

# UPPER CLUN COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

## BIRD GROUP NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2014

### NESTING SEASON 2014 - A GOOD YEAR FOR SOME



Kestrel chicks ready to go back into their nest after ringing

The breeding season this year produced contrasting results, some species doing exceptionally well, while others struggled. Notable winners were Barn Owl and Kestrel, which profited from an abundance of voles, laying their eggs earlier than usual, and producing larger clutches, with a high percentage fledging.

Red Kites fared less well: their season started promisingly, but some ill-timed downpours caused a number of nests to fail. Some that were successful, or partially successful, also showed signs of stress. However, the young kites that made it to mid-June enjoyed a much easier time after that, with warm, settled weather and plentiful food through the fledging period.

Blue Tits had a season of two halves: they got off to a good start, with more breeding pairs, and egg-laying two to three weeks earlier than usual. But although they were early, the caterpillars on which they feed their young emerged earlier still, peaking too soon. And Blue Tits were also hit by the effects of heavy rain, which washes caterpillars and other insects off the foliage - with serious consequences for some of their chicks. On the whole, though, it's likely that when all the results are in we'll find that the net result was a good one for Blue Tits.

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### KEEPING TABS ON CUCKOOS

"In July, away I fly..." goes the old rhyme about the Cuckoo. In fact this year, many of the Cuckoos in the BTO's radio-tracking project were well on their way back to Africa by the end of June: "Hennah" (*sic*) was on the Italian Adriatic coast, "Ash" was sunning himself in the south of France, and 134952 (yet to be named) was in Spain heading towards the Mediterranean.

Unlike other birds, Cuckoos don't have to stay around to care for their young until they can look after themselves - the Meadow Pipits, Dunnocks or Reed Warblers they've duped do that for them. So once the last eggs are laid, they're off back to their wintering grounds in Africa. It sounds as though life's one long holiday for the Cuckoo - but of course it isn't, which is why their numbers in England halved between 1998 and 2008.



Kasper, one of the radio-tagged Cuckoos

As with all migrant species, it's hard to tell whether the damage is being done in this country, in its wintering areas, on migration, or all of the above. The first step is to find out exactly where the Cuckoos go, and BTO has done that by attaching tiny, solar-powered radio transmitters, weighing less than 5g, to their backs. Already, the project team has learned that migration is even more hazardous for Cuckoos than previously imagined, with losses of tagged birds associated with hailstorms, drought conditions, and unreliable food supplies.

***There's something very compelling about being able to follow the journey of a wild bird - make the most of it by visiting [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org) and clicking on [Cuckoo tracking project on the home page](#).***

## CURLEWS ON THE CUSP...

For the last few years, we've been able to say that Curlews seemed to be holding their own, while warning that there was no room for complacency. Although there's still time for a few more records, this season appears to justify the warning. There have been almost none of the scattered records that have hinted of possible additional territories; at the same time, there has been firmer evidence that some breeding attempts failed.

However, it's likely that at least three pairs hatched young, and there are a few more where the outcome is as yet unknown. In previous years, we've recorded Curlews right up to the end of July, although most have moved off to their wintering grounds before then. So it's still worth keeping eyes and ears open for them, and if you've recorded any Curlew activity earlier in the season, but haven't yet sent it in, please do so now.

## ... BUT BARN OWLS BACK FROM THE BRINK



After years of really bad news about Barn Owls, culminating in the "worst breeding season for over 30 years" last year, it's great to be able to report a major success. One of our most remote nestbox sites, which had a history of failed breeding attempts in recent years, had a family of at least five fledged young this summer. Its location close to vole-rich meadows helped the parents to keep their brood well supplied.

Clearly, given the right conditions, Barn Owls can do very well around here, which prompts the question, why do so few of them do so? As usual, a large part of the explanation is habitat loss: there are very few habitats as rich as this site left in the Upper Clun. Its remoteness may also be a factor: recent research has shown that 84% of Barn Owls have ingested rodenticides, used on some farms to control rats and mice. Some die as a direct result, and it's suspected that the poisoning has further negative impacts on Barn Owl breeding and survival.

*If you find the percentage of Barn Owls with poison in their systems shocking, the figure for Kestrels is 100%. That's right, by 2011 all the Kestrels studied were found to be contaminated with SGARs (second-generation anti-coagulant rodenticides). If you'd like to know more, have a look at [barnowltrust.org.uk](http://barnowltrust.org.uk)*

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## BIRDERS' MOTTO: THERE'S NEVER, EVER NOTHING ABOUT!

Our spring Curlew walk on April 27th at Lower Short Ditch took place in pretty tricky conditions. Finding birds was a bit of a challenge, although the indomitable Meadow Pipits put on a good show. But persistence paid off, and after about an hour of nothing very much, we started logging some great records.

Wheatears were passing through, most on their way to breed in the far north, though one or two stayed to breed. We had ample opportunity to admire their exquisite plumage and clean lines as they perched close by. A pair of Yellowhammers was nest-building, the female collecting dried grass, the male keeping a watchful eye.

And though we neither saw nor heard Curlews, we had the rare treat of hearing not just one, but two Cuckoos singing at the same time - the first recorded in the area this year. The final list ran to 20 species, including a Chiffchaff that sang just as we were leaving - not bad for a day when you'd have said there was nothing about!

*On migration, Wheatears, which are only just larger than a robin, can travel 1500 miles non-stop in 30 hours, losing up to half their body weight in the process. How tough is that?*

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