

LATE FINISHERS AND EARLY STARTERS

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, describes how a mild autumn and winter, led to late and early nesting activity among UK birds.

TARDONES Y TEMPRANEROS

El biólogo investigador del BTO *David Glue* describe cómo un otoño e invierno suaves han dado lugar a actividad de nidificación tardía y temprana en aves del Reino Unido.

BTO volunteers charted a more productive breeding season for most resident and migrant species in 2002 compared with 2001. The early signs for 2003 are very hopeful.

INDIAN SUMMER HELPS LATE NESTERS

A pleasantly changeable midsummer mix of weather in 2002 prolonged the breeding season for many. Observations from nestbox monitoring revealed the latest ever free-flying broods of Little Owl, Great Tit and Pied Flycatcher, a result of repeat layings. The warm, dry Indian summer heat in September saw successful late breeding by a number of species. Arguably, 'Nestbox of the Year' was at Treswell Wood (Notts), which successfully disgorged its final brood, Tawny Owl spring twins, which were followed by one, two and two young Stock Dove respectively (pers. comm. Chris du Feu).

BLACKBIRD AND ROBIN EXPLOIT NEW YEAR WARM SPELLS

Nesting activity continued low key during a mild, if very wet December. Most reports involved Woodpigeon and Feral Pigeon,

though there were some surprises. The BTO Barn Owl Monitoring Programme showed that, after a flying start in spring 2002, pairs were egg-laying a fortnight earlier than normal. About 10% of the monitored birds produced late clutches, with successes in November (Lincs, Sussex and Notts) and even December 2002, defying unfavourable hunting conditions. One unrivalled pair raised broods of four and nine young near Peterborough (Cambs).

Breeding activity was checked in mid December, as arctic air brought sharp frosts on 18–19th. Then over the Christmas week, unseasonably warm air lifted temperatures to a balmy 15°C in sheltered South Devon and North Wales, prompting a scatter of nesting attempts into the New Year. Early breeding activity involved Golden Eagle, Raven, Ring-necked Parakeet, Nuthatch and tits. Nesting was invariably in the shelter of suburbia and rural hamlets, with egg-laying and active young of Mallard (Herts, Central London), Robin (York, Leicester) and Blackbird (Southampton, Surrey, Pembroke) being reported from parks, shopping malls, allotments and hospital grounds.

A raw northerly chill from 3–11 January 2003, when frosts dipped to -18°C at Aviemore

(Highland), destroyed most early nesting attempts. However, record high monthly temperatures in the third week, with temperatures topping 18°C at Aboyne (Grampian), prompted the first Tawny Owl clutches and broods, from Cheshire, Gwent, Nottingham and Aberdeen (see Box). This activity was fuelled by plentiful Field Voles and Wood Mice, which were in part a product of a bumper beech mast crop.

VALENTINE'S DAY CHILL FRUSTRATES RESIDENTS AND WINTER VISITORS

Frustratingly, temperatures see-sawed violently during February, although overall it was drier and sunnier than normal. Early blizzards and widespread snowfall extended southwards into London suburbs, followed by a destructive raw easterly chill around St Valentine's Day.

The recovery of 14 dead Wrens, crammed into a single roosting 'pouch' near Church Stretton (Shrops) was a chilling find. Similarly, emaciated and oiled corpses, and ailing birds, including Little Auk, Puffin, Snipe, Water Rail, Goldcrest and Waxwing, were reported from the BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey, or were passed to the BTO's Ringing Unit or Natural History Museum (Tring). Fortunately, the wintry episodes were short-lived and the absence of lengthy lying snow and penetrating frosts helped the survival prospects of unusual over-wintering Ring Ouzel (Derbys), Whinchat (Bucks), Dusky Warbler (Suffolk), Yellow-browed Warbler, Little Stint, Whimbrel and Spoonbill (various sites). High numbers of voles will have supported larger than usual numbers of Short-eared Owls, Long-eared Owls and Great Grey Shrikes.

By the end of the month, 13 nesting species had been reported (five fewer than this stage in 2002). This included egg-laying by Egyptian Goose (Southeast), Moorhen (Gloucs), Starling (Co Cork) and Mistle Thrush (Hereford). The largest UK winter influx and dispersal of

Bitterns in modern times apparently led to only a few extra booming males.

MARCH HEAT HELPS RESIDENTS AND SPRING MIGRANTS

March roared in on a mild southwesterly airflow, prompting a spate of egg-laying as some resident species, including Grey Heron, Robin, thrushes and Rook played 'catch-up' in the first week. Some noteworthy cases were Cormorant (Isles of Scilly), Dipper (Gwent) and Lapwing (Bucks). Migrants, including Stone Curlew (Breckland, 3rd), Sandwich Tern (Anglesey, 16th) and Ring Ouzel (Durham 17th), were quickly noted back at traditional breeding sites by contributors to BTO/BirdWatch Ireland *Migration Watch*.

Record wintering numbers of Avocet and Mediterranean Gulls in certain counties have led to welcome extra breeding pairs. Peregrines, happily nesting atop Battersea Power Station since 2001, were joined by further pairs prospecting in London. The UK Peregrine Survey 2002 had showed an increasing use of man-made structures, notably ecclesiastical buildings, bridges, chimneys, warehouses, pylons and, most intriguingly, trees. In a similar fashion, Raven, having claimed Chester Cathedral, showed interest in further 'artificial' structures as nest sites, along with trees and quarries, enhancing prospects of their range extension yet farther eastwards in 2003.

With high pressure anchored over the UK midmonth, temperatures climbed to 19°C at Aberystwyth (Dyfed) by St Patrick's Day. Warm, glorious sunshine, leaf bud burst, and increased aerial insect food supplies led to a surge in egg-laying of many species, including grebes, dabbling duck, rails, some plovers and corvids, alongside Woodcock (Wilts), Long-eared Owl (Derbys) and Woodlark (Surrey) in the third week.

As in 2002, we look set for a possibly productive breeding season.

EARLY EGG-LAYING TAWNY OWLS

When long-time BTO Nest Recorders, Bryan Perkins and Colin Lythgoe, undertook the annual spring-clean of their nestboxes in Quakers Coppice, Crewe (Cheshire) on 27 February, they were surprised to be confronted by a large fledgling Tawny Owl and remains of two other chicks (fratricide is regular in this species). By 3 March the fledged owlet was found happily roosting alongside two older siblings and an adult in woodland nearby.

Back-calculation, based upon observations made, suggested that a clutch of five eggs, laid during the unseasonably mild spell between Christmas 2002 and the New Year, produced five hatchlings, three surviving to leave the nestbox.

Meanwhile, Julie Stevens of Retford (Notts) had chanced across a large, dazed juvenile Tawny Owl road casualty. A nearby nestbox was found to be holding another three young. Local owl expert, Derick Scott, considered that the road casualty was fit for release and was the result of an egg laid around 6–9 January.

Several further clutches were started before the close of January (see above). Tawny Owls adjust their breeding season around an often fickle food supply but such exceptionally early clutches are rare. The bulk of clutches are normally laid in late March, so that foraging parents can satisfy developing young in early May on an ephemeral crop of larger mammalian prey. Just occasionally, as in Winter 2002/03, a super-abundant food supply and mild weather overrides this time-table. In Autumn 2002, a huge crop of beech mast and other woodland fruits, fuelled locally high populations of rodent prey, enabling Tawny Owls to take the advantage via early egg-laying. *David Glue*

BTO NEST RECORD SCHEME

Completed Nest Record Cards for nests encountered are valued by the BTO. For a free starter pack please contact: Peter Beaven, at BTO Thetford HQ.