

OSPREY AND PEREGRINE AMONG BREEDING SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

DAVID GLUE

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

BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*, describes how contrasting weather conditions contributed to mixed successes among the UK's breeding birds in Year 2001.

AGUILAS PESCADORAS Y HALCONES PEREGRINOS ENTRE LAS ESPECIES A RESALTAR ESTA TEMPORADA REPRODUCTIVA

El biólogo investigador del BTO David Glue describe cómo diferencias en las condiciones meteorológicas contribuyeron a los resultados reproductivos de las aves del Reino Unido en 2001.

Sadly, vital Foot and Mouth restrictions cut through much of the BTO's summer fieldwork, preventing a comprehensive breeding season overview for many species. Nonetheless, preliminary findings from nest recorders, ringers, survey workers and reserve wardens outline some interesting trends in status and nesting success. Worries mount countrywide for depressed breeding populations of Hen Harrier, Capercaillie and Red-necked Phalarope, and more generally for widespread populations of Lapwing, Woodcock, Cuckoo, Willow Tit and Linnet. On an upbeat note, survey workers generally endorse another productive year for some migrants, including Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Whitethroat, residents such as Wren, Robin and Mistle Thrush, and others undergoing long-term decline, including Dunnock, Blackbird and Song Thrush (*BTO News* 235: 10–13).

short duration, with relieving mild interludes (*BTO News* 234: 13). Nonetheless, survey workers, mainly in Scotland and N England, attributed vacant territories, nest sites and local declines for Barn Owl, Bearded Tit, Stonechat, Grey and Pied Wagtails, to severe winter weather. Before the end of March, completed clutches of Peregrine, Raven, Coot and Long-tailed Tit were noteworthy. Similarly, some Barn and Tawny Owls laid eggs, fuelled by locally abundant rodent prey, which in turn benefited from a bumper crop of forest seed, especially beech mast. Elsewhere, high water tables, a result of the wettest winter period on record, had a mixed impact. Devoid of food stocks, some fenland Long-eared Owls failed to breed, while opportunistic Short-eared Owls (NE England) exploited super-abundant rodent prey exposed on dykes.

BEARDED TIT AND STONECHAT AMONG VICTIMS OF COLD WET WINTER

Winter 2000/2001 was the most severe for several years. Fortunately, cold snaps were of

SISKINS AND CROSSBILLS DEFY LATE SPRING CHILL

The coldest April since 1989, with sleet, snow, hail and heavy downpours at times, prolonged the wintery feel. Initially, mild southwesterly

winds helped early migrant warblers, Swallows, Redstarts and Wheatears to display and promptly lay. Northerly winds mid month, though, held back the bulk of summer visitors. Sadly, Tree Pipit, Whinchat and Yellow Wagtail, were lost to further traditional sites. Crossbill, Siskin and Redpoll sang strongly in forests of Central Wales, N England and the Highlands, a rich seed legacy of Scot's pine, sitka and Norway spruce triggering early egg-laying. Family parties were mobile within a month.

Torrential rains from vigorous Atlantic fronts in late April enhanced extra wetland habitat, which was exploited in time by additional Curlew, Snipe and Redshank. High water tables, in tandem with habitat rehabilitation, led to a welcome increase in booming Bittern (30 at 18 sites), similarly Slavonian Grebe (38 pairs up from the low of just 31 pairs in 2000) and, after early season losses, Black-tailed Godwit. Buoyant UK wintering populations of Avocet, Little Egret and Mediterranean Gull were translated into further breeding range extensions.

Some very warm and sunny weather in May favoured many nesting residents and summer visitors alike. Spring migrants flooded back, notably during hot and humid spells from 10–13th and 22nd–30th. Nesting activity was frenetic, song output was intense but frustratingly short. The blend of warm showers and dry interludes suited soil invertebrate gleaning Rooks, Robins, thrushes and Starlings, many fledging bumper broods. All was not rosy, though. Winter-like chill on 17th, and tropical deluges at times, notably during 14–18th and 26–27th, led to chilled, moribund broods of Mute Swans, Grey Herons, ducks, crakes, Song Thrushes and Reed Buntings.

TITS AND PIED FLYCATCHERS STRUGGLE IN COOL EARLY JUNE

A comparatively warm June, and thankfully relatively dry month (driest widely since 1996), was not all good news. In the first half, a cool, fresh showery regime, with northwesterly winds, depressed food supplies of larval insects (especially defoliating caterpillars) at a critical time for many birds such as single-brooded tits, Treecreepers, Nuthatches and Chaffinches. Ground-feeding adult tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, seeking dislodged prey, reflected

the difficulty in finding food. Chilled clutches, partial brood losses and starved families were uncomfortably frequent features among Pied Flycatcher, Blue Tit and Great Tit, with broods lingering in nestboxes as long as 18, 21 and 25 days respectively. Some cold nights, with slight ground frosts locally, and a chilly thundery episode during 11–16th was especially damaging for insect-seeking warblers, pipits and finches. Nests of Kingfisher, Dipper, Sand Martin and wagtails were reported lost in flash floods. Developing high pressure from the 17th, provided a welcome settled respite. Many coastal gulls and terns (including Roseate) enjoyed a productive summer. Baillon's Crake (Kent), Wryneck (Berks), Savi's Warbler (Gloucs) and Common Rosefinch (Northumberland) sang with great promise, but failed to attract mates. Golden Oriole, Spotted Crake and Serin were more successful in fresh sites. Spotted Flycatcher and Reed Warbler returned to breed in Regent's Park (Central London), after a lengthy absence.

HOBBY AND SWIFT THRIVE IN HUMID MID-SUMMER HEAT

From 24–26th June, through July, until late August, the weather was dominated by successive sticky, steamy heatwaves, interspersed with monsoon-like downpours. Many resident and migrant insectivores and seed-eaters profited, raising healthy broods. Raptors were very much to the fore. Osprey returned to breed in England after an absence of more than 200 years, with pairs at Rutland Water (Midlands) and Bassenthwaite Water (Cumbria), each raising single young. Hobby moved further into parkland and built-up areas. Reintroduced Red Kites were observed patrolling farm building environs and village gardens for rodents and carrion. Peregrines turned to yet more cliff-nest substitute structures close to man. Some 30 pairs across the UK nested on churches, cathedrals, pylons, power stations and high-rise flats (Ed Drewitt, and Nick Dickson *BBC Wildlife*, July 2001). Further unexpected nest sites were noted, including Barn Owl in a subterranean mine-shaft (Cornwall), Little Owl using a chalk pit rabbit burrow (Bucks), Red-legged Partridge in a town flower border (Lincs) and Spotted Flycatcher in a hanging basket (Grampian).

As searing heat intensified in late July,

temperatures regularly topping 30°C, broken by cooler autumnal interludes, there was a marked downturn in nesting operations of many species. Late broods of Kestrel, Little Owl, Swift and Great Tit were indicative of the tardy spring. Some Little Ringed Plovers, Nightjars,

Kingfishers, Reed Warblers and Dartford Warblers tended second broods into August and some Swallows, Robins, Stock Doves and Song Thrushes produced third sets of young in early September, bringing to a close a breeding season of mixed fortunes.