

## **Black Redstart 1944-56**

### **Title**

Black Redstart 1944-1956

(and the published paper continues with records to 1963)

### **Description and Summary of Results**

Apart from two isolated breeding records in Co. Durham in 1845 and possible breeding in Sussex in 1909, the history of the Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* as a British breeding bird began in 1923, when two pairs were found nesting on the cliffs near Hastings, Sussex. From then until 1939 there was sporadic breeding in Sussex and Kent, and continuous periods of breeding in Cornwall and Middlesex.

A survey was launched for the breeding season of 1944 to determine the actual status. In that year 47 observers found 9 pairs in 5 counties and 11 nonbreeding males. In 1945 61 observers found 6-8 pairs and 17-20 males in 6 counties. Thereafter the number of nesting pairs reached a peak of 41 in 1950, but reduced again to less than 20 in most years after 1953 and to 11 in 1962. The increase seemed to be encouraged by the availability of suitable nesting sites and feeding grounds in the shape of bombed buildings and the associated rubble waste, and that the decline after 1950 was contributed to by the rebuilding of these sites, especially in the City of London and at Dover, where a disproportionately large percentage of the breeding pairs were located.

The only area where Black Redstarts bred with any regularity was the coastal strip of SE England, from Great Yarmouth via the Thames estuary and London to Eastbourne usually with over half in the City of London and Dover. Nesting in inland cities (eg Birmingham) was sporadic, and nesting in natural cliff sites on the coast surprisingly rare.

Probably at least half, if not more, of the 'singing males' found in each year were, in fact, the males of breeding pairs whose nests were not discovered. Apparent large increases in the number of breeding pairs in the later 1940s, for instance, were partly due to the return of birdwatchers from the war, who proceeded to track down the singing males to their nests, while the disappearance almost to vanishing point of the singing males not proved as nesting in the City of London in the 1950s was due to similar careful work by observers in London.

Six counties recorded Black Redstarts breeding for the first time 1950-1963: Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire and Yorkshire, and two where it either probably bred or a pair was present without breeding being proved: Bedfordshire and Worcestershire. In three counties where the species bred before 1950 it was not proved to do so from 1950 on: Cornwall, Devon and Hampshire, though it probably did breed in the last in 1958.

Apart from the above, singing males occupied territories during 1950-1963 in four counties where they had never done so before: Berkshire, Herefordshire, Somerset and Midlothian; and Glamorgan was the only county where a non-breeding Black Redstart occupied a territory before 1950 but not afterwards.

### **Methods of Data Capture**

In 1944 appeals for all records of the species were sent out in BTO publications and other places. Similarly for the breeding seasons 1945-1949 but after this all information was gleaned from published county bird reports supplemented as needed by direct contact with observers or county report editors.

All information on distribution was requested (and from years previous to 1944 if known) and observers were asked to send as much information as possible on the breeding biology of pairs which did nest, as well as details of all unpublished records of occurrence at other times of the year.

The species was known to have been overlooked, especially as its main nesting habitat was industrial installations, old quarries, derelict buildings, docks and other places rarely visited by birdwatchers. It was hoped that observers living near such possible places, ie urban, suburban or industrial areas in England and Wales, would keep a particularly sharp look-out, and make an effort to trace the nests of any singing males that were located.

Any males identified as heard for only a day or two before mid May were omitted from the totals as being more likely to have been pausing on migration, unless they were heard in known Black Redstart territories of previous years.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

To determine the number of breeding pairs of the Black Redstart in each year. Some information on breeding biology was also sought.

### **Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain although in practice primarily the London area and SE England.

### **Temporal Coverage**

Primarily the breeding seasons of 1944 to 1956 although it started in 1941, and continued up to 1963 with many records extracted from county bird reports. In 1944 records from other seasons were also requested to try to determine how widespread was the species.

### **Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by Richard Fitter as a Trust-aided enquiry, with some of the records resulting from appeals made in BTO publications. It continued a private investigation by Richard Fitter.

### **Organiser(s)**

Richard S R Fitter

**Current Staff Contact**

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**Publications**

Annual reports for 1944-1949 were published in *British Birds*:

Fitter, R.S.R. 1945-1950. Report of the Black Redstart Inquiry for 1944. *British Birds* 38: 247-249; Report for 1945. *British Birds* 39: 207-211; Report for 1946. *British Birds* 40: 267; Report for 1947. *British Birds* 41: 267; Report for 1948. *British Birds* 42: 206-207; Report for 1949. *British Birds* 43: 175-176.

Subsequent years were summarised in:

Fitter, R.S.R. 1965. The breeding status of the Black Redstart in Great Britain. *British Birds* 58: 481-492.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual Report* numbers 11-20; *BTO Bulletin* numbers 16-18, 20, 24, 28, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38, 41, 45, 47, 49; and *Bird Study* issues for March and September 1954, March, September and December 1955, and March, September and December 1956.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

5 boxes containing the letters and information received by Richard Fitter about the species, arranged by year. Also drafts of various reports.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**