

Heronries 1964

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

The Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* is one of the largest and most widespread bird species in the UK and is a predator at the top of the freshwater food chain. As such it is an excellent indicator of environmental health in the countryside. Nesting is typically in colonies in traditional sites, many of which have been occupied by a heronry for many decades. The presence of a heronry is often the basis of designating a site as a protected area.

The Heronries Census grew from what was intended to be a one-off, complete survey in 1928, but is now the longest-running breeding season monitoring scheme for any bird in the world. The aim is to collect annual nest counts from as many heron colonies as possible in the United Kingdom. Coverage has been variable but for many years well over half the estimated population has been included in the year's count.

To complement the annual census there have been periodic attempts at complete coverage, partly at least to try to boost coverage of the annual sample. There was one such in 1954 and it was decided to repeat this in 1964 (and it was done again in 1985 and 2003). The 1964 census took place at a time when numbers were still very low following two hard winters (1961/62 and 1962/63). Coverage in England and Wales was adequate but in Scotland was known to be very incomplete.

A total of 2170 nests in 234 heronries was found, a figure which was only half that found in the previous national census in 1954, with numbers of nests well down in almost all counties. The only reported increases were from Cumberland (where difficult terrain resulted in incomplete coverage in both years) and from Dorset (where the discrepancy was possibly due to a 1954 counting error at the inaccessible Poole Harbour heronry). Three counties reported identical nest totals in 1954 and 1964 (Leicestershire, Wiltshire, Merioneth), and three more appeared to have only insignificant reductions in the latter year (Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire and Caernarvonshire). Apart from these instances, the decrease was general.

Allowing for unvisited heronries, the approximate number of occupied nests was 4800 in 1954 and 2450 in 1964. The latter was only a slight increase from the estimate for 1963 (2250 nests), and well below the last 'normal' year (4675 nests in 1961).

Methods of Data Capture

The field methods used closely followed those used in the annual Heronries census. Volunteer observers made a count of 'apparently occupied nests'. The ideal time for this is considered to be the second half of April when most active nests are likely to have an adult present either incubating or defending the nest. Some colonies are only visited once but others are visited several times through the season in which case the maximum estimate in the year is used for the dataset.

BTO Regional Representatives tried to arrange cover of all their heronries but assistance was sought from others, including interested landowners, farmers and gamekeepers, who were more likely to be acquainted with their local heronries. Such people were thought to be in a better position to locate outlying nests, and early and late ones, but were likely to be reluctant to complete the special enquiry forms provided.

Instructions to counters included guidance on how to decide which nests in a heronry were occupied that year, and on how to distinguish individual nests in clusters. Previous experience had shown that counts made within any stipulated period were likely to result in some nests being missed, either because early nesters had already finished or failed (though in the latter circumstance repeat attempts are often made), or because late nesters had not started; such effects can operate differentially between regions and years.

Therefore observers were asked to count the number of occupied nests in each heronry during the second half of April, but where possible to make additional visits before and after this optimum period. Some observers were able to do so, though many heronries which were difficult of access were visited only once.

Purpose of Data Capture

An attempt to count the numbers of nests in all the heronries in Britain and Ireland as one of the periodic attempts to boost coverage of the annual sample census.

Geographic Coverage

Britain and Ireland although in practice coverage was adequate only in England and Wales.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1964. However a few specific sites were covered in 1965 as they had not been counted in 1964.

Other Interested parties

The survey was run and organised by the BTO on its own.

Organiser(s)

John Stafford

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

Stafford, J. 1979. The national census of heronries in England and Wales in 1964. *Bird Study* 26: 3-6.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

The definitive data are held on the BTO network Unix system as part of the overall heronries dataset.

Computer data -- outline contents

Files contain the counts from each year at each site which was counted, habitat data from each site and its immediate surrounds and their name and geographical location.

Computer data -- description of contents

The three most important files and their contents are:

yrdata -- the counts (of apparently occupied nests) from each year at each colony.

cols 1-6 site number; cols 8-11 year; cols 13-15 the count (from primary source: -6 occupied, no count; -7 definitely not yet started; -8 extinct; -9 no information); col 17 accuracy (+ =minimum, ? =a guess,) inferred from another year, - =maximum); col 19 primary data source (c=heronries card; p=punchcards; r=bird report; l=letter/note; n=Nest Record Scheme; o=other/unknown ; cols 21-26 source codes (cprlno as for col 19, where relevant); cols 28-57 Notes.

habdata -- the habitat in which the colony occurs.

cols 1-6 site number; cols 8-9 habitat code (Crick system); cols 11-79 Description.

colonies -- geographic location of colonies.

cols 1-6 site number; cols 8-11 county code (GBxx) using BTO standard codes; cols 13-20 2-letter and 6-figure grid reference; cols 22-117 name of site.

Other directories contain some older versions of the data and the programs used to check and analyse the data.

Information held in BTO Archives

Data cards from this survey have been incorporated within the overall set of annual cards. All data cards and associated correspondence from the start (1928) to 2006 were scanned with material sorted by year.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis