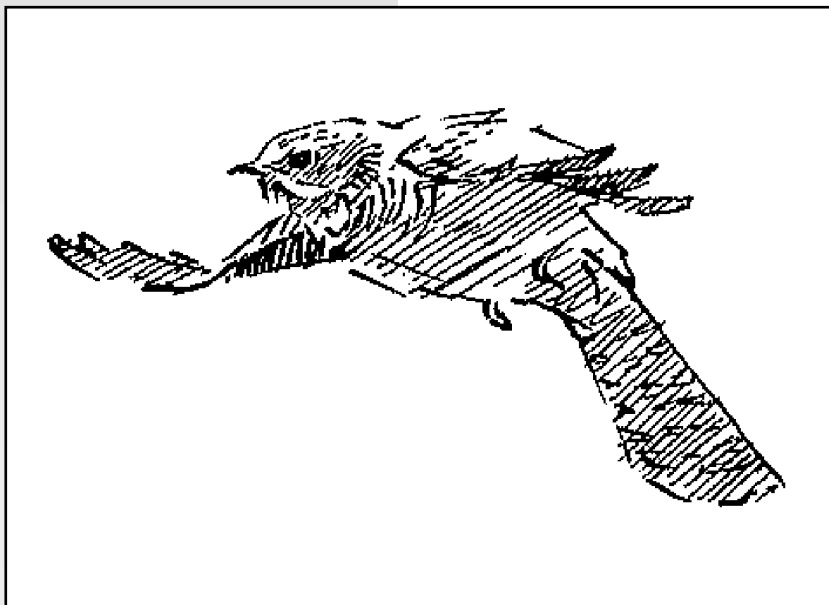


Nightjar

Caprimulgus europaeus



National lead organisation(s):

Forestry Commission, RSPB

County lead organisation(s):

Bedfordshire Bird Club (BNHS)

The nightjar is a summer migrant, arriving in Britain in the middle of May, and leaving again to winter in sub-Saharan Africa in September. It is primarily a species of sparsely forested areas such as open woodland, margins and clearings of mature woods, scrub and heathland. Lowland heathland and young forestry plantations are now the most important habitats for the nightjar. The species roosts on the ground or in trees by day and feeds mainly at night on flying insects such as moths, beetles and craneflies. Populations are monitored by counting singing males, which 'churr' at dawn and dusk. However their nocturnal nature makes the collection of reliable data difficult.

Current status

National status

Although nightjars have a wide range over much of continental Europe, the species has been declining in numbers and range since at least 1950 over much of north-west Europe. In the UK numbers have been declining for much of the 20th century, reaching a low point of 2,100 males in 1981 and a 52% decline in range between 1968 and 1992.

There has since been a partial population recovery reaching 3,400 males in 1992. Forestry clear fells resulting from major storms and forest management have helped increase nightjar numbers, a survey in 1992 found over 50% of the population in this type of habitat.

The species now breeds mainly in southern England. Dorset, Hampshire, Norfolk and Suffolk hold a large proportion of the national population. However the main population centre is in the Brecks (599 males in 1999), with others scattered throughout southern England to Wales, and as far north as central Scotland. Nightjars are probably extinct as a breeding species in Northern Ireland and generally very rare to extinct in the Midlands.

Local status

Within Bedfordshire the species is restricted to the Greensand Ridge but formerly occurred in the Luton Hoo area. Analysis of the data from the two Bedfordshire Bird Atlases (1968-77 & 1988-92) shows a large decline of about 85% during the 20-year interval. In 1974 seven pairs were present in the county but the breeding population during 1988-92 had declined to only three confirmed or probable pairs. At present there are no pairs breeding within the county; the last record of a male churring was in 1998 towards the western end of the Greensand Ridge. Territorial males occur infrequently in Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire.

Current factors affecting the Nightjar

- **Loss of suitable feeding habitat** – Nightjars travel up to 6 km in search of suitable feeding habitat. Thus loss of extensive areas of suitable habitat, especially uncultivated land within a few kilometres of the nesting area is thought to be the driving force behind the decline in numbers.
- **Loss of heathland** – The dramatic reduction of heathland during the course of the 20th century (approx. 40% of England's lowland heaths have been lost since the 1950s) due to agricultural land claim, afforestation and built development has been a major component of the decline of the nightjar.
- **Lack of heathland management** – Lack of appropriate heathland management can lead to the invasion of scrub and trees resulting in unsuitable nesting habitat for the nightjar.
- **Decline in large insects** – It is possible that changes in agriculture (such as the effects of pesticides) may have caused a decline in the availability of large insects, which form a large part of its diet.
- **Climatic change** – This may in future affect nightjar populations. However at present there is little information to whether it will be a positive or a negative factor.

- **Forest management practice** – In commercial forests, nightjars nest in young stages of plantations, while there is still bare ground between the trees. Local population declines could occur when recently planted blocks mature and no other suitable habitat becomes available in other new or young stands.
- **Disturbance and predation** – Nests are often located on relatively small (2x2m) patches of bare sandy ground amongst mature heather, with scattered plants to assist in camouflage. Recreational use of land, particularly uncontrolled dogs can disturb breeding birds.
- **Habitat re-creation and restoration** – Heathland re-creation and restoration, some agri-environment schemes, and community forests will all be important in delivering range expansion in Bedfordshire and other Midland counties.

Current action

The nightjar is protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Due to a >50% decline in range and population, and as a species with an unfavourable conservation status in Europe (SPEC2/SPEC3), the nightjar is Red-listed in 'Birds of Conservation Concern' (Gregory et al 2002). It is also listed in the Red Data Book for Bedfordshire and Luton.

Detailed research into the ecology of nightjars nesting in Thetford Forest has been carried out by the RSPB with Forestry Commissions help; Forest Enterprise's forestry practice is now aimed at maintaining a constant area of young plantation as good habitat for breeding nightjars.

Specific management on some nature reserves has benefited this species, as has the heathland management carried out by various county heathland projects managed by English Nature, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Local Authorities.

The Greensand Trust is actively managing habitat to benefit the species in Bedfordshire and management of heathland by the RSPB and the Wildlife Trust along the Greensand Ridge may incidentally provide suitable habitat.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

- Enhance foraging and potential nesting habitat to sustain the species.

Targets

- Increase numbers to at least three churring males by 2010;
- Enhance 30 ha of habitat for the nightjar by encouraging suitable management by 2010.

Proposed action

Abbreviations

BCC	Bedfordshire County Council
BNHS	Bedfordshire Natural History Society
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
EN	English Nature
FC	Forestry Commission
FE	Forest Enterprise
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
GST	The Greensand Trust
IOCP	Ivel and Ouse Countryside Project
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
WT	The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire

Action

Policy and legislation

- Encourage extension of suitable habitat through the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme.
- Support extensive agricultural systems within the former range of the species through the appropriate agri-environmental schemes.
- Consider identifying important nesting and foraging sites as County Wildlife Sites.

Site safeguard and management

- Take account of the requirements of the species when creating access land on heathland under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
- Take account of the requirements of the nightjar when considering felling and restocking proposals in its former range.
- Promote restoration to heathland as an appropriate afteruse on suitable sites, following minerals extraction on the Greensand Ridge.
- Where appropriate, incorporate specific actions for the nightjar in management plans along the Greensand Ridge.
- Promote appropriate habitat management to land owners/managers, farmers and local authorities on potential nesting or foraging land.

Implemented by

EN
DEFRA, GST

FC, FE

BCC, EN, GST, IOCP, RSPB

GST, RSPB

FWAG, GST, IOCP, RSPB, WT

Action	Implemented by
<p>Species management and protection</p> <p>a). Ensure that when breeding occurs, the site is free from disturbance, particularly by dog walkers and birdwatchers.</p>	GST, RSPB
<p>Advisory</p> <p>a). Provide specific advisory material for the management of heathland and forestry plantations for nightjar.</p> <p>b). Using the results of current and future research, provide advice to reverse the decline of the nightjar.</p>	EN, FE, RSPB RSPB
<p>Future research and monitoring</p> <p>a). Maintain current levels of annual monitoring of birds in Bedfordshire.</p> <p>b). Contribute data to the national survey (every 10 years) which monitors the changes of numbers and range.</p> <p>c). Encourage research to investigate the availability of the nightjar's food supply.</p> <p>d). Evaluate the condition of heathland in the former range of the nightjar and the potential for remedial action.</p> <p>e). Ensure that recorded data on the species in Bedfordshire is made available to the Biodiversity, Recording and Monitoring Centre (BRMC).</p>	BNHS RSPB
<p>Communication and publicity</p> <p>a). Use the nightjar as a flagship species to promote the conservation and re-establishment of heathland.</p>	BNHS EN, GST, RSPB, WT

Complementary plans

The UK Biodiversity Steering Group has produced a Species action plan for Nightjar.

No neighbouring counties have produced action plans for the nightjar.

It is likely that implementation of this action plan will also benefit the woodlark. This action plan should be read alongside the Species action plan for Woodlark and Habitat Action Plans for Heathland and Lowland acidic grassland for Bedfordshire and Luton.

Acknowledgements

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