

STONECHATS AND STARLINGS SPURRED ON BY SPRING WARMTH

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, draws on observations from BTO nest recorders, surveyors and ringers, to review the nesting fortunes of the UK's birds so far this year.

TARABILLAS Y ESTORNINOS INCENTIVADOS POR EL CALOR PRIMAVERAL

El biólogo del BTO David Glue utiliza observaciones de registradores de nidos, conteadores y anilladores del BTO para evaluar las suertes de las aves del Reino Unido en lo que va de año.

Last year, 2001, showed yet again that a relatively mild winter and early spring warm spells do not necessarily lead to a successful breeding season. The mixture of cool, damp spring weather, followed by heatwaves in the summer impaired the breeding success of resident and migrant insectivores, many seed-eaters, waders, gamebirds and raptors (*BTO News* 237, 239).

On a more upbeat note, 2001 revealed further range expansions, (compared with *The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988–91*). These included Little Egret and Marsh Harrier (southern counties); Osprey and Dartford Warbler (Midlands); Avocet and Roseate Tern (N England); Hobby and Little Ringed Plover (Wales); Red Kite and Nuthatch (Scotland).

YULETIDE FREEZE HALTS LATE NESTING GREBES

In 2001, the coolest September since 1994 hastened the end of a 'below par' breeding season. A few resilient seabirds, as well as Mute Swans, Little Grebes, Tufted Ducks and hirundines were noted tending growing families.

From 19–26 September, an unseasonably cold northeasterly blast, led to reports of orphaned, moribund or dead chicks of Manx Shearwater, Gannet, Stock Dove and House Martin.

A few species took advantage of the mildest October in some 300 years, courtesy of a warm, moist Atlantic airflow of tropical origin. Among those species rearing late broods were Moorhen (Bucks), House Martin (Staffs, Borders), Greenfinch (Oxon) and Stock Dove (Dyfed, Kent).

November maintained the mild theme. With frosts scarce, and growing seasons extended by a fortnight or more, Great Crested Grebe (Beds, Merseyside), Barn Owl (Lincs, Wilts), Coot and Feral Pigeon (various localities), were all seen looking after young. At Llanelli and Martin Mere WWT reserves, late hatching Mallard chicks coincided with the arrival of wintering Whooper Swans.

Mild interludes in an otherwise raw December, prompted tits, Mistle Thrushes, Robins, Jackdaws and Ring-necked Parakeets to sing, display territorial intent or explore for potential nest sites. Penetrating frosts and snow, affecting all areas by the year's end, effectively ended all nesting behaviour. Ironically, this

exceptionally warm calendar year (globally the second warmest on record after 1998), proved poor overall for UK's breeding birds.

NESTING SONG THRUSHES DEFY NEW YEAR STORMS

New Year's Day bird counts were undertaken in crisp and sunny, but freezing weather. Severe frosts on the 2nd saw temperatures dipping as low as -13°C in parts of Scotland. Emaciated corpses of Teal, Water Rail, Dunlin, Redwing and various finches, figured among cold-weather related losses reported to the BTO Ringing Office and the Natural History Museum. The cold snaps were never long enough, though, for any substantial impacts. Sea watching conditions for shearwaters and petrels in the New Year were more akin to October.

From mid January, the UK was battered by a string of vigorous troughs and deep depressions. Stick nest platforms, tree cavities, boxes and out-buildings used long-term by Red Kite, Buzzard, Grey Heron, Goldeneye and woodpeckers were destroyed. Spring-like spells from mid month, with temperatures of $10\text{--}14^{\circ}\text{C}$ contributed to the warmest January since 1992. This led to premature nest-building and egg-laying. Attempts by Feral Pigeons and Collared Doves were not unexpected, but free-flying broods of Blackbirds (Bideford, Liverpool), Song Thrushes (Bedford, Chester) and Woodpigeons were more unusual.

VALENTINE'S DAY HEAT PROVIDES NESTING STIMULUS

A warm, very wet and windy February enhanced the early breeding picture. Temperatures approached 15°C on many days. By the month's end, 18 species with active nests had been reported to the BTO. Cases of egg-laying Grey Heron, Mallard, Egyptian Goose, Tawny Owl, doves and thrushes were not too surprising, especially in the south midlands and Thames Valley, where temperatures were 4°C above average. More surprising were well-grown or fledged broods of Robin (Leicester), Starling (Truro, Cornwall; Mountsandel, Coleraine) and Pheasant (Soar, Devon). Most success stories were in the protected warmer environs of suburbia (gardens, markets, shops,

warehouses) or rural hamlets in valley or coastal settings — often aided by supplementary foods. Birds were helped by few frosts and little snow, but regular lashing rains (the wettest February since 1990) presented problems.

Events were far less advanced in Scotland and N Ireland, where daily temperatures were just 0.5°C above average and double the normal rainfall was endured. Elsewhere, conditions were good for certain wintering waders that had shown recent increases, notably Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit and Spotted Redshank (*WeBS News* 15, 2002). Mid month saw auks, Gannets and Fulmars returning to colony ledges; while Lapwings, Curlews and Ringed Plovers displayed early at inland sites.

WARM EASTER PROVIDES BOOST FOR BREEDING RESIDENTS

A quiet St David's Day saw a spurt in nesting activity, with early clutches started in the first week of the month by Peregrine (Gwent), Raven (Denbigh), Rook (Bucks) and Wren (Surrey). Osprey (Highland), Stone Curlew (Breckland, Norfolk) and Sand Martin (Worcester) were back at old haunts (reported to BTO *Migration Watch*), but generally slow to show nesting intent. Severe gales that followed, with temporary snow on northern hills, rocked treetop egg-laying Grey Herons, corvids, Cormorants and Mistle Thrushes.

Warm southerly airflow in mid March, with temperatures reaching 17°C along the south coast, prompted another surge in egg-laying, among grebes, dabbling ducks, Robins and thrushes. Noteworthy cases involved Canada Goose (Home Counties), Dipper (Gwynedd), Woodlark (Dorset) and Stonechat (New Forest). Brambling and Siskin lingered in gardens, singing tantalizingly. Following a 'gap' year caused by Foot and Mouth disease access restrictions, long-time BTO surveyors bemoaned the disappearance of Willow Tit, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Hawfinch and House Sparrow from survey areas. Others, encouragingly, reported fresh sites taken by Bittern, Red Kite, Raven and Black Redstart over a mild early Easter spell. The experience of recent years prompts a cautious outlook overall for the UK's breeding birds in 2002, though, as early clutches of Long-tailed Tits, Chiffchaffs and Swallows (Devon) were lost in the April chill.