

## Case study: Nightjar

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### National status

'Consolidation & expansion' of the nightjar's breeding range across England & Wales has been the most notable change since the national 1988 – 91 Breeding Atlas. Historically the nightjar held a wider distribution throughout Britain & Ireland, presently it is associated with lowland heath and (more recently) felled or newly planted conifer plantations. This range has contracted by 51% in Britain and by 88% in Ireland. In Britain the number of churring males has increased from 2100 in 1981 to 4600 in 2004. Despite this doubling in numbers, there has been relatively little range expansion.

### Local Status

Locally, prior to the early 1970's, its breeding range was limited to below the gritstone edges. Since this period, it has conformed to the recent national trend by showing a moderate population increase. This was despite decline during the 1975 – 1980 period. (Wetter / cooler springs were thought to be the culprit as breeding habitat remained stable and this decline was also evident in adjacent recording areas during this period). Recovery has occurred since the 1975 – 80 Atlas, This country - wide increase is no doubt due to both habitat protection and restoration (instigated since the 1980's and 90's). Though suitable nightjar habitat may have remained stable locally since the 70's, the weather may be crucial to the nightjar's success. A slight increase in the mean minimum & maximum temperature during May & June will influence the availability of insect prey. Equally, excessive rain during the same period could push this species in the opposite direction. The implications of climate change are uncertain.

There is also increased pressure from dog walkers, mountain bikers, climbers, Etc. due to a big push in Sheffield to get people to use the open spaces within the city ('Sheffield the Outdoor City'). This includes the habitats used by the nightjar. Forestry plantations are being opened up to the public, new multi - use trails are being created or planned for recently felled sites, This will create conflict with the existing wildlife and the species that are colonising these newly opened terrains, species such as the nightjar. Consideration for these 'transients', need to be factored in to these projects.

Being nocturnal makes it difficult to confirm breeding. Data is often based on churring / displaying males only. Fledgling surveys are needed to get a true picture of breeding success.

### Local breeding population:

**10 – 20 pairs** From 'Breeding Birds of the Sheffield Area (including the NE Peak District)'

### Species description

The European nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) is an amber - listed (Bird of Conservation Concern / BoCC). It is a summer visitor (May – September), wintering in Africa and is one of the latest to reach these islands. The migration is poorly understood, though they reach Africa around October / November. Nocturnal in habit, during the breeding season the 'churring' and the frog - like 'coo - ikk' gives its presence away. Its flight is twisting in nature and almost silent, as it hawks for insect prey. If alarmed, it will clap its wings together (over its back).

### Folklore

Due to its crepuscular nature this species has a rich folklore woven around it. To our ancestors any creature active at night acquired a negative reputation. Older names such as the goatsucker, churr owl, scissor grinder, night swallow, etc. These all lend a gothic edge to this long misunderstood bird. The name 'gabble ratchets' (aka Gabriel hounds or corpse hounds) was the name given to the nightjar in the Nidderdale area of North Yorkshire...where it was believed to be the 'repository for the souls of unbaptised children condemned to wander about the world forever'. H. P. Lovecraft used its 'New World' cousins (nighthawks, whip - poor wills, etc) as harbingers of horror, pre - cursers to some nameless terror...

## Sheffield Biological Records Centre (Feb 2018)

Records from 1927 (then a big gap) 1969 – 2017: 168 total for the Sheffield area

1927: Noted as a former breeder in the more open areas of Ecclesall Woods.

1969 – To the present: Recorded in the Wharncliffe area (Woods, Craggs, Heath and also over the Barnsley border on the Chase). *It was particularly numerous in 1973 with a total of 9 birds churring, although numbers were to decline in subsequent years.*

### Regular moorland fringe sites:

Ewden Valley, Agden Side, Cowell Flat, Strines Moor, Broomhead Moor, Emlin Moor, Bradfield Moor etc

### Former clear – fell plantations:

Burbage, Redmires, Fairthorn, Agden Side, etc

### Random but interesting records:

Shirtcliff Wood (7.7.1975, 'flying around Woodhouse at night'), Rivelin Roughs (2 records from 1992), Loxley & Wadsley Common (3 records: 2 from 1986, the last from 1996), a recent record from outside the Cricket Inn, Totley (2016), 2 birds observed from the beer garden.

### Sheffield Bird Study Group

Records from 2005 – 2015: total 320

### Bibliography:

'Bird Atlas 2007 – 11' (Balmer, D., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B., Swann, B., Downie, I., & Fuller, R. / BTO Books, Thetford / 2013)

'Breeding Birds of the Sheffield Area (including the NE Peak District)' (Edited by Wood, D. & Hill, R. / Sheffield Bird Study Group / 2013)

'RSPB Handbook of British Birds' (Cleeves, T. & Holden, P. / Bloomsbury Publishing, London / 4<sup>th</sup> Edition: 2014)

'The Nightjar' (Tate, P. / Shire Publications, Aylesbury / 1989)

