

Heronries Census

Instructions for volunteers



Thank you for volunteering for the Heronries Census. The BTO's Heronries Census has gathered nest counts annually since 1928 and is the longest-running monitoring dataset for any breeding bird in the world.

The main species covered is Grey Heron but Little Egrets and Cormorants are also included, as are rarer species of colonial waterbirds such as Cattle Egrets, Great White Egrets and Spoonbills. The data may be shared with county recorders and for rare species with the Rare Breeding Birds Panel.

The survey is organised via a network of voluntary Regional Organisers (ROs). Your RO will allocate a heronry to you and help you with any queries. More information can be found on the BTO website: www.bto.org/heronries



As well as Grey Heron, the Heronries Census also includes Cormorants, like these at Abberton Reservoir (Essex). Also look out for Little Egret, Cattle Egret and Great White Egret which may be nesting.

Photo: Jez Blackburn

Getting started

Please read the [guidance information for volunteer fieldworkers](#) on the BTO website before visiting your site; this includes information about access permission and Health & Safety.

Your RO will allocate the heronry to you on the [Heronries Online system](#) where you will be able to see the information held for the site including the grid reference. Various guidance documents are available [on the BTO website](#) (scroll down to view the 'Resources' section), including a Field Recording Sheet, Instructions and a Species Guide. If you are in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, you may need to ask permission to access your allocated heronry if it's located on private land. A standard letter requesting access can be obtained from your

RO. Permission requests are not required in Scotland under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC).

When to visit

It is a good idea to do 2–3 visits if possible, to repeat the count and get the best, most accurate estimate for the year. Visits should ideally be made between March and May. Nests should be counted in the second half of April, with this count being supplemented (if possible) by an earlier and a later visit.

Now that Little Egrets and other scarcer species are more widespread across the UK, you may also wish to consider carrying out additional later visits to check for activity by these species (see the [guidelines for monitoring scarcer species](#)).

You can visit a heronry at any time of day, although the birds may be more active in the morning. If you have to disturb the adults to get a clear view of the nests, try not to linger longer than you need to. It's a good idea to leave via an obvious route if possible so the waiting adults will see you go.



An early visit in late February or early March when there are few leaves on the deciduous tree makes it easier to see the nests

Photo: Heather Wilde

February – March	Early visit recommended for historical sites and heronries in deciduous woods (i.e. before leaf growth).
Mid – late April	Recommended visit time to count Grey Heron nests.
May – Early June	Recommended visit time to count Little Egret nests. Late visit for Grey Herons if required.
June - July	Possible extra visits if scarcer species such as Cattle Egret are present in your heronry
July - August	Enter any outstanding visit data into online system AND enter best estimates for the year (or send data to RO).

Locating a heronry

Your RO will allocate a known heronry to you and provide you with a grid reference to help you locate it. Many heronries hold a dozen or more nesting pairs, even a hundred or more, and occupy traditional, well-known sites that have been active for many decades. However, heronries may shift, so if it appears empty at first, it's important to search the area nearby.

Smaller and shorter-lived heronries must also be included in the counts to ensure that the data represent the whole population. Even single nests of any of the normally colonial heron or egret species are relevant to the Heronries Census, even if only occupied for one season.

New heronries should be reported to the RO in the first instance or directly to the BTO – herons@bto.org.

Habitat Recording

Habitat should be recorded to two levels (see Field Recording Sheet for details). The habitat details should relate to the habitat that the nests are in, e.g. if the nests are in conifer trees on a heath, the habitat should be recorded as A2, coniferous woodland, even if it's only a few trees. If in doubt describe habitat in words only.

Heron typically nest in the top of tall broadleaf trees, although they will also nest in conifer trees. They will sometimes nest in low trees or shrubs on lakes or coastal islets. Locally they nest in reeds or heather and even on cliff edges or shoreline rock. In exceptional circumstances they may nest on buildings or shingle. See the Species Guide for more information about other species.

Counting Nests

The simple aim of the Heronries Census is to collect counts of 'apparently occupied nests' (AONs) of herons, egrets, cormorants and other colonial waterbirds. 'Apparently occupied' simply means that there is some evidence of an active nest.

If you're lucky, you might be able to see into the nest and count the eggs or chicks. If this is not possible, droppings, hatched eggshell, pellets or even dead chicks on the ground below can also show occupancy. More information about signs of occupancy for each species can be found in the Species Guide. Be careful not to count nests from previous years with no signs of recent occupancy.

You will need to find a good vantage point to view the colony and count the nests. Depending on the nature of the colony, this may involve standing at a distance and viewing with binoculars or looking up from below. Two numbers should be recorded at each visit...

1. Count – this is the number of nests that are apparently occupied, e.g. adults or young seen on/at the nest, droppings or fresh eggshells
2. Estimate - The total number of pairs of each species you *estimate* are nesting in the colony on each visit. This estimate may be greater than the 'count', for example if

you can only access part of the colony, some nests are not clearly visible or if additional nests were occupied on an earlier visit.

Most (though not necessarily all) Grey Heron nests will often be visible at colonies, at least prior to leaf growth in spring, although nests in coniferous woodland will be more difficult to count. Nests of egret species are often at a lower height and in denser vegetation and hence may also be more difficult to observe directly. [Monitoring egret colonies](#) (and some Grey Heron colonies) may therefore require additional visits and more prolonged visits to observe the flight lines of birds commuting to and from the site in order to identify the location of probable nests within the colony.



Later in the season it may be possible to just see the heads of young birds in the nest.

Photo: John Bowers

If the colony is empty, with no sign of any herons or occupied nests, please return a zero count. This shows us that it has been checked and found to be empty, rather than not counted at all. It's valuable to visit inactive heronries that were previously active in recent years in case they become re-occupied.

Year's Best Estimate (YBE)

Once you have completed your last visit, please be sure to record a 'Year's Best Estimate' for each species. This final number of apparently occupied nests (AONs) should reflect what you have learned about the colony over the course of your individual visits.

It is your best estimate of the total number of nests you judge were occupied at the colony during the breeding season, including any nests in which nesting was attempted but was unsuccessful.

Your YBE will often be the highest 'estimate' made during your visits; however, it can be higher or lower if, with hindsight, you now judge a different estimate best reflects the total number of occupied nests.

Return of data

If you can, please submit your data online here: <https://app.bto.org/colonies/login/login.jsp>

You can find a [guide to online data entry](#) and an [instruction video](#) on the website to help you with this.

If you do not have online access, please complete a Heronries Census card or recording form and send this to your RO. Otherwise it should be sent directly to: Heronries Census, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

Nest Records

In some cases, it might be possible to count the number of eggs or chicks in a nest. If you are lucky enough to see this, you can also fill in Nest Record Cards or a colony sheet for the BTO's Nest Record Scheme.

This is an optional extra, but data is really valuable for understanding the reproductive behaviour of birds and the environmental pressures that influences their breeding success.

For more information, visit the NRS section of the BTO website: www.bto.org/nrs