



## HERONRIES CENSUS Guidance on Rarer Species



### Key Points

- Be aware prior to carrying out Census visits that rarer species are now widespread and could potentially be present, particularly in England and Wales.
- Rarer species may be prospecting for nest sites at the key time for Census visits to count Grey Herons (late March or April) and could be more susceptible to disturbance at this time than Grey Herons which start nesting earlier and will hence be more settled.
- If rarer species are present you should find a vantage point in order to monitor the heronry without disturbing the birds.
- As nests are more likely to be obscured by denser vegetation, monitoring rarer species (and Little Egrets) will often require longer survey visits to watch flight lines in order to robustly estimate the number of nests.
- Monitoring rarer species may also require additional visits later in the season as the typical breeding season is more extended than that of Grey Heron.

### Be aware of rarer species when carrying out Heronries Census counts

Grey Heron are an early nesting species and formal Census visits are often carried out early in the season in late March or April. Hence, the presence of Little Egrets and other scarcer breeding species may be missed as these species tend to start nesting slightly later than herons (although Spoonbills and Great White Egrets may sometimes start prospecting in March). Census volunteers, particularly those in England and Wales, are therefore encouraged to consider carrying out additional visits later in the season, to look for activity by egrets and Spoonbills (Spoonbills may sometimes continue to lay up until late June, and Cattle Egrets may be even later).

However, even if you are unable to carry out one or more additional late visits, it is important to be aware of the possible presence of Little Egret and the three rarer species within the site(s) you survey, as breeding of these species could now potentially occur anywhere within England and Wales. Little Egret is already breeding across Northern Ireland and it is possible that, in the future, the other three species could begin to colonise Northern Ireland and all four species could begin to appear more widely in Scotland too. It's also worth looking carefully at the behaviour of Glossy Ibis if you are fortunate to have any present at your site during the breeding season.

The rarer species (and Little Egret) may be prospecting for potential sites when Census visits are being carried out in March or April. As most pairs will still be prospecting at this time they are likely to be more sensitive to disturbance at this time than the nesting Grey Herons which will be more settled and may already have eggs or young.

### Consider whether you can change your survey methodology

If you normally need to approach your heronry closely to carry out your April Census count, we would encourage you to allow more time than usual for your visit so that you can approach the heronry more cautiously. This is particularly important if you are aware that some of the rarer species have recently been

present in the local area or if you have previously noticed that some of the herons become alert or are disturbed from the nest on your approach. If this is the case, you may also wish to consider whether you can find an alternative viewing point to carry out your count or to look for the presence of other species before approaching the heronry. Viewing the site from one or more vantage points is a good way to survey the heronry in a consistent manner from year to year without causing disturbance.

### **Monitoring from a vantage point**

Note that it will not always be possible to view all the nests from your vantage point. Although most Grey Heron nests are usually high in trees and will be visible, some nests could be hidden from view, particularly after leaf growth in spring. Anecdotal evidence from observers suggests that egret colonies are harder to check and count than Grey Heron colonies as they nest more frequently at lower heights and in denser vegetation and hence nests are more likely to be hidden from view. You may need to carry out several potentially lengthy visits to observe birds commuting to and from the site in order to confirm probable breeding of egrets and to estimate numbers of nests from flight lines and landing points. Therefore, even if disturbance is not a concern, it may still be worth considering carrying out additional and longer watches to assess numbers of egrets (including Little Egrets) present in a heronry. Subsequent visits later in the season (in late June or early July) would be helpful in order to confirm if a breeding attempt was successful, as any young may become more easily visible from your vantage point as they begin to move away from their nests immediately prior to and after fledging.

Whilst confirming breeding of the rarer species could potentially be time-consuming it may also be rewarding. Your observations may, for example, be the first breeding record for your county, and will provide important information to both the Census and the RBBP about the expansion of these species across the UK.

### **Spoonbills and the law**



PHOTO CREDIT: Edmund Fellowes/BTO

If you are lucky enough to find Spoonbill is present within your heronry, you should be aware 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.

Note that the law specifies that an offence is committed if disturbance is intentional or reckless, so you would not need a licence if you carefully approach a heronry to carry out a Census count if you are unaware that Spoonbills are present. However, if you do become aware that Spoonbills are present and are nesting it is important that you carefully leave the colony as at that point you may be committing an offence should you cause disturbance.

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.

For further information please see the [information about Schedule 1 on the BTO website](#). If you have any specific questions about Schedule 1 and the Heronries Census please contact [herons@bto.org](mailto:herons@bto.org).

### **Reporting sightings of scarce species**

You should also consider carefully whether to inform others of the presence of the rarer species in the heronry. Whilst it will be important to inform the landowner, it will normally be best to err on the side of caution about publicising your sighting more widely, even if the colony is publicly accessible. For Spoonbill, Little Bittern, Night Heron, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret and Purple Heron RBBP suggest that no records of these species in circumstances suggestive of breeding or potential breeding are shared in the public domain during the breeding season, unless public viewing has been arranged (see [https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RBBP\\_-\\_Guidance\\_on\\_reporting\\_Rare\\_Breeding\\_Birds.pdf](https://rbbp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RBBP_-_Guidance_on_reporting_Rare_Breeding_Birds.pdf)).

However, if you will not be able to spend time to carry out additional watches in order to count nests and confirm a breeding attempt yourself, it may be appropriate to inform one or two others in strict confidence in order to help you do so (obviously whilst bearing in mind the RBBP guidelines above and provided the landowner is happy for you to do so). Note that any records of rarer breeding species submitted to the Census database will be treated as confidential and the site information will not be made public or passed on to others (apart from the RBBP who also treat all site records as confidential).