

Nest Box Challenge 2008 Update



Thank you for taking part in Nest Box Challenge 2008. The idea for Nest Box Challenge came out of the long running National Nest Box Week. Launched in 1997, 2008 was the twelfth consecutive year that the BTO encouraged people to put up nest boxes. Since the launch, thousands of enthusiastic naturalists have supported the event and it is estimated that there are now between five



Great Spotted Woodpecker - John Harding

and six million nest boxes in gardens across the UK. With this many nest boxes available, it is important to know just how successful the birds that use them are and the only way to find out is to ask the owners of those nest boxes. Nest Box Challenge was born! With the support of the BBC Breathing Places Team, the launch of this new survey in 2007 was a great success, giving scientists at the BTO a chance to look into thousands of nest boxes for the first time. So how did it go in 2008?



Dipper - John Harding

Activity at nest boxes was recorded for 28 different species during the breeding season. New for the challenge were Dippers in Cheshire, Gwynedd and Ceredigion, a Common Redstart in Blaenau, Gwent and a Great Spotted Woodpecker that successfully fledged young from a nest box in Suffolk. All reports of Great Spotted Woodpeckers prior to this have been of birds visiting nest boxes but not using them.

For information on other species using nest boxes in 2008 visit www.bto.org/nbc/results/index.htm and select the species from the drop-down box.

Top 10 Nest Box Birds - 2008

The table below shows the top 10 list of species using nest boxes reported to Nest Box Challenge during 2008. Blue Tits, as expected, were the highest occupier. We were unsure as to the readiness of Robins to use open-fronted nest boxes - 75 occupied boxes shows that Robins may well use them if provided.



Nesting Robin - John Cranfield

First Eggs

The first egg recorded in 2008 was laid by a Robin in Thurrock on 12 March, followed by another on 13 March in Norfolk. The first Blue Tit eggs appeared on 8 April in Carmarthenshire, Derbyshire and south Gloucestershire. In 2007, the first Blue Tit eggs were recorded on 10 April.



Blue Tit eggs - Mark C Mainwaring

During 2008, Blue Tits occupied 696 nest boxes

Nest Box Registration

During the 2008 breeding season, 4,256 additional nest boxes were registered, bringing the total to 16,833. The five counties with the most boxes were:

- Norfolk - 623
- Hampshire - 565
- Greater London - 510
- Surrey - 488
- Suffolk - 452

Nest boxes have been registered across the whole of the country, from the Channel Islands to Shetland, with the highest rate of occupancy being recorded in the latter. The one and only nest box registered here was occupied by House Sparrows, giving Shetland 100% occupancy! To see where the nest boxes have been registered, visit: www.bto.org/goto/nbc-maps08.htm

Species	Scientific Name	Total
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	696
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	289
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	81
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	75
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	34
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	18
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	13
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	9
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europea</i>	8
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	6

Nest Box Challenge - Questions & Answers

More and more people are installing nest boxes with fitted cameras and recording some interesting behaviour, from birds using nest boxes to roost in during the winter months, to adult birds removing dead chicks and eggshells from the nest.

*Q: ... the last hatching was captured on DVD and then, to our absolute amazement, instead of removing the shell as we expected, the female Blue Tit proceeded to eat it!! She pecked at the smaller piece and then, having some difficulty with the larger piece, took it to the edge of the nest and stood on it to allow her to complete the devouring of it. Finally, she returned to her sitting position and appeared to clean her beak. Because we didn't believe what we had seen, we rewatched the recording - twice! Is this normal practice for the disposal of the discarded egg shells? Please help us if you can - we always thought that the shells were removed as quickly as possible from the nest - partly for hygiene, space etc., and partly to prevent the bright inside of the shell attracting predators. **Maureen & David Walker***

A: Birds will often eat the eggshell as it is an important source of calcium, helping to replace that used in the formation of the eggs originally.

*Q: Having monitored the comings and goings of our nest box, we were astonished to see one of the adults struggling to eject what we saw to be a large dead chick. Shortly after succeeding, normal feeding resumed. In all my years of birding I have never seen anything like this before. **John Dolan***

*Q: Watching the nest box through our nest cam, we noticed two of the young Great Tits had died. As the chicks were so far developed the adult struggled to get them through the entrance hole. Over the next hour or so the bodies were destroyed, and a fair amount consumed, until they were small enough to fit through the hole. It was very distressing to watch, but is it something that happens often, just that we don't normally get to see it? **E. Hassall***



Great Tit - John Harding

A: To minimise the risk of infection and disease, hole nesting birds keep the nest as clean as possible by removing faecal sacs and any young that perish. These are disposed of well away from the box in order to avoid attracting the unwanted attention of potential predators. This behaviour is therefore not unusual, but with the advent of nest box cameras we are now much more likely to observe it.

*Q: The Blue Tit in my nest box has nine eggs. Is this number normal and how do they fill so many small mouths? **Katie***

A: The average clutch size for a Blue Tit is 8-10. It seems amazing that these small birds can raise so many young; each youngster needs on average 100 caterpillars a day. With ten young to feed, the adults have to find 1000 caterpillars each and every day for around 20 days, adding up to an amazing 20,000. If the weather is kind to them, they are more than capable of achieving this seemingly impossible task.

Q: Is it too late to enter my data for 2008?

A: There is still time to submit your records for 2008. The more records we receive, the better we will be able to calculate breeding issues in 2008.



Blue Tits in nestbox - Peter Thornhill

Attach your nest box camera to your television and enjoy hours of fascinating viewing.

*Q: We have a new box with a camera in it. Great, we thought, we have always had birds nesting in all our boxes. We put this new box where another box used to be and it seemed a little slow to become occupied. A few weeks ago a Nuthatch started popping in. We have watched him hammering away inside and mudding up all the crevices to block out the light! Our worst fear has now happened and he has covered the camera hole! What can we do, if anything, or what would you suggest for next year? **Jackie Andrews***

A: Oh dear, this is unfortunate but perhaps not entirely unexpected given that Nuthatch like plastering mud everywhere in the nest box. If it were me, I would be so pleased to have Nuthatch in a nest box that I would just leave them to their own devices. As for next year - I don't know if there is a solution in advanced planning! If the Nuthatch decides to nest in the same box (highly likely), then he will almost certainly do the same again. You might think of filling in the camera hole temporarily with newspaper and then removing it once the birds have finished mud plastering.

*Q: I would like to know if birds that use nest boxes with nest box cameras attached to them are affected at all by the camera? **Heather***

A: There is no evidence that the birds in these nest boxes behave any differently from those in boxes without cameras.



Simon Thurgood

Several hungry mouths to feed

Q: Should I clean out my nest box now that the breeding season is over? Sam

A: Bird protection law permits the cleaning out of nests between 1 August and 31 January. Some hole nesting species, including sparrows, may have second or third broods in the same nest. The nests of these species should be left until sometime during the autumn when it is certain that they are no longer in use. We have received a lot of reports from Challengers who have nest cameras fitted to their nest boxes of birds returning to the box to roost over the winter months. It seems that most of these boxes are empty or have been cleaned out and it might be that birds actually prefer an empty box to roost in.



Q: I thought these photos might interest you seeing as you're the nest box man. This is an 'RSPB' approved nest box but the Blue Tits hereabouts seem to think the hole is too small. If I hadn't seen them biting it myself I'd have suspected some sort of acrobatic rodent was frequenting my garden. The odd thing is that I've seen Blue Tits going into the box. Maybe they're expecting fat children? **Pete Smith**

A: Birds that use nest boxes will often peck around the hole and seem to be trying to make the hole larger. In the spring of 2007, Blue Tits started to do this with the nest box in my garden. However, they didn't use the box, so the following winter I enlarged the hole from 25mm to 28mm. Blue Tits returned this spring and proceeded to peck around the enlarged hole and chip away the wood. Again, they didn't use the nest box. It may well be that the pecking around the box is more about marking the entrance in some way rather than enlarging the hole. As Pete's photograph shows, the birds have chipped away quite a bit of wood but have not actually enlarged the actual size of the hole.

BTO Nest Record Scheme

The success of Nest Box Challenge is all down to the participants who provide the BTO with a lot of detailed information about the birds in their boxes, but it does not stop with their nest boxes. David Huxter emailed to tell us about events in his garden. He managed to video a Sparrowhawk that caught a bird in his garden, he had Blue Tits nesting in one of his boxes, Robins nesting in some ivy and Blackbirds nesting in his Leylandii hedge. The BTO can also cater for those people who are fortunate enough to have birds, such as Blackbirds, Dunnocks and Spotted Flycatchers, nesting in their gardens, but not in nest boxes. Since 1939, the BTO has collected this information through the Nest Record Scheme (NRS) and whilst it has collected a huge amount of information (if all the NRS cards were stacked up they would be taller than the Empire State Building),



Susan Waghorn

This Blackbird favoured an unconventional location to raise her brood.

we are always looking for more. A good nest record will entail at least two visits to the nest and the recording of your observations during those visits. So, if you have birds that shun your nest boxes but still nest in the garden, why not take part in NRS. For more information and to take part, visit www.bto.org/goto/nrs.htm.



Dunnock - Shane Hinkley



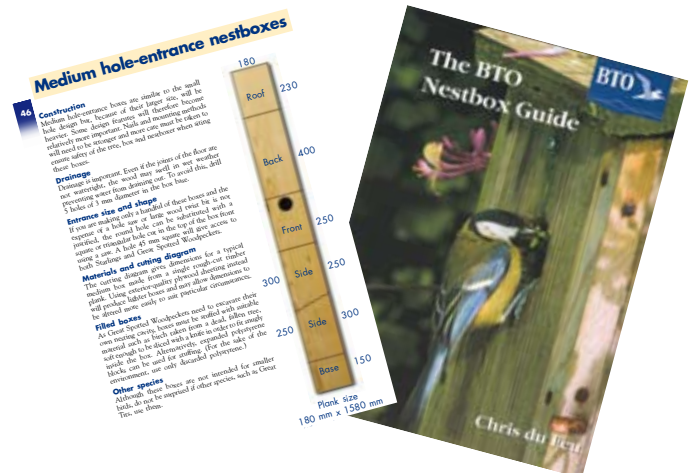
Some of the Nest Record Cards received at the BTO Headquarters.

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BTO Nest Box Guide

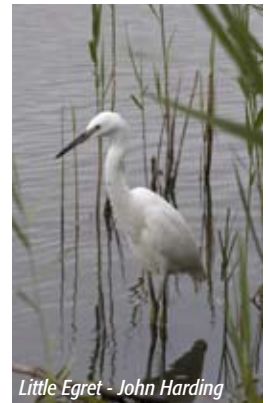
It is estimated that there are 5-6 million nest boxes in gardens across the UK. The majority of these are of the small-hole type used by Blue Tits or the open-fronted nest box favoured by Robins. However, a number of other species will use nest boxes. *The BTO Nest Box Guide* has information on 23 species that regularly build their nests in boxes. There are designs for eight different types of nest box that will accommodate birds as diverse as Barn Owl and Wren and answers to many of the questions posed when confronted with the challenge of siting a nest box.

The BTO Nest Box Guide is available from the BTO at a cost of £7.99 plus postage and packing. Visit www.bto.org or telephone 01842 750050 and ask for catalogue sales.



BTO Atlas 2007-11

With 15 years having lapsed since the last Atlas of Breeding birds in the UK, and 20 years since the Winter Atlas, the BTO has launched the 2007-11 Bird Atlas. This is to be the biggest stocktake of Britain's birds ever undertaken. We know that there will be some big changes. Common Buzzard has extended its range from the west of the country and is now found in every county, and the once rare Little Egret is now breeding in many counties. But how are some of our commoner birds doing? The ambitious aim is to map the birds in every 10km square in the country, both in the winter and the summer. There are two ways that this can be achieved. People signing up for a Timed Tetrad visit record all the birds seen in a 2km x 2km square on two visits in the summer and another two in the winter. Alternatively, anyone can submit sightings of birds they see anywhere in the country, from a Blue Tit in the garden to a Barn Owl flying in front of the car, as Roving Records. Both Timed Tetrad visits and Roving Records can be submitted online or by paper recording forms, available from the BTO. To take part in the Atlas visit www.bto.org/birdatlas/index/htm, write to Dawn Balmer, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU or telephone 01842 750050.



Little Egret - John Harding

BTO Garden BirdWatch



Birdwatchers - Paul Stancliffe

Garden BirdWatch can be enjoyed by people of all ages.

For those who enjoy taking part in Nest Box Challenge and can't wait for the next breeding season to begin, the BTO Garden BirdWatch (GBW) might help to fill the void. Like Nest Box Challenge, all the action takes place in the garden and those who take part submit records on a weekly basis throughout the year. It is the only way to collect information on garden birds and, as a third of Britain's birds live in and around those gardens, it is an incredibly important survey. There is an annual membership fee of £15.00 but for that, every surveyor receives the quarterly magazine *Bird Table*, full of up-to-date information on



garden birds, identification guides and tips on how to make your garden better for birds and wildlife in general. Every new member also receives a free book and has a choice of the *BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Book* (128 pages on how, why, when and what birds use gardens) or the newly published *BTO Gardening for BirdWatchers*, full of ideas not only on gardening for birds but for wildlife in general.

For more information on the survey visit www.bto.org/gbw, write to GBW, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU, telephone 01842 750050 or email gbw@bto.org.



British Trust for Ornithology

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), founded in 1933, is the foremost bird research organisation in the UK, specialising in providing high quality, impartial research in field ornithology. This is achieved by a partnership between the BTO and volunteer birdwatchers across the country taking part in the various surveys. Through the efforts of those volunteers, the bird populations of the British Isles have been monitored more effectively and for longer than those of most other parts of the world. This has produced a uniquely rich and detailed body of scientific work and engaged thousands of people in 'hands on' conservation research. Building on this heritage and reinforcing our core work of volunteer surveys will help us to understand the complex and worrying challenges facing wild birds at a time of great change in the environment that we have to share with them.

The Trust exists independently of both the conservation campaigners and the government agencies responsible for environmental protection. This means that the data we gather and the survey results we publish are objective and unbiased. Hence, both government agencies and conservation campaigners can rely on them.

For more information on the work of the BTO visit, www.bto.org/aboutBTO/workofbto.htm.



BTO HQ - Mike Toms

BTO Headquarters are in the grounds of a Nunnery complete with ruins.