



Rare Breeding Birds in the UK in 2021: report summary table

The 2021 report of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel was published in *British Birds* in November 2023 (Eaton *et al.* 2023) and can be obtained by subscription at www.britishbirds.co.uk; a pdf of the report will be available at www.rbbp.org.uk in due course. The report documents 111 species and races of rare native breeding bird which bred, or showed signs of breeding, in the UK in 2021. In addition, records of 12 rare non-native breeding species are detailed. The tables in this document provide a summary of numbers of these species and races in 2021.

Table 1: UK totals and trends for rare native breeding birds, 2021

.....2021 data.....

Common Name	Breeding population status ¹	Population estimate ²	Estimate source ²	Trend category (25 yr trend unless stated) ³	Trend ³ (%)	Number confirmed breeding pairs	Maximum number breeding pairs	Number sites	Quality of coverage in 2021 ⁴	Notes
Capercaillie	Rare	542 individuals	Wilkinson et al in press	Strong decrease (29 yrs)	-75	-	149	45	Low	Maximum count is of lekking males.
Common Quail	Scarce	426	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-1	2	510	-	High	Similar numbers to 2019 and 2020.
Whooper Swan	Rare	31	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+1,083	24	29	27	Near-complete	Another good year for this increasing species.
Garganey	Rare	117	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-7	16	89	64	High	A fall in numbers to below the long-term average.
Shoveler	Less scarce	1,351	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak increase (10 yrs)	+33	369	1,358	262	High	Numbers reported have crept up slowly since the species was added the RBBP's list in 2006.
Eurasian Wigeon	Rare	216	RBBP 5-yr mean	No trend available	-	69	236	114	Moderate	The highest total reported since the species was added to the RBBP's list in 1996.
Pintail	Very rare	30	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak decrease	-33	6	32	25	Near-complete	A typical year.

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Common Pochard	Scarce	773	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak increase	+56	387	815	177	High	The second highest total since reporting of this species started in 1986; nearly all in England.
Ring-necked Duck	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A female summered at a site in Cornwall.
Greater Scaup	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	6	6	-	A scatter of records from the Outer Hebrides, including a juvenile – could have been locally bred, or an early migrant from elsewhere.
Common Scoter	Rare	52	Eaton et al 2008	Stable	-22	8	36	8	Near-complete	A return to typical monitoring following 2020.
Goldeneye	Rare	200	Woodward et al 2020	No trend available	-	55	93	-	Moderate	Monitoring in Scotland much reduced in recent years; numbers reported now far short of true population.
Red-breasted Merganser	Less scarce	1,565	Humphreys et al 2016	No trend available	-	64	192	106	Low	Only about 10% of the population reported annually.
Great Bustard	Very rare	13	RBBP 5-yr mean	No trend available	-	19	19	1	Near-complete	Five or six birds fledged by 19 nesting females.
Turtle Dove	Less scarce	2,092	Stanbury et al 2023	Strong decrease	-97	-	2,092	-	High	The first national survey, in 2021, produced an estimate of 2,092 territories (95% confidence limits 1,559-2,782).
Corncrake	Scarce	909	Wotton et al 2015	Strong increase	+113	-	871	-	Near-complete	The lowest total reported since 2003.
Spotted Crake	Very rare	22	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak decrease	-35	0	46	12	High	A spike in numbers, owing to a remarkable influx at the Lower Derwent Valley in Yorkshire.
Baillon's Crake	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	One bird singing in Lincolnshire.
Common Crane	Rare	53	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+1,653	55	76	47	Near-complete	Another record total.
Pied-billed Grebe	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A single male bird, resident since 2014.
Slavonian Grebe	Very rare	26	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-58	12	20	12	Near-complete	The lowest total reported (excluding lockdown-impacted 2020).
Black-necked Grebe	Rare	54	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-3	49	54	15	Near-complete	A typical year, although productivity was high.
Stone-curlew	Scarce	305	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak increase	+78	310	327	-	Moderate	It is known that some pairs are uncounted on land from which surveyors are denied access.

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Black-winged Stilt	Colonising breeder	3	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase (10 yrs)	+1,600%	1	4	4	Near-complete	Black-winged Stilts have now bred for eight years in a row; one young fledged in 2021.
Avocet	Less scarce	2,228	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+252	2,349	2,349	152	Near-complete	The breeding population of Avocets has remained above 2,000 pairs since 2016.
Little Ringed Plover	Scarce	665	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable (20 yrs)	+13	478	734	-	Moderate	The highest total reported since 2011.
Dotterel	Scarce	423	Hayhow et al 2015	Strong decrease (24 yrs)	-57	24	52	-	Low	
Whimbrel	Scarce	378	Skene & Perkins 2023	No trend available	-	-	378	-	Low	A national survey produced a estimate of 378, suggesting numbers may have increased since 2009.
Black-tailed Godwit	Rare	54	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak increase	+34	61	68	13	Near-complete	The highest total reported since 2006.
Ruff	Very rare	8	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-72	0	3	4	High	The fewest breeding females since 2009.
Temminck's Stint	Former breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	1	-	A pair almost certainly bred in Highland but the nest site was flooded; an additional male was present briefly.
Purple Sandpiper	Very rare	1	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-50	1	1	1	Near-complete	A pair was recorded with two chicks at the traditional site in north Scotland.
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	Only the second record for the RBBP, a male displaying in Cornwall.
Red-necked Phalarope	Rare	110	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+259	49	146	48	Near-complete	A new record total.
Green Sandpiper	Very rare	4	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase (20 yrs)	+175	1	9	3	Near-complete	A new record total of singing males.
Marsh Sandpiper	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	The first record for the RBBP, a displaying male in Cumbria.
Wood Sandpiper	Rare	43	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+383	6	58	32	Near-complete	A new record total.
Greenshank	Less scarce	1,080	Hancock et al 1997	No trend available	-	18	120	-	Low	As usual, massively underreported.
Mediterranean Gull	Less scarce	1,913	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+5,663	2,320	2,365	45	Near-complete	The third time since 2018 that the population has exceeded 2,000 pairs.

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Ring-billed Gull	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	The returning adult in a Common Gull colony in Perth & Kinross for the 12 th year.
Elegant Tern	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	The first record for the RBBP, a displaying male in a tern colony in Anglesey.
Little Tern	Less scarce	1,409	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable (20 yrs)	-10	1,467	1,467	48	Near-complete	
Roseate Tern	Rare	129	RBBP 5-yr mean	Weak increase	+49	152	152	3	Near-complete	Another increase in the population.
American Black Tern	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A summering male in Northumberland for the second year in succession.
Arctic Skua	Scarce	785	Woodward et al 2020	Strong decrease (19 yrs)	-70	-	352	-	Low	
Long-tailed Skua	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	-	A bird summered in Shetland for the second year in a row.
Red-throated Diver	Less scarce	1,255	Dillon et al 2009	Weak increase (12 yrs)	+38	162	194	-	Low	Only a small proportion of the population is monitored annually.
Black-throated Diver	Rare	217	Eaton et al 2007	Stable (12 yrs)	+16	21	75	-	Low	Only a small proportion of the population is monitored annually.
Great Northern Diver	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A mixed pairing with a Black-throated Diver in Highland, although it is not known whether there was a breeding attempt.
White Stork	Reintroduced breeder	-	-	-	-	9	9	2	-	Pairs from the reintroduction project bred at two sites.
Glossy Ibis	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A pair prospecting briefly in Cambridgeshire.
Eurasian Spoonbill	Very rare	43	RBBP 5-yr mean	No trend available but increasing	++	71	73	8	Near-complete	A new record total, with 112 young fledged.
Eurasian Bittern	Rare	230	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+1,197	76	289	150	Near-complete	Another new record for the 16th year in a row.
Little Bittern	Very rare	3	RBBP 5-yr mean	No trend available but has increased	++	0	1	1	Near-complete	One male at the usual site in Somerset.
Night Heron	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	3	3	-	

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Cattle Egret	Very rare	30	-	No trend available but increasing	++	63	77	17	High	Another substantial increase in numbers.
Purple Heron	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	One bird at a site in Kent.
Great White Egret	Very rare	28	RBBP 5-yr mean	No trend available but increasing	++	53	59	14	Near-complete	Another record total.
Little Egret	Less scarce	1,476	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase (20 yrs)	+2,876	1,525	1,598	192	High	The highest total reported since colonisation in 1996.
Osprey	Rare	246	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+167	224	271	-	High	The highest number reported by the RBBP.
Honey-buzzard	Rare	130-150	Clements et al. 2022	Strong increase (20 yrs)	+85	40	110	-	High	Numbers reported were much higher than usual due to the national survey.
Golden Eagle	Scarce	508	Hayhow et al 2017	Stable (33 yrs)	+16	163	269	-	High	
Northern Goshawk	Scarce	813	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+214	629	1,012	-	Moderate	Once again, a new record total for Goshawk.
Marsh Harrier	Scarce	424	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+212	388	473	-	High	Another raptor reaching a new record total.
Hen Harrier	Scarce	575	Wotton et al 2018	Weak decrease (12 yrs)	-29	240	381	-	Moderate	The much-depleted English population increased again, to 31 confirmed breeding pairs.
Pallid Harrier	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A first-summer male on moorland in North-east Scotland.
Montagu's Harrier	Very rare	4	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-62	0	3	4	Near-complete	There was no confirmed breeding in 2021, the second blank year in a row.
White-tailed Eagle	Rare	131	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+1,210	132	150	-	High	New record values for the breeding population, and the number of young fledged (116).
Long-eared Owl	Less scarce	1,800+	Woodward et al 2020	No trend available	-	252	330	-	Low	
Short-eared Owl	Scarce	620+	Woodward et al 2020	No trend available	-	68	266	-	Low	Included the first-ever breeding on Guernsey.
Snowy Owl	Former breeder	-	-	-	-	0	5	4	-	Five individuals.

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Hoopoe	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	-	A singing male in Hampshire, for the second year, and a singing male in Cornwall.
Wryneck	Former breeder	-	-	-	-	0	4	4	-	Included, unusually, two records from Wales.
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Less scarce	1,000+	Woodward et al 2020	No trend available	-	34	306	-	Moderate	
Merlin	Less scarce	1,160	Ewing et al 2011	Weak increase	+94	268	340	-	Moderate	
Hobby	Less scarce	681	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	+38	241	648	-	Moderate	Numbers have fallen by 34% over the last decade.
Peregrine	Less scarce	1,701	Wilson et al 2018	Stable (22 yrs)	+5	854	1,225	-	High	The most widespread species covered by the RBBP.
Red-backed Shrike	Very rare	5	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-23	0	1	1	High	A poor year, with a singing male on just one date.
Golden Oriole	Former breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Kent.
Red-billed Chough	Scarce	381	Hayhow et al 2018	Stable (32 yrs)	-1	364	368	-	High	A considerable increase in England, with 41 pairs in Cornwall.
Crested Tit	Less scarce	1,000-2,000	Forrester et al 2007	No trend available	-	13	38	-	Low	Low reporting in the second year after the return of this species to the RBBP list.
Bearded Tit	Scarce	663	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong increase	+95	-	591	88	High	Some gaps in monitoring.
Woodlark	Less scarce	3,064	Conway et al 2009	No trend available	-	-	1,198		Moderate	The highest total reported since the last national survey in 2006.
Yellow-browed Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A bird that overwintered in Buckinghamshire sang for two months before departure.
Iberian Chiffchaff	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Suffolk.
Dusky Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A male singing in Lancashire & North Merseyside, the first record for the RBBP.
Great Reed Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	-	Singing males in Northumberland and Nottinghamshire.

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Blyth's Reed Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Staffordshire.
Marsh Warbler	Very rare	18	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-55	3	17	13	High	Fewer than in 2020, but still the fourth-highest total this century.
Melodious Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Worcestershire.
Icterine Warbler	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	-	Two singing males in Shetland.
River Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Somerset, the first RBBP record since 2010.
Savi's Warbler	Very rare	10	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	+13	0	12	11	Near-complete	Another relatively good year for this species.
Zitting Cisticola	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male at the site on Alderney, Channel Islands where breeding occurred in 2020.
Eastern Subalpine Warbler	Potential breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Cornwall.
Dartford Warbler	Less scarce	3,214	Wotton et al 2009	Stable	+27	-	1,860	-	Moderate	The highest total reported since 2008.
Fair Isle Wren	Rare	41	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	+26	-	48	-	Near-complete	The highest total reported since 1966.
Fieldfare	Very rare	2	RBBP 5-yr mean	Strong decrease	-73	0	2	2	Moderate	Just two possible breeding pairs.
Redwing	Very rare	24	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-3	4	21	18	High	
Bluethroat	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	-	Two male 'White-spotted Bluethroats' held territory, in Gloucestershire and Norfolk.
Black Redstart	Rare	72	RBBP 5-yr mean	Stable	-8	40	80	47	High	A good year, with the second-highest total since 2002.
Blue-headed Wagtail	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	-	Mixed pairs, males with female Yellow Wagtails.
White Wagtail	Very rare	29	RBBP 5-yr mean	no trend available	-	39	45	-	High	4-10 pairs in the UK, plus an estimated 35 pairs on the Channel Isles.

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Brambling	Occasional breeder	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	-	A singing male in Highland.
Hawfinch	Less scarce	500+	Clements 2013	no trend available	-	16	114	-	Moderate	
Common Redpoll	Very rare	24	RBBP 5-yr mean	no trend available but increasing	++	1	21	17	Moderate	
Cirl Bunting	Less scarce	1,079	Jefferies et al 2018	strong increase (27 yrs)	+814	102	469	-	Moderate	A welcome increase in coverage.
Snow Bunting	Rare	79	Hayhow et al 2018	no trend available	-	8	40	-	Low	

In addition to the native species listed above, Short-toed Treecreeper (Channel Islands only), St Kilda Wren (St Kilda only) and Parrot Crossbill (Highland only) were known to have been present in 2021, but no breeding records were submitted.

Table 2: Rare non-native breeding birds in the UK, 2021

Common name	Notes
Reeve's Pheasant	Records from Denbigh & Flint, Derbyshire and Worcestershire
Golden Pheasant	Reported from Dorset, Isles of Scilly and Suffolk.
Indian Peafowl	Records received from eight counties only; breeding was confirmed in Cornwall, Hertfordshire and Yorkshire.
Swan Goose	A pair were present in Cumbria all year.
Bar-headed Goose	43 individuals reported at a site in Cumbria.
Snow Goose	Six birds on Coll, Argyll, as the population there continues to dwindle; there was no breeding in 2020. A pair bred in Yorkshire.
Black Swan	Reported from ten counties, with pairs in six, and confirmed breeding in Devon and Worcestershire.
Muscovy Duck	Records received from five counties with breeding confirmed in two; this species is clearly hugely underreported.
Red-crested Pochard	Reported from six counties with confirmed breeding in five; the stronghold remains in Gloucestershire & Wiltshire.
Harris's Hawk	A male was resident in Cambridgeshire for a sixth year, and another nest-built with a Common Buzzard in Derbyshire.
Eurasian Eagle Owl	One pair in Lancashire & N Merseyside but no sign of a breeding attempt; individuals in Anglesey and Cumbria.
Lanner Falcon	A male reared three young in a hybrid pairing with a Peregrine in Lothian.

Footnotes:

1. An indication of population status in one of four categories: Very rare (mean of <30 breeding pairs (bp) per annum); Rare (30–300 bp per annum); Scarce (301–1,000 bp per annum); Less scarce (>1,000 bp per annum).
2. Published estimate or RBBP 5-year mean. If a recent estimate from a published national survey is available, this is used and referenced. Otherwise the estimate is based on RBBP data, using the mean maximum population size from the last five years (currently 2017–21, excluding 2020 if data for that year were impacted by lockdown restrictions). If annual RBBP coverage is poor, the best available national population estimate is used. The unit varies, but is most frequently ‘breeding pairs’ (bp). We acknowledge that, for some species, estimates based purely on RBBP data may be contrary to other estimates, especially where RBBP coverage is moderate or low (see below).
3. A population trend, where one can be calculated; this is presented as a 25-year trend where possible; if a species has been covered by the RBBP for a shorter period then a 10-year, 15-year or 20-year trend is given as appropriate. Trends are calculated by comparing the 5-year mean in 2021 (for the years 2017–21) with that for 25, 20, 15 or 10 years earlier. If 2020 coverage was impacted by lockdown restrictions that year is omitted from the trend calculation. Trends are categorised into five bands, based on thresholds of rate of change used to classify species trends in the Wild Bird Indicators (e.g. Defra 2022): further details can be found in the RBBP report. Most trends are derived from RBBP data, although in some cases trends from periodic surveys are used if they are more robust, and trends from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB UK Breeding Bird Survey are given for Turtle Dove and Willow Tit.
4. The degree of coverage (in 2021), defined as follows: Near-complete (RBBP reports present more or less complete annual totals); High (a good estimate of the number of pairs breeding annually, though an unknown (but thought to be small) proportion has not been recorded/reported); Moderate (a less accurate estimate of the number of pairs breeding annually, which is nonetheless thought to be a significant proportion of the total population); Low (the volume of the data received is such a small proportion of the total population that RBBP totals are of little value for calculating trends or status reviews; however, maintaining an archive of known sites is useful, and this information can be used in the design of future targeted surveys). Coverage categories (reassessed in this report) are based on comparisons between the 5-year mean and the most reliable population estimate, where possible, taking into account known factors in the monitoring and detectability of the species.