

## UNSEASONAL NESTING

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, describes how a mild mid-winter and excess of natural foods prompted premature nesting among some UK birds in 2005.

### ANIDACION PREMATURA

El investigador del BTO *David Glue* describe cómo un invierno suave y la abundancia de alimento natural dieron lugar a una temporada de anidación prematura en varias aves del Reino Unido en 2005.

### WATERFOWL AND OWLS AMONG CHRISTMAS NESTING HIGHLIGHTS

Initially, winter 2004/05 maintained the apparent growing strength of unseasonal nesting during the 'non-breeding' season (October-February). My well-thumbed 'bibles'. *The Handbook of British Birds* (Witherby *et al.* 1938-41) and *A Field Guide to Birds' Nests* (Campbell and Ferguson-Lees 1972), both describe how winter nesting attempts by some grebes, ducks, thrushes and sparrows have long been an occasional feature. For some waterfowl, owls, doves and thrushes this is becoming a regular occurrence.

Ongoing, incessant mild westerlies in October (the mildest since 2001) were followed by a grey November, blanketed by cloud (the duller since 1997), continuing into early December. BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatchers reported Woodpigeon and Collared Dove broods and some Stock Doves turning to birdtable fare in various parts of the country. Many surveyors, though, described quiet, often relatively 'birdless' gardens - Coal Tit, Nuthatch, and Chaffinch, in particular, were in short supply. This was a legacy of the huge

berry and seed crops (it was the highest beech mast yield since 2000, and conifer 'coning' year since 1995), which resulted in many birds wintering in the UK's woods.

Gardens and shopping precincts, though, were slowly brightened by an unusually early influx of Waxwings, starting in mid October, initially to Scotland and the northwest, with flocks of 500 or more strong noted in Aberdeen, Renfrew (Clyde), Edinburgh (Lothian), Morpeth (Northumberland), and Newcastle-under-Lyme (Staffs).

The mild weather and wild fruit glut also fuelled buoyant populations locally of voles, mice and rats. These aided late fledging broods of Barn Owl near Peterborough (Cambs) in mid November, and premature broods of nestbox-using Tawny Owl on the Wirral (Cheshire) and in Highclere Forest (Hants). Other unusual nesting resulted in well-grown families of Great Crested Grebe (Stafford), Moorhen (Birmingham) and Mallard (several sites), the latter aided by grain sources on wildfowl reserves. December records of lingering summer visitors, as reported to BTO/RSPB/BirdWatch Ireland BirdTrack, including Swallow (Somerset,

Cornwall), Redstart (London), Willow Warbler (Upton-on-Severn) and Ring Ouzel (Durham), posed growing headaches for County Recorders recording first/last, arrival/departure dates.

### ROBIN AND THRUSHES GET OFF TO FLYING START

A brief Arctic blast gave a festive white Christmas for some, arresting most nesting operations. Dominant westerly winds in January (the mildest since 1990, with the daily temperature 1.9°C above average), brought several spring-like episodes, values topping 14.7°C at Church Fenton, near York, on 9th, dropping to just 12.7°C at Weybourne (North Norfolk) overnight on 10th. By mid month, egg-laying by Collared Dove was reported family parties of Woodpigeon were observed in several localities. Intriguingly, unusually early fledged broods for other species came from coastal settings by mid month: Song Thrush, Brighton (Sussex) Pavilion gardens; Blackbird, Southampton (Hants) Ocean village; Starling, St Just (Cornwall); while Robin benefited from garden centre surroundings at Bicester (Oxon).

Most coastal stretches of southern England and Wales remained frost-free, helping overwintering survival prospects of potentially vulnerable Spoonbill, Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper and Little Stint; similarly, long-staying Lesser Yellowlegs (Norfolk), Dusky Warbler (Suffolk) and Yellow-browed Warbler (Devon).

However, not all was rosy. Violent stormy spells, with lashing rain and sleet at times, chiefly to northern parts, saw sustained winds of 60-70 knots, gusting hurricane force in Highlands, topping 120 knots in the Western Isles. Crown-heavy conifers, laden with cones (notably spruces) toppled like cards, causing costly forestry losses. Birds also suffered: nest platforms of divers, Sea Eagle, Red Kite, Long-earned Owl, woodpeckers, and others were damaged or destroyed, alongside battered hides and rafts on reserves. Resilient, paired Crowbills sang lustily, weathering the storm, alongside stay-at-home Siskin and Redpoll in many

conifer plantations in the north and west, with only a few resorting to supplementary foods at birdtables.

### FEBRUARY SNOW-CHILL CHECKS EARLY NESTING PROMISE

Spring seemed well set at the start of February — a dangerous assertion, as nature chose to turn the screw. Initially, in late January, a 'blocking' anticyclone anchored west of Ireland generated a cold northerly airflow, sweeping seabirds (notably Shag and auks) to East Anglia and further inland.

A swift shift to warmer winds from the south and west saw vegetation developing 2-3 weeks early by mid month. Shelduck, Grey Heron, Ringed Plover and Kingfisher had returned to inland sites and displayed breeding intent. By St Valentine's Day an interesting spectrum of 19 species had been reported to the BTO as having active nesting with eggs or young. Not too unexpected were a scattering of thrushes and Robin: more so were Great Crested Grebe (River Thames, Bucks), Raven (North Devon), Magpie (Essex, Merseyside), Stock Dove (West Norfolk), Wren (London), Blue Tit (North Wales) and Mistle Thrush (Oxon).

Nesting progress was cruelly curtailed from the 20th, a northeasterly airflow sweeping progressively cold air from North Russia, giving snow to most parts, with overnight frosts plunging to -9°C in central England by the month's close. The bitter easterly winds created adverse conditions to rival February 1991 or January 1987, but were not as destructive for UK's birds as February 1986 which hit hard overwintering waders and resident populations of Bearded Tit, Cetti's Warbler and Dartford Warbler. Despite this untimely late cold snap, winter 2004/05 continued with an increase in the strength and frequency of westerly winds, a feature of the January-February spells starting broadly from 1988. These key months are now 1.7°C warmer than 50 years ago, a feature that has been driving the UK's recent series of mild winters, and contributing to so many unseasonal nesting attempts.