

## **A statement on potential disturbance of Rare Breeding Birds – from the Rare Breeding Birds Panel**

**By nature of their rarity, rare breeding birds are vulnerable to disturbance, but to do so deliberately is against the law. Although some species, particularly raptors, are still persecuted by game managers in some areas, there has been an increasing incidence of disturbance by birdwatchers and especially by bird photographers. Although such disturbance may be accidental, inconsiderate or careless behaviour can lead to birds deserting their nests or losing their eggs or young to predators.**

Rare breeding birds inevitably attract attention and interest from a wide range of people, who mostly wish them well. Certainly, most birdwatchers would like to be able to watch rare breeders, since by their nature they are not encountered often and are usually very interesting in their breeding habitat, but most people realise that approaching them is likely to cause harm and don't do so. Some individuals however wish to harm our rare breeders. This might be because they want to kill them (usually raptors on land used for shooting) or because they want to take their eggs or young for personal satisfaction or gain. Other people may not wish to harm them but could do so by behaving irresponsibly. This would include people trying to take photographs of breeding birds from close up, or to photograph nests.

All species of bird are fully protected by law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) but some species are assigned special protection when at the nest – these species are included in Schedule 1 of the Act. Deliberate or reckless disturbance of rare breeding birds thus constitutes wildlife crime.

The issue of disturbance by photographers may be growing, as more people own high quality equipment, which increases the temptation to approach birds, and some who own photographic equipment may not have the field skills to recognise when disturbance is happening. RBBP has a role in that our data can be used to assess the risks to rare breeders of deliberate crime, as well as reckless disturbance. In the 1990s, the RSPB analysed the susceptibility of rare breeding birds to egg collecting and other threats, assessing this against the birds' population sizes, creating a threat index. RBBP data was used to inform the work, and an updated review of this would be welcome. In the last 20 years there have been changes in the status of some rare breeding birds and changes to threats; for example, persecution is still affecting the status and distribution of some raptors, egg collecting has declined, but digital photography threats have increased.

The Rare Breeding Birds Panel maintains the main central repository for rare breeding bird records which come from many individuals across the country: information is held securely and only made available to bona fide users for legitimate reasons. We contribute to national schemes which are aimed at monitoring and conservation – that is why the RBBP exists. In terms of wildlife crime we would always make our information available to the Police or other investigators of potential wildlife crime, though in practice this has rarely happened. We have consulted with RSPB Investigations to produce joint guidelines about how to record birds and behave responsibly, including the role of the bird information services in withholding sensitive information (available on the RBBP website). We condemn deliberate or reckless wildlife crime outright and we encourage birdwatchers recording rare breeders to be vigilant and look out for the activities of those who wish to harm birds.