

## NRS training courses take off



The 'class of 2009' at the NRS training course in Cupar, this May.

Welcome to the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of *Nest Record News*, in colour for the first time. I write this newsletter somewhat exhausted after attending four BTO nest recording courses in as many weeks. At the beginning of May, Gwent Wildlife Trust hosted a one-day course at Pentwyn Farm Nature Reserve, which was run by nest recorder and BTO Wales Officer John Lloyd and attended by 15 people. The following weekend, Chapel House Farm in Poulton, Cheshire, played host to the first residential course of the season, this one run by well-known nest recorder Richard Castell. Activity shifted to The Wetland Trust's Pannel Valley Nature Reserve in East Sussex for the weekend of the 22-24, with Tony Davis returning to run a course that was piloted so successfully at the reserve last year. And finally, on the 29-31 May, Scotland got its chance as Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife, hosted an excellent course run by David Oliver.

All the courses were fully booked and the enthusiasm of those who came was truly inspiring. Attendees ranged from experienced nest box recorders eager to branch out to 'open' nests, to complete

newcomers to the Scheme. There were even a few people present who had never heard of the BTO before, which was surprising given that the courses were only advertised to existing nest recorders and ringers. How word spreads!

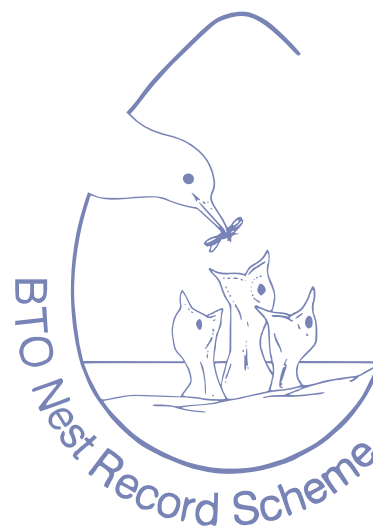
The courses were a great education for all of us, including the tutors, who had to overcome the difficulties inherent in teaching nest monitoring to a large group of people in the field. Most of all, the courses were great fun and I have already received several emails from people who have started putting their new nest-finding skills to good use. For a full write up on the last year's pilot course, please see page 7. And if you missed out this year, don't worry: we'll be running more courses in 2010.

A huge debt of thanks is owed to so many who have been integral to the success of the courses so far: Gwent Wildlife Trust, Val & Denis Jackson, Rodney Morris, John Lloyd, Richard Fair, Richard & Peter Castell, The Wetland Trust, Rye Bay Ringing Group, Tony Davis, Elmwood College and David Oliver. Thank you!

*Carl Barimore, NRS Organiser*

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# News from the Nest Record Scheme

## NEST RECORD SCHEME ALL CHANGE

A couple of changes have taken place at the Nunnery in the last year. Firstly, an internal reorganisation now sees the Nest Record Scheme placed in the new Demography Team alongside the Ringing Scheme, including CES and RAS. We're always saying that the data are integrated—well, now the staff are too! The benefits in terms of organisation and promotion are already very apparent and we're really looking forward to working even more closely together in the future.



The new Nest Record Scheme team, from left to right: Vivienne Greenough, Carl Barimore, Dave Leech and Debbie Nicholls. Absent from the photo is David Glue, who is based in Tring. Photo by Lee Barber.

We're also pleased to welcome two new members to the NRS staff: Vivienne Greenough and Debbie Nicholls. Vivienne has been appointed to the brand new post of Nest Records Officer, which will see her taking the lead on Nest Box Challenge and working on the NRS database and archive. But surely there's always been a Nest Records Officer? Don't panic—Carl Barimore has not left us or changed job, he's merely been re-branded as 'NRS Organiser' to bring us in line with the terminology used by other surveys. Debbie takes over from Mandy Andrews as NRS secretary—amongst her other responsibilities!—so she's the person to contact for cards, starter packs and observer codes. Dave Leech is still Head of the NRS, but is now also overseeing CES and RAS, which are organised by Mark Grantham, while David Glue continues to play an invaluable promotional and organisational role from his base in Tring.

## SUBMISSION TOTALS

As of 31<sup>st</sup> May, the total number of nest records submitted for the 2008 season stands at 33,591—another triumphant total and the second highest since the start of the decade. A continuing goal of the NRS is to increase the number of nest records submitted for open-nesting passerines, a group of 70 species that includes the pipits, larks, chats, thrushes, warblers, finches and buntings. We received 6,107 nest records for open-nesters last year, a drop of 63% since submissions for these species began to decline in the 1970s. To reverse this trend we need your help. If you are ever able to monitor even a single nest of the 'target' species marked with an asterisk on pages 8 and 9, please do take the opportunity. And if you want to learn how to find more of these open nests, why not come along to one of our nest finding courses next year?

## NRS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Along with the development of the training courses detailed on the front page, the NRS Development Project, supported by the generous legacy left to the BTO by Dilys Breese, has allowed us to produce a new six-page, full-colour 'Quickstart Guide' to nest recording. The guide is designed to provide a simple, stand-alone summary of the NRS methodology for beginners. We've already received records for 2009 from new recorders who have been issued the Quickstart Guide, so it appears to work well. Have a look for yourself at [www.bto.org/survey/nest\\_records/become\\_nest\\_recorder.htm](http://www.bto.org/survey/nest_records/become_nest_recorder.htm).

The next stage in the NRS Development Project is a rewrite of the NRS Handbook, after which we'll be revamping the NRS web-pages with the aim of providing a comprehensive online resource for recorders. Following on from revising these materials, we plan to establish a mentoring system for new recorders. If you have any ideas or requests for the website, or you'd like to get more involved in mentoring or NRS promotion, please do email us at [nest.records@bto.org](mailto:nest.records@bto.org).

## VOLUNTEER INPUTTING

Tribute must be paid once again to the Nest Record Scheme's contingent of volunteer inputters, who have been working their way through the Scheme's paper archive of nest records at a breakneck pace. In the last 18 months, over 21,000 Nest Record Cards have been input and loaded into the BTO database, many of which are already being used in analyses (see page 3). Our thanks go to Michael Palles-Clark, Mike Reed, Fran Blackburn, LizAnn Petch and Andrew Moss for their steadfast dedication to the computer keyboard!

As well as Michael Palles-Clark's 11,165 Pied Flycatcher card marathon and Mike Reed's 6,450 Blue Tit and Great Tit tally, special mention must be made of Fran Blackburn's efforts. Over the past year, Fran has compiled, input and submitted over 1,200 nest histories from data recorded during her husband Adrian's work on Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and Kestrel from 1996 onwards. As if that wasn't enough, she's currently inputting over 400 nest histories from 10 years' worth of heronry recording—thanks for your hard work, Fran! If you have a PC that will run Microsoft Access and would like to get involved in helping us to input historic records, please feel free to drop us an email at [nest.records@bto.org](mailto:nest.records@bto.org).



Volunteer inputter Fran Blackburn ringing a Sparrowhawk. Not as fun as inputting nest record cards, of course, but a close second. Photo by Jez Blackburn.

# From farmland owls to urban tits: NRS research roundup

*The huge amount of effort that goes into collecting the NRS dataset each year allows us to monitor changes in breeding success and to carry out a huge range of scientific studies—Dave Leech summarises some of the ongoing projects.*

All nest recorders will be familiar with the sense of satisfaction triggered by the click of the 'Send' button or trip to the Post Office that signifies the end of the recording season. While you sit back and wait for the first Collared Dove to decide that mid-winter is actually an ideal time to raise a family, your data are hard at work—but what are they being used for?

By now, I hope everyone is familiar with the productivity trends that we update each year and publish on-line as part of the Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report (WCR), available for all to browse at [www.bto.org/birdtrends](http://www.bto.org/birdtrends). This website brings together information from the Breeding Bird Survey, Constant Effort Sites Ringing Scheme and the NRS for around 115 species. So, if you want to know how laying dates, clutch and brood sizes or failure rates have changed over time for your favourite species, have a look today. The NRS Concern List highlights those species for which both breeding success and population size have declined simultaneously. One species, Starling, has dropped off the list since last year, and no new species have been added, so the current total stands at 19: Kestrel, Moorhen, Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Nightjar, Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Pied Wagtail, Dunnock, Whinchat, Willow Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, House Sparrow, Linnets, Bullfinch, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Corn Bunting.

This is by no means the only way in which your records are useful, however, an increasing number of researchers are using NRS data to look at the impacts of a wide range of environmental factors on the breeding success

of the UK's birds. The Scheme has a long history of providing information for climate change studies, and recent work has focused very much on the relationship between temperature and the number of fledglings produced by Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts and tits. Research in The Netherlands has suggested that warmer springs may increase the likelihood of a mismatch between the hatching of hole-nesting passerine chicks and the peak availability of their caterpillar prey. This results in reduced breeding success and population declines that are greatest in areas where temperatures have increased most rapidly. We are currently analysing NRS data to look for similar patterns, a study that would not have been possible if it were not for the hard work of Michael Palles-Clark and Mike Reed, who between them have input data from over 21,000 historic

Nest Record Cards in the last 18 months. Other long-distance migrants are equally susceptible to such shifts in prey availability, and the impact of climatic change on Willow Warbler breeding success is being explored as part of a PhD at the University of East Anglia, investigating the decline of this once-common species. NRS laying date data for a range of species are also included in the SPACE project, led by CEH, which aims to look at the impacts of climate change on the phenology of a wide range of British taxa, from phytoplankton to mammals.

Students at Birmingham University are currently exploring the Great Tit and Blue Tit NRS datasets to determine whether birds in urban areas, which have access to less natural food but can make use of the peanuts and sunflower seeds seemingly provided *ad*

*infinitum* in Britain's gardens, manage to produce the same number of fledglings as those breeding in woodland habitats. The inputting of an additional 3,700 historic Blackbird nest records will allow BTO staff to look for similar relationships in this species, and also to combine NRS and ringing data to build a population model. Productivity in agricultural habitats is also under scrutiny, with a recent paper by Sharpe *et al* (*Bird Study* 55, 247–258) demonstrating that regional variation in population declines of Lapwing is not solely due to differences in nest failure rates. Papers focusing on Barn Owl breeding success in agricultural habitats and the frequency of double-brooding of Yellowhammers on farmland are currently in press. Ten thousand additional historic Swallow



Is Pied Flycatcher productivity in the UK decreasing as the climate warms? Your records, past and present, are helping us to find out. Photo: John Harding

nest records have been input for a BTO project looking at the influence of livestock densities on productivity and the effects of soil moisture on Starling and Song Thrush reproductive output are being investigated by researchers at Newcastle University. NRS data for a range of farmland bird species are also being used by researchers at Central Science Laboratory to determine the potential for exposure of nesting birds to pesticides under different spraying regimes.

Many of the studies mentioned above are ongoing or awaiting publication, but we'll summarise the results in future editions of *Nest Record News*. Our thanks go out to all involved in collecting the data, past or present, on which these studies are based—I hope that this article demonstrates just how important your efforts are to bird conservation in the UK.

# 2008 nest recording highlights

A selection of totals for the season, highlighting some of the remarkable fieldwork feats of our most active nest recorders, is given below. The 'Top Participants' section shows all the nest recorders or groups who submitted 100 or more records for the 2008 season. It's important to recognise, though, that the majority of our nest records come from survey participants who submit under two dozen nest records per year. So, a big thanks to ALL who submitted records in 2008!

## TOP PARTICIPANTS BY RECORD TOTAL

National Trust, Farne Islands 1,888 • John Brook & Reg Cooke 979 • Bob Danson 877 • Merseyside Ringing Group 687 • David Warden 503 • Birklands Ringing Group 450 • Michael Mac 447 • Robert Batty & Nick Bateman 417 • East Dales Ringing Group 396 • Sorby Breck Ringing Group 395 • Ian Spence 377 • Lancaster & District Birdwatching Society 366 • Ron Louch & Dave Thompson 344 • Matt Prior 339 • Robert Stevens 326 • Geoff Myers 324 • John Lawton-Roberts 321 • Newbury Ringing Group 321 • Kevin Briggs 317 • Neil Croton and Mike Tyler 304 • Rye Meads Ringing Group 301 • Nunnery Ringing Group 295 • Souder Ringing Group 287 • Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project 285 • North West Norfolk Ringing Group 279 • David Oliver 277 • Peter Roe 272 • Arden Ringing Group 265 • Northumbria Ringing Group 263 • Nagshead RSPB Reserve 261 • Reginald Lanaway 251 • Mike Russell 251 • John Lloyd 246 • Tom Dewdney 240 • Alan Ball 237 • Roy Rhodes 229 • Nigel Lewis 222 • Bob & Rob Swann 220 • Jonathan Lingard 215 • Dartford Ringing Group 214 • Edward Cowley 214 • Dave Francis 213 • Anne Goodall 210 • Paul Robinson 206 • Noel Fenwick (Jr.) & Julie Brigden 201 • Paul Holness 198 • Keith Seaton 193 • Derek Holman & Karl Ivens 189 • Dave Hazard 189 • Alan Old 176 • Rodney Morris 175 • Jerry Lewis 174 • Peter Johnson 173 • Robert Smith 161 • Ronald Turkington 160 • David Myers 159 • Frank Mawby 155 • Nik Ward 150 • Cwm Clydach RSPB Reserve 150 • Mike Netherwood & Mick Cook 148 • Sean Morris 147 • Neville Powell 144 • Max Meadows 142 • Jan Pritchard 139 • English Nature Devon Group 138 • Peter Robinson 135 • J & M Hodson 131 • UEA Ringing Group 129 • South Devon Nestbox Group 128 • Simon Cox 127 • Colin Davison 127 • David Garner 127 • Stephen Lemon 123 • Kevin Leighton 121 • Nigel Goodgame 121 • Kane Brides 120 • Andrew Ramsay 120 • Michael Thomas 118 • Farlington Ringing Group 114 • Grampian Ringing Group 114 • Alison Cooper 114 • Jeremy Gates 113 • Robin Husbands 112 • Adrian Blackburn 111 • John Walshe 109 • John Hyde 109 • Wicken Fen Ringing Group 108 • Stanford Ringing Group 107 • Mike Rogers 107 • Scott Jarvis 104 • Philip Bone 103 • Euan Cameron 103 • Alan Lowe 102 • Peter Wilson 102 • Garth Lowe 100 • WWT Martin Mere 100 • Tees Ringing Group 99 • Peter Goodlad 99 • Douglas Miller 99

## AND A WARM WELCOME TO...

Graeme Ashton • Axe Estuary Ringing Group • Christopher Baker • Tim Ball • Dick Best • G.W. Britton • Roger Broad • Cambridge Nesters • W.E. Cannon • Sheila & Mac Cooper • Malcolm Creighton • Andrew Cristinacce • Michael D'Oyly • Georgina Dean • Waine Dodds • Stephen Dorrington • Alan Eardley • Noel Fenwick (Jr.) & Julie Brigden • Friends of Warnham Local Nature Reserve • David Gains • Mary Galloway • Victor Giles • Elizabeth Glazier • Keith Grant • Philip Harris • Sarah Harris • Wendy Hatton • John Robin Hodgson • David Kings • John Kirk • Liz Mackley • Jim Manthorpe • Kevin May • Kath Meikle • David Newton • John Palmer • Sally Ann Pittam • Andrew Ramsay • Simon Roberts • Phil Slade • Richard Smith • Helen Summers • Paul Tinsley-Marshall • Andrew Turner • UEA Ringing Group • Roy Unsworth • Stephen Welch • Anthony Williams & Paul Tabor



## TOP 10 OPEN NEST FINDERS

Ron Louch & Dave Thompson	341
John Brook	239
David Warden	169
Birklands Ringing Group	163
Nunnery Ringing Group	150
Reginald Lanaway	148
David Oliver	125
Rye Meads Ringing Group	105
Ronald Turkington	102
Robert Batty & Nick Bateman	101

## VARIOUS TOP 5s...

### Counties by record total

Northumberland	2,457
Lancashire	2,167
Norfolk	1,625
Warwickshire	1,229
Clwyd	1,120

### Waterbird recorders

Michael Mac	370
National Trust, Farne Islands	299
David Warden	157
Keith Seaton	135
Mike Russell	110

### Raptor & owl recorders

Alan Ball	229
Nigel Lewis	222
North West Norfolk Ringing Group	171
Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project	157
Derek Holman & Karl Ivens	109

### Box recorders

Bob Danson	569
Merseyside Ringing Group	429
Ian Spence	297
Nagshead RSPB Reserve	261
John Brook	254

Nest recorder Ron Louch points out the location of a Willow Warbler nest

# Recorders' eye view

*With each annual intake of nest records, the Nest Records Unit receives many letters and reports on how the breeding season went—for birds and recorders—and the NRS online forum also receives regular updates from dozens of NRS participants. As producing annual trends from your data takes time, these reports provide a fascinating and comprehensive early account of the breeding season, though they tend to suggest that no two patches have it the same...*

## OWLS

There was a general consensus that the season had been below par for many owl species, most notably Barn Owls, on account of poor weather early in the season and low vole abundance throughout. Colin Shawyer had a relatively high rate of occupancy in his Barn Owl boxes and recorded egg laying in the third and fourth week of April, close to the average, although other recorders found that their birds did not appear to start breeding until quite late-on. Mark Oksien wrote that, '2008 appears to have been a very poor breeding year in Fife with most birds at nest sites just standing around looking very sorry for themselves. It would seem that the cold wet start to the year adversely affected the shrew/vole populations in the eastern parts of the region and is considered to be the most likely cause of this year's poor breeding success'.

Philip Hanmer from Northumberland, reported that owls did not start breeding until after the cold April and that many birds were seen trying to feed young on shrews. Similar accounts were given by Andy Watson from Norfolk and Tony Warburton from South-west Cumbria, who reported fairly early laying but attributed continuing low vole numbers to flooding and waterlogging earlier in the year. Sheila and Mac Cooper from Lancashire thought that the incessant rain and wind later in the season would have made hunting difficult for many birds.

The story was not so bleak for Tawny Owls, according to John Massie in Aberdeen: 'A good owl year with Wood Mouse and Rabbit main prey. Short-tailed Field Vole in small numbers'. Bob Stevens from Nottinghamshire, on the other hand, reported low occupancy and small brood sizes.

Congratulations go to Chris and Elspeth Rowe, who found a Long-eared Owl chick at 5 a.m. by stopping to attend to what they thought was the sound of squeaky bike wheel; it's good to see that nest recording by bicycle is alive and well on the Isle of Wight.

## SEABIRDS

Few reports are sent in for seabirds, but those we did receive in 2008 were invariably bleak. 'Little Tern breeding poor owing to absence of Sand Eels. Late laying showed birds in poor condition,' was the conclusion of John Massie in Aberdeen, whilst Moira Convery from Dyfed reported, '...a very poor season for (Herring Gulls). On Penderi South Cliff, I noted 34 well built nests with birds standing or sitting with them on 7<sup>th</sup> May. On my next visit on 1<sup>st</sup> June a lot were empty with gulls standing beside them looking fed up and many nests were missing altogether...The other sites were much the same. The weather of course was very poor but it did not seem to affect the Cormorants'.

## OPEN NESTERS

One open-nesting species whose fortunes were particularly noteworthy in 2008 was the Song Thrush. 'I have never found so many Song Thrush nests,' reported Frank Mawby from Cumbria, with Kane Brides from Manchester echoing this sentiment almost exactly. David Oliver in Fife also noted an 'outstanding' Song Thrush season and recorded a very unusual case of a pair lining and then raising a brood in a recently successful Blackbird nest.

There was no consensus to be had on warblers. Jim Cobb from Fife had a 'catastrophic' return of Willow Warblers to his site and

Ron Louch in Oxford recorded Blackcap singing in lower than usual numbers. Leo Robinson from Lancashire only heard one Wood Warbler instead of his usual four or five. On the other hand, Max Meadows from Essex reported 'far more' Chiffchaffs on the go, and Frank Mawby counted relatively high numbers of Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Garden Warbler singing on his patch. John Little from Surrey, in his typically excellent annual report, noted good numbers of Willow Warblers, in keeping with recent years, and a very good turnout for Chiffchaff, though he found very few Song Thrush nests! John Little also heard more Dartford Warbler males singing than ever before.

A dearth of invertebrates was generally noted. Toby Spall suggested that the good Sedge Warbler and Reed Warbler season on Rye Meads Ringing Group's patch in Herts was owing to '...the cold damp weather (making) insects more than usually easy to collect'. John Clarke from Gloucestershire observed that, '...a period of cool, damp, windy weather conditions in spring changed the feeding habits of a number of bird species—including the Spotted Flycatcher. The birds fed in the canopy of trees, rather than chasing down flying insects in the open, and thus were difficult to locate'.

## TITMICE

Bryan Nelson, from Woodwalton Fen in Cambridgeshire, Bill Watkins, Severn Valley Country Park, Shropshire, and David Counsell, Kent, reported 'average' occupancy rates and breeding success in their tit boxes, similar to 2007, though Bryan Nelson noted that both years had seen high predation at the egg stage (45% of nesting attempts in 2008). Many people wrote to say that they had put metal plates over boxes in 2008 to combat increasing predation by woodpeckers, with the majority seeing an immediate result.

An interesting whodunnit was posed in a letter from William Kennedy, Londonderry, Northern Ireland. For the second winter running, a Coal Tit had taken up residence in a hanging basket in William's garden and by October 2008 it appeared to be well entrenched in a roosting hole. However, on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October, something attempted to pull the Coal Tit out of its roost, leaving the bird dead in its hole minus tail feathers and a portion of its rump. What interested William was that the hanging basket was out of reach of any ground predators and that the perpetrator had both failed to enlarge the roosting hole and failed to pull the victim out. William surmised that a starving Great Tit might have made an unsuccessful attempt on the bird.



William Kennedy found a dead Coal Tit freshly predated and still lying in its roosting hole in a hanging basket in his garden last October. Photos by W. Kennedy.

# Breeding birds and weather in 2008

*The summer of 2008 was again dominated by unseasonable rainfall, this time towards the latter half of the breeding season. BTO Research Ecologist David Glue describes how the weather changed for the worse and the impact that this had on nests being monitored by some nest recorders.*

## New Year warmth triggers premature nesting

Mild Januarys have embodied the recent trend towards warmer and wetter winters and January 2008 was no exception, with a series of vigorous moist Atlantic depressions lifting daytime temperatures 3°C above average in the south. Temperatures reached a balmy 15.2°C at Preston Wynne (Hereford) by the 20<sup>th</sup>, thanks to warm air from the Azores, and night frosts remained scarce. This mild weather spurred birds on to loud dawn choruses and displaying, whilst grebes, Ravens, Egyptian Geese, Peregrines, Ring-necked Parakeets and Dippers were seen claiming and renovating nests. Early nesting attempts were spotted too, most being within the protected environs of suburbia and wetland reserves.

Alongside the usual reports of Woodpigeon and Collared Dove with eggs and young, there were nesting Great Crested Grebes on the River Welland (Lincs), Tawny Owls in a rat-infested dockland (Portsmouth), Blackbirds in a heated greenhouse (Wisbech), Mistle Thrushes atop traffic lights (Greater Manchester) and Robins in a garden centre (Milton Keynes). By St. Valentine's Day, the Nest Record Scheme had received reports of 17 species with active nests, comparable in scale with the unseasonal nesting noted in 2007.

## Spring chill checks residents and summer visitors

A 'manyweather' March slowed down spring events. Temperatures climbed to only a modest 15.4°C at their highest in Gravesend (Kent) and the average temperature was cooler than February for the first time since 1998. March was also the most 'northerly' since 1970, with head winds retarding bird migration. Whilst there were a few path-finder Swallows, Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps, many more migrants were either on schedule or late.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, an unusually deep spring depression swept a destructive storm into the Western Approaches and West Wales, with winds gusting at up to 70 knots. Stick nests of Grey Heron, Little Egret, Rook, Raven and Mistle Thrush were reported lost. A tidal surge swept away the world famous Mute Swan herd nests at Abbotsbury (Dorset) as well as many coastal gulleries, though all had time to relay.

April initially flattered to deceive, with a plume of warm air nosing up from Iberia in the first week, lifting temperatures to 18.9°C at Inverbervie (Aberdeen). Tits, Wrens and finches were prompted to begin egg-laying, while complete clutches in nest boxes were reported for Mandarin, Starling, Great Tit and House Sparrow. However, from the 6<sup>th</sup>, a bitterly cold northerly blast swept the heaviest April snows in 20 years across from Caithness south to Sussex. This, together with regular sharp frosts (-11.4°C at Aberdeen on the 25<sup>th</sup>), led to chilled clutches and desertions among study populations of Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush and Long-tailed Tit. All in all, it was a 'go-stop-go' beginning to the breeding season.

## May rains hit nesting tits and warblers

The warmest ever start to May, thanks to settled high pressure and mild air sweeping up from sub-tropical latitudes, saw daytime temperatures 2.3°C above average. Birds stumbled clumsily from wintering into breeding mode. Many stressed spring migrants, finally aided by favourable tail-winds, sang only briefly before laying eggs, much to the frustration of nest recorders.

Remarkably, for a third successive late May, slow-moving humid fronts arrived from France in the final week, dumping deluges of rain at a critical time across the May bank holiday (24–27). Manston (Kent) recorded a staggering 121 mm and flash flooding occurred in Somerset and the Thames Valley. Study populations, including Common Sandpipers, Grey Wagtails, Sand Martins and Kingfishers along the waterside, suffered high nest failures. Caterpillars were stripped from trees by heavy rains in some parts of the UK and

Blue Tits, Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits struggled to rear their young. Some wetland *Acrocephalus* warbler nests were simply flattened.

## Dull showery June lit by breeding raptors and exotic overshoots

June was slow to ignite and instead a showery theme dominated, with regular cool nights and temperatures topping a modest 26.9°C in Solent, Hants, by the 8<sup>th</sup>. Field Vole populations dipped surprisingly sharply in parts of the UK, having peaked in spring 2007, with a knock-on effect for various diurnal raptors and owls. Hunting conditions also became challenging in the soggy, wet tail-end to June. Buzzards, Kestrels, Barn Owls, Tawny Owls and Long-eared Owls delayed egg-laying or failed to lay at all.

Heavy rains in June and July reinvigorated lawns and pasture, potentially aiding repeat broods of Blackbird, Song Thrush and Starling, though the same showers were less of a blessing to Bearded Tit broods and the rain-battered nests of second-brooding leaf and scrub warblers.

A Spanish plume of hot humid air at the start of July saw temperatures top 28.2°C in Central London on the 1<sup>st</sup>, but these high summer conditions were short-lived. An autumnal low pressure system arrived on the 6<sup>th</sup>, generating sustained winds of 60 knots across the country, which dislodged raptor and Raven stick nests, flattened second-nests of warblers and swamped replacement tern and gull clutches. Ongoing unsettled weather in mid-summer contributed to another 'below par' breeding season for many seed-eaters and insectivores as well as raptors, owls, certain waterfowl and gamebirds.

Fragile pockets of Golden Oriole (East Anglia) and Marsh Warbler (Eastern England) again endured poor seasons, both species just clinging to their status as UK breeding birds. At the other end of the scale, Serin, Common Rosefinch and Great Reed Warbler sang well, but failed to establish themselves.



Buffeted: Strong winds in Wales in early March damaged Grey Heron nests in some areas. Photo by Jan Pritchard.

# Nest practice...

Last May, the Nest Record Scheme ran the very first BTO nest recording field course at Pannel Valley Nature Reserve in East Sussex. The course ran for three days and places were available for just £20 each. Attendee and BTO bird ringer Bob Francis gives his account of the weekend's activities.

Finding open cup nests is an art that requires patience, an intimate knowledge of the behaviour of breeding birds, familiarity with one's site, good field skills, and of course good weather. But the number of people who can bring those things together is on the slide and consequently fewer open cup nest records are being submitted to BTO HQ. Given all that has already been said about the importance of productivity data collected via the Nest Record Scheme, how can this worrying trend in nest recording be reversed?

Part of the answer comes in the form of a new series of practical field courses for aspiring nest finders, designed to kick-start the process of acquiring the field skills necessary to record the nests of species such as Blackcap, Sedge Warbler and Yellowhammer. The inaugural course, or 'pilot' as it was dubbed, was held at the Wetland Trust's Pannel Valley Nature Reserve in East Sussex from Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May till Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June, with on-site accommodation being generously provided by the Wetland Trust. Seven students participated in the course and they were joined by four facilitators from the Wetland Trust and Rye Bay Ringing Group, as well as BTO staff Dave Leech and Carl Barimore, and main tutor and expert nest finder Tony Davis.

From their arrival on Friday afternoon, the group gelled and the 'pilot' nature of the course emerged as Tony, Dave and Carl tried to find the best mix of theory and practical work to maintain momentum and stimulate interest.

We were introduced to two complementary techniques for nest finding. The first was called the 'cold search' method, where the nest finder, equipped with binoculars and a light bamboo stick, taps, probes and searches likely areas of scrub, nettles, ivy-covered trees and bushes in order to either directly find nests hidden in vegetation or else detect the presence of adults leaving the nest site on approach.

The second technique we learned was the 'watch back' method, where the nest finder observes patiently until they see a bird that is doing something indicative of nesting, such as carrying food or flying away with a faecal sack. Once such a bird is spotted, the observer

then has to follow it back to its nest, which involves tracking the bird through the undergrowth, noting where it disappears into a bush or grassy thicket and where it reappears again, these points being the likely entrance to the nest. Next comes the careful approach: investigating the targeted spot and parting the vegetation without creating a trail or exposing the nest. Once the nest itself has been found, the contents are noted and, if a ringer is present, any suitably sized pulli are ringed. Tony Davis stressed the importance of doing one's 'gardening' when leaving a nest site; covering your tracks so that the nest site is not obvious to predators but is sufficiently well marked so that the nest can be relocated for follow-up visits.

Over the two days, six Sedge Warbler nests were found, which is not bad given that only 36 Sedge Warbler nest records were submitted to the BTO nationally the previous year. A Wren's nest with eggs, a sitting Blackbird and a collection of old, recently vacated or predated nests were also found. It became apparent that the timing of the course was not ideal as many species had just fledged their first broods and the scrub was buzzing with juvenile birds in family parties still being fed by adults.

It seemed to me that open cup nest recording has periods of high drama separated by extended periods of patient watching or inactivity. On the course, the less intense parts of the day were livened up by talks and presentations on nest recording, tutorials on the use of IPMR, general birdwatching, moth trapping, and, for the ringers, the opportunity to notch up a ringing tick by ringing Rooks from a nearby Rook trap. To cap it all, a very welcome (chicken!) egg buttie breakfast was available at no extra cost.

Apart from the timing of the course, the mix of informality, good accommodation and facilities, ideal weather, and the right balance of practice and theory made for a very informative and enjoyable experience.

Hopefully the nest recording courses will do a lot to boost the profile of the Nest Record Scheme. I look forward to attending further courses in a different habitat and with a different range of species.



Course participants standing back to watch a female Sedge Warbler return to the nest...



Tony Davis moving in to locate the nest and using sticks to carefully part the vegetation...



Nest found!

Photos by Bob Francis

## NEST RECORD SCHEME TOTALS 1939-2008 (AS OF 01/05/09)

Species	Code	2007	2008	TOTAL
<b>Red-throated Diver*</b>	<b>RETDI</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2,446</b>
<i>Black-throated Diver</i>	BLTDI	1	1	238
Little Grebe	LITGR	51	49	2,726
Great Crested Grebe	GRCGR	129	116	4,245
Red-necked Grebe	RENGR			1
<i>Slavonian Grebe</i>	SLAGR	2		198
<i>Black-necked Grebe</i>	BLNGR	1		31
Fulmar	FULMA	335	125	7,603
Manx Shearwater	MANSH			629
Storm Petrel	STOPE			92
<i>Leach's Petrel</i>	LEAPE	17	51	75
Gannet	GANNE			33
Cormorant	CORMO	72	67	2,397
Shag	SHAG.	382	332	15,402
<i>Bittern</i>	BITTE			39
Night-heron	NIGHE			3
Little Egret	LITEG	19	34	90
<b>Grey Heron</b>	<b>GREHE</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>8,422</b>
<i>Spoonbill</i>	SPOON			2
<b>Mute Swan</b>	<b>MUTSW</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>6,884</b>
<i>Whooper Swan</i>	WHOSW	1	1	24
<i>Greylag Goose</i>	GREGO	44	73	991
Snow Goose	SNOGO			8
Bar-headed Goose	BAHGO			9
Canada Goose	CANGO	82	91	4,732
Barnacle Goose	BARGO		1	72
Egyptian Goose	EGYGO	8	7	131
Shelduck	SHELD	7	11	365
Ruddy Shelduck	RUDSH		1	3
Mandarin	MANDA	30	49	728
Wigeon	WIGEO			187
Gadwall	GADWA	11	14	225
Teal	TEAL.		1	240
Mallard	MALLA	134	140	9,628
<i>Pintail</i>	PINTA			23
<i>Garganey</i>	GARGA	1		11
Shoveler	SHOVE	7	9	228
Red-crested Pochard	RECPO		11	12
Pochard	POCHA	11	19	244
Tufted Duck	TUFDU	9	26	1,363
<i>Scaup</i>	SCAUP			1
Eider	EIDER	412	295	10,351
<i>Common Scoter</i>	COMSC			43
<i>Goldeneye</i>	GOLDE	4	5	255
Red-breasted Merganser	REBME		1	290
Goosander	GOOSA	9	8	403
Ruddy Duck	RUDDU	5	4	183
<i>Honey Buzzard</i>	HONBU	12	12	146
Red Kite	REDKI	124	164	600
<i>White-tailed Eagle</i>	WHTEA	2	3	5
<i>Marsh Harrier</i>	MARHA	7	10	119
<b>Hen Harrier</b>	<b>HENHA</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>1,983</b>
<i>Pallid Harrier</i>	PALHA			1
<i>Montagu's Harrier</i>	MONHA	1		45
Goshawk	GOSHA	102	71	1,339
<b>Sparrowhawk*</b>	<b>SPARR</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>5,715</b>
<b>Buzzard</b>	<b>BUZZA</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>7,216</b>
<i>Golden Eagle</i>	GOLEA	13	10	655
<i>Osprey</i>	OSPPE	3	11	107

Species	Code	2007	2008	TOTAL
<b>Kestrel</b>	<b>KESTR</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>9,449</b>
<b>Merlin*</b>	<b>MERLI</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>3,973</b>
<b>Hobby*</b>	<b>HOBBY</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>1,142</b>
<b>Peregrine*</b>	<b>PEREG</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>3,428</b>
Red Grouse	REDGR	1	1	856
Ptarmigan	PTARM		1	132
Black Grouse	BLAGR	1		81
Capercaillie	CAPER			91
Red-legged Partridge	RELPA	3	4	493
Chukar	CHUKA			1
Grey Partridge	GREPA	2		868
Quail	QUAIL			16
Pheasant	PHEAS	27	19	2,319
Golden Pheasant	GOLPH			6
Lady Amherst's Pheasant	LAAPH			1
Water Rail	WATRA	3	3	108
<i>Corncrake</i>	CORNC			32
<b>Moorhen</b>	<b>MOORH</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>24,569</b>
Coot	COOT.	498	716	20,890
<b>Oystercatcher</b>	<b>OYSTE</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>18,169</b>
<i>Black-winged Stilt</i>	BLWST		1	4
<i>Avocet</i>	AVOCE	38	49	929
<i>Stone Curlew</i>	STOCU			425
<i>Little Ringed Plover</i>	LIRPL	80	69	2,736
<b>Ringed Plover</b>	<b>RINPL</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>10,897</b>
<i>Kentish Plover</i>	KENPL			19
<i>Dotterel</i>	DOTTE		1	263
<b>Golden Plover</b>	<b>GOLPL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>929</b>
<b>Lapwing</b>	<b>LAPWI</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>27,687</b>
<i>Temminck's Stint</i>	TEMST			1
<i>Purple Sandpiper</i>	PURSA			4
Dunlin	DUNLI	2		574
<i>Ruff</i>	RUFF.			4
<b>Snipe*</b>	<b>SNIFE</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1,843</b>
Woodcock	WOODC	7	4	679
<i>Black-tailed Godwit</i>	BITGO	2	1	42
<i>Whimbrel</i>	WHIMB			60
<b>Curlew*</b>	<b>CURLE</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>3,107</b>
<b>Redshank*</b>	<b>REDSH</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3,419</b>
<i>Greenshank</i>	GRESH	1	4	198
<i>Wood Sandpiper</i>	WOOSA			2
<b>Common Sandpiper*</b>	<b>COMSA</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1,658</b>
<i>Red-necked Phalarope</i>	RENPH			163
Arctic Skua	ARCSK	2		374
Great Skua	GRESK	3	4	433
<i>Little Gull</i>	LITGU			3
<i>Mediterranean Gull</i>	MEDGU	9	7	36
Black-headed Gull	BLHGU	43	8	10,044
Common Gull	COMGU	67	184	5,809
Lesser Black-backed Gull	LBBGU	6	11	4,690
Herring Gull	HERGU	128	86	7,685
Great Black-backed Gull	GBBGU	6	1	3,488
Lesser Crested Tern	LECTE			5
Kittiwake	KITTI	756	600	18,476
Sandwich Tern	SANTE			1,814
<i>Roseate Tern</i>	ROSTE	76	74	1,343
Common Tern	COMTE	243	158	8,417
Arctic Tern	ARCTE	556	376	12,782
<i>Little Tern</i>	LITTE	204	35	6,903

Species	Code	2007	2008	TOTAL
Guillemot	GUILL	206	93	1,578
Razorbill	RAZOR	81	56	1,619
Black Guillemot	BLAGU	34	30	1,762
Puffin	PUFFI	105	101	1,185
Rock Dove	ROCDO	44	68	780
Feral Pigeon	FERPI	6	36	2,451
<b>Stock Dove</b>	<b>STODO</b>	<b>653</b>	<b>853</b>	<b>12,744</b>
Wood Pigeon	WOODP	528	531	31,053
<b>Collared Dove*</b>	<b>COLDO</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>5,982</b>
<b>Turtle Dove*</b>	<b>TURDO</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2,071</b>
Ring-necked Parakeet	RINPA		2	51
Cuckoo	CUCKO	3	17	2,220
<i>Snowy Owl</i>	<i>SNOOW</i>			2
<b>Barn Owl</b>	<b>BAROW</b>	<b>1,988</b>	<b>1,663</b>	<b>14,859</b>
<b>Little Owl*</b>	<b>LITOW</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>2,711</b>
<b>Tawny Owl</b>	<b>TAWOW</b>	<b>482</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>12,601</b>
Long-eared Owl*	LOEOW	19	12	841
Short-eared Owl*	SHEOW	4	3	417
<b>Nightjar</b>	<b>NIJAR</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>2,062</b>
Swift	SWIFT	112	126	3,135
<i>Kingfisher</i>	<i>KINGF</i>	25	17	783
<i>Hoopoe</i>	<i>HOOP</i>			1
<i>Wryneck</i>	<i>WRYNE</i>			23
Green Woodpecker*	GREWO	12	14	519
<b>Great Spotted Woodpecker*</b>	<b>GRSWO</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>2,627</b>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker*	LESWO	19	3	266
<b>Woodlark*</b>	<b>WOODL</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>1,948</b>
<b>Skylark*</b>	<b>SKYLA</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>8,704</b>
<b>Sand Martin*</b>	<b>SANMA</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>3,951</b>
<b>Swallow</b>	<b>SWALL</b>	<b>2,473</b>	<b>2,331</b>	<b>71,751</b>
House Martin	HOUMA	172	208	10,826
<b>Tree Pipit*</b>	<b>TREPI</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>2,070</b>
<b>Meadow Pipit</b>	<b>MEAPI</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>10,149</b>
Rock Pipit*	ROCP	13	8	896
<b>Yellow Wagtail*</b>	<b>YELWA</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1,085</b>
<b>Grey Wagtail*</b>	<b>GREWA</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>6,711</b>
<b>Pied Wagtail</b>	<b>PIEWA</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>11,149</b>
<b>Dipper</b>	<b>DIPPE</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>11,270</b>
<b>Wren</b>	<b>WREN.</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>17,395</b>
<b>Dunnock</b>	<b>DUNNO</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>32,180</b>
<b>Robin</b>	<b>ROBIN</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>23,558</b>
Nightingale	NIGAL	1		488
<i>Bluethroat</i>	<i>BLUTH</i>	1		2
<i>Black Redstart</i>	<i>BLARE</i>		1	181
<b>Redstart*</b>	<b>REDST</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>7,289</b>
<b>Whinchat*</b>	<b>WHINC</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>2,531</b>
<b>Stonechat*</b>	<b>STOCH</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>4,487</b>
<b>Wheatear*</b>	<b>WHEAT</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>4,160</b>
<b>Ring Ouzel*</b>	<b>RINO</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1,844</b>
<b>Blackbird</b>	<b>BLABI</b>	<b>1,283</b>	<b>1,271</b>	<b>138,889</b>
<i>Fieldfare</i>	<i>FIELD</i>			7
<b>Song Thrush</b>	<b>SONTH</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>77,383</b>
<i>Redwing</i>	<i>REDWI</i>		1	127
<b>Mistle Thrush*</b>	<b>MISTH</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>8,456</b>
<i>Cetti's Warbler</i>	<i>CETWA</i>		2	34
Grasshopper Warbler*	GRAWA	7	2	429
<i>Savi's Warbler</i>	<i>SAVWA</i>			4

Species	Code	2007	2008	TOTAL
<b>Sedge Warbler*</b>	<b>SEDWA</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>5,106</b>
<i>Marsh Warbler</i>	<i>MARWA</i>		2	170
<b>Reed Warbler</b>	<b>REEWA</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>18,062</b>
<i>Dartford Warbler</i>	<i>DARWA</i>	14	9	544
Lesser Whitethroat*	LESWH	12	18	986
<b>Whitethroat*</b>	<b>WHITE</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>6,704</b>
<b>Garden Warbler*</b>	<b>GARWA</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2,337</b>
<b>Blackcap*</b>	<b>BLACA</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>4,169</b>
<b>Wood Warbler*</b>	<b>WOOWA</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>2,789</b>
<b>Chiffchaff*</b>	<b>CHIFF</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>4,035</b>
<b>Willow Warbler*</b>	<b>WILWA</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>13,842</b>
Goldcrest*	GOLDC	19	16	940
<i>Firecrest</i>	<i>FIREC</i>			9
<b>Spotted Flycatcher</b>	<b>SPOFL</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>12,173</b>
<b>Pied Flycatcher</b>	<b>PIEFL</b>	<b>991</b>	<b>934</b>	<b>46,512</b>
<i>Bearded Tit</i>	<i>BEATI</i>		4	356
<b>Long-tailed Tit*</b>	<b>LOTTI</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>6,908</b>
<b>Marsh Tit*</b>	<b>MARTI</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>1,771</b>
Willow Tit*	WILTI	24	24	574
<i>Crested Tit</i>	<i>CRETI</i>	2	3	461
Coal Tit	COATI	76	89	5,974
<b>Blue Tit</b>	<b>BLUTI</b>	<b>4888</b>	<b>4728</b>	<b>126,133</b>
<b>Great Tit</b>	<b>GRETI</b>	<b>4,511</b>	<b>4,210</b>	<b>87,908</b>
<b>Nuthatch</b>	<b>NUTHA</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>4,718</b>
<b>Treecreeper*</b>	<b>TREEC</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2,790</b>
<i>Short-toed Treecreeper</i>	<i>SHTRR</i>			1
<i>Golden Oriole</i>	<i>GOLOR</i>	1		42
<i>Red-backed Shrike</i>	<i>REBSH</i>	2		258
<b>Jay*</b>	<b>JAY..</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1,646</b>
<b>Magpie*</b>	<b>MAGPI</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>8,436</b>
<i>Chough</i>	<i>CHOUG</i>	28	24	1,005
<b>Jackdaw</b>	<b>JACKD</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>9,579</b>
<b>Rook*</b>	<b>ROOK.</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>15,503</b>
<b>Carrión Crow*</b>	<b>CROW.</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>8,406</b>
Hooded Crow	HOOCR	2	4	1,159
<b>Raven</b>	<b>RAVEN</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>4,994</b>
<b>Starling</b>	<b>STARL</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>18,012</b>
<b>House Sparrow</b>	<b>HOUSP</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>15,769</b>
<b>Tree Sparrow</b>	<b>TRESP</b>	<b>2,115</b>	<b>1,702</b>	<b>30,268</b>
<b>Chaffinch</b>	<b>CHAFF</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>24,853</b>
<i>Brambling</i>	<i>BRAMB</i>			2
<i>Serin</i>	<i>SERIN</i>			1
<b>Greenfinch</b>	<b>GREFI</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>15,478</b>
<b>Goldfinch*</b>	<b>GOLDF</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>3,756</b>
Siskin	SISKI	1	1	94
<b>Linnet</b>	<b>LINNE</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>29,358</b>
Twite*	TWITE	2	2	1,191
<b>Redpoll*</b>	<b>LESRE</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1,372</b>
<i>Crossbill</i>	<i>CROSS</i>		3	169
<i>Common Rosefinch</i>	<i>SCARO</i>			1
<b>Bullfinch*</b>	<b>BULLF</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>6,130</b>
Hawfinch	HAWFI	2	2	215
<i>Snow Bunting</i>	<i>SNOBU</i>			202
<b>Yellowhammer*</b>	<b>YELHA</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>8,339</b>
<i>Cirl Bunting</i>	<i>CIRBU</i>	66	65	425
<b>Reed Bunting*</b>	<b>REEBU</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>8,389</b>
<b>Corn Bunting*</b>	<b>CORBU</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1,035</b>

Species in bold are incorporated in the BTO's Integrated Population Monitoring Programme. We would be particularly pleased to receive more records for those species marked with \* (fewer than 150 records per year on average over the last 10 years). Schedule 1 species are in italics (please note that this list relates to GB classification and may vary for Eire, Northern Ireland and Isle of Man).

# Owls about it

*With just over 100 records received per year, Little Owl nest monitoring is not nearly as popular as for other common owls, such as Tawny Owl (c.400 records per year) and Barn Owl (c.1,500 records per year). This is partly due to the fact that, with a few notable exceptions, efforts to erect Little Owl boxes meet with little success. However, Barn Owl conservationist, bird ringer and nest recorder Bob Sheppard may have found the solution...*

Traditionally, Little Owls have not occupied nest boxes in great numbers in the UK. This has made monitoring the species quite difficult and so, in 1998, my father designed a box that fulfilled all the requirements I felt were necessary to attract them. The specification for the box was as follows:-

1. It had to be easy to make in quantity.
2. It had to have a dark nesting chamber.
3. The entrance hole had to be 70 mm.
4. There had to be a ducting system so that the owl felt it was entering a tunnel, similar to many tree nests I had found.
5. There had to be a large door which made access to the nest chamber for monitoring really easy.
6. The design had to prevent the young from falling out of the box prematurely.

The nest boxes were duly built and tested. The results were immediately encouraging and by 2008 my Little Owl nest box scheme had 32 breeding pairs, one of the most successful schemes for this species in Western Europe. Early monitoring indicates that this year there are likely to be 40 occupied boxes.

The boxes are mostly sited in old crew yards and isolated farm buildings, as the south and mid-Lincolnshire population seem to like these structures. It is most important that the boxes are placed in an open-fronted building—we have only two or three pairs in enclosed



Little Owls switch to provisioning earthworms whenever it rains. Photo by Bob Sheppard.

barns as Little Owls seem to shun dark places. The buildings they prefer often have breeding Barn Owls in the same complex. Only a few of our boxes are in trees.

Several features of the box design have made all the difference to their being occupied and to the ease of monitoring. Every box has a ring of Tippex painted around the entrance hole. If the box is occupied then the white ring will be discoloured; a fresh-looking hole means there is no need to waste time climbing a ladder and checking the box! From the entrance hole, there is a tunnel that runs to the back of the box, from where there is another hole that provides access to the nest chamber beneath. The effect of this tunnel is to make the nest chamber completely dark, which seems to be more attractive to the Little Owls. The nest chamber is covered in a layer of mini bark chips, as the owls don't generally nest on bare wood.

Four boxes can be made from a sheet of exterior plywood 8' x 4' by 0.5" thick. The front, back, base and roof are 11.75" wide and 13.5" high. The sides are 11.75" x 10.75". The door is 6.5" wide and 8" high. I use about 25 screws, 1.75" long, to hold the box together. Each box costs about £8. If you are making lots of tree boxes then I would recommend using marine ply, which is far superior, though this increases the cost to £10 per box.

Some reference books suggest that Little Owls incubate from the first egg. My colleague who monitors the owls with me, Alan Ball, and I find that this is rarely true. The eggs would hatch asynchronously if that were the case, yet our chicks are usually uniform in size, except for an occasional runt. Furthermore, when monitoring early in the season, we often find part clutches of cold eggs



Little Owls appear to like entering the nest box via a tunnel, with a resulting dark nest chamber. Photo by Bob Sheppard.

# Extended family

with no adult present, though the nests are usually successful nonetheless. It appears that the females incubate after laying the penultimate egg, as is the case with Kestrels.

Little Owls are remarkable mothers. Of the birds we ring, the female Little Owl is the only one that will sit tight on the nest and allow us to pick her up to take measurements, such as wing length and weight. On placing her back on the nest, she will immediately settle and sit tight again. Occasionally, the male is in the box at the early stages of egg laying.

Our Little Owls don't travel very far, and the adults spend their whole life within the immediate area of their nest site. Many of our birds are old friends and we catch them every spring. This year we monitored a female on eggs that we first ringed as an adult in 2002 and have caught every year since in the same box; a consecutive run of eight years.

I have spent long periods of time photographing Little Owls at their nests, which has allowed me to observe their breeding habits closely. In South Lincolnshire, their prey is predominantly invertebrates, particularly moths and beetles, but as soon as it rains, the birds switch to large earthworms. Rodents are unusual as prey. Last year, many broods failed at an early stage as there had been no rain, which suggests that earthworms are a staple part of the diet of chicks in our boxes.

All in all, Alan and I have been delighted with the success of our Little Owl boxes. I hope this article will stimulate other keen nest box builders to have a go. Needless to say, it is immensely rewarding to have this mercurial little bird nest in a box you've made and put up yourself.

*Every season, the Nest Record Scheme receives one or two reports of a tit box containing a mixed brood of Blue Tit and Great Tit chicks. Roger Peart here gives his account of a nest found in 2008.*

I have about 70 nest boxes dotted around the 200+ acres of grounds of Canford School, which have been *in situ* for most of the past 29 years. The network of boxes originally started as about a dozen RSPB kits, but over the years more substantial hand-made boxes have been added and most recently several woodcrete boxes. Every year these boxes are home to many broods of Blue Tits, fewer Great Tits, two to four Nuthatches and the occasional Coal Tit.

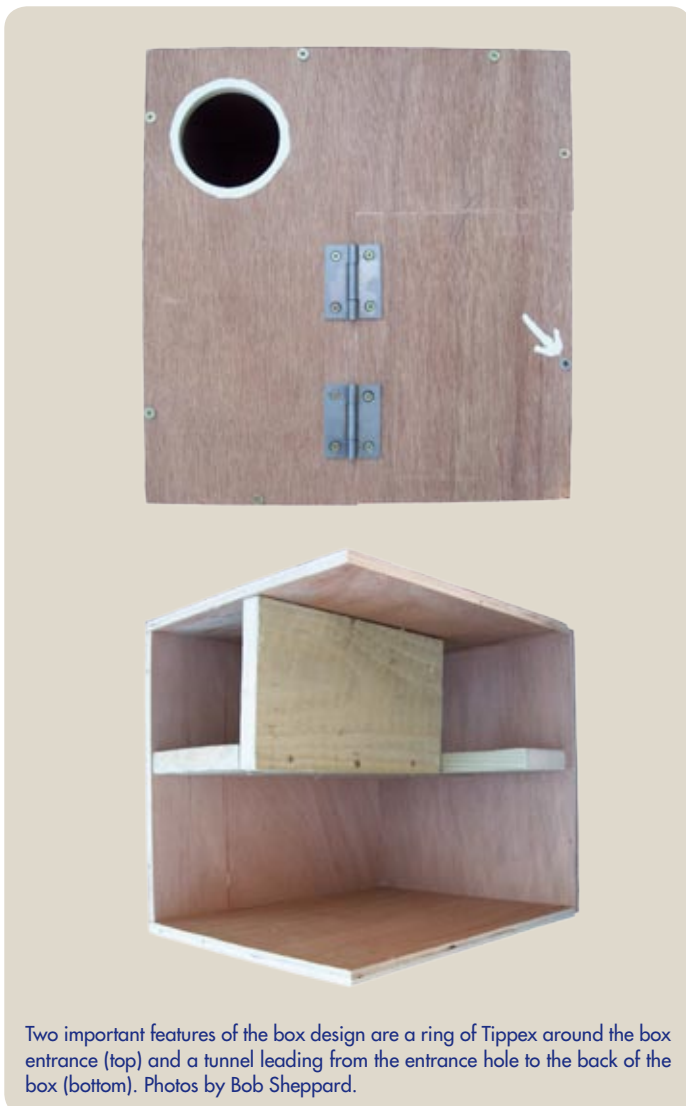
Last season, when checking the nest boxes in early May, I found a Blue Tit sitting atop a pyramid of what I counted as 17 eggs. Returning to the box two days later and finding the adult absent, I made a complete count and found 18 eggs!



Above: Roger Peart's discovery of a clutch—or rather more than one—of 18 eggs. Below: Two Great Tit and two Blue Tit chicks remain. Photos by Roger Peart.

Thinking this was a shared nest of two female Blue Tits, I went back again five days later to find a female Blue Tit in the box with seven two-day-old young and at least four unhatched eggs. A week later the adult was off the nest again, but this time I saw only four live young—to my surprise two Blue Tit chicks 'in pin' and two Great Tit chicks, noticeably older. I also counted eight unhatched eggs, distinguishable by size as two Blue Tit eggs and six Great Tit eggs. Five days later, the Great Tit pair were close to fledging but the Blue Tit chicks were several days behind. On my final visit several days later, all four had flown.

I was pleased to know that at least four of the original 18 eggs came to fruition, though I had much sympathy for the Blue Tit pair who were saddled with this extended family. Although this occurrence has certainly been noted elsewhere, I had not come across it in over 40 years of nest recording.



Two important features of the box design are a ring of Tippex around the box entrance (top) and a tunnel leading from the entrance hole to the back of the box (bottom). Photos by Bob Sheppard.

# Sorting your *Sylvias*

*The books say that Blackcap and Garden Warbler nests are tricky to tell apart—Dave Leech and Richard Castell don't agree...*

How many readers have to re-learn the difference between Blackcap and Garden Warbler song each spring? In fact, how many of you still haven't got it 100% sussed? Same here! While the books say that differentiating the nests of these species is just as tricky, it can actually be far easier than identifying the birds themselves. The eggs of both species are incredibly variable, with some overlap in the patterning, and young chicks are indistinguishable save for their tongue spots, but the structure and location of the nest can give you all the clues you need.

## BLACKCAP

Blackcaps use dried grass stems to produce a neat woven basket of about 7–8 cm in diameter, which is firmly tied to the surrounding vegetation with basket handles that often incorporate cobwebs and moss. While the 'typical' Blackcap nest would be tucked just inside a bramble or snowberry bush at a height of 0.6 m – 1.2 m, locations can vary. At the Nunnery, we've found nests a few centimetres off the ground in a nettle bed and over 2 m high in an ivy-covered tree. Blackcaps are usually double-brooded, particularly in the south of the UK, producing the first clutch of 4–5 eggs in late April and second broods from late May, with the last chicks fledging in July.



The neat nest of the Blackcap, lashed to the surrounding vegetation. Photo by Dave Leech.



The scruffier nest of the Garden Warbler, wedged into place in bushes. Photo by Dave Leech.

## GARDEN WARBLER

While the Garden Warbler builds its nest from the same dried grass stems favoured by Blackcap, it is a much bulkier and scruffier affair. The key identification feature is that the material is wedged rather than tied into place, with the ends of the stems sticking out at all angles from the perimeter of the nest. This construction method necessitates a more robust substrate than that required by Blackcap, and Garden Warbler nests are most commonly found in bramble patches, typically at a height of about 0.5 m. As it is a long-distance migrant, the first clutches are produced later than those of Blackcap, usually around mid-May, again consisting of 4–5 eggs, with second broods frequent in the south.

## NEST FINDING TIPS

The best way to find nests of both these species is to get out early in the year and work out where the territories are by listening to the

# IPMR tips

singing males. Song-posts won't necessarily tell you much about the location of the nest, although one will be close to it, so it's best to focus your attention on patches of suitable habitat (for Blackcap, always check the taller bramble growth first) and search carefully. Always take a stick with you to carefully part the undergrowth, and gardening gloves can be a very useful accessory for the less fashion-conscious. Remember, with bramble in particular, it's often easier to spot nests by getting down low and looking through the vegetation. Beware of cock nests, loose platforms of material that can look like beginnings of a structure and are often located quite some distance from the actual nest site.

Both sexes incubate, but they are generally very quiet at this stage—they can be flushed by tapping vegetation, but they sit very tightly and often only move a foot or so from the nest, so you need to listen carefully and look hard for the slightest flicker of vegetation as the bird creeps off. Post-hatching, nests can be found by following feeding birds back, but make sure the parents are returning to the same spot each time and not provisioning fledged offspring moving about in the undergrowth. The adults will scold during the nestling stage, with the intensity increasing as the chicks grow older and peaking just after fledging.



Above: A Blackcap nest clearly lashed to several stems. Note the neat cup and the border of moss and spiders' webs. Below: A scruffier Garden Warbler nest, made entirely of dead grass. These photographs demonstrate that the eggs of these two species can look very similar. Photos by Richard Castell.

The proportion of nest records submitted electronically via the free nest recording program, IPMR, now stands at over 65%, which is great news. There are many benefits to using IPMR over cards for both the BTO and the nest recorder. Electronic records do not have to be sent away for inputting and they can be made available for analyses much more quickly. For the nest recorder, IPMR provides a quick and easy way of storing and accessing all their nest records, including those from previous years, and it makes summarising and comparing records very easy indeed. So, if you haven't yet given it a try, please download IPMR for free at [www.bto.org/software/ipmr](http://www.bto.org/software/ipmr).

## SIX FIGURE GRID REFS WANTED

An accurate OS grid reference is an essential part of a good quality nest record. In IPMR, the user is required to give a valid four-figure grid reference for every 'place' where they monitor nests. Subsequently, when a record is completed for a nest found at a given 'place', the associated four-figure grid reference is added to the record automatically. Thanks to this system, every nest record that is created using IPMR has a grid reference that is at least accurate to 1 km<sup>2</sup> (four-figures).

However, it is also possible on both cards and IPMR to enter six-figure OS grid references, which are accurate to 100 m<sup>2</sup>. On IPMR, this is very easy: simply go to the 'grid reference' field at the top-right of the nest record window and type the six-figure reference over the top of the four-figure reference already given (see below)

Currently, over 75% of records submitted on card have six-figure grid references, compared with only 25% of IPMR nest records. So, if you are able to give a six-figure grid reference, please remember to type it in.

## HABITAT INFO: MORE DETAIL NEEDED

The Nest Record Scheme has long used the 'Crick System' for recording the habitat surrounding the nest (see page 16 of the *NRS Handbook* for details). On IPMR, the user is required to record the main habitat types (eg 'A1' for broad-leaved woodland) associated with every 'place' where they monitor nests. This habitat information is then automatically added to any nest records created. However, the story doesn't end there: by clicking the 'All levels' button on a nest record, the user can enter more detailed 'level B' and 'level C' habitat information via a pop-up form.

Over 90% of records submitted on card have these more detailed habitat data but only 20% of IPMR records include them. So, please do remember to select the 'All Levels' button and complete the habitat form (see below).

Two little used but important features in IPMR are the ability to type a full six-figure grid reference directly into a nest record and the option to provide more detailed habitat information by clicking the 'All Levels' buttons.

# Barn Owl Conservation Network Symposium

*Participants in the Nest Record Scheme's sister survey, the Barn Owl Monitoring Programme, will be familiar with the Sheepdrove Trust, who have generously sponsored the annual breeding occupancy and productivity survey since 2000. Another project funded by the Sheepdrove Trust—the Barn Owl Conservation Network (BOCN)—celebrated 21 years of operation at its biannual Symposium at Sheepdrove Organic Farm in April 2009. Sheepdrove Farm's manager for biodiversity and alternative energy, Jason Ball, takes us through the day's events.*

Now 21 years old, the Barn Owl Conservation Network (BOCN) celebrated its 'coming of age' at the Kindersleys' Sheepdrove Organic Farm in Berkshire. Juliet Kindersley welcomed 120 delegates from across the UK and Ireland for the BOCN Symposium 2009.

"What you do for Barn Owls all over the country is very important work," Juliet told the audience. She recalled how, one spring back in the 1990s, her owl nest box, placed in a barn, very quickly attracted a Barn Owl. At the time, Juliet and her husband Peter Kindersley contacted the BOCN and received expert advice on how to provision nestboxes and develop owl-friendly habitat across their farm. Today, up to five breeding pairs of Barn Owl live at Sheepdrove Organic Farm and all five British owl species use its rich landscape.

The owl success story at Sheepdrove Farm is typical of the work of the BOCN. Since the project's inception by Colin Shawyer and the Hawk and Owl Trust in 1988, the BOCN's regional network of Barn Owl 'advisors' have worked in partnership with dozens of farmers, landowners, agencies and volunteers nationwide. By promoting creation of the essential rough grassland habitat that Barn Owls require and the careful provision of nest boxes, the Network has overseen a rise in both Barn Owl numbers and distribution.

One of the founding aims of the BOCN was to increase the number of Barn Owls in the UK from around 4,000 pairs, as was estimated following a survey of abundance in the mid-1990s, to 6,000 breeding pairs by the year 2012. The general feeling of Barn Owl observers in the field is that the birds have increased substantially in range and abundance over the past 20 years, which is good news! However, a new survey of Barn Owl abundance is required before we can tell whether the 2012 target has been met.

Another key role of the BOCN has been to foster dialogue and the sharing of knowledge between the surprisingly large number of Barn Owl conservation groups and organisations in the UK, and the symposium certainly bore testimony to this facilitative role. Speakers delivered presentations on a large range of topics



BOCN volunteers ring a large number of Barn Owl chicks every season. BTO's Mark Grantham takes the opportunity to talk about 100 years of bird ringing.

and reflected what has been learned from over two decades of Barn Owl conservation and study. Bob Sheppard summarised 25 years of owl conservation in Lincolnshire; Mark Grantham (BTO) looked at 100 years of bird ringing; Alex Copland and John Lusby (BirdWatch Ireland) detailed some of the unique challenges of monitoring Barn Owls in Eire; Paddy Jackson presented his findings on Barn Owl double brooding; Karen Davies (FWAG) looked at the Environmental Stewardship Scheme with reference to Barn Owl habitat requirements; Bernard Wright and Roy Leigh summarised Barn Owl monitoring work in Cheshire and Colin Shawyer reviewed the work of the BOCN itself.

Symposium papers will be brought together with county-based reports from the Network and published as a collection to illustrate the progress made by the Barn Owl Conservation Network over its 21 years.



Over 120 delegates from across the country attended the BOCN Symposium at Sheepdrove Organic Farm. Photos by Jason Ball.

# Nest collecting revisited

Have you ever wondered how a Blackbird knows how to build a Blackbird nest? Or, if nests are all designed to do much the same thing—hold eggs in an insulated, protected place—why is there so much variety in nest construction among different species? Is all of that information in a bird's genes? In a collaborative project with Dr Sue Healy and Professor Mike Hansell, of the Universities of St Andrews and Glasgow respectively, I am trying to answer some of these questions by looking at the nests of Blackbird and Song Thrush. Granted, these thrush nests do not look especially flamboyant or intricate, but they are relatively easy to obtain compared to those of other birds and it is crucial to the project that we are able to examine a large number of nests from individual species. The more nests we examine, the more likely we will be able to identify which aspects of a nest are common to a species and which bits are due to some component of individuality.



Patrick Walsh is examining Blackbird nest construction. Photo by BTO.

As you will have seen from previous issues of *Nest Record News*, BTO nest recorders have been sending nests to Glasgow University's Hunterian Nest Reference Collection for several years and this collection is providing a very useful basis for our work. However, over the next year, we wish to collect much larger samples of nests of Song Thrush and Blackbird, and so we are turning to you for help. If you find even one nest of either species this season, we would be extremely grateful if you could to send it to us—the more the better. Here's how:

- Once the chicks have fledged, carefully remove the empty nest from its location.
- Leave collected nests in a dry place for at least three days, so that when they are posted, they will not rot.
- Seal each nest individually in a plastic bag with the following identifying information: your surname, your forename, other initials, nest species, date collected, geographical location of nest. *eg* Walsh, Patrick, Blackbird, 28/03/2009, St Andrews.
- Send the nest to me at the University of St. Andrews (Address at end of article).

In addition to requesting your nests, we'd be even further indebted if you could provide additional geographical and habitat information by completing our on-line survey form at the following address: <http://psy.st-andrews.ac.uk/people/res/ptw1.shtml>.

Thank you in advance for any nests you are able to send. If you have any queries, please do get in touch with me via email at the address below.

*Dr. Patrick Walsh, School of Psychology, University of St Andrews, St. Mary's College, South Street, St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland, KY16 9JP.  
Email: [patrick.walsh@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:patrick.walsh@st-andrews.ac.uk)*

## A shared Hobby

Thanks must go to Jez Blackburn for promoting contact between two 'species'—*ie* nest recorders and ringers. For a while now, Jez has been issuing Schedule 1 licences for monitoring Hobby nests in my local area on the condition that licence holders contact me to ring the pulli.

Right on cue, I received a letter outlining the whereabouts of one such nest, whereupon I contacted the nest recorders by phone to ascertain whether I had landowner permission for ringing on the site and to explain what age the chicks would have to be before I could ring them. Two days later the nest recorders got back to me: permission had been sorted and they knew the exact age of the chicks. A date was fixed for ringing and I duly met the recorders at a predetermined grid reference.

What an amazing experience! These chaps had spent 20+ years locating and watching Hobby nests and the tips they passed on to me about likely habitats for breeding birds and how to find nests were priceless. They had observed Hobby nests at a distance for hours on end and knew all there was to know about Hobby feeding behaviour. One amazing fact they revealed to me was that Hobbys continue to feed well after dark; on more than one occasion, birds had been observed catching bats at midnight in bright moonlight.

For my nest recording colleagues, the benefit to the liaison was that they got to see the birds in the hand. For the BTO, three more Hobby pulli were ringed and the accompanying nest record added to their dataset.

I was contacted again by the nest recording pair a while after the ringing outing, and they were pleased to report that the chicks had fledged successfully.

*Dave Fulton, Chelmarsh Ringing Group*



A Hobby chick in the hand. Photo by Dave Fulton.

# Species protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

The species listed in italics in the tables on pages 8 and 9 are specially protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended by the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (list also available at [www.bto.org/survey/schedule1.htm](http://www.bto.org/survey/schedule1.htm)). You must obtain a Schedule 1 licence to visit the nests of these species and any such nests that are found by accident should not be visited a second time without a licence. **NO SCHEDULE 1 NEST MAY BE VISITED WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL.**

To obtain a Schedule 1 Licence for nest recording and/or bird ringing on behalf of the BTO, please contact the BTO Licensing & Sales Manager, Jez Blackburn ([jez.blackburn@bto.org](mailto:jez.blackburn@bto.org)), for an application form. A first-time licence application must be accompanied by two references from 'respected' ornithologists (eg County Recorder, BTO Regional Rep, Bird Club Chairman, BTO Ringer etc).

Licences are issued annually and must be renewed each season by submitting a renewal application and a 'Schedule 1 Report' of monitoring activities the previous season. No Schedule 1 Licence can be renewed without the receipt of a report on the previous season. Please note that applications submitted after February may take longer to process owing to the volume of applications received.

To obtain a Schedule 1 Licence for approaching protected nests for other purposes, such as nest photography or consultancy work, please contact the relevant Government body (eg Natural England).



Kingfishers are specially protected at the nest under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. A licence is required to monitor their nests. Photo by John Bowers.

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(Scotland)

## Nest Record News

*Nest Record News* is the annual newsletter for supporters of the Nest Record Scheme (NRS), which is part of the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Integrated Population Monitoring Programme.

The views expressed by the contributors to this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Editor, the Council of the BTO or its Committees.

*Nest Record News* is written by you, so please send your ideas and contributions by 31<sup>st</sup> January to: *Carl Barimore, NRS Organiser, Nest Record Scheme, BTO, The Nunnery, Theford, Norfolk IP24 2PU*

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The British Trust for Ornithology is a charity dedicated to researching birds found in the UK. For Membership details please contact Chris Morley at [info@bto.org](mailto:info@bto.org)

## Useful addresses

BTO website [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)

NRS webpages [www.bto.org/nrs](http://www.bto.org/nrs)

IPMR webpage [www.bto.org/software/ipmr](http://www.bto.org/software/ipmr)

Wider Countryside Report [www.bto.org/birdtrends](http://www.bto.org/birdtrends)

Online forum <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nrsforum>

General NRS enquiries [nest.records@bto.org](mailto:nest.records@bto.org)

Submission of IPMR data files [nrs.data@bto.org](mailto:nrs.data@bto.org)

## The NRS team

### Carl Barimore, NRS Organiser

The main point of contact for nest recorders, provides IPMR support, and is the person to whom your records should be sent.

### David Glue, Research Ecologist

Provides advice based on a long involvement with the Scheme.

### Vivienne Greenough, Nest Records Officer

Provides additional support for nest recorders and is the main contact for Nest Box Challenge.

### Dr Dave Leech, Head of Nest Record Scheme

Oversees the running of the NRS and undertakes research using the data collected.

### Debbie Nicholls, NRS Secretary

Provides secretarial support to the Scheme, including processing records and sending out materials.