



Birds

Ecology

Almost 600 wild bird species have been recorded in Great Britain. Our resident bird species spend all year here, however there are also species and populations which only spend summer or winter in Great Britain, and some that only pass through.

Some birds typically nest in trees, whilst others will nest on the ground. Some put great effort into creating secretive, structured nests, whilst others will nest on bare gravel. Sizes range from the tiny goldcrest, which weighs as little as a ten pence coin, to the white-tailed eagle with a wingspan just short of 2.5 metres.

This variety is also reflected in the diets of our bird species, with many eating cereals, seeds and insects. Waders, such as black-tailed godwits, are specialised for extracting invertebrate prey from exposed mud, whereas the sharp, hooked beak of a sparrowhawk has evolved for tearing meat.

Most of our resident bird species breed during the summer, between March and August. However, there are exceptions to this, such as the collared dove, which nests all year round, and species such as the barn owl that may also breed over a longer period.

Habitat and distribution

Birds have adapted to live in a range of habitats across the UK, from remote mountains and glens, to urban city centres and along the coast. Several species, such as swifts, swallows and peregrine falcons have adapted to nesting in or on buildings.

In the context of new developments, the most frequent habitats affected are trees, hedgerows, scrub, dense shrubs, barns, and old buildings.

Why are birds protected?

Changes in land use, expansion and intensification of agriculture, and inappropriate management of countryside and coastal areas, have all contributed to declines across the majority of our bird species.

The law

All wild birds, their nests and young are protected throughout England and Wales by the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is illegal to kill, injure or take any wild bird, or damage or destroy the nest or eggs of breeding birds. The legislation applies to all bird species, common and rare.

In addition to the protection afforded to all wild birds, more vulnerable species listed on Schedule 1 of the Act receive enhanced protection when breeding. Schedule 1 species, including their dependent young, are protected from intentional or reckless disturbance whilst at or near the nest, in addition to the protection afforded the more common species.



Penalties for offences include fines of up to £5000, plus up to six months imprisonment, for each offence committed.

Local Planning Authorities will often ask for a bird survey to be undertaken as part of planning if the proposed development has the potential to impact on protected, or large numbers of, birds or their habitats. It should be noted that developments that are not subject to planning permission are still subject to the above legislation.