Bulletin of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel

No. 39 - November 2026

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[1]. Further information on the RBBP is available on our website at www.rbbp.org.uk.

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[1] If you would prefer not to receive this e-newsletter, please let me know at secretary@rbbp.org.uk

Data for 2025: please submit 2025 RBBP data to me, at secretary@rbbp.org.uk, by 30th November 2026.

About 65–70% of the data we receive each year come from county and regional recorders, and your annual returns remain the bedrock of everything the Panel does – from our annual reports, to the advice we provide to support the conservation of rare breeding birds and the protection of the sites they depend on. The 2024 report (see page 4) drew on more than 11,400 individual records, and we would love the 2025 report to be even more complete. So, whether your 2025 submission is large or small, please do send it in as promptly as possible. If you think you may struggle to meet the deadline, or would like help with any aspect of preparing your return, please just get in touch and we can talk it through. Historical records that have come to light since previous submissions are also very welcome.

For county datasets, please use the excel sheet available at https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/rbbp-data-entry-excel-form-for-2025.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. 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.

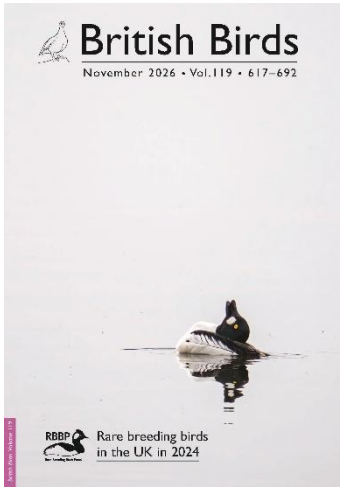


The RBBP list is available at **https://rbbp.org.uk/list-of-species-currently-reported-on-by-rbbp/**; please check to ensure you are not forgetting any species or races – some species such as **Little Egret** and **Quail** tend to get overlooked in submissions. **Crested Tit** was added to the list in 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! And keep an eye out for new arrivals – Red-breasted Flycatcher featured in our reports for the first time in 2024 (see below).

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/**.

OUT NOW: Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2024



The 2024 report of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) was published in British Birds in November 2026 (Eaton et al. 2026; British Birds 119: 621–687) 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. As ever, huge thanks to all of you who have compiled and submitted data to enable this reporting. And if you missed it, our previous report, for 2023, is now available to read and download open access at https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/rbbp-report-2023.pdf.

This is the 51st report published by the RBBP – we have now reported on 52 breeding seasons (with one report covering two years, 2003 and 2004).

The 2024 report documents the status of the 103 species and subspecies of rare and scarce native birds that were recorded breeding, or showing signs of breeding, in the UK, although for three of these the accounts are simply reports of continued presence. In addition, records were compiled for 13 rare non-native breeding species. Population totals are given for each species in the report, alongside a breakdown of records by country and recording area, and where possible updated trends are given. A table summarising species' numbers and trends is available at **https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/2024-RBBP-report-summary-table.pdf**.

For the first time, our report features a table summarising UK population trends for those species for which annual coverage is robust enough to do so. When possible, trends are presented for the most recent 10 years, 25 years, and the longest available trend period, along with the between-year change since 2023. The UK table, along with separate online-only tables with English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh trends, can be found at **https://rbbp.org.uk/country-trend-tables-2024/**.

The report was enabled by the collation of over 11,400 individual records, which, once duplicates were identified, provided nearly 8,600 unique records. The most important sources of data are the detailed submissions compiled by the UK's county and regional bird recorders, who in turn depend on observers submitting their records in the first place. Other important sources include returns from Schedule One licence holders, the BTO/JNCC Nest Record Scheme, raptor study groups, annual species' monitoring, periodic national surveys, and counts from RSPB reserves.

The 2024 breeding season followed an exceptionally mild, wet and stormy winter, with ten named storms between late September 2023 and late January 2024. The spring that followed was the warmest on record but also the sixth wettest, and while wetland conditions may have been good early in the season, continued rainfall

caused flooding at some important sites. The summer was the coolest since 2015, particularly in the north and west, and there were widespread reports of poor breeding success, especially amongst ground-nesting raptors such as Hen Harrier.



Perhaps the two most eye-catching records are of a species new to our reports and one recorded breeding for the first time. Two territory-holding male Red-breasted Flycatchers were found in woodlands in North-east Scotland and Upper Forth within four days of each other. Meanwhile, a pair of Blyth's Reed Warblers fledged at least two young in Highland – not an entirely unexpected development given the westward range expansion of this species in recent decades. This is the fourth new confirmed breeding species we have reported in the last ten years, following Iberian Chiffchaff (2015), Black-crowned Night Heron (2017) and Glossy Ibis (2022). A pair of Blue-winged Teal in Yorkshire may also have bred, which would have been a first for the UK had it been proven, and a pair of Ferruginous Ducks that fledged young in Warwickshire provided the first record of this species for which there was no doubt that breeding occurred, although it is uncertain whether the birds were of wild origin.

Amongst our c. 80 regularly breeding species there was much good news, with many increasing or maintaining populations at historically high levels. Waterbirds continue to do well: Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Bittern, Little Egret, Great Egret and Western Cattle Egret all reached record totals in 2024, and Common Crane nearly did so. In northern Scotland, Whooper Swan also reached a new record total. These species are benefiting from conservation action, especially wetland management and creation, in some cases alongside the beneficial effects of climate change along the northern edges of their ranges.

Several raptor species continued to recover from historical depletion. Osprey, Western Marsh Harrier and White-tailed Eagle all reached new record totals, more European Honey Buzzards were reported than in any year outside the 2020–21 national survey, and European Goshawks increased again. Two pairs of Montagu's Harriers bred, a welcome return after a gap of four years.

One of the more unexpected patterns of the last decade – population increases and range expansions in some northern waders – was maintained in 2024. Numbers of Red-necked Phalarope and Wood Sandpiper remained high, three pairs of Purple Sandpiper were confirmed breeding for the first time since 2003, and the first Temminck's Stint chicks were recorded in the UK since 1993.



In contrast, while species from continental Europe that have established populations in the UK in recent years continued to prosper, those that might be considered the 'next wave' of potential colonists had a poor year. After ten successive years of breeding by Black-winged Stilts, no eggs were laid in 2024; there was no repeat of the previous year's breeding by Eurasian Hoopoe; a single returning pair of European Bee-eaters failed quickly in bad weather; and there were no records of breeding behaviour by Little Crake, Baillon's Crake, Glossy Ibis, Little Bittern or Iberian Chiffchaff. It seems the wet spring and cool summer were enough to deter these species from breeding.

There was comparatively little bad news to report. Slavonian Grebe numbers remain very low, with only seven young fledged by 20 breeding pairs, and numbers of lekking male Western Capercaillie fell. Redwing numbers dropped to just four pairs, the lowest we have ever reported, and for the fourth successive year there were no confirmed breeding records of Fieldfare or Red-backed Shrike.

As usual, there was a range of infrequently reported oddities, such as a male Barolo Shearwater holding territory in Devon for the second year. Many such records involved mixed pairings with closely related species: Pink-footed Goose, Lesser

Scaup, Green-winged Teal, Spotted Sandpiper, American Black Tern, Yellow-legged Gull, Great Northern Diver, Black-crowned Night Heron, Western Cattle Egret, Little Egret and Scandinavian Rock Pipit all bred or showed signs of breeding in mixed pairings in 2024.



After two years of reporting on outbreaks of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI; bird flu) of the strain H5N1 amongst rare breeding species such as Roseate Tern, Mediterranean Gull, White-tailed Eagle and Peregrine Falcon, it is a relief that very few cases were reported in 2024. Near-record productivity at the Roseate Tern colony in Northumberland suggests that a recovery is already underway.

As always, we wish to thank all those who support the work of the RBBP, particularly the 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.

Helping observers to submit better records

In May we published a series of three blogs on our website, each with an accompanying video, giving guidance to birdwatchers on recording rare breeding birds: how to submit records, what makes a good record, and how to use breeding evidence codes. The aim was simple – to improve both the number and the quality of the records that reach you, as county and regional recorders, from the observers in your area. Better records submitted to you mean less chasing for missing details, fewer duplicates to untangle, and more complete and valuable returns to the RBBP.

We would be really grateful if you could help to amplify these messages. Please share the blogs and videos through your club or society's website, newsletter, social media and WhatsApp groups, and do feel free to point observers towards them when you respond to their sightings or chase up missing details.

The key points are summarised below, and the full blogs can be found at **https://rbbp.org.uk/2026/05/15/submitting-records-to-help-the-rbbp/**, **https://rbbp.org.uk/2026/05/15/what-is-a-good-record/** and **https://rbbp.org.uk/2026/05/20/recording-breeding-evidence-codes/**.

1. How to submit records

Unless observers are taking part in a formal scheme – such as the BTO/JNCC Nest Record Scheme, as part of a raptor study group, or participating in a national survey – records should be submitted to the local bird recorder. Even where records will reach the RBBP via another route, it is good to also submit them to the relevant county recorder so that local databases are as complete as possible. Observers can submit records directly (the BTO website has a list of county recorders, with contact details, at **https://www.bto.org/learn/community/county-recorders**), via a local bird club's own reporting routes, or through BirdTrack or eBird. Both portals are free to use, work out which recording area a sighting falls in, make records available to county recorders, and use filters so that records of rare breeders are not shared publicly during the breeding season.



2. What makes a good record?

A good record should include the species, date or dates, precise location, the number of birds, what breeding evidence was observed, any information on productivity, and any other relevant contextual information. In particular, submitted observations should include these details:

Dates – include at least the first and last dates of observations (if seen more than once), but it's better to include all dates.

Location – be precise! Use a good location name, and provide an OS grid reference: at least a 4-figure reference, but better still a 6-figure reference where there is an obvious territory centre or nest site. BirdTrack and eBird allow users to drop a pin on a map to give the exact location.

Counts – say how many 'breeding units' there were, such as the number of singing or displaying males, pairs or nests, and how many of each sex. A breeding-season record of seven Woodlarks is far more useful as seven singing males; 13 Shovelers in May is more useful as seven males and six females, and better still if it is noted that eight of these appeared to be paired up (i.e. four pairs).

Productivity – if observed, include any information on the number of eggs, young in the nest, dependent young out of the nest, and fledged birds.

Anything else – including null data. If a singing Golden Oriole was present from 18th to 27th May, it is useful to know whether you failed to find it after the 27th, or simply stopped looking.

3. Breeding evidence codes

Breeding evidence codes provide a simple and standardised way to describe what was observed, grouped into three classes of possible, probable and confirmed breeding. Observers should record the ‘best’ evidence code seen, and are encouraged to add text giving more detail. It is worth reminding observers that, in this long-established system, a pair that settles, displays or even builds a nest but then leaves before laying eggs still counts as ‘probable’ breeding – confirmed breeding refers to an attempt where eggs were laid, even if it subsequently failed. The most important codes to learn are H. (in suitable habitat), S. (singing), P. (pair), D. (display), FL (recently fledged young, or downy young of waders and wildfowl), ON (occupied nest), FF (carrying faecal sac or food for young), NE (nest with eggs) and NY (nest with young).

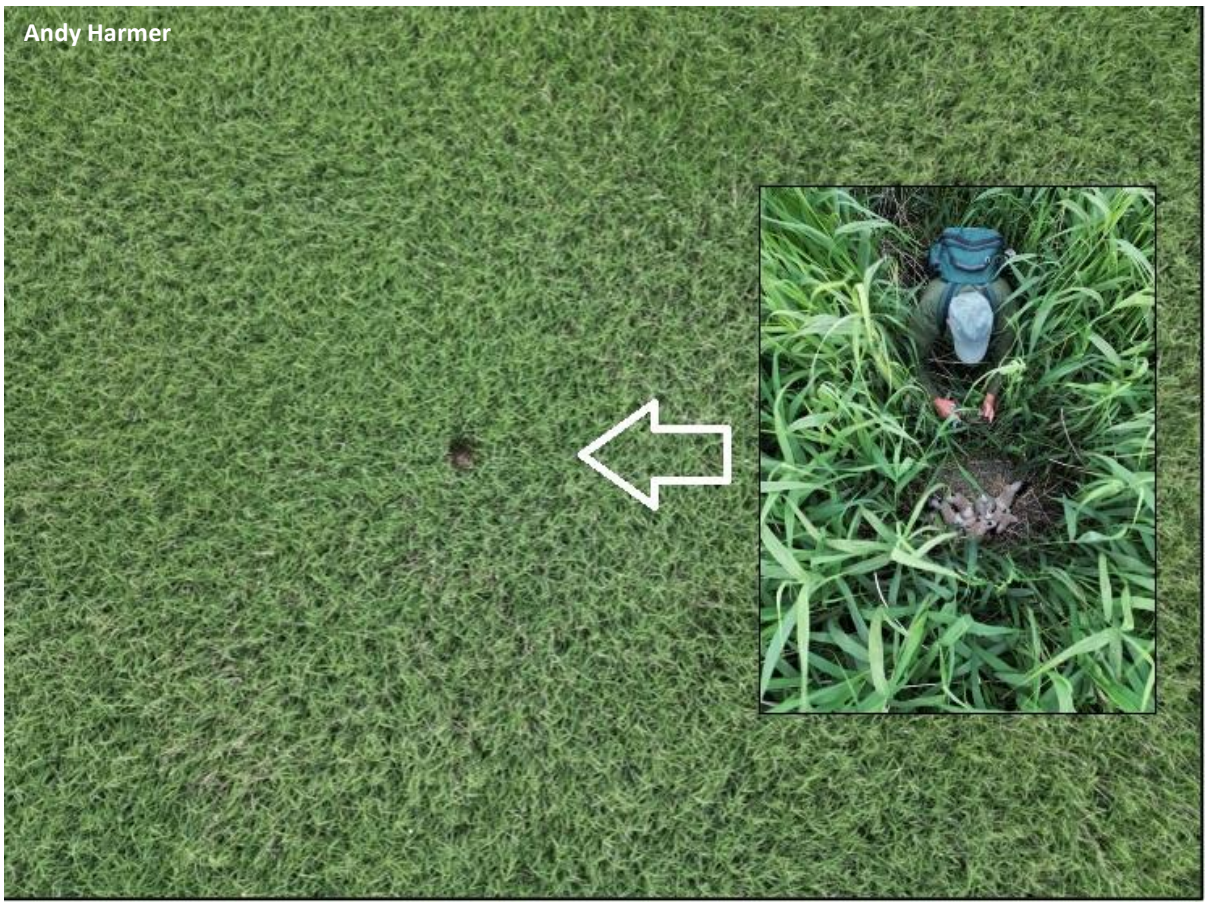
And one last thing… breeding season fieldwork for the next Britain, Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands bird atlas starts in the spring of 2028. Breeding evidence codes are a vital part of atlasing, so now is a good time for everyone to be brushing up their knowledge!



Using drones for finding and monitoring nests

Improvements in drone technology, and their increasing affordability, mean that drones have become a familiar part of modern life – including for recording wildlife. There is, however, a dearth of guidance on nest recording with drones, including for rare breeding birds, so in October we published a blog by experienced drone user Andy Harmer sharing his expertise. It can be read in full at https://rbbp.org.uk/2026/10/27/using-drones-for-finding-and-monitoring-nests/.

Andy describes the considerable benefits that drones can offer for nest finding and monitoring: aerial views of nests invisible from the ground; thermal imaging that picks up the heat signatures of birds and nest contents; access to areas that are difficult to reach on foot; precise mapping of nest locations; and photographic evidence that gives greater confidence in survey results. Used well, they can also reduce disturbance, by cutting the number and proximity of people in a survey area, the duration of visits, and the trampling of habitat that might lead predators to a nest. The results can be striking – drone inspections of 87 factory and warehouse roofs in Cheshire in 2022 located 1,250 breeding pairs of large gulls, almost none of which had previously been recorded.



However, it is important that drones are used responsibly. Drone users must follow the Civil Aviation Authority's Drone Code – never flying above 120 m (400 ft), always keeping the drone in sight, respecting Flight Restriction Zones and registering their drone where required – and the Code also states that drones should not be flown

where they will disturb or endanger wildlife. Flights may be restricted over some Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and landowner permission is still needed for take-off and landing.

Most importantly, all breeding-season fieldwork should aim to keep disturbance to a minimum, and drone work is no exception: fly as high as possible while still obtaining usable images, and stop the flight immediately if any signs of disturbance are seen. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb Schedule One species while they are building a nest, or are at or near a nest containing eggs or young, or to disturb their dependent young. Any drone work that may disturb Schedule One species – even when they are not the target of the survey – must therefore be carried out under licence. The blog also includes Andy's own step-by-step protocol for drone nest recording, which we hope will be useful to others.

As county recorders you may increasingly be receiving records gathered using drones, and we would be grateful if you could share this guidance with any observers in your area who are using, or considering using, drones for monitoring breeding birds.

Estimates for the less scarce species

As well as site-by-site records, for a limited number of the more widespread species on our list we ask county recorders to provide an estimate of the total number of pairs believed to occur within their recording area (distinct from the number of pairs that are actually reported). These estimates can be entered on the first sheet of the data entry spreadsheet, and we would like to encourage as many of you as possible to provide them with your 2025 returns.

Why do they matter? Our rarest species are generally very well monitored, but as species become more numerous and widespread their numbers may exceed available recording effort. In addition, less rare species may have less 'novelty value' hence observers may be less likely to spend time carefully monitoring and counting them, and their distribution may be spread into parts of the wider countryside that are less well watched. As a result, breeding numbers of many of the less scarce species on our list are likely to be under-reported. By providing estimates alongside the totals reported, we can provide context on the likely true populations of these species and thus the scale of under-reporting and how robust our published totals are.



Even where you feel you know the location of all the pairs of a species in your area, the records you receive in any given year may not reflect the full picture – perhaps because a key site was not visited, or because local recording levels for that species are low. Although estimating numbers can be difficult, we believe that the county recorder is the one person best placed to compile these figures, and we use them to provide more realistic totals for the whole country.

A few suggestions for producing an estimate:

Use your local knowledge – think about regularly occupied sites that were not visited or not reported in 2025, and about suitable habitat in less well-watched parts of your area.

Draw on all available sources – such as recent atlas or national survey results, estimates provided from adjacent counties, local studies, and records from previous years – to judge how complete your 2025 dataset is likely to be.

Tell us how you did it – a brief note on the basis of your estimate, and how confident you are in it, is very helpful when we combine figures from across the UK.

A reasoned estimate with a short explanation is much more useful to us than no estimate at all – so please don't be put off if your estimate is really a guesstimate. And if you would like to discuss how to approach an estimate for any particular species, please get in touch.

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/**. Recent posts have included the recording guidance and drone blogs described above, and on the Heathland Bird Survey results. 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, post-Covid, 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 the deadline for submitting 2025 data:

30th November 2026.

Mark Eaton, on behalf of the RBBP, November 2026

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