

BEE-EATERS — THE STARS OF AN UPBEAT BREEDING SEASON

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, outlines how nesting success by Avocet, Bee-eater and Chough will ensure that 2002 figures in bird history books.

ABEJARUCOS – LAS ESTRELLAS DE UNA TEMPORADA REPRODUCTIVA ANIMADA

El biólogo del BTO *David Glue* explica cómo el éxito reproductivo de la avoceta, el abejaruco y la chova piquirroja asegurarán que el 2002 figure en los libros de historia...

The UK's breeding birds in 2002 faced challenges from extremes of weather — premature spring warmth, nullified at times by destructive wind chill, record-breaking summer rains contributing to see-sawing water levels, torrid mid-summer heat triggering monsoon-like tropical downpours — it was all there. In spite of this there were reports of Hen Harrier, Cormorant, Avocet and Roseate Tern nesting for the first time in Cornwall, Bucks, Hants & Cheshire and Cleveland respectively. Raucous young Peregrines upset cathedral choral evensong at Chichester, Sussex and healthy populations of Short-eared Owls were bolstered by a peak in vole prey (Borders Region).

Such events were countered by stories of many bedraggled Mute Swan cygnets drowning (River Thames, Oxford), a Little Tern colony destroyed by vandals (Great Yarmouth, Norfolk) and auk, tern and Kittiwake chicks starving through a shortage of sand-eels (Shetland).

GREY HERON AND STONECHAT SPURRED ON BY SPRING HEAT

BTO nest recorders and surveyors ventured forth

with greater expectations in spring 2002, following the somewhat poor breeding season for many species in 2001 (*BTO News* 237, 239). Survival and breeding chances were enhanced by a very mild, if cheerless March, with a dominant cloudy southwesterly airstream. This prompted a premature return of seabirds to coastal ledges and waders to inland wetlands. Conditions favoured a surge in egg-laying by grebes, dabbling ducks, doves and thrushes, with noteworthy clutches started by Canada Goose, Raven, Stonechat and Woodlark by mid-month.

Tail winds hastened the return of some spring migrants, including earliest ever Swallow, Grasshopper Warbler and Cuckoo to the Northern Isles during the third week. The swiftest yet Osprey also reached the Loch of Lowes (Perth) on the 19th but, sadly, the famous Loch Garten (Highland) site was unoccupied after a sequence of 43 years.

Early breeding promise was enhanced during a gloriously dry, and initially settled, April with temperatures climbing to 25°C. Broods of Grey Heron, Egyptian Goose, Woodcock, Mistle Thrush and Dipper fledged during the third week.

SAND MARTIN, REDSHANK AND TITS SATURATED BY SPRING RAINS

Yet again, with spring seemingly well set, a swift shift to inclement, unsettled weather from late April depressed much nesting activity. Torrential deluges, strong winds and a sharp drop in temperatures all played a part in heavy losses among tree-nesting corvids, doves, finches, Red Kite and Long-eared Owl. The strong winds, combined with freak high spring tides, decimated first clutches of saltmarsh nesting gulls, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Meadow Pipit and Reed Bunting along south and west coasts.

The relatively sunless, damp theme dominated May (one of wettest for a century). Adult Great Tits, Nuthatches and Great Spotted Woodpeckers resorted to ground feeding with the scarcity of caterpillars. Fortunately frosts were rare. Summer visitors filtered through erratically (as charted by BTO Migration Watch), helped by warm southerly winds during 15–17th, with temperatures reaching 27°C in West London.

On the debit side, Cuckoo, were in short supply, along with many of their primary hosts (Reed Warbler excepted), while Willow Warbler numbers dipped sharply in places, part of a worrying decline (*BTO News* 233, 239). Redstart, Tree Pipit, Wood Warbler and Yellow Wagtail were reported as lost or clinging-on to certain south-central and Midland counties. Encouragingly, Marsh Harrier, Little Egret, Woodlark and Cetti's Warbler further extended the northern limits of their previous breeding range.

CONTINENTAL CELEBRITIES LIVE! AN UNSETTLED JUNE

The nesting season stuttered along through a contrary June. Again, most western districts were very wet. Lengthy thundery downpours, often with damaging hail, from slow-moving fronts, brought flash flooding. Nests of Sand Martins, Kingfishers and waders were swamped, saturated broods of Mute Swans, Hen Harriers and Nightjars were left chilled and moribund. Hot spells in the south, followed by tropical humidity, with temperatures topping 29°C in Norwich (Norfolk), triggered a spate of nest building and egg laying by warblers, House Martins and Swifts. Those monitoring nest

boxes reported many partial or complete brood losses among tits and Pied Flycatchers.

Scotland basked in heat around 5–7th, when conifer forests buzzed with mobile Siskin family parties, while newly fledged young appeared at garden feeders to the south. Redpoll also fared well, with nesting pairs spilling over on to commons and farmland scrub. Wryneck (Isles of Scilly), Great Reed Warbler (Surrey) and Rustic Bunting (East Lothian), Savi's Warbler and Common Rosefinch (various localities) all sang strongly, but failed to attract mates. The wild pair of Choughs in Cornwall, considered from arrival pattern and nesting habits to be of Brittany origin, were the first to breed in the county since 1952.

The breeding highlight of 2002, though, was the much-watched pair of Bee-eaters at Middleham Quarry (Co Durham), only the second successful UK attempt, following that at Street (East Sussex) in 1955. Three young fledged from a clutch of five eggs on 24 August, two surviving to fly south with their parents.

SIZZLING MID SUMMER HEAT TOO LATE FOR SWIFT AND HOBBY

A cool first half to July limited aerial insect food supplies, which was reflected by small hirundine and warbler broods. Many Hobbies, Nightjars and Swifts raised only single young. Osprey (Cumbria), Goosander (Hants) and Sedge Warbler (Shetland) each bred successfully for only the second occasion in modern times. Conditions changed dramatically in the last two days of July, when hot subtropical air brought a succession of mini heat waves, with fierce electrical storms, torrential deluges. This spilled over into early August, when sizzling temperatures topped 32.6°C at Northolt (West London), resulting in substantial losses among open-nesting waterfowl, finches and buntings. Nonetheless, late summer warmth helped Little Grebes, Moorhens, Barn Owls, Goldfinches and Tree Sparrows to rear second broods, Stock Doves, Song Thrushes, Greenfinches and Yellowhammers, tended third and subsequent families into September.

Overall, most observers charted another breeding season of mixed fortunes, with modest productivity, though an improvement on 2001.