



BTO HERONRIES CENSUS 2020 SUMMARY

GARY HAIGH / BTO

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will be remembered for the impact of Covid-19 on all aspects of our lives and sadly for the much more personal impact the virus has had on many families. The Heronries Census did not escape the effects of covid, even though the first lockdown in late March 2020 came into effect at a time when some Heronries Census volunteers had already completed one or more visits. This first UK wide lockdown meant that visits could not be carried out during the recommended key survey period in April. Some volunteers were able to carry out visits in late May or early June but by that date it is likely that many Grey Heron young would have already fledged. As a result, we are unable to present provisional Grey Heron population estimates in this summary report, but we will be undertaking further analyses of the 2020 data in the future and present some of the data from the 2020 Census below.

GREY HERON RESULTS

Data were received from 485 sites, the lowest number since 2001 when survey coverage was disrupted by the Foot and Mouth disease outbreak. A total of 3,224 apparently occupied nests were counted, around half the number recorded in 2019. The highest counts received were 80 occupied nests at a confidential site in Hampshire and 73 at Northward Hill in Kent. Counts at the latter site have decreased in recent years having peaked at over 250 in 2015.

Visit data were received for 378 sites in 2020 – for the other 107 only a YBE (Year's Best Estimate) was received. 36% of the sites for which we received visit information were visited before the lockdown and did not receive any further visits, 16% were visited only after mid-May (i.e. only after lockdown restrictions started to ease), and a further 6% received visits both before and after lockdown but not during the lockdown period. Despite the lockdown restrictions, counts during the lockdown period were received from around 140 sites in 2020 – these will be sites that could be viewed from the observer's home or garden, and sites where the landowner or land manager was able make a count themselves without breaking lockdown guidelines.

Not surprisingly, comparison of these figures with previous years shows that the proportion of sites which only received a visit prior to March 24th was substantially higher than normal (see Fig. 1).

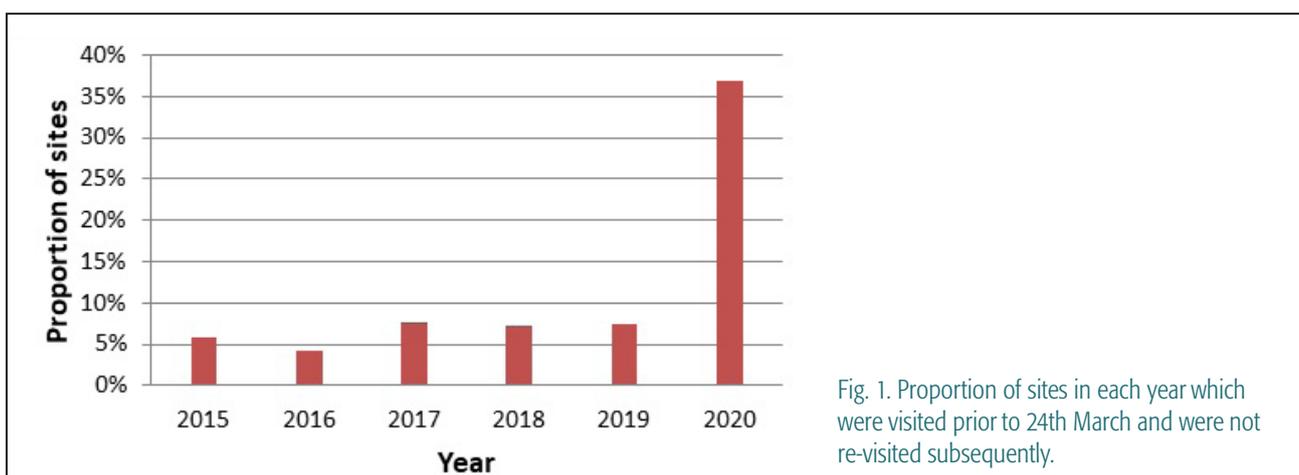
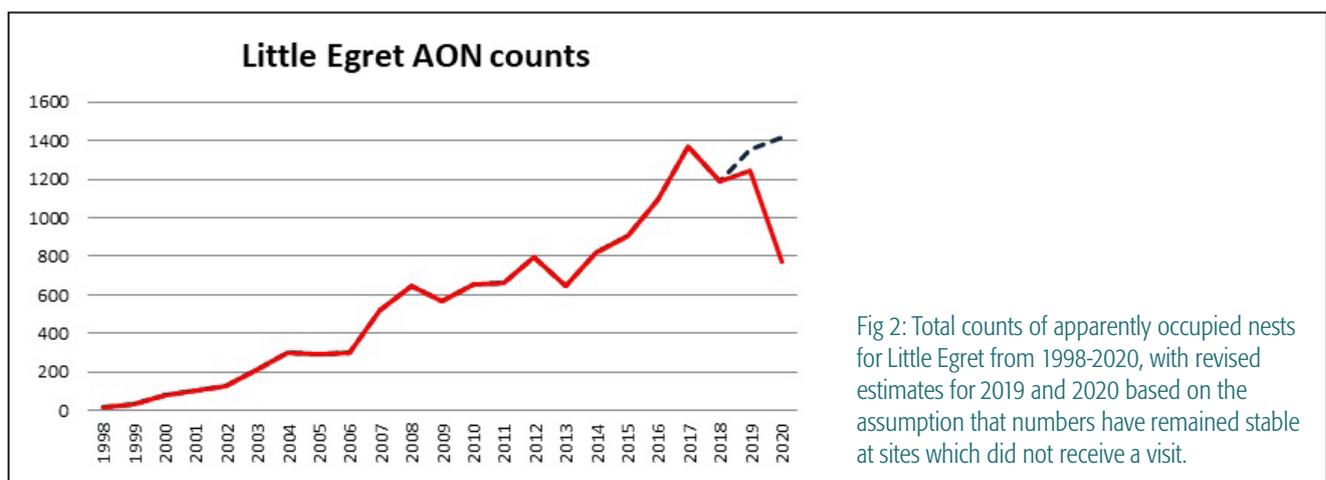


Fig. 1. Proportion of sites in each year which were visited prior to 24th March and were not re-visited subsequently.

LITTLE EGRET

A total of 754 occupied nests were counted at 75 sites. Whilst this represents a substantial decrease from the 1,222 nests counted at 124 sites in 2019, this is clearly due to reduced coverage as a result of Covid. Comparison of the 54 sites which were counted in both 2019 and 2020, making no allowance for visit timing (see below), suggests that numbers were similar or increased slightly in 2020 (by 0.4%). If we assume that these 54 sites are broadly representative of the overall breeding population of this species, it is likely that Little Egret numbers have recovered fully from the drop in 2018 that is believed to have been caused by the 'Beast from the East' (see Fig. 2). The expansion of the range of Little Egret has also continued with the first confirmed breeding record in Scotland occurring in 2020, in Dumfries & Galloway (Mearns & Mearns 2020; *Scottish Birds* **40**: 305–306).

The peak Census count in 2020 was 98 occupied nests at Northward Hill in Kent, a site where counts had been above 100 in the previous two years. It is not possible to be certain whether this count and those at some other sites may be an under-estimate due to covid. Egrets nest later than Grey Herons and many egrets would still have been nesting when the easing of restrictions enabled some surveyors to carry out visits in late May and early June. However, it is possible that some nests may have already fledged and that the increase between 2019 and 2020 was greater than suggested by the data. It will be interesting therefore to see what the 2021 results will show, assuming that the Census is able to go ahead as planned.



CORMORANT

As for Grey Heron and Little Egret, 2020 saw a reduction in the number of counts received, and a total of 827 occupied nests were counted at 24 active sites (1,296 nests counted at 42 sites in 2019). Comparison of 16 sites for which full counts were received in both 2019 and 2020 (i.e. about one third of the number usually surveyed) reveals that numbers were similar (630 nests in 2019 and 610 in 2020).

Three counts of over 100 occupied nests were received in 2020, from Rye Harbour LNR (158 nests), Duck Decoy, Hale (154 nests) and Walthamstow Reservoirs (135 nests). Recent counts at the latter site in north-east London are substantially lower than they were in the early 2000s, with a peak count in 2004 of 360 nests.

SCARCER SPECIES

All records of scarce colonial species reported to the Heronries Census will be kept confidential and will be forwarded to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP). In 2020, despite the reduced coverage due to covid, records of Great White Egret were received from three sites and records of Cattle Egret nests from six sites, including three new sites. We have now received Cattle Egret breeding records from a total of 11 sites since 2017: However, we are aware that our data for both species are incomplete and we would welcome additional records. Submission of records of all scarcer breeding species will help ensure that the data in the Heronries Census for the early years of colonisation are complete. This will mean that we can accurately monitor future population changes if (as expected) the populations of scarcer heron species continue to increase in future years and the direct reporting of breeding to the RBBP begins to drop off.

RESEARCH USING HERONRIES DATA

Isabel Lewis, an MSc student at Edinburgh Napier University has used Heronries Census data along with freshwater data obtained from the Environment Agency to assess the relationship between heronry numbers and phosphorous concentrations of freshwater bodies. While some nutrient enrichment can enhance food webs, it can lead to eutrophication, high algae growth and consequently anoxic conditions harmful to fish. The study found that Grey Herons numbers were higher in areas with lower water quality in 2003 but there was no significant relationship in 2018 and the effect of phosphorous on herons was concluded to be weak. This suggests that eutrophication is not likely to be a limiting factor for Grey Heron populations.



EDMUND FELLOWES / BTO

SURVEYTIMETABLE AND TASKS



REMEMBER TO INFORM YOUR REGIONAL ORGANISER (RO) OF ANY NEW HERONRIES SITE YOU FIND.

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank all surveyors and Regional Organisers for their work on the 2020 Census. Space does not permit all observers to be acknowledged individually, but we would especially like to thank the ROs for their efforts.

HERONRIES CENSUS REGIONAL ORGANISERS IN 2020

ENGLAND

Avon	Eve Tigwell
Bedfordshire	Graham Goodall (now VACANT)
Berkshire	Sean Murphy
Birmingham & West Midlands	Steve Davies
Buckinghamshire	Phil Tizzard
Cambridgeshire	Charlie Kitchen
Cheshire (Mid, North-East, South)	Brian Martin (now Phil Hampson)
Cleveland	Michael Leakey
Cornwall	Simon Taylor
Cumbria	Colin Gay
Derbyshire (North, South)	Dave Budworth
Devon	Stella Beavan
Dorset	Greg Lambe
Durham	David Sowerbutts
Essex (North-East)	Steve Hallam
Essex (North-West)	Graham Smith
Essex (South)	VACANT
Gloucestershire	Michael Smart
Hampshire	Brian Sharkey (now Glynne Evans)
Herefordshire	Chris Robinson
Hertfordshire	Murray Orchard
Huntingdon & Peterborough	Derek Langslow
Isle of Wight	Jim Baldwin
Isles of Scilly	Will Wagstaff
Kent	Brian Watmough
Lancashire (East)	Tony Cooper (now VACANT)
Lancashire (North-West)	Jean Roberts
Lancashire (South)	Stephen Dunstan
Leicestershire & Rutland	Dave Wright
Lincolnshire (East, North, South, West)	Barrie Wilkinson
London (North)	VACANT (now Sabrina Schalz)
London (South)	Richard Arnold
Manchester	Nick Hilton
Merseyside	VACANT
Norfolk (North-East)	Chris Hudson
Norfolk (North-West)	Bob Osborne (now VACANT)
Norfolk (South-East)	Rachel Warren
Norfolk (South-West)	Vince Matthews
Northamptonshire	Bob Bullock
Northumberland	Tom Cadwallender
Nottinghamshire	Lynda Milner (now VACANT)
Oxfordshire (North)	Frances Buckel
Oxfordshire (South)	John Melling
Shropshire	Jonathan Groom
Somerset	Eve Tigwell
Staffordshire (North, South, West)	Scott Petrek
Suffolk	Mick Wright
Surrey	Ray Phillips
Sussex	Helen Crabtree
The Wirral	Brian Martin (now Phil Hampson)
Warwickshire	Annette Jarratt-Knock
Wiltshire (North)	Bill Quantrill (now John Sealy)
Wiltshire (South)	Claire Jones (now Phil James)
Worcestershire	Mervyn Needham
Yorkshire (Bradford)	Mike Denton
Yorkshire (Central)	Mike Brown
Yorkshire (East, Hull)	Brian Walker
Yorkshire (Leeds & Wakefield)	Rachael Dixey
Yorkshire (North-East)	Nick Gibbons
Yorkshire (North-West)	Alex Gould
Yorkshire (Richmond)	Mike Gibson
Yorkshire (South-East)	Grant Bigg (now VACANT)
Yorkshire (South-West)	Grant Bigg
Yorkshire (York)	Rob Chapman

SCOTLAND

Aberdeen	Moray Souter
Angus	VACANT (now Steve Willis)
Argyll (Mull, Coll, Tiree & Morven)	Ewan Miles
Argyll (mainland & Gigha) & Bute	Nigel Scriven
Arran	James Cassels
Ayrshire	Dave McGarvie
Benbecula & The Uists	Yvonne Benting
Borders	Malcolm Ross
Caithness	Donald Omand
Central	Neil Bielby
Dumfries	Andy Riches
Fife & Kinross	Norman Elkins (now Paul Blackburn)
Inverness (East & Speyside, West)	Hugh Insley
Islay, Jura & Colonsay	David Wood
Kincardine & Deeside	Claire Marsden
Lanark, Renfrew & Dumbarton	Gordon Brady
Lewis & Harris	VACANT (now Craig Ferries)
Lothian	Stephen Metcalfe
Moray & Nairn	Melvin Morrison
Orkney	Colin Corse
Perthshire	Mike Bell
Rhum, Eigg, Canna & Muck	Bob Swann
Ross-shire	Simon Cohen
Shetland	Dave Okill
Skye	Stephen Bentall
Sutherland	VACANT
Wigtown	VACANT

WALES

Anglesey	Ian Hawkins
Brecknock	Andrew King
Caernarfon	Rhion Pritchard
Cardigan	Naomi Davis
Carmarthen	Paul Aubrey (now VACANT)
Clwyd (East)	Anne Brenchley
Clwyd (West)	Mel ab Owain
Glamorgan (Mid, South)	Wayne Morris
Glamorgan (West)	Lyndon Jeffrey
Gwent	Richard Clarke
Merioneth	Dave Anning
Montgomery	Jane Kelsall
Pembrokeshire	Annie & Bob Haycock
Radnorshire	Carlton Parry

NORTHERN IRELAND

All regions	Ian Enlander
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CHANNEL ISLANDS

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

ISLE OF MAN

Isle of Man	Pat Cullen
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We would be grateful for help organising the Heronries Census in regions currently without a Regional Organiser (marked **VACANT**). If you live in one of these regions and would be interested in taking on the role, please let us know.

Many thanks are due to the ROs listed who stepped down during 2020 some of whom had been the ROs for many years.

Finally, we would like to thank all the landowners who kindly allow volunteers access to their land to carry out Heronries Census visits.