



► Faecal sacs are solid evidence of young in the nest for passerines like this Redstart.

FIELD CRAFT

Collecting breeding evidence

Regular readers might have come across requests to collect breeding evidence. But what does this mean, why is it important, and when, where and how can you record it? Training Manager, Nick Moran, explains.

What?

Breeding evidence can be thought of as the three categories used in many schemes and surveys, including *Bird Atlas 2007–11*: possible, probable and confirmed breeding. The idea is for birdwatchers to look – and listen – for clues that a particular species is or might well be breeding in a given location. An individual bird seen, or heard singing, in suitable nesting habitat during the breeding season is enough to indicate that the species is a possible breeder in that

spot (though care should be taken with birds that are likely to be passing through, such as a Wood Warbler singing for a few days in May far from their remaining strongholds). Pairs seen in suitable habitat, a territorial bird seen or heard a week or more apart in the same place, courtship and display behaviours, and any indication of nest building or having a nest nearby are all signs of probable breeding. Adults carrying food for young or faecal sacs, occupied nests and recently fledged young are some commonly seen forms of evidence of confirmed breeding. The three categories are hierarchical, meaning that if you visit the same area on multiple occasions throughout the same breeding season, it is likely that you'll be able to 'elevate' species from possible to probable to confirmed breeding over the course of your visits.

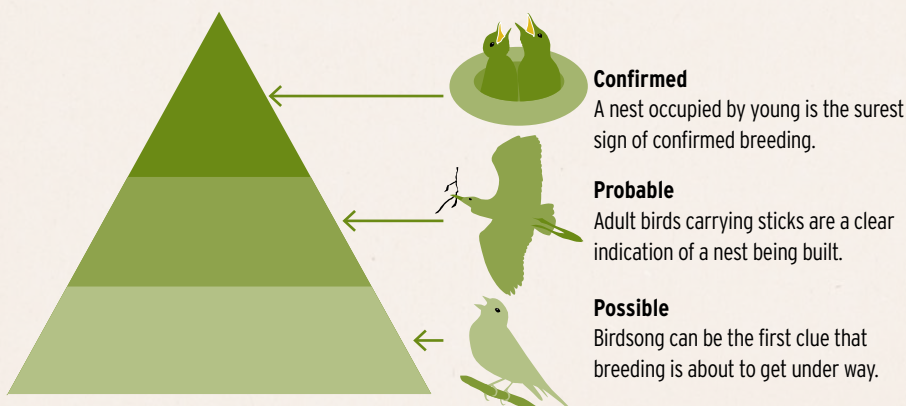
Why?

Breeding evidence plays an important role in several elements of monitoring and conservation. It can be used to monitor population change in scarcer species at both UK-wide and local levels and is valuable for mapping changes in breeding distribution, through local and national atlas projects. This in turn can be used to identify patterns across groups of species, such as breeding waders. At a fine scale, breeding evidence can be a key component of site protection – knowing that certain species are breeding in a given area can help to secure appropriate designation, and even inform decisions about practical conservation measures to improve the habitat in that location. If information about the birds that are breeding in a particular spot is not available, there is more chance of ill-informed and potentially damaging choices being made about changes in land use.

Breeding evidence can be valuable for any species but there are a number of scarce, declining and sometimes poorly known birds for which it can be particularly helpful. Examples include Long-eared Owl, Turtle Dove, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Grasshopper Warbler and Corn Bunting. Two cryptic waders, Woodcock and Snipe, are usually detected on their breeding grounds by their display flights – this is another situation where birdwatchers out looking and listening for them can make an important contribution to our knowledge. The population and distribution of Water Rail is difficult to monitor due to its secretive nature, so birds heard 'sharming' (squealing) during spring and summer are certainly worth recording. There are many other examples, some of which might not immediately come to mind: ducks such as Pochard, Wigeon, Shoveler and Garganey, species undergoing range expansion like Cetti's Warbler and Nuthatch, and birds inhabiting areas infrequently visited by birdwatchers, such as Snow Bunting and other montane specialists.

BREEDING EVIDENCE

The three categories are hierarchical, moving up the triangle as more evidence is collected.



◀ Breeding evidence is relatively easy to collect for conspicuous, colonial breeders like Black-headed Gulls.

Taking the nest steps

The BTO Nest Record Scheme (pages 12–14) gathers vital information on the breeding success of Britain's birds by asking volunteers to find and follow the progress of individual birds' nests. Although monitoring nests also provides evidence of confirmed breeding, the main goal is to monitor breeding performance, including clutch and brood sizes, laying dates and nesting success. This information can be used to identify causes of population change and is essential if conservation measures are to be effectively and efficiently put into action.



▲ Common Crossbills pair up very early in the year.

When and where?

It might seem obvious that the time to collect breeding evidence is when birds are engaged in breeding activities, typically spring and summer. However, some species start very early in the year: Raven and Common Crossbill can be egg-laying in February, and young Egyptian Geese can be out of the nest by that time, too. In contrast, Hobby breeds late in the year; noisy young birds might not be encountered until August.

Recording breeding evidence for your local birds is a great starting point, as you should have the opportunity to witness activities indicating possible, probable then confirmed breeding as the season progresses. It is also very useful to keep breeding evidence in mind when 'staycationing', particularly if you holiday in less populated areas such as the uplands. Even if you only find the odd piece of evidence to suggest or prove breeding in such places, those nuggets might be the only local information on that species in a given year.

Some species start very early in the year: Raven and Common Crossbill can be egg-laying in February

◀ Ravens nesting in southern Britain typically lay their eggs in early March.

How?

BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net) has the option for you to record examples of the three levels of breeding evidence, both via the online portal and in the smartphone apps. Data entered this way are then available to County Recorders and, for scarcer species, the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP). Alternatively, breeding records can be sent directly to the relevant County Recorder, who is responsible for collating and submitting records of RBBP species every year. BirdTrack's outputs have built-in filters so that information about sensitive species is not made public. Similarly, County Recorders and the RBBP treat such information as confidential. It is of course important to be mindful of ways that sensitive information can become widely known, such as word of mouth and social media. ■