

# ***Nesting* Egrets?** ***Breeding* Kites?**



***Improving the  
recording of rare  
and non-native  
breeding birds  
in the UK***

Red Kite © T. Cross (www.welshkitetrust.org)

## **Why we need YOUR help**

*Understanding the status, distribution and population trends of our rarest breeding birds, and species introduced to this country, requires high quality information. This has often not been achieved. Many valuable records have never been properly submitted or archived and have been lost forever, seriously hampering conservation work. This guidance suggests recording practices that will produce better quality information about rare breeding birds in the UK.*

**Best Practice Guidance Notes**  
*prepared by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel*



## WHAT ARE RARE BREEDING BIRD RECORDS USED FOR?

The Rare Breeding Bird Panel (RBBP)'s archive of records is the definitive historical record of rare breeding birds in the UK. It is kept confidentially and offers the only way of charting the status and population trends of species too rare to monitor in any other way. In addition, the UK devolved governments have a legal responsibility to monitor and protect birds listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act and Annex I of the EU Birds Directive, especially by designating protected sites. RBBP records contribute towards much of this work.

## SUBMITTING RARE BREEDING BIRD RECORDS

The RBBP collects data on over 160 species of rare and non-native breeding birds in the UK – see the list at [www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk). Records should be sent to the Local Bird Recorder for the area concerned – see the list at [www.britishbirds.co.uk/countyrecorders.htm](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/countyrecorders.htm). This keeps local recorders informed and allows them to place the record in context with their local situation.

## RECORDING RARE BREEDING SPECIES - IDENTIFICATION

The identity of rare or non-native breeding birds must be verified. The British Birds Rarities Committee validates identification of the UK's rarest species and this may include first breeding records. Most local recording groups validate records of other scarce species, using a records committee and local lists. It is important that these systems are used for breeding birds when identification might be an issue, including non-native species when appropriate. Records are only useful when identification and veracity are assured.

## CATEGORIES OF BREEDING EVIDENCE

RBBP classifies records as possible, probable or confirmed breeding, as shown in Box 1 and we urge observers and recorders to make this interpretation. These European Bird Census Council (EBCC) categories have been used in most breeding bird atlases. Many breeding categories are self-evident, but others require care; for some rare species, experts should be consulted and RBBP can help with this.



CAPERCAILLIE © D. Dugan

## BOX 1. EUROPEAN BIRD CENSUS COUNCIL BREEDING CATEGORIES

Always use these – see the comments to help interpretation.

*Please note that for many rare species it will be necessary to hold a licence under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act (as amended) to establish some of these breeding activities (see RBBP website for list of species).*

### POSSIBLE BREEDING

#### H. Species observed in breeding season in suitable nesting habitat

*This can be a problematic category, and relies on significant judgement by observers and local recorders.*

*We suggest the following guidelines:*

- Consider carefully what is likely to be 'suitable' or 'possible' breeding habitat. In many cases this will be clear, but for some, especially non-native birds, it may not be. Be cautious rather than optimistic.
- 'Suitable' habitat may vary according to where in the country a record comes from.
- Historical breeding records in the area may guide this judgement, but range expansions should also be considered.
- Discussions with the local recorder can help agree whether habitat is suitable, so good communication is desirable.

#### S. Singing male present (or breeding calls heard) in breeding season

- This must include an assessment of whether the habitat is suitable for breeding.
- Consider the most probable situation, and be cautious. Is the bird likely to be a migrant? Even a singing male may well not breed. However, if song persists for over 7 days, see 'T - Permanent territory presumed' below. Many potential rare breeders are also scarce migrants. If they are reported through local recording channels, it will be possible retrospectively to extract records from bird reports if at some stage breeding, or a colonisation, takes place.

### PROBABLE BREEDING

#### P. Pair observed in suitable nesting habitat in breeding season

**T. Permanent territory presumed through registration of territorial behaviour (song etc.) at the same place, on at least two dates separated by at least one week.** Consider possibility of an unpaired male when recording 'probable' breeding using this criterion.

**D. Courtship/display** (judged to be in or near potential breeding habitat; be cautious with wildfowl.)

**N. Visiting probable nest site**

**A. Agitated behaviour or anxiety calls from adults**

**I. Brood patch on adult examined in the hand**

**B. Nest building or excavating nest-hole**

### CONFIRMED BREEDING

**DD. Distraction-display or injury feigning** (make sure no confusion with courtship display or low-levels of agitation).

**UN. Used nest or eggshells found** (occupied or laid within period of survey).

**FL. Recently fledged young (nidicolous species) or downy young (nidifugous species).**

Careful consideration should be given to the likely provenance of any fledged juvenile capable of significant geographical movement. Evidence of dependency on adults (e.g. feeding) is helpful. Be cautious, even if the record comes from suitable habitat.

**ON. Adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating occupied nest (including high nests or nest holes, the contents of which can not be seen) or adults seen incubating**

**FF. Adult carrying faecal sac or food for young**

**NE. Nest containing eggs**

**NY. Nest with young seen or heard**

## SITE NAMES AND LOCATIONS

We must be certain where rare birds are nesting; either to a very precise point on the ground, or whether they lie within a protected area or other defined site. The lack of a standard approach to recording locations is a major problem in the proper recording of rare breeding birds in the UK. We urge observers and recorders to adopt the following best practice.

The RBBP strongly recommends that all records of rare breeding birds (especially nests) should be supported by a six-figure grid reference (or more precisely using GPS). This is the most unambiguous, long-term way of storing locations. This information will always be held securely and not released without strong conservation reasons (to bona fide individuals only). The way in which RBBP uses data is set out in its Data Access Policy (see RBBP website or contact the Secretary for more information).

However, if grid references are not used, the simplest way to count rare breeding birds is to divide an area into sites, each being adequately counted (or not) in any one year. We strongly urge county recorders that do not already have lists of standard site names, locations, defined boundaries and alternative names to develop them. Many counties already do this. Such records are easy to handle



GOLDEN ORIOLE © S. McElwee



OSPREY © S. Rae

with computerised methods once the site boundaries have been digitised. Obvious features to name and map include woods, marshes, or designated protected sites.

Site sizes vary and some (e.g. mountains, estuaries) might be large, which could be split into smaller units for convenience. Boundaries may have to be arbitrary but should ideally follow permanent natural features and be sensible for recording without being excessively complicated and detailed. They should be linked to traditionally used names and be acceptable to most birdwatchers. Alternative names should also be noted. In some cases, site boundaries could be defined by grid reference units (e.g. four-figure grid references or sets of 1 km squares). But in every instance there should be no ambiguity about the boundary of an area within which a record falls.

## SITE LOCATION CODES

Often, observers and recorders use 'site codes' for rare breeding species. This is unsatisfactory for long-term recording. An example would be the proliferation of names like 'Site A', 'Site B' etc., when say after 10 years there are 23 sites for that species, sites A and B haven't been occupied for 8 years, and the recorder has changed twice. This would be fine if sites were named or given a grid reference, but with coded sites it becomes confusing. In addition, there is the question of who knows the key to sites, and how well this information is archived. RBBP recommends that codes are not used in the raw, original data. It may be necessary at times to disguise or code

localities when reporting the information in publicly available media, but this should never apply to the original data when submitting to approved and confidential archiving systems.

## ESTABLISHING NUMBERS

Bird numbers can be overestimated when adding up fragmentary evidence at a site across a season. Individuals not nesting may be capable of moving a kilometre or more. Such distances may also separate sequential nesting attempts by the same pair. Ideal counts would use simultaneous records to produce minimum estimates. Over a season, clusters of records in one place can be assumed to belong to one or more pairs or individuals. During territory occupation, it is reasonable to assume that a female (for most species) in another area is a separate bird, but males may range more widely.

If records are spread over time and cover a large area, the only way to obtain a minimum estimate of numbers is to establish a separation distance between records assumed to be of different individuals. Such distances will be species-specific and bigger for more wide ranging species. Detailed guidance should be taken from bird survey manuals if possible, though little is known about some species. See [www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk) for further details.

## NEGATIVE RECORDS AND RECORDING EFFORT

Lack of information about survey effort is another major problem in interpreting records held by RBBP. Collecting negative records would help. Many rare breeding birds are fairly predictable, and often use the same nesting area each year. Best practice should distinguish between apparent absence and a site not being checked. For many species and some



INSH MARSHES © J. Matthews (Inset: SPOTTED CRAKE © C. Donald)

counties/areas, it may be possible to visit and count all regularly used sites each year. Examples of ways of summarising information for a species at an example county site ("Black Moss") are shown below. The three figures (e.g. 0,11,4) are possible, probable and confirmed pairs. The table shows ambiguous phrases on the left and clearer statements which include recording effort on the right.

**Example species, County site example "Black Moss"**

	<b>Ambiguous statements</b>	<b>Unambiguous statements</b>
<b>1999</b>		Not surveyed
<b>2000</b>	No birds recorded	Not surveyed
<b>2001</b>	0	Visited casually, no records
<b>2002</b>	0,0,0	Good count: 0,0,0
<b>2003</b>	0,11,4	Good count: 0,11,4
<b>2004</b>	0,7,2	Partial count: 0,7,2
<b>2005</b>	0,1,0	Visited casually, incidental records: 0,1,0

The important distinctions are between a site not being visited (e.g. 1999, 2000) and a zero record based on known effort (2001, 2002). If there is no comment (1999) it is impossible to tell whether the site was not visited or whether there were no birds that year. Please distinguish a good estimate for the year (2003) from years where effort was less and the total may have been higher (2004) or where only incidental records were received (2005). 'No birds recorded' (2000) is clear about numbers but does not indicate recording effort.

We suggest these standard terms, which, though subjective, are better than other phrases.

**Suggested standard terms**

Not visited	Visited casually: no records	Visited casually: incidental records
	Surveyed - partial count: no records	Surveyed - partial count: x records/pairs
	Surveyed - good count: no records	Surveyed - good count: x records/pairs

'Partial count' means a known site was visited but only partly covered. Terms such as 'no records' or 'no birds seen', without further details, should not

be used, to avoid ambiguity. 'Good count' may be hard to define, but this sort of subjective statement is still helpful.

**SPECIALIST AND PROFESSIONAL ORNITHOLOGISTS**

Many specialist groups such as Raptor Study Groups, or professional ornithologists, adopt high recording standards, but some do not and at times important information may not be passed on, recorded, or archived properly, and so is lost. We urge all specialists and professional ornithologists to ensure that their records follow the guidance in this note and are passed to appropriate recording schemes or local recorders for use in future years.

**LESS SCARCE SPECIES**

Since 1996, the Panel has collated records for some "less scarce" species, to assist government with statutory reporting requirements. However, for some commoner birds such as Gadwall or Little Ringed Plover, this system does not work well because many counties do not produce annual estimates – something that would be very useful. As for rarer species, recording can use 'units', which might be sites or 10 km squares, with an estimate of the numbers of pairs in the breeding categories above and an estimate of the level of effort in each unit. Information from any dedicated surveys, local atlases or study groups should be reported. Using sample areas may reduce the scale of the task for the more widespread species in this category.

**RARE NON-NATIVE BREEDING SPECIES**

The same good practice and recording protocols for native species should apply, though sometimes more caution is needed in interpreting habitat or behaviour because these may be less well understood for non-native birds in the UK. We strongly encourage more recording of potential breeding by the rarer or less well established non-native species (see [www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk) for list), as these are generally very poorly recorded. It is very important to chart the potential colonisation and spread of non-natives because in some cases conservation problems may develop. Please help us to improve information about these birds.

**Much more information about rare non-native breeding birds is needed**



EGYPTIAN GOOSE © J. Dickenson

### WHAT ARE WE AIMING FOR?

We wish to improve the quality of information about rare breeding birds held in the RBBP archive. This dataset is the definitive historical record for the UK and is of great importance for bird conservation. The guidance here will help achieve this.

#### Key messages

- ▶ The identity of rare breeding species must be confirmed at local or national levels as appropriate.
- ▶ European Bird Census Council breeding evidence categories (as adopted by most breeding bird atlases) should always be used.
- ▶ The numbers of breeding birds should be established using methods suitable to each species.
- ▶ Records of a species' absence should be distinguished from absence of information.
- ▶ Grid references and/or precise site names should always be used.
- ▶ Specialist recording groups and professional ornithologists should always adopt these standards.
- ▶ Local bird clubs should make periodic efforts to assess the status of the 'less-scarce' rare breeders in their areas.
- ▶ Non-native breeding birds should be given much greater emphasis in bird recording and the same protocols should apply as for native species.

*We thank you for your help.*



DARTFORD WARBLER © K. Joynes

*The UK Rare Breeding Birds Panel is an independent body, supported by JNCC (for the country statutory nature conservation agencies), RSPB, BTO and ACRE for county recorders. It collates records of rare breeding birds and scarcer non-native breeding species, ensures data are archived properly and are used for conservation. Summary results are published every year. This leaflet is also available on our website: [www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk)*



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