

BTO HERONRIES CENSUS 2025 SUMMARY REPORT



Birtles, G.A., Balmer, D.E., Massimino, D., Walker, J. & Woodward, I.D. 2026.
BTO Heronries Census 2025 Summary Report. BTO. Thetford.

Grey Heron, by Sarah Kelman / BTO

INTRODUCTION

The 2025 breeding season was the 98th year of the Heronries Census, which began in 1928 as a special survey for *British Birds*, co-ordinated by Max Nicholson (who went on to be a leading contributor to the formation of BTO in 1933). The initial survey covered only Grey Heron with other species added to the Census as they have begun to colonise the UK or, in the case of Cormorant, started to nest in trees well away from their traditional coastal colonies, often within or close to heronries. In addition to Grey Heron and Cormorant, the Census now includes Little Egret, Great White Egret, Cattle Egret and Spoonbill.

We would like to thank all Heronries Census volunteers and Regional Organisers for their efforts in 2025. The latest results are presented in this annual summary report. By the end of 2025, we had received counts (including zero counts) from 895 sites (Figure 1), which is slightly fewer than last year, with the revised number of sites covered in 2024 being 916 following late submissions (which is up from 877 originally reported in the 2024 Summary Report). Hopefully late data for 2025 will be input soon and will be reflected accurately in next year's summary report.

Population estimates for Little Egret are reported here for the first time, following the publication of a paper in *British Birds* magazine (see page 4 of this report). These estimates combine Census data with additional counts from the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) and we thank the RBBP for sharing data for this purpose.

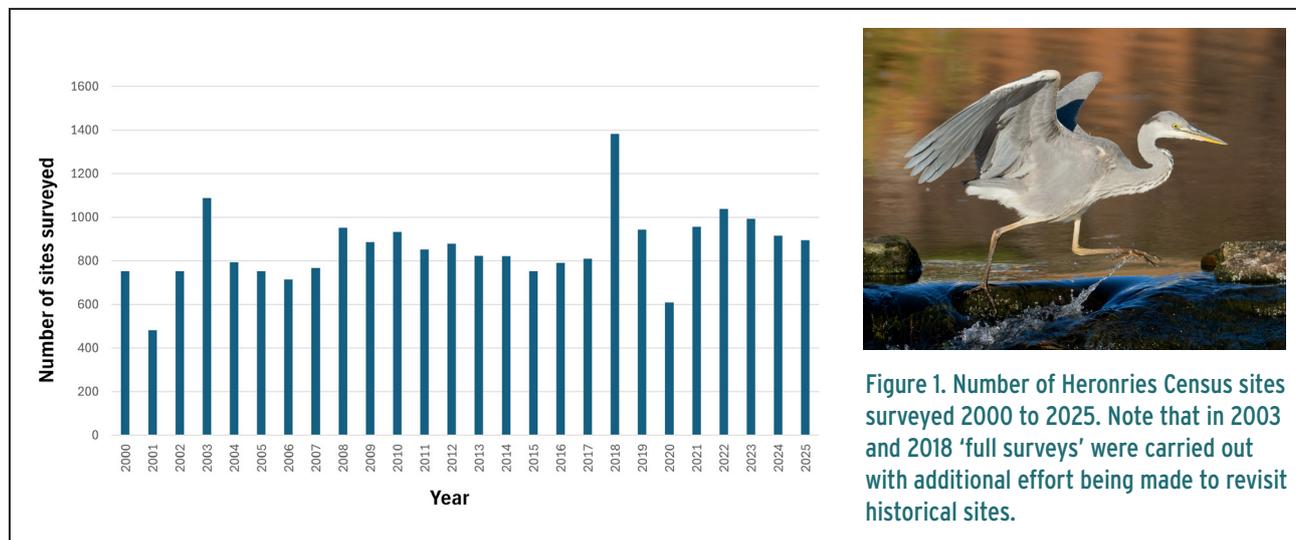


Figure 1. Number of Heronries Census sites surveyed 2000 to 2025. Note that in 2003 and 2018 'full surveys' were carried out with additional effort being made to revisit historical sites.

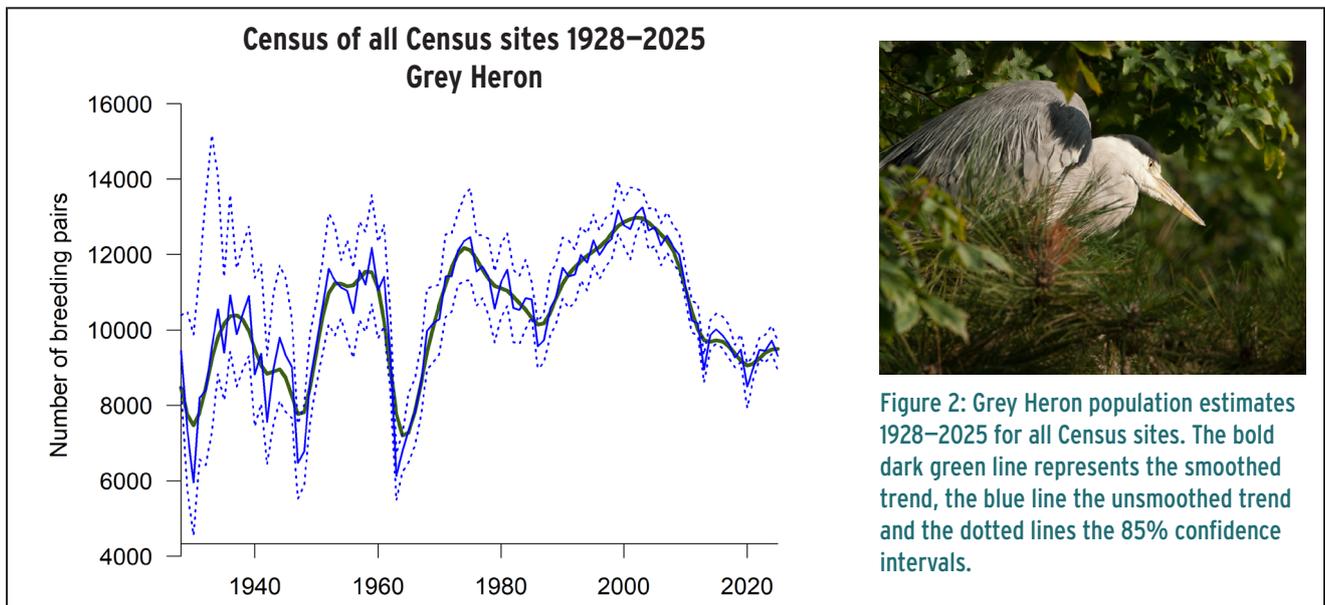
Grey Heron, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

RESULTS

GREY HERON

The UK population estimate for 2025 is 9,301 Apparently Occupied Nests (AONs), down from the revised estimate of 9,714 AONs in 2024. The largest Grey Heron colony in 2025 was 85 AONs at a site in Wiltshire, a decrease on the count of 100 nests there in 2024.

As highlighted in recent Heronries Census summary reports, the population still remains well below the levels seen at the peak in the early 2000s, when there were around 13,000 AONs in the UK (Figure 2). As discussed in the [2024 summary report](#), it is unclear why Grey Heron numbers have failed to recover following the decline during the severe winters of 2008/09 and 2010/11. However, whilst a lack of any recovery is concerning, it should also be remembered that despite recent decreases, the current population estimate is similar to that at the time of the first Heronries Census in 1928 and that there have been times during the last 98 years when numbers have been lower.



Grey Heron, by Sarah Kelman / BTO

Table 1: Grey Heron population estimates for 2025, and associated changes

	Estimated number of Apparently Occupied Nests with 85% confidence intervals	Estimated % change over five years with 95% confidence intervals	Estimated % change over 10 years with 95% confidence intervals	Estimated % change over 25 years with 95% confidence intervals
All Census sites	9,301 (8,922 – 9,676)	3 (-3 – 7)	-2 (-7 – 2)	-26 (-31 – -21)
England	5,930 (5,658 – 6,176)	3 (-1 – 6)	-1 (-6 – 4)	-26 (-31 – -21)
Northern Ireland	701 (654 – 768)	0 (-11 – 14)	-9(-22 – 5)	-55 (-79 – -27)
Scotland	2,510 (2,129 – 3,055)	11 (-9 – 35)	-6 (-32 – 16)	-11 (-35 – 14)
Wales	603 (556 – 664)	1 (-18 – 14)	-1 (-16 – 14)	-32 (-46 – -15)

NOTE: The population estimates are run separately for all Census sites (the UK and Isle of Man, as there are no Grey Heron Census records from the Channel Islands), and for the four constituent countries of the UK and the summed total for the four UK countries is greater than the UK + IOM total. Separate population estimates are not produced for the Isle of Man due to low sample sizes. The calculated 'All Census sites' total is considered to be a more reliable estimate than the summed UK total.

NOTE: The percentage changes exclude the first and last year with data from the change periods as these changes are calculated using the smoothed index, whose estimate is not very stable at the extremes.

LITTLE EGRET

The combined Census and RBBP trend gives a population estimate of 2,274 (2,145–2,500) pairs in 2023 for the UK and the Channel Islands (there are as yet no breeding records on the Isle of Man), a 2% increase from a revised estimate of 2,224 pairs in 2022. RBBP data are not yet available for 2024 and 2025. However, Census data from these years suggest that numbers increased again in 2024 but dropped sharply in 2025 and that the population in 2025 was around 6% lower than in 2023 (see Figure 3). Although the winter in 2024/25 was warmer on average, some periods of severe wintry weather did occur and both this and the prolonged dry spells in spring 2025 may have caused this decrease.

Through Heronries Census visits, where we collect data on AON, the largest count of 91 AONs in 2025 came from a site in Merseyside with numbers at that site down from 101 AONs in 2024. Looking across the whole of the UK, AONs were recorded at 164 sites in England, 12 sites in Wales, six sites in Scotland, six sites in Northern Ireland, and one site in Jersey.

CORMORANT

A total of 2,443 AONs were recorded for Cormorant at 63 Heronries Census sites in 2025. This is up from 1,917 AONs at 56 sites in 2024 (Figure 4). The largest count of 272 AONs came from a site in West Yorkshire, which has seen a large increase as in 2024, this site reported 155 Cormorant AONs. It is also an increase from the largest count in 2024, which came from a site in Merseyside, recording 217 AONs. Across the UK in 2025, AONs were recorded at 59 sites in England, one site in Scotland, two in Wales and one site in Jersey.

We are very pleased to see an increase in submissions for this species and we continue to encourage observers to count and report nesting Cormorants to the Census, including at sites which are not within a heronry, to ensure that the inland nesting Cormorant population can be monitored in the future. This will help ensure we can get an accurate understanding of Cormorant population trends.

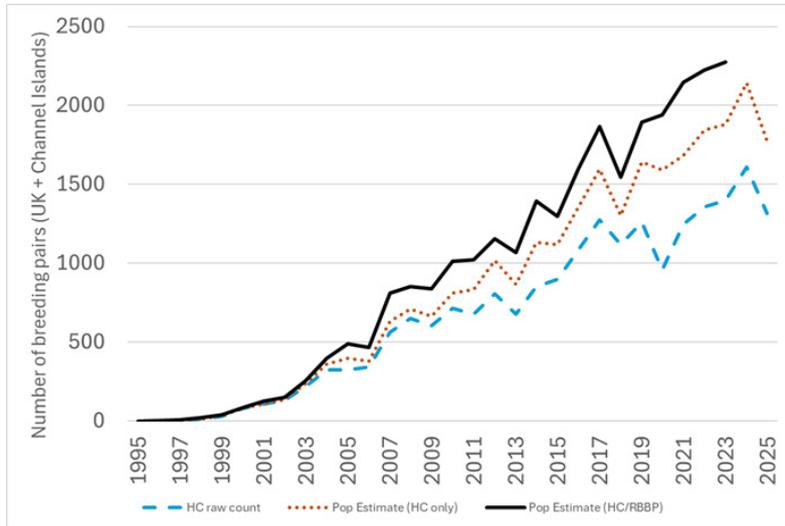


Figure 3. Population estimates for Little Egret 1995–2025 using Heronries Census (HC) and Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) data. RBBP data are not yet available for 2024 and 2025.

Little Egret, by Liz Cutting / BTO

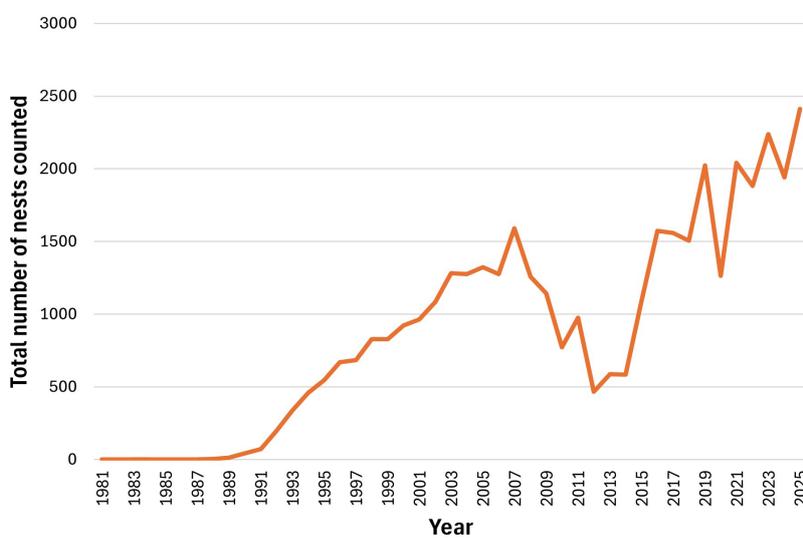


Figure 4. Number of Cormorant nests counted by Heronries Census volunteers 1990–2025. Note that the lower counts between 2007 and 2016 (also in 2020) are due to reduced coverage in those years rather than a genuine decline in numbers.

Cormorant, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

SCARCE SPECIES

The Heronries Census also collects data on other colonial birds nesting within heronries, to help keep track of the population growth of these species if, as expected, they continue their recent range expansion across the UK. We have received records of a minimum of 133 Cattle Egret AONs in 2025 at 25 sites, all in England, which is up from 119 at 22 sites in 2024. For Great White Egret, 72 AONs were recorded at nine sites (all in England) which is slightly down from 87 at 10 sites in 2024. And for Spoonbill, 69 AONs were recorded at eight sites (all in England), which is exactly equal to what was recorded in 2024 (Figure 5).

These are actual counts rather than population estimates and hence (as in previous years) the apparent decrease in Great White Egret compared to 2024 probably does not represent a real decrease but more likely changes in recording effort. We would welcome late submissions of data for scarcer species for 2025 and earlier years: all records which have not already been publicised by the land owners will be kept confidential and will only be shared with the RBBP.

GUIDANCE ON SURVEYING FOR SCARCE SPECIES

For the Heronries Census, scarcer species are considered to be Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Spoonbill, Night Heron and Glossy Ibis.

Heronries Census surveyors should be mindful that scarcer species may be prospecting for nests at the key time for Grey Heron counts (late March or April) and could be more susceptible to disturbance at this time – more so than Grey Herons, which start nesting earlier and will hence be more settled.

If scarcer species are present (they are becoming more widespread, especially in England and Wales), surveyors should find a vantage point to monitor the heronry from, without disturbing the birds. And as nests are more likely to be obscured by denser vegetation, this monitoring will often require longer survey visits to watch flight lines in order to robustly estimate the number of nests. Monitoring scarcer species may also require additional visits later in the season as the typical breeding season is more extended than that of Grey Heron.

If you are lucky enough to find Spoonbill is present within your heronry, it should be noted that this species is afforded additional protection as it is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) and it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb them when they are building a nest or at a nest containing eggs or young, i.e. you should not approach the nest without a Schedule 1 disturbance licence issued by the relevant licencing body. In the absence of a Schedule 1 licence, you should only carry out Census counts when you know that Spoonbills are nesting if the colony can be viewed from a vantage point without causing any disturbance. Although Great White Egret and Cattle Egret are not listed under Schedule 1, if you find these species you should consider treating these species in the same way as Spoonbills.

Further guidance on surveying for scarcer species can be found within the [Survey Resources](#).

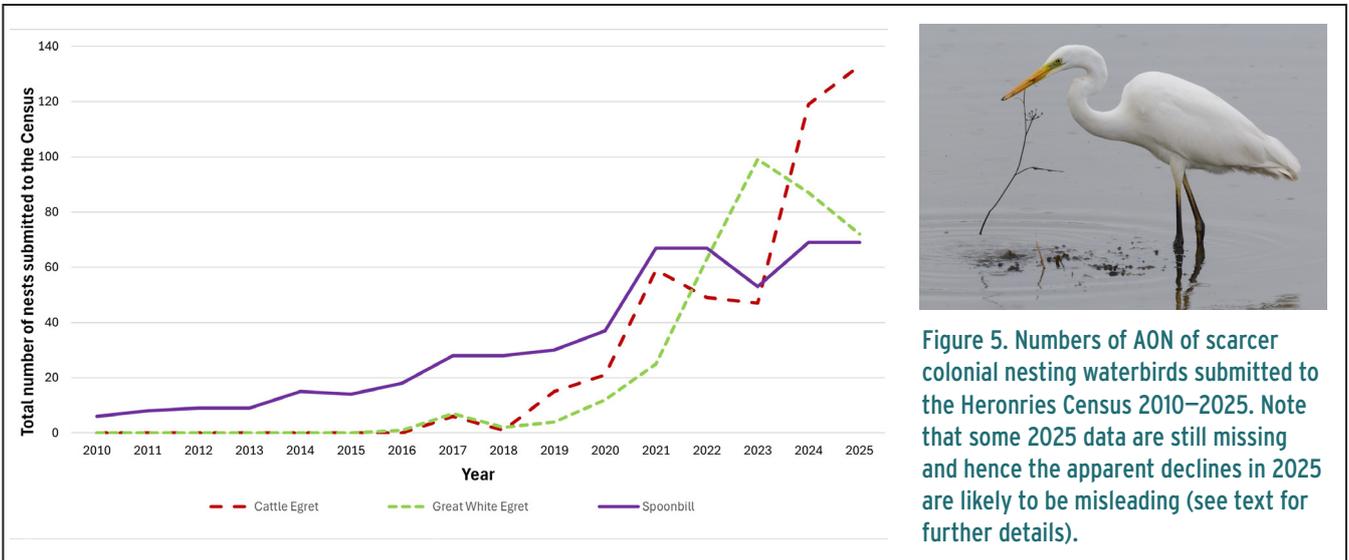


Figure 5. Numbers of AON of scarcer colonial nesting waterbirds submitted to the Heronries Census 2010–2025. Note that some 2025 data are still missing and hence the apparent declines in 2025 are likely to be misleading (see text for further details).

Great White Egret, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

PRODUCING POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR LITTLE EGRETS

Counts and species trends for Little Egret, published in previous Heronries Census Annual Summary Reports, have shown the raw Census counts for each survey year. However, as Little Egret has spread across the UK and increased in abundance, it becomes more likely each year that some 'egrettries' will be missed and that known colonies will not be counted, making the counts incomplete. Recent analysis published in *British Birds* quantified the number of missing pairs and produced population estimates for Little Egret, using a methodology which is similar to the model which produces the Grey Heron trends presented in this report each year.

This assessment used combined Heronries Census and RBBP data to produce a population estimate of 2,236 Little Egret pairs (85% confidence intervals 2,100 to 2,484 pairs) in 2022 for the UK and the Channel Islands when taking the highest count from either RBBP or the Heronries Census. This compares to a raw count of 1,359 pairs reported to the Census and 1,603 pairs reported in the 2022 RBBP Report, suggesting that the population was around 40% higher than the RBBP count (as Heronries Census data are shared with RBBP, the RBBP total count will always be higher than the Census total).

Census volunteers can help to ensure that ongoing Little Egret estimates are robust by reviewing the online guidance on counting egret nests. Longer and more thorough survey visits may be needed to find evidence of nesting activity and count nests, as well as additional visits later in the season (in May or June).

We would also welcome submissions to the Heronries Census from any Little Egret sites which are currently reported to the RBBP (via county bird recorders) but not to the Census. Whilst data from these sites will continue to be incorporated into combined Census/RBBP population estimates, there will be a delay of two years before counts not submitted directly to the Census are included in the combined trend (i.e. whilst the RBBP data are processed). Furthermore, whilst members of the RBBP have decided to continue to consider Little Egret for the time being, at least until the raw total number of pairs reported reaches 2,000, they may drop the species from their list when that threshold is reached: the Census would become the sole route for monitoring Little Egret trends at that point.

The paper summarising the Little Egret population estimates can be found here: www.britishbirds.co.uk/journal/article/producing-breeding-population-estimates-monitor-little-egret-trends (abstract only; note that the full paper is only available to *British Birds* subscribers).

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank all the volunteers and Regional Organisers (ROs) for their work on the 2025 Census. Space does not permit all observers to be acknowledged individually, but we would especially like to thank the Regional Organisers for their efforts. The project is supported by funding from Gifts in Wills, for which we are extremely grateful.



HERONRIES CENSUS REGIONAL ORGANISERS IN 2024

ENGLAND

Avon	Eve Tigwell
Bedfordshire	Phil Cannings
Berkshire	Sean Murphy
Birmingham & West Midlands	Steve Davies
Buckinghamshire	Phil Tizzard
Cambridgeshire	Charlie Kitchen
Cheshire (Mid)	VACANT
Cheshire (North & East)	VACANT
Cheshire (South)	VACANT
Cleveland	Michael Leakey
Cornwall	Simon Taylor
Cumbria	Colin Gay (now VACANT)
Derbyshire (North)	VACANT
Derbyshire (South)	VACANT
Devon	Alex Banks
Dorset	Greg Lambe
Durham	David Sowerbutts
Essex (Northeast)	John Fell
Essex (Northwest)	VACANT
Essex (South)	VACANT
Gloucestershire	Michael Smart
Hampshire	Robin Findlay
Herefordshire	Chris Robinson
Hertfordshire	Murray Orchard
Huntingdon & Peterborough	VACANT
Isle of Wight	Jim Baldwin (now Robin Attrill)
Isles of Scilly	VACANT
Kent	Brian Watmough
Lancashire (East)	VACANT
Lancashire (Northwest)	Graham Hulme
Lancashire (South)	Mark & Heather Walsh
Leicestershire & Rutland	Russ Malin (now VACANT)
Lincolnshire (East, North, South & West)	Barrie Wilkinson
London (North)	Ben Hillier
London (South)	Richard Arnold
Manchester	Nick Hilton
Merseyside	VACANT
Norfolk (Northeast)	Chris Hudson
Norfolk (Northwest)	Russ Malin (now VACANT)
Norfolk (Southeast)	Rachel Warren
Norfolk (Southwest)	Vincent Matthews
Northamptonshire	Bob Bullock
Northumberland	Tom Cadwallender (now Daisy Barnes)
Nottinghamshire	Julia Thrush
Oxfordshire (North)	Frances Buckel
Oxfordshire (South)	John Melling
Shropshire	Jonathan Groom
Somerset	Eve Tigwell
Staffordshire (North, South & West)	Ben Reavey
Suffolk	Mick Wright
Surrey	Ray Phillips
Sussex	Helen Crabtree
The Wirral	VACANT
Warwickshire	Annette Jarratt-Knock
Wiltshire (North & South)	John Sealy
Worcestershire	VACANT
Yorkshire (Bradford)	Mike Denton
Yorkshire (Central)	Mike Brown
Yorkshire (East & Hull)	Brian Walker (now VACANT)
Yorkshire (Leeds & Wakefield)	VACANT
Yorkshire (Northeast)	Nick Gibbons (now Alan Burnham)
Yorkshire (Northwest)	VACANT
Yorkshire (Richmond)	VACANT
Yorkshire (Southeast & Southwest)	Grant Bigg
Yorkshire (York)	Rob Chapman

SCOTLAND

Aberdeen	VACANT
Angus	Steve Willis
Argyll (Mainland, Bute & Gigha)	Nigel Scriven
Argyll (Mull, Coll, Tiree & Morvern)	Ewan Miles
Arran	Jim Cassels
Ayrshire and Cumbrae	VACANT
Benbecula & the Uists	Yvonne Benting (now VACANT)
Borders	Malcolm Ross
Caithness	Donald Omand
Central	Neil Bielby
Dumfries	Andy Riches
Fife & Kinross	Paul Blackburn
Inverness (East, Speyside & West)	Hugh Inslay
Islay, Jura & Colonsay	David Wood
Kincardine & Deeside	Claire Marsden
Kirkcudbright	Andrew Bielinski
Lanark, Renfrew & Dunbarton	Gordon Brady
Lewis & Harris	Emma Niederberger
Lothian	Stephen Metcalfe
Moray & Nairn	Melvin Morrison
Orkney	VACANT
Perthshire	Mike Bell
Ross-shire	Simon Cohen
Rum, Eigg, Canna & Muck	Bob Swann
Shetland	VACANT
Skye	Carol Hawley
Sutherland	VACANT
Wigtown	Andrew Bielinski

WALES

Anglesey	Ian Hawkins
Brecknock	Andrew King
Caernarfon	Rhion Pritchard
Cardigan	Naomi Davis
Carmarthen	Clare Bishop
Clwyd (East)	Ian Spence
Clwyd (West)	Mel Ab-Owain
Glamorgan (Mid & South)	Strinda Davies
Glamorgan (West)	Lyndon Jeffery (now Strinda Davies)
Gwent	Richard Clarke
Meirionnydd	David Anning
Montgomery	VACANT
Pembrokeshire	Annie & Bob Haycock
Radnorshire	Gethin Jenkins-Jones

NORTHERN IRELAND

All regions Ian Enlander

CHANNEL ISLANDS

Channel Islands (excl. Jersey)	Chris Mourant
Jersey	Tony Paintin

ISLE OF MAN

Isle of Man	Robert Fisher
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We would be grateful for help organising the Heronries Census in regions currently without an RO (marked VACANT). If you live in one of these regions and would be interested in taking on a role, please let us know at: herons@bto.org.

Many thanks are due to ROs listed who stepped down during 2025. Finally, we would like to thank all the landowners who kindly allow volunteers access to their land to carry out Heronries Census visits.

SURVEY TIMETABLE AND TASKS



USEFUL LINKS

Log in and enter data: app.bto.org/colonies/login/login.jsp?event=auth_fail>l=private%2Fdata-home.jsp

Heronries vacant sites map: app.bto.org/colonies/public/vacant-sites.jsp

Survey resources: www.bto.org/our-science/projects/heronries-census/taking-part

Heronries Census team contact: Email: herons@bto.org. Tel: 01842 750050