



Wildlife



Living with *nesting birds*

About nesting birds ...

When you mention 'nest' most people probably think of a small, cup-shaped structure in a bush. Whilst many nests are indeed like this there is a great deal of variation in the types and location of nests created by the birds resident in, or visiting, Britain. Some birds build no structure at all! Although nests can actually perform a variety of purposes, generally speaking, they help to provide shelter and protection for the eggs and young from adverse weather conditions and predators – and help hide the parents whilst incubating their eggs.

'Nests' can be shallow scrapes prepared in the ground by waders – such as the curlew, very simple platforms of twigs used by woodpigeons and collared doves, or the cup-shaped nests constructed by most garden birds to hide their eggs from view. Starlings and tits may also use holes in trees or other cavities for more protection and to reduce the risk of eggs or young falling out. Puffins even use disused rabbit burrows on cliff-top nesting sites. For some species, nests can also provide important sites to roost in at other times of the year. For example, over a dozen wrens might congregate in a nest for shelter on a winter's night.

Did you know?... *Long-tailed tits take up to three weeks to build a unique, purse-shaped nest – carefully constructed using moss, spiders' webs and lichens lined with 2,000 or more feathers.*

There are more than 500 species of wild birds that visit the British Isles – of these about 200 breed regularly. Some bird populations – such as house sparrows and starlings in urban areas – are declining, partly as a result of the loss of nest sites. Bird-friendly buildings and gardens – providing appropriate food, water, nesting material and preferred nesting sites – can therefore be important for the different birds in the area.

A joint RSPB/BBC Radio 4 survey investigated the use of houses for nesting by swifts, house martins, starlings and house sparrows. An analysis of almost 10,000 questionnaires revealed that houses built before 1919 and buildings in rural areas are most important for these nesting birds. The space under the roof and eaves were the most commonly reported nest-site locations. Unfortunately, modern houses provide fewer nesting sites and are therefore used relatively infrequently by nesting birds – particularly in urban areas.

Did you know?... *Male wrens impress potential mates by building up to four nests within their territory. The hen bird then usually adds the interior decoration by lining the chosen nest with feathers.*

Most birds lay their eggs and rear their young through the spring and summer months – just as people start gardening and undertaking repairs to their properties! Birds, their nests and eggs are legally protected, but mitigating against the adverse impacts of building work and gardening on nesting birds is also important to help sustain their populations. Wherever possible, construction work, building repairs, pruning, tree-felling or hedge-cutting should be avoided in spring and summer, so as not to disturb nesting birds or destroy their nests while in use. Advance planning before starting any work can reduce the risks of damage or falling foul of the law.

Your questions answered ...

Are all birds and their nests protected?

All wild birds in England, Scotland and Wales are protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (and subsequent amendments). It is an offence, subject to certain exceptions – such as the control of some species for permitted reasons under licence – to intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while that nest is in use or being built. It is also an offence to take or destroy an egg of any wild bird or to kill, injure or take them. Special protection is also provided for rarer birds listed in *Schedule 1* of the Act (see box above), where it is an offence to intentionally or *recklessly* disturb a wild bird while it is building a nest or when it is in or near a nest with eggs or young; or disturb their dependent young.

Schedule 1: *Over 80 species of rare birds are listed, including: barn owl, bittern, corncrake, roseate tern, all divers, fieldfare, kingfisher, goshawk, all harriers, red kite, Mediterranean gull, peregrine, common scoter and Whooper swan.*

When do birds breed and use their nests?

In the UK, birds usually breed in the spring and summer. Several factors affect when a bird starts preparing a nest and when the last brood of the season leaves the nest. These factors include the climate, the location of the nest site, availability of food, timing of the moult, level of disturbance, loss of eggs and young to predation and division of labour by the parent birds to collect food and feed their dependent young. It is not uncommon for garden birds to lay more than one clutch of eggs during the breeding season – with the parent birds starting their autumn moult of feathers just after the last brood have fledged the nest. Summer visitors, such as swallows and house martins, moult later and may even desert their last brood to begin their autumn migration southwards.

How can I help birds nest in my garden and local area?

Many birds will welcome the provision of food, water, nest sites and nesting material. Providing for all or some of these needs will help attract birds into your garden. Feeding birds is one of the easiest and most rewarding ways to see wildlife close-up. Information on growing plants for natural food and habitat for birds, and on providing additional food (and water) for different species is included in the RSPCA leaflet *Feeding wild birds in your garden*. Suitable nesting material can also be left in the garden to help birds prepare their nests – such as sheep's wool, hair, twigs and straw. If the garden also provides suitable nesting sites – such as trees, hedges and nest boxes of the appropriate design – local birds may also be encouraged to stay. For detailed information on the design, maintenance and positioning of nest boxes, the British Trust for Ornithology publishes *The BTO Nestbox Guide* by Chris du Feu.

Can bird nests be moved or destroyed by building contractors or tree surgeons when 'in the way'?

Nests cannot be moved or destroyed by anyone while they are being built or are still in use – apart from exceptions to allow the control of certain birds for specific reasons under licence. Birds are at their most vulnerable when nesting – they are at risk of either being killed or disturbed so much that they abandon the nest and eggs. Contractors have contacted the Society for advice after finding nesting birds 'in the way' while building or undertaking work in gardens, roadsides or beside waterways etc. Often they are completely unaware of the legal protection nesting birds, their eggs and young have and what action they can legally take. However, reckless building work, tree-felling or hedge-cutting at the height of the nesting season can leave local authority contractors, developers or individuals facing prosecution (see overleaf). In England and Wales, anyone found guilty of an offence is liable to a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment or a level 5 (£5,000) fine, which can be imposed in respect of each bird, nest or egg affected.

Before starting any building work or cutting back any vegetation it is therefore important to forward-plan and take precautionary measures to avoid having an impact on any nesting birds (and other protected animals – such as roosting bats). Ensure work only proceeds after nests are no longer in use. Spring is also a bad time to cut back trees and bushes, as many plants are vulnerable to pest and disease attack if cut back while the sap is rising to distribute nutrients to the stems.

What should I do if I dislodge a nest while pruning in the garden?

If, during the spring or summer, an empty nest is knocked down by accident it should be left alone. Do not attempt to place the nest into a nearby tree or hedge – it will probably be abandoned if the site is not in an appropriate location or adequately sheltered. The nest will already have been damaged and if replaced and reoccupied it might be easily dislodged by the wind – smashing any eggs or killing any young inside. If the dislodged nest has young inside contact the RSPCA on the number below for advice. If there are unhatched eggs in the dislodged nest, the developing young are likely to have already died following a period of not being incubated. But as the young have died before hatching, the adult birds are more likely to have time to prepare another nest for a new clutch of eggs.

I have found a young bird, should I return it to its nest?

No - do not attempt to return a bird to the nest as this could disturb other young or any foliage that was providing valuable camouflage, and may also be illegal. Returning some species (such as the barn owl and other Schedule 1 birds) back to the nest and disturbing any dependent young would be an offence under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. If the bird is found in the open and is not fully feathered (a nestling that should still be in the nest) contain it in a warm, dark, well-ventilated cardboard box (do not offer water, milk or food) and contact the RSPCA on the number below for advice. If the nestling is obviously injured or sick, take it to your local vet. Anyone finding a fully feathered bird (fledgling) on the ground should generally leave it alone. If the bird is injured or sick, contain as above then contact the RSPCA or take the bird straight to a local vet. Otherwise, the golden rule, as with all wildlife, is to withdraw and observe. Consider the situation carefully *before* taking any action. If the fledgling is in danger move it to a safe place a short distance away. Retreat from the area and return at least two hours later to see if the bird is still there. Its parents are probably nearby waiting for you to go and will continue feeding it once you have left. Most birds found in gardens leave their nest at about two weeks and will then spend some time on the ground being fed by the parent birds as they gradually learn to fly and fend for themselves. Each year between April and July as many as 20,000 fledglings are picked up and passed on to the RSPCA by people who think the bird has been abandoned or orphaned.

To report an injured or sick bird to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour national cruelty and advice line 0300 1234 999