

# Trends of scarce and rare breeding birds

While population trends for our common and widespread breeding birds are provided by the BBS (pages 8–13), the scheme is unable to provide trends for the many species with smaller populations and/or restricted ranges. These species, which include some of our greatest conservation priorities, are monitored in a number of different ways, many of them involving bespoke effort to monitor a single species.

Here we summarise the latest information on the status of 60 of our rarest breeding species, drawing on data recorded up to 2014.

These data are mainly provided by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP), an independent body supported by the JNCC, the RSPB and the BTO.

Since 1973, the Panel has collated information from a range of sources, relying mainly on reports of breeding birds by birdwatchers through the county bird recorder network.

The RBBP reports annually on the fortunes of over 80 breeding species, as well as on a range of species that only occasionally attempt to breed in the UK.

Some of these occasional breeders may simply be lost individuals. Others, such as the **little bitterns**, **black-winged stilts** and **bee-eaters** that have bred successfully in recent years, may be the forerunners of colonisation events as these species move north in response to Europe's warming climate.

## Bespoke surveys

For some species, coverage by the RBBP, although informative, is not complete enough to allow robust estimates and trends to be calculated. Bespoke surveys are conducted for some of these species, usually at intervals of either six or 12 years, under the Statutory Conservation Agency and RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme (SCARABBS), or as BTO surveys.

These surveys derive population estimates from either a complete count of the breeding population or a scientifically-robust sample. When carried out more than once using the same or similar methods, population trends over the intervening years between surveys can be calculated.

## Extinction concerns

The rare breeding birds reported on in the table on pages 24–25 include many of our greatest conservation priorities: 20 of them were Red-listed by *Birds of Conservation Concern 3*.

A number of these birds are perilously close to extinction in the UK: one species, the **wryneck**, may already be

extinct, as the last known breeding record was in 2002.

Another bird, the **golden oriole**, has not bred since 2009. However, singing males do occur at a few sites every spring, so there is hope that it may yet recolonise, especially if climate change improves the attractiveness of the south of the UK to this Mediterranean species.

**Red-backed shrikes** appeared to be going the same way, but successful breeding in Devon and the Highlands in recent years gives us some cause for hope.

While **red-backed shrikes** and **wrynecks** were once found breeding across large parts of the UK, other extreme rarities such as **purple sandpipers**, **Savi's warblers**, **marsh warblers**, **redwings** and **fieldfares** have never, to the best of our knowledge, been anything more than rare breeders. The UK lies at the edge of their breeding ranges, and so to a certain degree, their fortunes here have been dependent on how they fare elsewhere in Europe, and there is relatively little we can do to help them, other than protect the few pairs that do breed.

### Conservation successes

Elsewhere in this group of rare breeders are those birds for which we believe conservation can have a positive impact, if properly informed, targeted and resourced. Here we can provide a heartening list of conservation successes:

- **Black-throated divers** have benefitted from the provision of nesting rafts, which allow them to breed successfully on the fluctuating waters of hydro-lochs.
- Numbers of **white-tailed eagles** have increased following reintroduction projects in western Scotland (from 1975 to 1985, and 1993 to 1998) and more recently in eastern Scotland (2007 to 2012). In 2015, 99 years after the species became extinct in the UK, the breeding population exceeded 100 pairs.
- **Marsh harriers** have recovered from the low of a single breeding male in 1971 to in

excess of 350 pairs spread across much of southern England, west to Wales and north to Scotland. This recovery is thanks to the banning of organochlorine pesticides, a reduction in persecution and the creation of new freshwater wetland habitat.

- **Red kites** are now a familiar sight across much of the UK due, largely, to reintroduction projects from 1989 onwards. The population is now thought to be in excess of 2,500 pairs.
- **Ospreys** have recovered steadily to over 200 pairs, following natural recolonisation of Scotland in the 1950s. Breeding resumed in England in 2001 and in Wales in 2004.
- **Corncrake** numbers are now at their highest since population monitoring began, although a severe dip in 2013 caused by cold spring weather gave cause for concern. The population

remains largely restricted to the Western Isles of Scotland, a small fraction of its former range.

- As with **corncrakes**, **stone-curlews** were badly hit by the cold spring of 2013. However, conservation effort over three decades has enabled this species to recover slowly, aided by the improved management of semi-natural grassland and intensive work to protect and provide habitat for pairs on arable farmland.
- **Red kite** and **woodlark** numbers have increased to the extent that, despite some regional declines for the **woodlark**, these species are no longer reported on by the RBBP.

This list is just a sample of the good news stories – elsewhere in this report we touch on other partnership conservation projects that have delivered success for species such as **bitterns**, **cranes** and **curl buntings**.



Dean Bricknell (rspb-images.com)

**Ospreys have recovered steadily to more than 200 pairs**

## Scarce and rare breeding birds

### Work still to do

That said, there is much yet to be done if many species are to recover to the levels of abundance seen just a few decades ago, and there are a number for which the corner has not yet been turned. In Scotland, concerted effort on **capercaillie** may have halted a steep decline and prevented it from going extinct in the UK for

a second time, but the species remains at perilously low levels. Both **common scoters** and **Slavonian grebes** have declined in recent years; research is ongoing to identify the causes.

The table below draws on the best sources of information, whether from the RBBP or

dedicated species surveys (note that some species are covered by both).

Where possible, we have given trends for the most recent 25 years, but in many cases different trend periods (some considerably shorter than 25 years) are used.

### Trends in scarce and rare breeding birds in the UK

Species <sup>1</sup>	Population estimate <sup>2</sup>	Trend (% change)	Trend source and period <sup>3</sup>	BOCC <sup>4</sup>
Whooper swan	23	1,457	RBBP	
Pintail	30	38	RBBP	
Garganey	89	80	RBBP	
Pochard	653	207	RBBP	
Common scoter	52 <sup>(2007)</sup>	-60	RBBP	
Goldeneye	200 <sup>(APEP)</sup>	72	RBBP	
Quail	839	443	RBBP	
Black grouse	5,100 <sup>(2005)</sup>	-80	SCARABBS (1991/92–2005)	
Capercaillie	1,300 <sup>(2009/10)</sup>	-42	SCARABBS (1992/93/94–2009/10)	
Red-throated diver	1,300 <sup>(2006)</sup>	38	SCARABBS (1994–2006)	
Black-throated diver	220 <sup>(2006)</sup>	16	SCARABBS (1985–2006)	
Bittern	153 <sup>(2015)</sup>	660	Annual monitoring (1990/94–2011/15)	
Little egret	816	Large increase	RBBP	
Slavonian grebe	27	-62	Annual surveys	
Black-necked grebe	51	59	RBBP	
Honey buzzard	43	634	RBBP	
Red kite	1,600	2,000+	RBBP	
White-tailed eagle	106 <sup>(2015)</sup>	760	Annual surveys	
Marsh harrier	351	770	RBBP	
Hen harrier	630 <sup>(2010)</sup>	15	SCARABBS (1988/89–2010)	
Montagu's harrier	13	42	RBBP	
Goshawk	469	336	RBBP	
Golden eagle	440 <sup>(2003)</sup>	5	SCARABBS (1982–2003)	
Osprey	206	397	RBBP	
Merlin	1,100 <sup>(2008)</sup>	94	SCARABBS (2008)	
Hobby	2,800 <sup>(APEP)</sup>	284	RBBP	
Peregrine	1,505 <sup>(2014)</sup>	5	SCARABBS (1992–2014)	
Spotted crane	28 <sup>(2012)</sup>	189	RBBP	
Corncrake	1,311 <sup>(2014)</sup>	75	Annual surveys	
Crane	19	1,800	RBBP	
Stone-curlew	390	244	Annual surveys	
Avocet	1,747	470	RBBP	
Little ringed plover	1,200 <sup>(2007)</sup>	80	Surveys (1984–2007)	
Dotterel	423 <sup>(2011)</sup>	-57	SCARABBS (1987/88–2011)	
Whimbrel	300 <sup>(2009)</sup>	> -50	Surveys (1995–2007)	

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Black-tailed godwit	59	8	RBBP	
Ruff	8	-62	RBBP	
Purple sandpiper	1	-42	RBBP	
Red-necked phalarope	34	117	RBBP	
Green sandpiper	3	Increase	RBBP	
Wood sandpiper	27	621	RBBP	
Mediterranean gull	878	>10,000	RBBP	
Yellow-legged gull	4	Increase	RBBP	
Nightjar	4,600 <sup>(2004)</sup>	114	SCARABBS (1982–2004)	
Wryneck	3	-65	RBBP	
Golden oriole	3	-89	RBBP	
Red-backed shrike	4	-60	RBBP	
Chough	394 <sup>(2014)</sup>	-1	SCARABBS (1982–2014)	
Firecrest	687	966	RBBP	
Bearded tit	533	48	RBBP	
Woodlark	3,100 <sup>(2006)</sup>	1,086	SCARABBS (1986–2006)	
Cetti's warbler	2,000	668	RBBP	
Dartford warbler	3,200 <sup>(2006)</sup>	663	SCARABBS (2006)	
Savi's warbler	5	-71	RBBP	
Marsh warbler	9	-73	RBBP	
Ring ouzel	5,332 <sup>(2012)</sup>	-72	Atlas & SCARABBS (1988/91–2012)	
Fieldfare	3	-39	RBBP	
Redwing	13	-74	RBBP	
Black redstart	53	-53	RBBP	
Cirl bunting	860 <sup>(2009)</sup>	629	SCARABBS (1989–2009)	

- 1 Trends for three rare breeding seabirds – **Arctic skuas**, **roseate terns** and **little terns** – are presented on page 34.
- 2 Population estimates are based on the most recent survey results (with the year of origin in parentheses), or means of RBBP or annual survey totals from the five years 2009–2013. For species for which RBBP totals may underestimate numbers, we have used alternative estimates from the Avian Population Estimates Panel (Musgrove, *et al.* (2013) *British Birds 106: 64–100*). For those well-monitored species with increasing populations, we have used the most recently available year of data. Numbers are pairs, territories or units which are likely to be equivalent to breeding pairs, although do not necessarily equate to successful breeding attempts; for example, there has been no known breeding by **wrynecks** since 2002. The estimate for **capercaillie** is individuals counted in the winter.
- 3 RBBP and annual survey trends are five-year means calculated for a 25-year period between 1984–1988 and 2009–2013. The trend periods for those species covered by periodic surveys, such as under SCARABBS, are given. RBBP trends for **common scoters** and **spotted crakes** have been given despite SCARABBS coverage, as they allow a 25-year trend to be given rather than just 12 years between surveys. Species that have colonised the UK since the start of the 25 year period cannot have percentage figures calculated, so we have just noted that an increase has occurred.
- 4 Note that new assessments of conservation status will be published in December 2015, in *Birds of Conservation Concern 4*. A number of species referred to in these tables will change status.