

To obtain a free 'Starter Pack', an IPMR disc or further information, please contact the Nest Records Unit nest.records@bto.org. *Peter Beaven*