

STRETTONS AREA COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

DIPPER PROJECT

Dipper Habitat



Dippers inhabit fast flowing streams with rapids, small waterfalls and gravelly beds, and the Shropshire Hills, particularly in the Teme catchment, is the County stronghold.

They feed largely on larvae collected on the stream bed (they do not take invertebrates from bankside vegetation, like Grey Wagtails do), and, to a lesser extent, on small fish. They take readily to carefully-sited nest boxes over water.

Several other Community Wildlife Groups have put up boxes, and shown that they help increase the population, partly by

providing new nest sites on suitable stretches of stream which otherwise lack them, and partly by protecting the eggs and chicks from predators, so the average number of fledged young per nest increases.

Dippers in the Strettons area

Dippers were absent from most of the Strettons area since the 1980s, but the population has increased across the whole of the Teme catchment in recent years, as a result of the nest boxes, which has led to more observations here. The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group has now started its own Dipper Project, covering the Cound Brook north to Longnor, and the Quinney Brook south to Marshbrook, and their tributaries.

Dippers are very territorial, so the first step was getting a better understanding of which streams they inhabit, their favoured locations and the distances between nests, before putting up boxes.

Members were asked to report sightings in 2020, and from previous years, and an appeal for information appeared in *Stretton Focus*.

Nest building usually starts in early April, and young are being fed in late April or early May, so that is the best time to locate breeding pairs. Some pairs raise two broods.

In 2020, the population in the area was estimated at 9 – 11 pairs.

2021

Members were again asked to report sightings, and another appeal for information appeared in *Stretton Focus*.

Sites occupied last year, or known to have been occupied previously, were revisited in 2021, but several were not occupied. A new site was found, with old nests from previous years, but it was unoccupied.

Altogether, 13 sites were checked.

- Five sites were unoccupied, and the nest of another failed early.
- A pair near All Stretton successfully raised two broods. The first brood was ringed, and one was photographed in Batch Valley.

- No nest was found at Little Stretton, but an adult was seen with one fledged young on 15 June
- Two pairs north of All Stretton both lost their first broods close to fledging. One of these pairs had well grown young from a second brood in the nest, but the outcome is unknown
- It appears that a colour-ringed male in Cardingmill Valley was lost at the start of the season, but the colour-ringed female found a new (unringed) mate, and they raised two fledged young
- The outcome at two other occupied sites is unknown

Water levels were high at the start of the season, and the weather was cold, probably resulting in less invertebrate food in the streams, perhaps accounting for the unoccupied sites and the fewer breeding pairs. The population in 2021 is estimated at 8 pairs. Only four young are known to have fledged, considerably fewer than in 2020.

Two recently-fledged young, with grey back and speckled breast, were photographed.



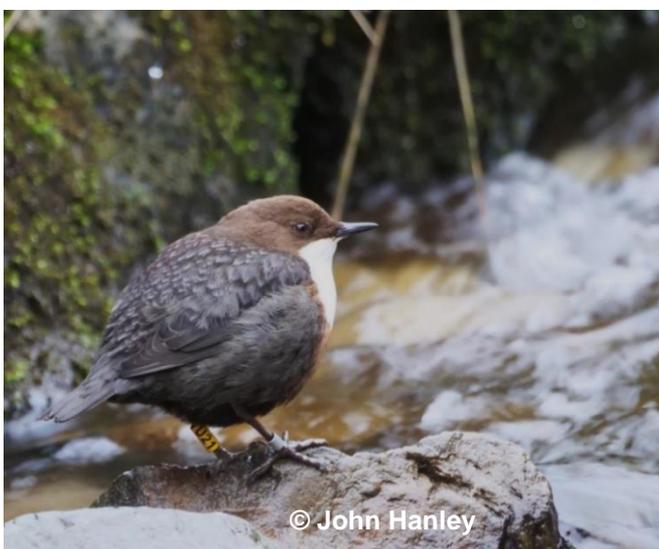
© Paul Langford (Batch Valley)



© Steve Rooney (Carding Mill Valley)

Nest boxes

The Community Wildlife Group received a grant from the Stepping Stones project, with the support of players of People's Postcode Lottery, which included funding to install 10 new nest boxes. The nest finding in 2020 identified some sites that will be more secure if boxes are placed there, and other suitable sites have now been identified, some mid-way between nests now known, which may result in a population increase.



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Rings

Ringling has been going on for many years, across the whole of the Teme Catchment, but also on the Cound Brook around Leebotwood and Longnor, but the colour-rings to identify individual birds in the field were only introduced in 2014. A colour-ring on the left leg is shown in the lower photo. The letter and two numbers on each ring are unique, so if the ring can be read it will add to what is known of the life history of the bird.

The smaller ring looks silver, and in silhouette it looks like a small wellington boot (the leg appears thicker at the bottom than the top).

The Dipper in both photos has a small metal (BTO) ring on the right leg.

Members were asked to report colour-rings and the smaller metal rings, and an attempt was made to read the former, by photography with a long lens, or a telescope. Unfortunately, no ringing was allowed at winter roost sites over the winter 2020-21 period, so far fewer Dippers were ringed than in the 2020 breeding season. Four colour-ringed birds were found: three were read, but one did not provide a good enough view.

One of the three was colour-ringed in Cardingmill Valley in the winter of 2018, and the other two were ringed in winter 2019, all adults at or very close to the sites where they nested. None of them had been ringed earlier, as nestlings

By carrying on with the project in future years, it will be possible to build up an understanding of how long Dippers live, how far they move between fledging, roosting and nesting, and fidelity.

If you see a Dipper, please try and see if it has a ring and colour-ring, and report it, with the location, to Leo Smith (01694 720296 leo@leosmith.org.uk).

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Leo Smith
Project Organiser
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