

Bird Boxes in the Wyre Forest

ANDY SPENCER

Andy Spencer is an experienced bird watcher and qualified bird ringer. He took over the Wyre Forest nest box scheme from Dave Fulton in the spring of 2002 to study population dynamics and survival rates of Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers.

The Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) is on the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Birds of Conservation Concern Amber list showing that it is of medium conservation concern. It also appears as a European SPEC (Species of European Conservation Concern) category 2. This species was lost over 20% of its range between 1968-72 and 1988-91 possibly due to severe famine in its wintering area in the Sahel area in Africa, although numbers started to recover in England in the 1990s. The Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) is also amber listed and the BTO's Breeding Bird Surveys show that its breeding population has declined between 25% and 50% over the last 25 years.

This study is part of the British Trust for Ornithology's RAS (Ringed Adults for Survival) scheme. It was set up to monitor the Pied Flycatcher (see Photo 1) and the Redstart (see Photo 2), both of which are known to have declined quite considerably in the Wyre Forest over the last 50 years. The study aims to discover more about survival, migration, movement between sites, longevity, post natal dispersion and site fidelity and fieldwork is undertaken from early May to late June each year.

Before the author took over the monitoring work in 2002, Dave Fulton and his colleague had for some years been managing bird boxes in Chamberline Wood, Park End (Frank Chapman Centre grounds) and Knowles Coppice, although the scheme in Chamberline Wood was discontinued in 1998.

During 2001 monitoring of nest boxes showed four active Pied Flycatcher nests in the Frank Chapman Centre woodland and three in Knowles Coppice, with one Redstart nest at each site. In an attempt to bolster the population



Pied Flycatcher male

Andy Spencer

of both these species permission was obtained from the landowners (the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell and Worcestershire Wildlife Trust respectively) to extend the scheme by putting up more boxes in these two areas and to extend the boundaries, linking up all the natural corridors between the study sites.

In 2002 80 boxes were in place in Knowles Coppice and 70 in the Frank Chapman Centre woodland in Rock Coppice. An additional 90 boxes were erected in New Parks in 2003 with permission from the Forestry Commission and in 2004 the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust gave permission for their 40 boxes already in situ at the Betts Reserve to be taken into the scheme. In 2005 90 boxes were put in Town Coppice with permission from English Nature and a further 55 were put into the woodland at Bell Coppice with permission from the landowner Mr. James Tibbetts. In 2006 six boxes were erected in Chamberline Wood but as they were not used during the following three years so they were removed in 2009. See Chart 1.

Some boxes are lost each year through natural deterioration, theft or vandalism and an ongoing system is in place for repairing and replacing where necessary to ensure that there continues to be around 400 bird boxes in the six sites. All boxes are handmade to a high specification.

Results

Year	No. of sites	No. of boxes	Redstart broods	Pied Flycatcher broods
2001	2	150	1	7
2002	2	150	1	16
2003	3	240	1	17
2004	4	280	1	18
2005	6	425	1	23
2006	7	431	3	20
2007	7	431	3	19
2008	7	431	5	12
2009	6	431	3	4

Chart 1. Results of the nest box ringing scheme results 2001 to 2009 Wyre Forest, Andy Spencer

Pied Flycatcher

Chart 1 shows that Pied Flycatcher broods are going down in numbers, whereas the Redstart brood numbers have shown an increase in recent years. 2008 was the first time that Pied Flycatchers had not bred in the Frank Chapman Centre woodland since the study began, and sadly this was repeated in 2009. The Betts Reserve



Redstart male

Neville Wilde

had no Pied Flycatchers either in 2009. These figures do not include the broods that were predated, or second clutch broods outside the study area.

Results show that for Pied Flycatchers –

- adults and juveniles move between Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire and the Wyre Forest to breed;
- many adult and juveniles return to the same box to breed;
- some males are bigamous;
- the second beta clutches are smaller;
- the forehead patches on the males change with age (see Photo 3);
- the second year juveniles can breed at the same site at which they were hatched.

The worrying trend is that the numbers of Pied Flycatchers seem to be declining in the Wyre Forest, although they are apparently increasing in their strongholds in the Shropshire and Welsh valleys. The reason is not clear, but may be due to increased disturbance or problems in their wintering grounds or during their migration.

The study to see if the white forehead patches change with age has been interesting and yes, they do! (see Photo 3)



Pied Flycatchers showing forehead patch

Andy Spencer

Redstarts

These have shown an increase in recent years which is a good sign. It is thought that the number of Redstarts using natural tree crevices in the study areas is low as their presence would be obvious during inspection of the boxes.

All adults of the two target species are trapped where possible, to check for leg rings and to record biometrics, including age, wing length and weight. Colour ringing began in 2005 and this minimized the need for recapture at the nest box. Records are made using binoculars instead, thus limiting the disturbance to the birds.

Of the other bird species that use the nest boxes, Blue Tits and Great Tits are by far the most numerous with approximately 60% occupancy over the 431 boxes in the last three years. These had a fledging success of 90%. The Wyre Forest study shows that Blue Tits have good fledging success even in cold wet springs. Other species that use the nest boxes are Nuthatches (six to eight nests a year), Marsh Tits (between one and two a year), and occasionally Treecreeper.

Other bird species recorded during the study are Tawny Owl, Buzzard, Blackbird, Robin, Song Thrush, Jackdaw, Tree Pipit, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff. These appear to be present in good numbers, but Lesser Whitethroat and Wood Warbler are becoming increasingly rare. In 2009 only one singing male Lesser Whitethroat and three male Wood Warblers were recorded across the six sites!

It is hoped that the scheme will continue to operate in the future and that it can be used to educate others about bird behaviour and the need for conservation. The "Rent a Nest Box Scheme" organised by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust operates in Knowles Mill and sponsors visit in May each year. This provides an opportunity to explain the bird monitoring work and to show the public that their nest boxes make a difference.

A special thank you is extended to all those people who have enabled this work to take place over the last nine years, providing access to sites and help with the fieldwork. More volunteers are, however, still needed to help with the inspection of nest boxes!

References

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