

WHITE STORK FAILS TO DELIVER

DAVID GLUE

*British Trust for Ornithology
The National Centre for Ornithology
The Nunnery, Thetford
Norfolk, IP24 2PU, United Kingdom*

Intriguing New Year breeding successes, exciting range extensions, and productive nestbox projects: all features of an upbeat 2004 breeding season, outlined by BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*.

LA CIGÜEÑA BLANCA NO CUMPLE

Intrigantes éxitos reproductivos en Año Nuevo, excitantes extensiones de rango, y productivos proyectos con cajas nido: características de una temporada 2004 muy animada, resumida por el biólogo del BTO *David Glue*.

Following the relatively poor breeding season for many species in 2003 (*BTO News* 249), it is pleasing to outline a more productive current season for many of the UK's breeding birds. The early breeding events were reported in *BTO News* 252.

MANDARIN AND STONE CURLEW OCCUPY FRESH HAUNTS

A dull, wet April was tempered by regular warmth, 1–2°C above average. Attempts by a pair of White Stork to breed in the Calder Valley, west of Wakefield (West Yorks) atop a hastily erected pole and pallet, substituting for an electricity pylon, led to frustration and failure. They carried Continental rings, the female fitted near Lille (France) and male at Mechelen (Belgium).

Wandering birds elsewhere in the UK suggest that the first successful breeding, since that on St Giles' Cathedral (Edinburgh) in 1416, may not be far away. The naturally recolonising Chough, on the Lizard peninsula (Cornwall) were more successful with four young hatched in this, the third year.

Periodic heavy rains mid month and during the last week, with flash-flooding in the Severn Complex and northeast, led to locally heavy losses among nesting duck, Black-headed Gull, plovers and Reed Bunting. Sadly, yet another spring buildup of water in the Ouse Washes washed out a nationally significant population of more than 1,000 pairs of waders, including Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe and Blacktailed Godwit.

Stone Curlew fared better in Breckland and Wessex populations, with signs that a 'dumbell' distribution may form via the Ridgeway counties. Warm spells in the final week, with temperatures touching 23°C in London on 24th, saw a surge in reported active nests of dabbling duck, tits, thrushes and finches. Those checking nestboxes were delighted to find Goosander (Devon, Montgomery), Mandarin (Bucks, Hants) and Black Redstart (Birmingham). Among spring migrants, Chiffchaff and Blackcap maintained their recent strength, Yellow Wagtail and Tree Pipit reappeared in improved numbers but Cuckoo were again woefully few in parts.

WARM MAY SUITS OWLS, TITS AND FLYCATCHERS

May was the driest such month since 1998 and the warmest and sunniest since 1991. Consistent comfortable heat, moist soils and clear blue skies favoured early nesting residents and summer visitors alike. Daily temperatures 1–2°C above average in all regions, topping 25°C in Greater London on 24th, boosted aphid, caterpillar and midge prey. The mercury dipped to –4°C at Kinbrace (Sutherland) early on 27th, but fortunately the spring remained largely frost-free (unlike 2003).

Tits survived the winter in modest numbers and average sized clutches were laid. Fledging success though was generally high, with relatively few broods of Great Tit, Blue Tit, Long-tailed Tit and Pied Flycatcher predated by weasel, pine marten, wood mouse or Great Spotted Woodpecker, in contrast with the previous season. Checking nestboxes in rampant vegetation was hard work, but lush grass growth resulted in plenty of prey that fuelled egg-laying Buzzards, Kestrels, Tawny Owls and Long-eared Owls.

Progressively drier conditions, especially in western parts, checked some invertebrate numbers and limited mud for nest building supplies, but rain-bearing Atlantic fronts from the 28th relieved matters.

A warm first-half to June, with temperatures topping the 30°C mark, helped Swallow, Dipper, Pied Wagtail and Spotted Flycatcher to fledge first broods and to lay repeat clutches. Delighted homeowners in Liss Forest (Hants), Great Gaddesden (Herts) and Church Stretton (Shrops) attracted families of Siskins to feeders.

Elsewhere, onlookers in Chichester (Sussex), inner city Gloucester and Nottingham, watched nesting Peregrine. Melodious Warbler (Cornwall), Icterine Warbler (Suffolk) and Great Reed Warbler (Essex) sang well but failed to attract mates, Spotted Crake, Serin and Common Rosefinch in new haunts proved successful.

OSPREY AND HOBBY CHECKED BY MIDSUMMER RAINS

Winds veered to the north on 17th June, introducing sharp showers and a cooler theme, revitalizing parched soils and drying waterbodies. The period mid-June to mid-July proved the chilliest since 1981 (daily temperatures 0.7°C below average) but many thrushes, Robins, Wrens, hirundines, chats and pipits reared successive broods. Avocet, Little Egret and Mediterranean Gull made significant range extensions, chiefly to the northeast, inland, and south coast populations respectively. A record-breaking ‘autumnal’ low, crossed southern parts on 7/8th, with torrential rains and winds to 50 knots. Crown-heavy trees were uprooted, with young Grey Heron, Cormorant, Osprey, Hobby and doves reported lost, as well as swamped broods of ground-nesting divers, Merlin, Hen Harrier and Nightjar, among others. Some Barn Owl young starved, but the Barn Owl Monitoring Programme reported modest numbers of free-flying youngsters, eclipsing the grim season 2003 (*pers com.* Colin Shawyer, Peter Beaven).

Seabirds, as ever, enjoyed mixed fortunes, but ‘catastrophic’ stories from northern sites dominated. Initially east coast mixed colonies, including Sandwich Tern and Little Tern, were decimated at the chick stage by tidal storm surges. Longterm nest-recorder Eric Meek, on Orkney, described “the worst season in living memory”, with thousands of Guillemot, Shag and Kittiwake missing from traditional ledges. Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua and Great Skua were inactive, while starving chicks were a feature. Debate centred around climate change and a northward shift of plankton and fish prey to warmer waters. Gannet provided one bright spot, 14 pairs occupying the UK’s newest colony on The Noup, Westray. On land, healthy nestbox broods of Great Tit, Pied Flycatcher and Nuthatch in the third week of July, reflected repeat layings and second brood successes. Gathering heat in late July, temperatures clipping 30°C at the month’s end (Cardiff), boosted aerial insect supplies, enabling martins, Spotted Flycatcher and Nightjar, among others, to fledge late broods in August, before nesting activity wound down in torrential midsummer rains, the wettest August since 1956.