

Heronries Census

Species Guide



This guide is designed to help you determine which species are breeding at a heronry, count the number of nests, and decide whether a nest is occupied. It can be really hard to see every nest clearly, so don't worry if you can't get an exact number – just use your best judgement. Note that this guide currently covers only the three commonest species nesting in heronries, but three more species (Great White Egret, Cattle Egret and Spoonbill) are now becoming more widespread and could potentially nest at heronries in England and Wales.

“Even if no nest count can be made, a report indicating whether or not the heronry is in use, and if so by which species, is valuable for monitoring.”

Grey Heron - *Ardea cinerea*

Grey Herons usually have one brood and generally start laying eggs from late February. The incubation period is 25–28 days and chicks will hatch from mid-March, fledging 50–55 days later. Colonies are best located in February when males perch high and make [noisy advertising calls](#).

Signs of an Apparently Occupied Nest (AON)

Adults will dive in a zig-zag down to the site and may be carrying sticks or other nesting material. The nests are made up of a platform of branches untidily woven together, lined with twigs, leaves, grasses and roots. They are usually 80–120cm across.



Photos: Heronries - Helen Crabtree (left) and Kane Brides (above)

If you're lucky and have a good vantage point, you may be able to see into the nests. Grey Heron eggs are a dull pale greenish-blue and approximately 60mm long by 43mm wide. The normal clutch size is 3–4.



Photos: Grey Heron eggshell - Kane Brides (left), Grey Heron chicks - Chris & Elspeth Rowe (right)

Grey heron chicks look quite scruffy and are brown-grey above, with notable head crest, and white below. They have large yellow eyes, a grey and yellow bill and green-grey legs.

If you can't see chicks on your first visit, you might be able to see them later in the season when they are bigger and more active. They stay in the nest for 3–4 weeks and they will then spend another 3 weeks in the branches around the nest and returning for food, which is regurgitated by the parents.



If you can't see into the nests, other signs of occupancy include...

- Adults visiting/sitting on the nest
- [Persistent chatter](#) of the chicks in the nest
- [Begging calls](#) from the chicks
- Eggshell fragments underneath the nests
- Droppings on or under the nest
- Regurgitated pellets

Photo: Regurgitated Grey Heron pellet - Kane Brides

“In dense conifers, the use of vantage points does not always work, and sometimes vantage points cannot be found. For such sites a quiet walk underneath the canopy looking for eggshells/splash is the best approach. If multiple visits are anticipated for large colonies in conifers it can be helpful (with permission) to number the trees using a wax crayon as this will allow comparison between visits.”

Little Egret – *Egretta garzetta*

Little Egrets nest in colonies near shallow lakes and pools, slow-flowing rivers and streams, marshes, estuaries and coastal waters with trees or large bushes for nesting.

They start laying eggs in late April and incubate for up to 25 days before hatching in late May, so if you suspect Little Egrets are breeding, an additional visit to the heronry is recommended.

Nocturnal roosts are often centred at breeding colonies, so it is worth tracking groups of egrets returning in evenings.

Signs of an Apparently Occupied Nest (AON)

Listen for [loud grating and scratching calls](#), which are only made at breeding sites.

The nests are a shallow platform made up of twigs and sticks, approximately 30-35cm across. In mixed colonies, Little Egret nests tend to be lower than Grey Heron nests.



If you can see into the nests look for the eggs, which are similar to Grey Herons slightly smaller – 46mm long by 34mm wide. They are dull pale greenish-blue and the average clutch size is 3–6.

The young are white and downy with a grey bill. They stay in the nest for about 30 days before climbing onto nearby branches.

Photo: Little Egret chicks - Graham Giddens

If you can't see into the nests, look out for...

- Adults visiting/sitting on the nest
- [Begging calls](#) of the chicks in the nest
- Eggshell fragments underneath the nests
- Droppings on or under the nest
- Regurgitated pellets

“Take your time, and look from different angles. I often use a camera to take panoramic shots to help ID and count chicks.”

Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Cormorants normally nest on the coast, but will sometimes nest inland in trees by large lakes, reservoirs and gravel pits. The trees selected will often have a heavy coating of guano, so are often quite conspicuous and easy to identify.

Coastal birds breed within a very narrow period, with all chicks all hatching at a similar time. In contrast, inland Cormorants have a long breeding season. The large difference in timing of breeding within an inland colony means that competition for food when chicks are large is reduced.

Signs of an Apparently Occupied Nest (AON)

Inland nests can be more substantial than those on the coast, made up of sticks and lined with leaves, grasses and water plants. They become whitewashed with guano as the season progresses.



Photo: Cormorant colony - Jez Blackburn

Where it's possible to see into the nest, you may be able to see the eggs, which have a pale blue undershell with an uneven chalky outer layer. They are 66mm long by 41mm wide and the average clutch size is 3–4.

The chicks are naked and blackish-purple in colour when they hatch, growing a thick dark brown down within a week. They stay in the nest for around 7 weeks and return to be fed for a further 6–7 weeks after that. Each parent feeds them by regurgitation once a day.

If you can't see into the nests, look out for...

- Adults visiting/sitting on the nest
- [Begging calls](#) of the chicks in the nest
- Eggshell fragments underneath the nests
- Droppings on or under the nest
- Regurgitated pellets

“When counting a heronry I use a notebook and I usually record details for each tree/structure separately and summarise this when submitting. This allows easier comparison between site visits and is particularly helpful in large heronries. Having detailed knowledge by individual trees allows much easier estimation of Years Best Estimates in such sites.”