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Cover photograph: Ring ouzel © Laurie Campbell; Wheatear © Laurie Campbell; Skylark feeding uckoo chicks © John Walters



Birds

of the open moor





Meadow pipit feeding a young cuckoo © John Walters



Bird survey © DNPA

Dartmoor - a special place for moorland birds

Dartmoor is the largest upland area in southern England, offering many different habitats to a wide variety of breeding birds. In particular, moorland areas are home to a fascinating range of birds, all of which contribute to the richness of the area and our enjoyment of this special place.

Dartmoor has such a rich diversity of upland birds because cattle, ponies and sheep graze the moor extensively and create the open habitat with the tussocks of heather, gorse and grass that provide an ideal habitat.

If you do happen to find an occupied nest, please leave it alone and move away.

Recent surveys have shown that:

- Dartmoor is a stronghold for species that have declined elsewhere in the UK, such as snipe and skylark;
- familiar Dartmoor birds, such as meadow pipit and stonechat, are present here in nationally and even internationally important numbers;
- some birds which evoke the spirit of Dartmoor, such as curlew and lapwing, are now in serious decline and under threat of extinction as breeding birds in the National Park.

Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA), RSPB and partners are responsible for delivering the Dartmoor Biodiversity Action Plan. The success of this Plan depends very much on the co-operation of many organisations and individuals, including land managers and the public.



Skylark nest © John Walters



Meadow pipit nest © DNPA

The nesting season

The dates when birds breed varies between species, and from year to year. This can depend upon the weather on Dartmoor, and for migrants, on weather conditions abroad. However, most activity connected with setting up territories, nesting and fledging young takes place during the months of March, April, May, June and July.

Most moorland birds build their nests on the ground. In order to avoid their nests being found by predators, they will often be very well hidden under a tussock of grass or heather, or amongst rocks. In some cases a nest might be built in the middle of a boggy area.

The nests will always be very well camouflaged and are therefore incredibly difficult to see: just because you cannot see any nests does not mean there aren't any!

Once a pair has built a nest, the female will lay the eggs over a period of a few days, and will then settle down to incubate. She will rely on her mate feeding her, though sometimes she will leave the nest for a short period. After about a fortnight, the young hatch. Over the next two weeks, both parents will be busy gathering food to feed the hungry mouths of their chicks until the young have grown big enough to fend for themselves. This is a very sensitive time as any disturbance could result in the parents not being able to incubate or feed their young.



Dunlin © DNPA



Snipe © Laurie Campbell

Waders

Four species of wading birds breed on Dartmoor.

There are about 15 breeding pairs of **dunlin** on Dartmoor. This is the southern-most breeding population of this species in the world! Nationally, numbers of dunlin appear to be stable at the moment. Dunlin breed in the areas of high moor on good quality blanket bog where they feed within the short vegetation and runnels. In the winter, they move off Dartmoor and can be seen along the mudflats of the coast.



Curlew
© Chris Gomersall
rspb-images.com

Curlew are threatened with extinction as a breeding bird on Dartmoor. There are only 1-3 pairs left. This species is globally near-threatened. On Dartmoor, these birds build their nests within the damp valley mires. They normally lay

around three eggs and two to three young tend to hatch. However, research has shown that few, if any, young fledge successfully.

Dartmoor has a healthy population of breeding **snipe**. Recent surveys have shown that there are close to 200 breeding pairs of snipe on Dartmoor – this is the biggest breeding population of this species in southern England. The evocative drumming display of the males is one of the sounds of spring on Dartmoor. They build their nests in the wettest parts of valley mires.

Lapwing have a striking appearance, with black and white plumage, iridescent green and purple back and a wispy crest. Large flocks of lapwing can still be seen on Dartmoor in the winter months, but they are now restricted to one breeding site. Concerted habitat management work by the conservation authorities and the landowner means that in recent years there has been breeding success. Nationally, this species is in decline.



Lapwing © DNPA



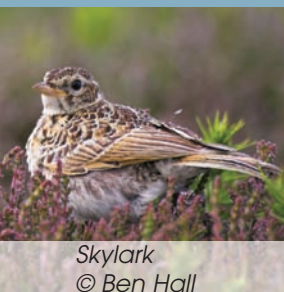
Meadow pipit feeding a young cuckoo © John Walters



Ring ouzel © Laurie Campbell

Ground-nesting birds

Meadow pipits are, together with skylarks, the most common birds on the open moor. The population is thought to be stable. Their parachuting display flight in the spring is quite distinctive. Meadow pipits are occasionally parasitised by the **cuckoo**. Cuckoos lay their egg in a meadow pipit nest. The young cuckoo hatches before the meadow pipits, and pushes all the other eggs from the nest. In this way it has the sole attention of its foster parents, who will continue to feed it even when the cuckoo has become bigger than them!



Skylark
© Ben Hall
rspb-images.com

The never-ending song of the **skylark** high over the moors in summer has inspired many a poet and composer. Skylarks are common on Dartmoor's uplands. Our population is nationally significant as there have been huge declines in the lowlands. As obvious as they are in the sky, they are well hidden on the ground. Skylarks hide their nests deep in a tussock.

Ring ouzels and **wheatears** both use rocks and boulders under which to hide their nests such as clitter slopes below a tor. Dartmoor holds nationally important numbers of wheatear and is now the only upland in the south with breeding ring ouzel. DNPA is working with letterboxing and geocaching organisers to avoid placing boxes or caches in known sensitive areas during the nesting season.



Wheatear © DNPA

At night, a continuous churring noise gives away the presence of the **nightjar**. These migratory birds normally arrive in early May and tend to breed well into August. The nest of a nightjar is just a shallow scrape of earth. This scrape is protected from view by surrounding heather or bracken. Nightjars are one of the few moorland species on Dartmoor that are increasing in numbers.



Nightjar
© Mike Richards
rspb-images.com



Stonechat © Jeremy Barker



Red grouse © Tom Marshall rspb-images.com

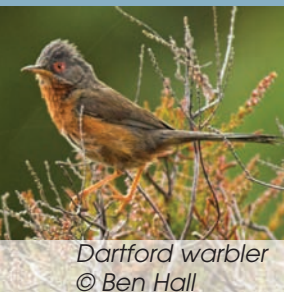
The **stonechat** is a common sight on Dartmoor. They remain on Dartmoor all year round and only retreat to the lowlands when it gets really cold. You can often see them sitting proud on a gorse bush or a hawthorn tree.



Whinchat © DNPA

Whinchats overwinter in Africa and return to Dartmoor in April. About 500 pairs are thought to breed on Dartmoor. They are different from the stonechat because they have a white eyestripe. Whinchats make a small nest in a tussock of grass or

bilberry. Quite often you can see a whinchat singing or calling from a bracken frond.



Dartford warbler
© Ben Hall
rspb-images.com

Dartford warblers have recently expanded their range across southern Britain. They prefer to breed in areas of thick gorse. As they are at the northern edge of their range and overwinter on Dartmoor, they are heavily affected by harsh winters.

Other moorland birds

Dartmoor has a small breeding population, of around 40 pairs of **red grouse**. They can be found on the high plateaus of the moor amongst heather.

Reed buntings breed next to the boggy areas and springs on Dartmoor. Their nests are very low to the ground and occasionally run the risk of flooding! The male has a striking black and white head.



Reed bunting
© Mike Richards
rspb-images.com

Grasshopper warblers

are rarely seen, more often heard. A quiet, continuous reeling noise from a willow tree in May or June is most likely to give away the presence of this African migrant.



Grasshopper warbler
© DNPA



Ringing young birds © DNPA



Swaling, Haytor © DNPA

What we are doing to help moorland nesting birds

Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) works in partnership with the RSPB, Natural England, the Duchy of Cornwall, the MOD and many others to monitor the numbers of moorland breeding birds, and to implement the necessary actions to improve breeding success.

The Operation Wader Project has worked for several years to monitor numbers and establish the causes of decline for curlew, lapwing and snipe. The results help in developing suitable habitat management schemes.

A partnership project to restore the blanket bog on Dartmoor also involves the monitoring of breeding dunlin. The restoration of the habitat should result in more favourable conditions for this species, as there will be more bog pools and bog mosses.

Swaling, the burning of heather and grass, when undertaken at the right time of year, is a lawful land management activity. It is carried out from the beginning of October, and, by custom, on Dartmoor it is completed before the end of March because of its potential disturbance to moorland breeding birds. Swaling during January and February is preferred but current weather patterns make this difficult.

Properly carried out, swaling promotes the growth of young heather and is important for maintaining moorland habitats.

Particularly sensitive areas for vulnerable bird species are now avoided through annual Fire Plans prepared by the Dartmoor Commoners' Associations, assisted by DNPA and Natural England.



Rambler walk © DNPA

How we can all help moorland nesting birds

Many factors play a part in influencing the success of breeding birds including climate change and human disturbance. Even short-term disturbance can be fatal. When a bird is forced to leave its nest, the eggs or newly fledged young can chill and die very quickly, or predators can move in and take eggs or nestlings.

During the **bird breeding season** (the months of March, April, May, June and July), you can minimise disturbance by:

- keeping to tracks and paths as much as possible, particularly in areas of dense heather, clitter and wetlands;
- keeping your dog on a lead – especially as most lambing takes place at the same time that birds are nesting;
- avoiding young birds on the ground or distressed parent birds, by walking around the area and moving away quickly, allowing the parents to return;
- spreading the word by telling others how they can help too.

Organising events

Events involving large groups are considered to represent an increased risk of disturbance. Many major walking, riding and orienteering events have been rescheduled in recent years. The organisers of these events have thus taken positive steps to help safeguard moorland breeding birds. DNPA also strictly regulates its own walks for the public and school groups.

If you are planning an event on moorland involving over 50 people, please:

- avoid the main bird breeding season (1 March to 15 July);
- contact DNPA during the early planning stages for further guidance.

DNPA and the RSPB are working together with many other people to conserve Dartmoor's moorland birds, including landowners, Natural England, the MOD, commoners and recreational user groups. DNPA and the MOD also brief all Ten Tors participants on minimising disturbance during training and ensure that environmental safeguards are incorporated into the event. Discussions continue on ways to reduce impact.