

If conservationists are to have any chance of reversing population declines, they must first understand what is causing them. The devastating influence of DDT and other organochlorine pesticides on songbird numbers, prior to it being banned in the 1970s, is testament to the impact that a reduction in breeding success can have at a national scale. Recent declines of species such as Lapwing and Linnet have likewise been linked to falling productivity. None of this would be known if it were not for the incredible efforts of the thousands of volunteers who have contributed data to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme (NRS) since its inception in 1939.

It is difficult to imagine a world prior to the production of affordable binoculars and telescopes, but the ornithologists of the late 19th century had to work much harder to improve their knowledge; the fieldcraft required to locate nests forming an essential part of their armoury. During the 20th century, the increased accessibility of optical equipment and the negative perception of nest monitoring, fostered by the destructive behaviour of egg collectors, saw these skills gradually disappear. Nest recording schemes across Europe began to fold and our own NRS was in serious trouble – but what could we do?

DILYS BREESE

Throughout her career as a natural history broadcaster on both radio and television, Dilys Breese was passionate in her desire to involve amateurs in conservation. For her, it was not simply enough to observe wildlife – we should be actively involved in safeguarding it for future generations. With such an outlook, it was only natural that she should become heavily involved with BTO and, through her work as Honorary Secretary and Chair of the Garden BirdWatch Working Group, she had a huge impact on our survey work. Her death in 2007 robbed us of one of our most enthusiastic supporters, but the inclusion of BTO as a beneficiary in her will has ensured that her influence on bird conservation remains as significant as ever.

Given her desire to bridge the gap between amateur and professional conservationists,



THE LEGACY OF A LEGACY

The profile of the Nest Record Scheme has increased rapidly over the last few years.

Dave Leech explains how one woman played a pivotal role without monitoring any nests herself...

the Nest Record Scheme, a survey which is accessible to everyone, everywhere, without the need for expensive equipment, seemed a fitting recipient of Dilys's support. With her help, we have been able to undertake a series of improvements aimed at recruiting new nest recorders and developing their skills, while also providing more support to existing volunteers.

THE NEXT NESTING GENERATION

Tasked with creating the next generation of nest recorders, our first priority was to improve the guidance materials produced for new

recruits. To this end, we developed the NRS Quickstart Guide, which contains everything you ever need to know about becoming a nest recorder in six colourful pages. The BTO Field Guide to Monitoring Nests, written by James Ferguson-Lees, Richard Castell and myself, provides additional guidance on finding, identifying and monitoring the nests of 145 species. As there is no substitute for practical experience, we have also established a series of training courses, designed to help existing recorders develop their skills as they move towards monitoring trickier species.

Since 2007, the development of Nest Box Challenge (NBC), in collaboration with the BBC has allowed anyone with a nest box to record the contents on-line. Thanks to Dilys's legacy, NBC was extended to include open-nesting species such as Blackbird and Collared Dove in 2009, and in 2012 work on the creation of a full on-line system for NRS will commence.

So, has it all worked? The answer is a resounding 'yes'. Over 40,000 nests were monitored in 2010, the fifth highest total in the last 70 years, and it's not just a case of existing recorders collecting more data – the number of observers collecting data on declining species such as Dunnock, Willow Warbler and Linnet has increased dramatically over the last three years (right). This recruitment is vital to the long-term sustainability of the NRS.

Thank you, Dilys, as you continue to inspire and motivate amateurs to play their part in the fight to conserve our wildlife. Great progress is being made, but I'm sure she would agree that this is no time to rest on our laurels; so make 2012 the year you became a nest recorder.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We greatly appreciate the support of Dilys Breese and the executor of her estate. Thanks also to the volunteers who make all this possible, be they nest recorders, training course leaders or data inputters, and the JNCC for the support that they give under the BTO/JNCC partnership on behalf of the Country Agencies.

FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the Nest Record Scheme and how to take, part visit www.bto.org/nrs or email nrs@bto.org. To find out more about Nest Box Challenge visit www.bto.org/nbc.

New nesters flock to NRS...

Numbers of observers submitting records of Willow Warbler, Linnet and Dunnock have all increased markedly as a result of work funded by Dilys Breese's legacy since 2007 (see arrows below).

Why not take part in the Nest Record Scheme? Simply visit www.bto.org/nrs



PAUL REDDISH/Northeastwildlife.co.uk/STEVEN ROUND.stevenround-birdphotography.co.uk