

Birds and the Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme

Guidance notes for experts undertaking surveys of traditional farm buildings under the Heritage Council's Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme

(prepared for the Heritage Council by BirdWatch Ireland)

Introduction

Many, if not all, of the buildings that will be offered grants by the Heritage Council under the REPS4 Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme are likely to be used by nesting birds, as well as bats. Each grant recipient is required as a condition of the grant to commission an appropriate expert to undertake bat surveys of the buildings; these surveyors are also requested to:

- ascertain if there are any bird nesting sites present in the buildings,
- to include reference to these in the final report submitted to the owner and the Heritage Council,
- to advise if the timing of works to the building needs to be altered to ensure the nesting sites are not impacted upon during the breeding season
- if barn owls are present, the surveyor should contact BirdWatch Ireland to seek advice on appropriate mitigation measures to include in the report to the owner and the Heritage Council.

In order to support those surveying the buildings, the Heritage Council requested BirdWatch Ireland to prepare some guidance notes on what species to look for, what signs to look for, as well as information on the nesting seasons of the various species that have been recorded using farmyards and buildings.

Birds and Farm Buildings

Nesting birds and the law

All birds, nests, eggs and nestlings are fully protected under law. Wilful destruction of an active nest (from the building stage until the chicks have fledged) is an offence, unless the building is occupied (in which case, the nest is only protected when there are eggs or chicks present). If work is being undertaken on a building, and an active nest is found, this constitutes notice that the nest is present. Any further work that results in the destruction of the nest is therefore an offence. It is therefore vital to ensure that all buildings are fully and properly surveyed to ensure that active nests can be protected, and to avoid the unnecessary inconvenience of halting building works when a previously undiscovered nest is found.

Which species?

A huge variety of bird species use buildings for nesting, feeding and roosting. A recent survey of farmyards and buildings recorded over 41 bird species using such habitats at different periods throughout the year (see Table 1). Note that this survey, which sampled a selection of farms nationally, did not include scarce species such as Barn Owl, Chough or Tree Sparrow that are known to regularly use farm buildings.

As can be seen from the list of species in Table 1, buildings are important for certain species during the summer (breeding) season, such as Kestrel, Swift, Sand Martin, Swallow, House Martin and Spotted Flycatcher. In the winter seed-eating birds, including the Red-listed Yellowhammer, forage for food in farmyards, joining more typically resident species such as Starling, House Sparrow and Linnet.

Table 1: Species recorded in farmyards and buildings

Species	Season	Species	Season
Kestrel	Summer	Willow Warbler	Summer
Merlin	Winter	Goldcrest	All
Pheasant	All	Spotted Flycatcher	Summer
Stock Dove	Summer	Coal Tit	Winter
Woodpigeon	All	Blue Tit	All
Collared Dove	All	Great Tit	All
Swift	Summer	Magpie	All
Sand Martin	Summer	Jackdaw	All
Swallow	Summer	Rook	All
House Martin	Summer	Hooded Crow	All
Meadow Pipit	All	Starling	All
Grey Wagtail	All	House Sparrow	All
Pied Wagtail	All	Chaffinch	All
Wren	All	Greenfinch	All
Duncock	All	Goldfinch	All
Robin	All	Linnet	All
Stonechat	Summer	Lesser Redpoll	Winter
Blackbird	All	Bullfinch	Winter
Fieldfare	Winter	Yellowhammer	Winter
Song Thrush	All	Reed Bunting	Winter
Mistle Thrush	Winter		

Note: the colour (Red, and Amber) of each species name corresponds to that species' status on the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland

When should works be carried out, if active nests are present?

Conservation and renovation work of farm buildings will generally have the greatest impact on bird species during the birds' breeding season, when birds will be nesting in such structures. **Ideally, therefore, such work should be undertaken out-with the bird-nesting season (typically November to February).** See Table 2 for further information on the nesting season of bird species that use farmyards and buildings.

Even during this period, it is still wise to survey buildings for active nests, since certain species such as pigeons and Blackbirds, can nest at any time of the year.

One exception to this is Barn Owls, which can be adversely affected by renovation works throughout the year. Whenever a building is being renovated, surveys looking for the presence of Barn Owls (pellets, whitewash and feathers) should be undertaken as a matter of course.

Please note: Any evidence of the presence of owls should be reported by the surveyor to BirdWatch Ireland, who can recommend appropriate mitigation measures to be included in the surveyor's report and to be put in place by the building's owner.

If active nests are found for other bird species, please make specific recommendations as to the timing of when works may be carried out.

Surveying buildings

The general activity of birds around a building provides the best indication of whether there may be an active nest site inside. Before entering the building, find a vantage spot several metres away from the building (so as not to disturb the nesting birds) and watch for any birds entering or leaving the building, or from any part of the external wall (where there may be

cavities or holes being used). This may need done from several locations to ensure that all walls and points of access to or from a building can be seen. Particularly important to look out for are birds carrying anything in their bills (such as nesting material, food or faecal sacs) that might indicate an active nest in the vicinity.

When approaching a building observe if any birds fly out. Birds may flush off nests at some distance, while other can remain sitting tight even when approached to within a few inches. At the same time, and while surveying inside a building, listen for any birds making alarm calls (usually short, harsh *chacking* calls). These may indicate a nest nearby.

The presence of a nest does not necessarily mean that it is in use. Old nests will often look dishevelled, with the nest cup containing old leaves or other detritus. Some nests, such as the mud-lined cups of Blackbird, can persist in a sheltered location inside a building for several years.

A nest containing one or more cold eggs does not necessarily indicate that it has been abandoned. Many species lay one egg per day, and do not start to incubate eggs until clutches are complete. The eggs in these incomplete clutches are often cold, but such nests should be left for at least three days to check whether any more eggs have been added, or whether the adults have begun incubation.

For hole-nesting species, where there are no external signs of nests, detection of an active site can be difficult. Covering potential looking holes with a hand may elucidate cheeping from any chicks inside (they associate the darkening of the nest entrance with a parent returning with food, and therefore beg noisily for the food that the adult may be bringing with them). However, this method only works when chicks are a few days old.

Table 2: Nesting habits of bird species commonly associated with buildings

Species	Nesting season	Nest description	Nest location	Other signs
Barn Owl	March-September	No material; slight depression in substrate; rarely visible	In chimney or large cavity in stonework	Pure white droppings, pellets and feathers
Kestrel	April-July	No material (slight scrape in substrate)	On ledge or in cavity	Cluster of droppings, pellets; adults obvious and vocal
Stock Dove	March-August	Twigs and sticks; partly visible	In cavities in buildings	
Swift	May-August	Small cup nest in nesting area (not visible for outside)	In large cavity or loft space; entrance through a hole at least 5m high	Adults circling and 'screaming' near building towards dusk
Swallow	March-September	Mud nest inside building	Usually on wooden beams or occasionally against gable (stone) walls	
House Martin	April-September	Mud nest outside building	Usually under eaves at top of gable wall of building	
Spotted Flycatcher	May-August	Cup nest of fine grasses and other natural fibres; lined with feathers	High up on cavity in stonework; usually with good 'view' from nest	
Chough	April-July	Bulky nest of sticks; thickly lined with wool	Cavities and ledges, usually inside derelict buildings	Vocal adults at occupied building
Starling	March-August	Cup nest of grass, rarely visible	Inside cavity but usually obvious entrance hole	Droppings on lip of hole; noisy chicks inside nest hole; adults obvious and vocal
House Sparrow	March-October	Domed nest of grass	Usually inside cavity; occasionally free-standing in ivy or other creeper	Nests in loose, but vocal, colonies
Tree Sparrow	April-September	Domed nest of plant material	Rarely visible inside cavity	
Peregrine	March-October	No material (slight scrape)	On ledges or in cavity	Pellets; adults obvious and vocal
Pied Wagtail	April-September	Cup nest of plant material, lined with feathers and hair; often visible	In cavity in stonework, occasionally on ledge	
Wren	April-September	Domed moss nest, occasionally in old nest cup of another species	Anywhere nest is supported (in cavities, on ledges, amongst ivy, etc.)	
Robin	March-October	Cup nest of leaves, grass and moss	Often in cavity; sometimes base of wall	
Blackbird	February-November	Cup nest of plant material, lined with mud then finer materials	Sheltered ledge or cavities	Adults can be obvious and vocal flying in and out of buildings
Coal tit	April-August	Typically a cup nest of moss and grass inside cavity	Nest rarely visible; small entrance hole or crack in stonework	
Blue Tit	April-August			
Great Tit	March-August			
Jackdaw	April-July	Bulky nest of sticks; thickly lined with wool	In cavities in buildings, including gaps in roof spaces and, especially, chimneys	Several pairs may be present together; adults obvious and vocal.

Note: the colour (Red, Amber and Green) of each species name corresponds to that species status on the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland