Bulletin of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel

No. 38 - November 2025

From Dr Mark Eaton, the Secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel

This bulletin is intended for county and regional bird recorders but is circulated to all data suppliers and those with close links to the RBBP to help keep the bird recording community informed on the work of the Panel. Further information on the RBBP is available on our website at www.rbbp.org.uk.

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Data for 2024: please submit 2024 RBBP data to me, at secretary@rbbp.org.uk, by 30th November 2025.

For county datasets, please use the excel sheet available at https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/rbbp-data-entry-excel-form-for-2024.xlsx **Note that this was revised in 2023.** Please download and use this version as it has been tweaked to make the form a little easier to use – some of the protections have been removed, meaning that actions like editing data entered already, cutting and pasting and so forth are now possible.

We are very keen wherever possible to receive data for each species on the RBBP list from all sites individually, rather than summed as county totals. This helps with the identification of duplicates received from sources other than county recorders, such as from RSPB reserves, the BTO/JNCC Ringing and Nest Recording Schemes and Schedule One licence returns. In addition, it greatly increases the value of our dataset for the conservation and research use of data. The RBBP dataset has been used for a wide range of conservation and research purposes, such as assessing populations of rare breeding birds within the protected area network – see the short piece about rare breeding birds in Special Protection Areas on the following page. Such assessments are only as robust as the data we hold, and so if we don't know which sites held rare breeding birds they will not be included in analyses.



The RBBP list is available at https://rbbp.org.uk/list-of-species-currently-reported-on-by-rbbp/; please check to ensure you are not forgetting any species or

races – some species such as **Little Egret** and **Quail** tend to get overlooked in submissions. **Crested Tit** was added to the list in 2022, and **Turtle Dove** and **Red-breasted Merganser** are other recent additions. Also, save yourself some work by remembering that **Water Rail, Cetti's Warbler, Firecrest** and **Willow Tit** were removed in recent years, so we no longer require records – there are still some of you sending in records for these species! There's a short article in this bulletin about how we review the species list, most recently at our Panel meeting last week, when we decided to keep it unchanged.

And please remember that we also cover rare non-native breeding species. We know that the likes of **Black Swan**, **Muscovy Duck** and **Indian Peafowl** are greatly under-reported.

Guidelines on preparing an annual submission to the RBBP can be found on our website at **https://rbbp.org.uk/guidance-on-submitting-records/**.

Using RBBP data to guide site protection for rare breeding birds

The UK's network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) plays a vital role in safeguarding the most important sites for birds in the UK, with 270 SPAs classified for 151 species or populations (in some cases the breeding, non-breeding and/or passage populations of species are assessed separately). Key sites are selected for each species (or population), giving a 'suite' of sites for each. The most recent review (the third) of the sufficiency of this network was published in 2016 (Stroud et al. 2016). It examined species' populations and trends within and outside of the network and identified those species for which the existing network was insufficient. A second phase of the assessment (published as Grady et al. 2025) provided advice and options on how to address insufficiencies, through the classification of new sites, extension of the boundaries of existing sites and/or revision of SPA site Citations to include new features (i.e. species/populations). It also identified recommended management reviews of existing SPAs, as well as additional site-specific monitoring, research and wider survey needs.

Data from the RBBP were extremely important in informing Phases 1 and 2 of this review process. There are 32 rare breeding bird species and one subspecies (Fair Isle Wren) with SPAs classified for their protection, and for many of these species the RBBP is the key data source. A summary of the network sufficiency for each species is given in Holling et al. (2017). Given the lengthy delay in the finalisation and publication of the Phase 2 report (first drafted in 2017), by the time it was published newer data were available for many species, particularly those monitored annually by the RBBP. The report itself recognised that 'updated data will, nevertheless, be needed to support implementation during Phase 3 to either verify that the advice and options are still justified or to make any necessary adjustments.' As a consequence, the RBBP has conducted work over the last year, funded by

Natural England, to update the reviews at a UK-wide level for Spotted Crake, Common Crane, Avocet, Mediterranean Gull, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Bittern and Little Egret. Phase 3 will encompass the implementation of Phase 2 of the Third Review, comprising a range of responses: the classification of new sites; the extension of the boundaries of existing sites; and/or the revision of SPA site Citations.



The recent work on these seven species demonstrated the value of our data holdings for informing conservation planning and action, and thus how the recording activities of volunteer ornithologists and birdwatchers make a valuable contribution to the conservation of rare breeding birds, but this also highlighted some weaknesses to be addressed. In particular, imprecise location data sometimes make it difficult or impossible to ascertain whether records lie within a particular site (i.e. within the precise legal boundary). We therefore repeat our frequent request that all records are submitted with site information that is as precise as possible.

OUT NOW: Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2023



The 2023 report of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) was published online by *British Birds* on 4th November 2025. Printing and posting was delayed slightly, but hopefully many of you will have received your hard copies by now. As ever, huge thanks to all of you who have compiled and submitted data to enable this reporting – this year's report was derived from more records than ever before.

This is the 50th report published by the RBBP – we have now reported on 51 breeding seasons (with one report covering two years, 2003 and 2004). For those species that have been covered since the first report, for 1973, we can now report on change over the 50-year period from 1973 to 2023.

The 2023 report documents the status of the 104[1] species and subspecies of rare and scarce native birds that were recorded breeding, or showing signs of breeding, in the UK. Population totals are given for each species in the report, alongside a breakdown in records by country and recording area, and where possible updated trends are given. A table summarising species' totals and trends can be found at **https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2023-RBBP-report-summary-table.pdf**. In addition, records were compiled for 11 rare non-native breeding species.

The report was enabled by the collation of over 11,500 individual records, which, once duplicate records were identified, provided just under 7,800 unique records. The most important sources of data are the detailed submissions compiled by the UK's county and regional bird recorders. Of course, these recorders, and in turn the RBBP, are highly dependent on observers submitting records in the first place. It is vital that birders across the UK continue to make their sightings available, not least for the value these records have for conservation, as outlined in this report. Other than data submitted by county bird recorders, our important data sources include returns from Schedule 1 licence holders, the BTO/JNCC Nest Record Scheme, raptor study groups, annual species' monitoring, periodic national surveys, and counts from RSPB reserves.

[1] Note printed copies of British Birds say 98 species and subspecies – this is an editorial mistake.

There were no new species or races reported this year. Rather, the most eye-catching records are of two species returning to breed after many years of absence. Temminck's Stints have been returning to a site in Highland since 2021, and although it seems likely they have attempted to breed previously, it was not until 2023 that this was confirmed, with a nest found under licence; this was the first confirmed UK breeding record since 1997. Unfortunately, the nest was later washed out by rising water levels.



While there had been two years of forewarning for the return of Temminck's Stint, the successful breeding of a pair of Eurasian Hoopoes that fledged three young in Leicestershire & Rutland came out of the blue, although one of the largest ever spring influxes of this species clearly set the stage for the first confirmed breeding since 1996. Another southern European species, European Bee-eater, is becoming an almost expected breeder in England; in 2023 it bred at two sites for the first time, albeit unsuccessfully. After decades of regular breeding in the UK, the absence of breeding Yellow-legged Gulls since 2019 has been a surprise; they returned in 2023 with one pair and, as is often the case, an adult in a mixed pairing (in this instance with a Herring Gull).

In addition to these returning or colonising species, 15 species reached record totals in 2023. Three are in the UK as a result of reintroduction projects: Great Bustard, White Stork and White-tailed Eagle. The Scottish population of White-tailed Eagles, which originated from a reintroduction project starting in 1975, reached 156 pairs, but arguably the more notable record in 2023 was the first confirmed (and successful) breeding in England in 240 years; a pair, both of which were released in 2020, fledged one offspring in Sussex. Other raptor species continue to flourish; the breeding population of Marsh Harriers exceeded 500 pairs – an abundance not known in the UK since the early 19th century, or possibly even earlier. The sixth national survey of Hen Harrier showed a 20% increase since the previous survey in 2016, over which time the English population has risen from four to 50 pairs. A pair of Ospreys that bred in Co Fermanagh were the first on the isle of Ireland for over 200 years.

Five species of large wading birds reached record totals: Common Crane, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Bittern, Great White Egret and Little Egret. Many of these species are benefitting from conservation action, either from projects focused narrowly on their requirements, or action more generally to create, restore and maintain high-quality wetland habitats, often on a large scale, across the UK. Northern Shoveler, Common Pochard and Black-necked Grebe also reached new peaks in 2023, which might at least in part be a response to improved wetland habitat provision. Range shifts in response to climate change may also be a factor driving increases in some of these species, and that seems very likely in the ongoing increases in Black-winged Stilt and Mediterranean Gull. There were 3,482 pairs of Mediterranean Gulls breeding in the UK in 2023; this is the highest total for any species ever reported in an RBBP report, and this species is now a candidate to be removed from our list of rare breeding birds.

We readily attribute breeding population increases in species with breeding ranges centred to the south of the UK to the predicted impacts of climate change. However, such predictions also lead us to expect declines and eventual extinctions for many of the species for which the UK lies on the southern edge of their breeding ranges. This is not always the case, and perhaps one of the most surprising patterns shown by RBBP data over the last decade has been the increase in a number of wader species with breeding distributions across high latitudes in the Arctic, Fennoscandia and Siberia. The return of Temminck's Stint has already been noted. Numbers of Wood Sandpipers rose by 61% between 2022 and 2023, a continuation of a trend which has seen numbers reported triple over the last decade. While not quite matching record totals both species reached in 2021, numbers of Red-necked Phalarope and Green Sandpiper remained high in 2023.



Not all northern species are flourishing, however. The number of pairs of Slavonian Grebe fell yet again, to 16 pairs, the lowest total since RBBP reporting began in 1973. Six pairs of Redwings was also the lowest total we have reported, albeit one matched in 2001 and 2006. There were no confirmed breeding pairs of Fieldfare or Red-backed Shrike in 2023.

Further south, for the third year in a row there was no confirmed breeding by Montagu's Harriers, and no pairs reported. The three-year gap since the last confirmed breeding in 2019 is probably the longest absence of this species since the early twentieth century. The RBBP's coverage of two struggling species, European Turtle Dove and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, is not sufficiently robust to track population changes, although both were reported at their lowest-ever levels in 2023. RBBP data are, however, particularly valuable for reporting on range change; both species have suffered considerable range contraction since they were added to our species list, with European Turtle Dove now being reported from 18 counties (26 in 2018), and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker from 35 counties (47 in 2010).

Among the more unusual records were a Little Crake in Cambridgeshire (our third record from that county in six years). The American Black Tern returned to Northumberland, as did a Broad-billed Sandpiper to Shetland. A Greater Short-toed Lark summering in Pembrokeshire means this species features in an RBBP report for only the second time.



In last year's report we discussed the impact of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI; bird flu) of the strain H5N1 on rare breeding birds in 2022; outbreaks of the virus reoccurred in wild birds in 2023. The virus was again conspicuously present amongst breeding seabirds, although to some extent the species affected had changed with, for example, widespread reports of severe mortality amongst Black-headed Gulls and in Mediterranean Gulls breeding within Black-headed Gull colonies

with, for example, at least 40 adult and 50 young Mediterranean Gulls dying at a colony in Lancashire & North Merseyside.

Numbers of Roseate Terns at Coquet Island fell from 154 pairs in 2022 to 118 pairs in 2023, which can be attributed to the mortality of 90 adults (as well as 170 chicks) from HPAI the previous year. Only four adults were known to have died in 2023, suggesting that there may have been some build-up of immunity, although 73 chicks died.

Our data for Peregrine in 2023 show the largest between-year decline we have ever reported. This decline was widespread, across all four countries, with declines recorded in 66 counties; although there is no causal evidence, a decline due to HPAI mortality is perhaps the most plausible explanation for this change.



As always, we wish to thank all those who support the work of the RBBP particularly those such as county bird recorders who collate and submit data to us, and the observers who make the thousands of records of rare breeding birds that contribute to our reports.

The Rare Breeding Birds Panel – membership changes



The RBBP, photographed at our recent meeting on the Northumberland coast, from left to right: Jenny Weston, Dawn Balmer, Mark Holling, Ian Francis, Paul Castle, Andy Stanbury, Helen Baker, Mark Eaton, Katy Westerberg. Unfortunately, David Norman was not able to join us at this meeting.

The photo shows us marking the retirement of Dr Ian Francis from the RBBP. Ian joined the Panel in late 2000, and so had very nearly served 25 years; he was our second-longest serving member ever. He has brought great experience and insight to our work over this time, drawing on his background in conservation with the RSPB, his immense experience in fieldwork on a wide range of species and habitats, his expertise as a communicator, and his knowledge of the ornithological and biological recording networks (amongst many other things).

Ian has led on important work areas for the RBBP like developing our recording standards and communication strategies, and has always challenged us to do better in many ways. He has done so with warmth and good humour, has been a pleasure to work alongside, and will be much missed by all the Panel. However, we know that he will remain active in many areas of ornithology and conservation, and we will continue to hear from him and receive his rare breeding bird records!

At the same time we were delighted to welcome a new independent member to her first Panel meeting – Jenny Weston, who joined in summer 2025. Jenny has worked for the RSPB since 2007, undertaking the reintroduction of Red Kites to Aberdeenshire before becoming an established part of the local conservation team. Her current work for the RSPB is in Global Species Recovery, working as a Senior Species Recovery Officer, working mostly on Steppe Eagle, Vultures, Hen Harriers and UK migratory species.

In her spare time, Jenny is an active member of the North East of Scotland Raptor Study Group, acting as Red Kite coordinator and group secretary since the late 2000's. As an A permit and ringing trainer she has experience of a wide variety of ringing across the UK and abroad, with focus in recent years on specific projects, especially satellite tracking. Recent projects have included satellite tracking Hen Harriers and White-tailed Eagles, as well as using camera traps and colour rings to understand more about the habitat requirements of Corncrakes on Coll.



Osprey – one of Ian Francis's favourite study species. We hope he'll be able to do even more monitoring now he's stepped down from the RBBP.

The RBBP species list

The RBBP collects data and reports upon all native species with UK breeding populations of fewer than 2,000 pairs. In addition, some species with higher populations are retained if RBBP data still provide reliable annual totals or if alternative surveys (such as the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey) are unable to support the calculation of population trends. Species showing strong declines, but where the population is perhaps still above the 2,000 pair threshold, may be added in advance of them declining below the threshold. Note that some small passerines, such as Dartford Warbler, are susceptible to sudden population declines during long spells of particularly cold winter weather; although the populations can bounce back quite quickly during milder winters, we would need to be sure that the population remained consistently over 2,000 pairs before we considered removing the species from our lists.

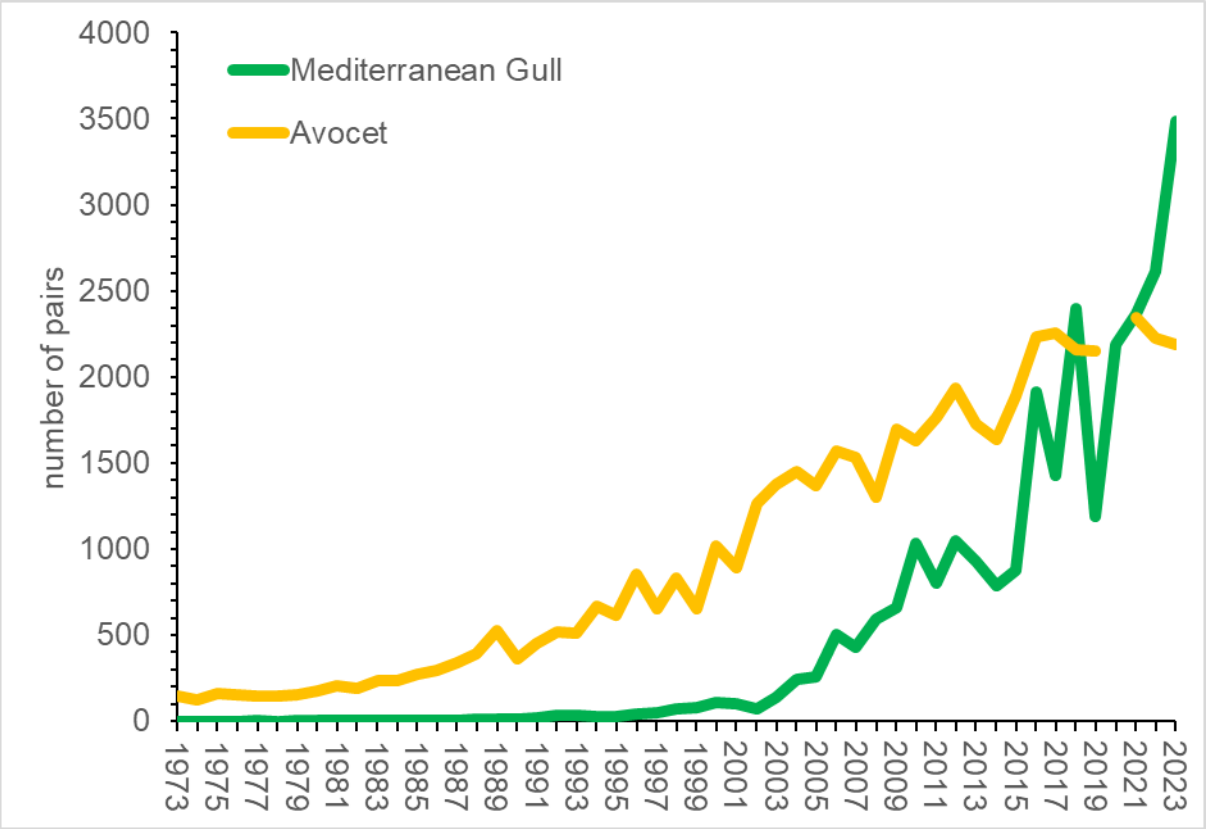
We review the RBBP list at regular intervals to consider whether species should be added to or removed from the list. To date, a number of species have been removed as their populations have exceeded 2,000 pairs: Gadwall (last reported on for 2009), Red Kite (2012), Cetti's Warbler (2016) and Firecrest (2017). Barn Owl, Crested Tit, Common Crossbill, Kingfisher and Leach's Petrel were added to RBBP reporting in 1996 due to their Schedule One status, but then removed subsequently (after 2005) when it was evident that populations were considerably higher than 2,000 pairs, and the RBBP received relatively few data for most of these species

Scottish Crossbill, Water Rail and Willow Tit were removed (in 2009, 2017 and 2020 respectively) when improved data (e.g. from national surveys) demonstrated that the populations were well in excess of 2,000 pairs.



Two species have been removed from the RBBP list but then returned at a later date – Crested Tit which came off in 2005 and returned in 2020, and Woodlark which was absent from our reporting just three years between 2012 and 2016. We are keen to avoid species coming off and on the list in this way, so are cautious about removing species too hastily.

Recently, we have considered the status of a number of increasing species to see if removal from our list is merited. The figure below shows annual totals of Mediterranean Gulls and Avocets. Both species have exceeded 2,000 pairs in recent years; indeed, the 3,482 pairs of Mediterranean Gulls in 2023 is the highest number of any species the RBBP has ever reported. However, in both cases we have decided to continue collecting data, at least for the time being. Neither is well-monitored by any other monitoring scheme (hopefully coverage of Mediterranean Gulls by the BTO/JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme will grow over time), and data collation is not particularly onerous given the colonial nature of both species means the number of sites occupied is relatively small, and they tend to be well-monitored. The increase in the Avocet population appears to have stalled around 2,200 pairs – not far above our threshold – and while there are many more pairs of Mediterranean Gulls, there are genuine concerns about the impact of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza on the population, with the potential for numbers to crash. We will of course continue to review numbers of both species on a regular basis.







We have also discussed the status of Little Egret, which continues to increase with a new record of 1,696 pairs reported in 2023. A new analysis (to be published imminently) combining BTO Heronries Census data with RBBP data suggests that there is a considerable degree of under-reporting, and the true population may now exceed 2,000 pairs, but we will continue to collate data at least until our reported total passes 2,000. The same is true for Goshawk, which has increased very rapidly in recent years, and for which true numbers are suspected to be considerably higher than those reported.

Finally, we will review the status of Woodlark and Dartford Warbler – both species known to have exceeded 2,000 pairs in the UK in recent years – once the results of the 2025 Heathland Birds Survey are available.

At present there are no new species approaching our list from the other direction i.e. by decreasing to below 2,000 pairs, Numbers of Great Skuas fell dramatically following the severe HPAI outbreak in their breeding colonies in 2021 and 2022, but it is likely the population remained above 2,000 pairs, and is now showing signs of a slow recovery. Of course, new species also join our list by arriving to breed, or show signs of breeding, in the UK for the first time. Recent additions to the list of 'potential' breeders have included Little Bunting in 2022, Marsh Sandpiper, Elegant Tern and Dusky Warbler in 2021, and American Black Tern in 2020, and as most readers will be aware we have recently received our first confirmed breeding records of Glossy Ibis (2022), Blyth's Reed Warbler (2024) and Zitting Cisticola (2025, although they had bred in the Channel Islands previously).

Offers and requests

Just briefly, I would like to repeat the requests and offers made in recent bulletins:

Blogs. The RBBP publishes blogs regularly on our website at **https://rbbp.org.uk/blog/**. As well as encouraging you to read these blogs, we would like all in our recording community to consider whether they would like to write one! If you would like to contribute a few hundred words on any aspect of rare breeding birds – about a particular species, or area, documenting a particularly interesting occurrence, giving advice on recording, or having a grumble (within reason!) – please get in touch.

Talks. Since 2020 I have given numerous talks about the work of the RBBP to bird clubs, RSPB groups and wildlife societies across the UK, via zoom. Of course, most of these were during the Covid-19 pandemic when in-person meetings were not possible, and most clubs have now returned to in-person meetings. However, I know that some are continuing with remote meetings held over zoom, or a hybrid model with a mix of in-person and remote events. I'd be happy to talk about the work of the RBBP and rare breeding birds to any interested group, free of charge, so please just email me if this is of interest.

If you want to see what you are letting yourself in for, there is a recording of my recent presentation to the Essex Birdwatching Society available online at **https://youtu.be/X6oNxtAreMM?si=c8WqghGEGSEb37NL**

Photos. The RBBP requires photos of rare breeding birds in order to promote our work. However, our photographic library is not as good as we would like and we often struggle to find appropriate pictures, especially when a particular species' photo is required. In particular, we are keen to have photos of 'real' breeding birds – individuals showing breeding evidence (e.g., singing, displaying, carrying food, at the nest, or with young). Of course, we would expect photos to have been taken under a Schedule One disturbance licence when this is required. If you can help by providing suitable photos for the RBBP to use please contact me. Please feel free to share this appeal with your networks to encourage others who may be able to help us out. We thank those photographers who have already provided great images for RBBP use.

To respond to any of the above, email me at **secretary@rbbp.org.uk**

As always, thanks for your efforts on behalf of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel!

Please remember that deadline for submitting 2024 data:

30th November 2025.

Mark Eaton, on behalf of the RBBP, November 2025

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