

Nightjar 1957

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

In the 1950s it was very unclear how widespread or otherwise was the Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* in the British Isles. It had been one of the 30 species surveyed as part of the distribution survey of 1952 but it was realised that it was a species which really needed a specific investigation due to its nocturnal and crepuscular habits. Therefore a survey was organised for 1957 and which continued into 1958 as coverage in the first year was not as good as had been hoped.

Over the two years 280 questionnaires were returned and 80 letters received with information concerning the species's status, but it became apparent early on that it was not going to be possible to reach anything approaching an accurate picture of the true status of the bird in every county, let alone in the British Isles as a whole, because of the generally poor coverage, in turn due at least in part to its habits. The best coverage was obtained in central, southeast and southwest England. From part of Wales and most of Scotland the opinion of one observer had to be taken for large areas. At best therefore, the results gave a reasonably accurate estimate, based on the opinion of local ornithologists, of the distribution of the bird in their area.

A full description of the results by county is given in the published report. In summary the Nightjar was shown to be a common bird in S England and to be holding its own in most of the rest of England and Wales particularly in less well-developed areas. Further north it became less common and, although it had bred in every Scottish county at some time (even in Caithness during the survey), it was irregular and very local in its occurrence. It did not breed in the Northern Isles, nor on Dartmoor, in Radnorshire, Northamptonshire, or Denbighshire in all of which it had done within the previous few years. In Ireland it was local and chiefly confined to Munster and Leinster. The overall breeding distribution closely agreed with information found by the distribution survey of 1952.

Of the 54 counties from which reliable information could be obtained concerning status over the previous ten years 23 reported no change, 30 reported a decrease and one an increase. All Scottish counties reported a decrease.

Reasons for the overall decrease mentioned by observers included: building on land previously inhabited – especially in Middlesex, Surrey, Essex and Kent; increased disturbance by weekend trippers and picnic parties – noted especially in the Epping Forest area and around Birmingham; building of airfields, army and air force installations and army activity – noted for Norfolk and Suffolk; and clearance of bracken, felling of trees and ploughing up of heathland – many different places.

Methods of Data Capture

The primary source of information was counts at breeding sites, and which were obtained in four ways: 1) responses to a questionnaire to BTO members who asked for them; 2)

responses to a request for information published in periodicals likely to be read by persons interested in the countryside and natural history, although replies from this source were very carefully vetted; 3) personal investigation by the organiser of less well-covered and 'doubtful' areas throughout the British Isles, chiefly in north Scotland; and 4) responses to a personal letter to BTO Regional Representatives in areas where information was still incomplete after the second year of the Enquiry, asking for their opinion as experienced ornithologists of the present status of the Nightjar in their region. After the return of the questionnaires for 1957, it was obvious that insufficient information had been obtained. Therefore the enquiry was continued for a further year with a questionnaire revised in the light of the previous year's experience.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the status and distribution of the Nightjar throughout the British Isles. Also to find out if there had been any changes since previous information gathered as part of the distribution survey of 1952 – the Nightjar was one of the 30 species surveyed for this.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain and Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding seasons of 1957 and it continued into 1958 as returns from the first year were considered insufficient.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by John Stafford with the support of the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

Organiser(s)

John Stafford as a volunteer.

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Stafford, J. 1962. Nightjar enquiry, 1957-58. *Bird Study* 9: 104-115.

The survey was noticed in all *Bird Study* issues for 1957 and 1958.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 Folder containing letters. The data are assumed to have been retained by the organiser and never returned to BTO.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis