

SCOPS OWL AND BLACK-WINGED STILT RAISE FALSE HOPES

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Woodlark incubating in March snows, Lapwing eggs floating in May floodwater, Swallow broods baking beneath hot summer tin roofs: all ingredients of an intriguing 2006, as BTO Research Biologist *David Glue* describes.

EL AUTILLO Y LA CIGÜEÑUELA NO CUMPLEN EXPECTATIVAS

Totovías incubando en las nieves de marzo, huevos de avefría flotando en las inundaciones de mayo, pollos de golondrina asándose bajo tejados ardientes en verano: todo esto ocurrió durante el intrigante 2006, como describe el investigador del BTO *David Glue*.

DIPPER AND STONECHAT DEFY LATE SPRING CHILL

In contrast to recent years, little unseasonable nesting activity was reported in New Year 2006. This may have been because of low recruitment from the below-par 2005 breeding season, and poor condition of some adult birds, both probably the result of a sparse wild fruit larder and the coldest midwinter in a decade.

Testing times in the cold dry January, with rock-hard frozen soils, limited early nesting activity to unsuccessful attempts by Mallard, Moorhen, Robin and House Sparrow in built-up areas, while Woodpigeon and Collared Dove were recorded with fledged young. Raw, bone-chilling dreich weather in early February are thought to have placed nesting operations on hold.

By mid February, reports of a meagre nine species with active nests had been received by the BTO's Nest Record Scheme, including Blackbird (Oxford), Mistle Thrush (South Yorks), Wren (Essex) and Raven (several sites), with the total number of nest record cards less than half that of the previous two years.

March was the coldest since 1996, with daily temperatures 1.4°C below average. The incessant cold, continental airflow saw Great Crested Grebes, Rooks, Carrion Crows, thrushes and Robins deferring egg-laying and incubation. Few birds defied the adverse elements, which were severe at times in Scotland. Grey Heron (Bucks), Dipper (Monmouth), Stonechat (New Forest, Hants), Woodlark (Thetford Forest, Norfolk), were observed incubating in ice, sleet and snow by the third week.

BARN AND TAWNY OWL NESTING CHECKED BY FEWER RODENT PREY

Cool, westerly winds sweeping UK over the first 12 days of April, with regular night frosts, prolonged the wintry feel. These conditions further delayed egg-laying among many species, including most dabbling ducks, corvids, thrushes, tits and finches by a few weeks. Warm temperatures and plentiful sunshine but another very dry month, especially in southeast and central England, compounded the drought conditions and populations of Field Vole and

Wood Mouse may have stayed low.

Contributors to the Barn Owl Monitoring Programme reported 'patchy' egg-laying, sometimes three weeks later than in the spring of 2005 (although that was an exceptionally early year).

Tinder-dry habitats sparked off destructive spring fires on coastal grassland, moss, heath and moor. Key fragments of nesting habitat for chats, pipits and Dartford Warblers were lost from Cornwall, Dorset, Hants and the Pennines. Countrywide, extra-limital nesting attempts included Nuthatch, Raven, Eider and Avocet to the north, east, south and west respectively.

GREAT TIT AND PIED FLYCATCHER PROFIT DESPITE MAY DOWNPOURS

Hot southeasterly winds in May swept waves of overshooting vagrants from the Continent, notably Hoopoe, Red-backed Shrike, Woodchat Shrike and Spoonbill: potential colonists, with global warming a reality. Black-winged Stilts settled at Martin Mere Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust Reserve (Lancs), but unfortunately the eggs failed to hatch. Scops Owl summered in the Oxford village of Thrupp, many twitchers homing in on the noddy-bike-like 'bleeping' call, the first 'stayer' since one in Dummer (Hants) in 1980. Elsewhere, Serin, (Portland, Dorset), Bee-eater, (Meon Valley, Hants) and Great Reed Warbler, (Loch of Kinnordy, Tayside) lingered and sang but failed to attract mates.

Tail winds helped sweep delayed Swifts, hirundines, warblers and other migrants back to breeding sites. Birds were quick to lay eggs and only sang briefly, to the frustration of surveyors and nest finders. Parched soils and probably limited invertebrate prey posed problems for many species, including foraging adult corvids, thrushes and Robins. Late-returning Pied Flycatchers found ample free nestboxes. Flash floods from thundery storms in mid May led to

clutch and brood losses for many species including river bank-nesting Kingfisher, Sand Martin, and Common Sandpiper; similarly, Jackdaw, Starling and House Sparrow within buildings, Lapwing, Red Grouse and Skylark on farm and moor. Many, though, had time and energy to repeat nesting.

NIGHTJAR AND SWIFT PROFIT FROM MIDSUMMER SCORCHER

High pressure throughout June gave a very warm month, with temperatures topping 31°C at Weybourne (Norfolk) on 11th; it was the driest and sunniest June since 1995, exceeded only by the famous 1976. Ongoing 'Mediterranean-like' weather in July, as successive heatwaves saw monthly records tumble, topping 36.5°C at Wisley (Surrey) on 19th, had mixed effects on the UK's breeding birds. Moribund exposed broods were reported of Swallow beneath farm barn roofs, House Martin under the eaves of houses, Spotted Flycatcher and Robin in open-fronted nestboxes.

A welcome boost in hither to disappointing volumes of aerial insect 'plankton' helped many Swift to rear broods of 2-3 young. Equally, multi-brooded success stories were reported by nest recorders for Nightjar, Goldfinch, House Martin, Greenfinch, Swallow (2-3), Tree Sparrow, House Sparrow (2, 4 families respectively). Searing heat reduced nesting activity, but by mid July and through August monsoon-like periods gave some relief. Hobbies, House Martins, Stock Doves, Song Thrushes and Yellowhammers continued to rear late broods in some parts of the UK.

For many UK birds, though, a sluggish season, slow to unfold, faded markedly and, for a second successive year, overall production of young appeared to be below average. BTO members' nest record cards and census survey returns will help to quantify the full story.