

## TESTING SEASON BECKONS FOR UK'S BREEDING BIRDS

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BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, chronicles the limited early nesting activity among Britain and Ireland's birds in 2006.

UNA TEMPORADA DE RETOS PARA LAS AVES REPRODUCTORAS DEL REINO UNIDO

El investigador *David Glue* del BTO relata el lento inicio de la actividad anidadora en el Reino Unido e Irlanda en 2006

### BARN OWL AND GREENFINCH CLOSE SUB-STANDARD SEASON

The mild 2004/05 winter was characterised by an exceptional glut of woodland foods (notably berries, beech mast and conifer seeds). Many resident species survived in high numbers and in good condition. Unfortunately, late frosts in May and early June checked the available invertebrate food and led to heavy losses of broods of many resident species.

Summer migrant numbers were down, partly a result of cold weather in North Africa and Iberia. Added to this, sizzling heat and unsettled weather in late June and July led to parched habitats and reduced breeding success of many species.

Few birds took advantage of late summer heat in September and October and surreal sub-tropical conditions in early November (warmest first half since 1993). The elements helped late families of Great Crested Grebe (Abingdon, Oxon) and Song Thrush (Matlock, Derby), and a scattering of House Martin, Swallow and Stock Dove with late broods. Similarly, Barn Owl incubating clutches (south Lincs) and Greenfinch with third broods (Hitchin, Herts) in mid October, were rather unusual for a 2005

season that had promised so much but failed to deliver (*BTO News* 261, 263).

### COLD SNAPS AND EMPTY WILD FOOD LARDER LIMIT MIDWINTER BREEDING

High pressure anchored over the UK from 14 November produced the sunniest November on record, but temperatures plunged overnight, to as low as  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The second half of November was the coldest since 1993 and nesting operations were effectively terminated. With damaging wind chill and depleted rodent numbers, Barn Owl, Little Owl, Kestrel and Buzzard increasingly resorted to roadside hunting and scavenging for kills. Shrivelled fruits of bramble and elder (a product of the dry summer) were swiftly consumed, while conifer seeds and berries of hawthorn, holly, rowan, among others, were in short supply. Chaffinch, Brambling, Blackbird, Woodpigeon and modest numbers of tits (reflecting the tardy breeding season) rapidly resorted to birdtable fare. A severe shortage of beech mast and acorns saw Mistle Thrush and Jay highly mobile. Groups of 62 Mistle Thrushes (Radnor) and 35 Jays (Bucks)

were reported.

Conditions generated a striking influx of Hawfinches and modest numbers of Waxwing. Most Redwings and Fieldfares quickly passed through berryless hedges and woods, moving south and west, few pausing in gardens to exploit windfall apples. Temperatures 0.4°C below average by day in December reflected an uncomfortable mix of weather for birds and humans. Warm, dry conditions over Christmas brought widespread reports from Garden BirdWatch (GBW) participants of juvenile Woodpigeons and Collared Doves at birdtables in suburbia. However, temperatures plunged from Boxing Day, to a bone-chilling -12.8°C at Aviemore in Inverness-shire, with snow on high ground short-term. Birds took the strain with ailing, moribund gulls, Song Thrush and finches noted at GBW feeding stations. None-the-less, shorelines remained effectively ice-free. Overwintering Whimbrel and Common Sandpiper, Spoonbill and Avocet (all in southwest England), Forster's Tern and Lesser Yellowlegs (both in Co Cork), among others, survived. Unseasonal midwinter nesting attempts, by waterfowl, owls and thrushes, an eye-catching feature of the previous two years, remained rare.

#### ROBIN AND RAVEN JILTED BY VALENTINE'S DAY PROMISE

The New Year's weather was regularly influenced by continental high pressure systems and January temperatures were the coldest since 2001. Fortunately, the UK largely avoided the bitter freeze in central and Eastern Europe. In UK, a timely mild southwesterly airflow in the third week produced spring-like temperatures. Conditions prompted a scattering of nesting attempts: Mallard, Romsey (Hants), Harlow (Essex), Moorhen, River Severn (Gloucester), Collared Dove and Woodpigeon (several sites)

attending young; Robin, Lockerbie (Dumfries), Starling (Worcester) and House Sparrow, Jedburgh (Borders) with active nests.

Under bright blue skies in a dry end to January (sunniest second half since 1994), tits, Mandarin, Tawny Owl and Ring-necked Parakeet were reported nest claiming, while Goshawk, Red Kite, Golden Eagle, spotted woodpeckers and Crossbill were busy displaying. A blast of Siberian air in the final two days once again stemmed nesting activity.

February maintained the generally cold theme, often wintery with snowy episodes. By Valentine's Day just eight species with active nests containing eggs or young had been reported to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme (compared to 17 and 18 species in 2004 and 2005 respectively). Highlights mid month included broods of Mistle Thrush atop a traffic light, Barnsley (South Yorks) and Blackbird in a motorway service station, Wirral (Cheshire); elsewhere, clutches were started by Dipper (Gwent), Raven (Beds), Wren (Essex) and Collared Dove (several localities) in the third week. Limited early breeding activity in the UK was made more difficult by exceptionally parched habitats. February 2006 registered minimal rainfall, a below-average sequence that, for all but two months in hard-hit parts of the southeast, extended back to November 2004. This contributed to retarded leaf development, and reduced invertebrate and insect food supplies. A bitter arctic blast on St David's Day, and the coldest March in a decade, further compounded a tardy start to the 2006 breeding season in UK. Concerns also extended toward the overwintering fortunes of spring migrants in Africa, severe drought continuing to affect much of the continent south of the Sahara.

Data from BTO surveys will assess the impact of some severe weather, both at home and abroad.