



Roger Koxon/Leicestershire County Council



David Tipling/rspb-images.com



The barn owl is one of our most well known and well-loved birds. There can be few finer sights than watching the ghostly shape of a barn owl hunting in the evening twilight. Although they often fly during daylight hours, they are much more frequently glimpsed in car headlights. Barn owls were formerly a relatively common breeding species in Leicestershire and Rutland, but several factors led to breeding numbers plummeting to only one or two pairs in the 1980s and 1990s. Loss of breeding sites was identified as a key cause of the decline, as many old barns and outbuildings favoured by barn owls were pulled down. Fortunately, these owls take readily to man-made nestboxes, and by 2004, the population had recovered to around 30 breeding pairs, nearly all using artificial nest sites. The stronghold is Rutland, and sightings are still scarce to the west of Leicester. However, we still require all records of barn owls. It is through receiving casual reports that we can identify where this species is occurring, and then erect a nestbox in the hope of encouraging breeding. The Biodiversity Action Plan target, which was to halt the decline and achieve an additional five pairs occupying artificial nests by 2005, looks to have been achieved, but there is still much work to do to safeguard this beautiful bird for generations to come.

Barn Owl

The sand martin is usually the first summer migrant to return to the UK each year, and seeing one fitting over a local reservoir in mid-March is a sure sign that spring is just around the corner. Sand martins are closely related to swallows, but are smaller, with a shorter tail, and are dark brown above and pale below, with an obvious brown chest-band. They breed colonially, excavating nest holes in river banks or other sandy cliff-faces. This breeding requirement means the numbers of sand martins breeding in Leicestershire and Rutland can fluctuate dramatically year by year. Their favoured nesting sites are recently-excavated gravel pits, but due to the constant changes in these kinds of areas, suitable breeding banks may disappear as quickly as they appear. In recent years, regular breeding areas have included Huncoate, Mountsorrel and the Castle Donington area, but it is not unknown for these colonies to fail completely if conditions change. To combat this, four artificial nesting banks have been constructed at Wanlip, Loughborough, Rutland Water and Sence Valley Forest Park, and these are generally very successful. The Biodiversity Action Plan target is to increase the population of sand martins to a total of at least 400 pairs and nine colonies containing around 350 pairs). Increased monitoring and reporting of nest sites may help us reach this target.

Sand Martin



Steve Knell/rspb-images.com



Barry Hughes/rspb-images.com



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The Community Heritage Initiative is working to help people record and celebrate the natural heritage of Leicestershire and Rutland. For more information, email chi@leics.gov.uk or visit www.leics.gov.uk/celebrating_wildlife.

Text by Rob Fray, LROS
Photos from rspb-images.com

The Biodiversity Bird Survey

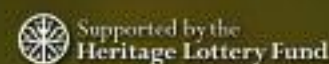


Several years ago, Biodiversity Action Plans were produced for four species of bird in Leicestershire and Rutland, in an effort to increase their numbers.

Each year, the Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society (LROS) carries out surveys for these species, and reports on the findings. You can help by recording when and where you see them.

The four species are all well known and easily recognised, but their fortunes have been fluctuating somewhat in recent times.

Front cover photograph: Mark Hamblyn/rspb-images.com





Roger Wilmshurst/rspb-images.com



Steve Kneill/rspb-images.com



Nightingale

The nightingale has found a place in literature and in the minds of everyday people thanks to its beautiful song. This can be heard at any time of day or night in the spring and summer, but particularly at dusk and dawn. In plumage, however, nightingales are rather plain, being mainly brown above and pale grey below, with a rusty coloured tail. Despite advertising their presence with their loud and melodic song, nightingales can be very difficult to see, preferring to spend their time hidden deep in thickets and scrub. Leicestershire and Rutland are at the northernmost limit of this species' UK breeding range, and they seem to be declining. Thirty or forty years ago, the song of the nightingale could be heard at many sites, but most areas have gradually been deserted. Now this species is only found in the large woods in Rutland. Favoured sites are around Rutland Water (such as Hambleton Wood and Barnsdale Wood), and further east at places such as Pickworth Great Wood. In 2004, 12 singing males were located, which is well down on the Biodiversity Action Plan target of 30 breeding pairs by 2005. It is hoped there may still be some nightingales lurking in other areas of Leicestershire (for instance, in the large woods of east Leicestershire around Loddington and Tugby). What better way could there be to spend a warm spring evening than rediscovering one of these unrivalled songsters in a quiet Leicestershire wood?

Redstart

Like the nightingale, redstarts are summer visitors to the UK, usually arriving in mid-April. Their song is rather quiet and easily missed, but the plumage of the male is spectacular, being slate grey above with a jet black throat and a beautiful reddish breast and tail. The Biodiversity Action Plan target for this species, to reach 20 breeding pairs by 2005, seemed reasonable when it was formulated. At that time there was a healthy population in the Chater valley around Launde, several pairs in Burley Wood near Rutland Water and a few scattered pairs in Charnwood Forest. However, within the last two or three years, redstarts have completely vanished from these sites, and it would appear that we have lost this as a breeding species in Leicestershire and Rutland. This is causing great concern, not least because the reasons for this sudden disappearance are not readily apparent. There has been no change to the habitat at their previous haunts, and redstarts do not seem to be having problems in other UK breeding areas. It is therefore important that we collect all sightings of this species. By following these up with repeat visits, maybe we can discover where they have all gone.



Mark Hamblin/rspb-images.com



Geoff Simpson/rspb-images.com



How you can help us

The first stage in conserving any species is to identify where they occur, and this is where you can help. All sightings of barn owl, nightingale and redstart are required, along with all records of breeding sand martins. Use the simple survey form attached to this leaflet to report your sightings of these four birds. All information will be gratefully received and will help to build up a complete picture of their distribution in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Instructions:

1. Use this form (and copies of it if you need more space) to record all sightings of barn owl, nightingale and redstart, and sand martin colonies within Leicestershire and Rutland.
2. Please try and provide an accurate grid reference for all sightings, as this greatly aids our recording process.
3. Use the 'Notes' box to give as much of the following information as you can:

Barn owl: time of sighting, behaviour (e.g. hunting, roosting), any sign of breeding behaviour, whether there are suitable breeding places nearby.

Sand martin: number of nest holes, number of birds in attendance (estimate if an exact count is not possible), type of habitat (e.g. gravel pit, artificial nest site, riverbank etc).

Nightingale: time of day, whether bird was singing, any other sign of breeding behaviour (e.g. carrying nesting material, displaying, feeding young birds etc).

Redstart: sex if known, whether bird was singing, any other sign of breeding behaviour (e.g. carrying nesting material, displaying, feeding young birds etc).

4. Please send your completed forms to: Rob Fray, LROS County Recorder, 5 New Park Road, Aylestone, Leicester, LE2 8AW.

Species:	Species:
Date:	Date:
Site:	Site:
Grid Reference:	Grid Reference:
Number of birds:	Number of birds:
Notes:	Notes:

Species:	Species:
Date:	Date:
Site:	Site:
Grid Reference:	Grid Reference:
Number of birds:	Number of birds:
Notes:	Notes:

Species:	Species:
Date:	Date:
Site:	Site:
Grid Reference:	Grid Reference:
Number of birds:	Number of birds:
Notes:	Notes:

Recorder's name: _____
 Address: _____

 Telephone number: _____
 Email address: _____

(Recorders' contact details are only requested so that we can get in touch with you in the event of any queries)