

Scottish Raptor

Bringing you the latest news from the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme

Season's greetings!

I am recently back from a family holiday to India – and Scotland feels decidedly chilly compared to the 30 degrees I was experiencing in Kolkata just a short time ago. It was my first trip to India so was delighted to see so many new-to-me raptors while visiting three of the national parks in Assam, including lots of Eagles and India's smallest raptor the Collared Falconet.

In this issue we appeal to those of you who were out in the field during 2023 for any information about atypical raptor observations which may be linked to Avian Flu. These will help inform an analysis of the 2023 breeding season data assessing the effect of flu on raptors. We also share with you the recommendations from the external evaluation of the SRMS that took place earlier this year and invite you to take part in some "ideas sharing" groups that the SRMS will be setting up to develop aspects of the SRMS work.



A huge thank you for all your support for the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme in 2023 and I look forward to working closely with many of you again in 2024.

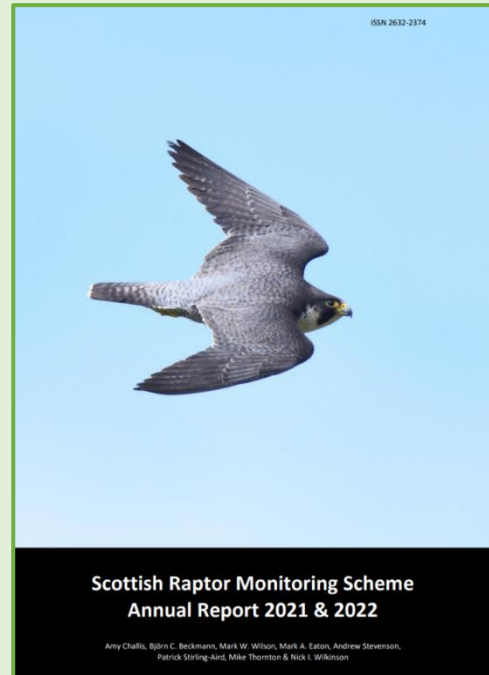
Amy Challis (Scottish Raptor Monitoring Coordinator)

SRMS Annual report

Our SRMS annual report, which reports on both the 2021 and 2022 breeding seasons, is now complete and printed and will be published soon.

A huge thank you to all our data contributors who worked hard to meet our 31st October deadline for getting data into the SRMS from the 2023 breeding season. We are cleaning these records as usual, ready for our next SRMS Annual Report.

If you still have data from the 2023 breeding season to send in, please continue to do so. Data submitted after 31st October will unfortunately miss out on inclusion in our 2023 annual report but will still enter the SRMS data holdings to be used to inform raptor conservation and future trends updates.



Raptors and Avian Influenza - analysis of 2023 SRMS data – your help sought!

In our December 2022 issue of Scottish Raptor, we appealed for information to help inform an analysis of SRMS data from the 2022 breeding season to assess effects of bird flu on raptors. The analysis aimed to evaluate quantitatively whether occupancy and breeding success in 2022 showed any unexpected patterns (relative to the recent trends published using data up to 2018), and to consider qualitatively any additional evidence reported by SRMS contributors in relation to AI. Many thanks to all who provided such information. The information received fed into the final report (<https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1331-analysis-scottish-raptor-monitoring-scheme-data-improve>).

NatureScot have asked for a repeat of the analyses in the New Year based on data submissions to the SRMS from the 2023 breeding season. Once more, we would really appreciate you contacting us to highlight supporting evidence from your own monitoring during the 2023 breeding season.

We are interested in hearing about any atypical observations you have made which may be linked to Avian Flu. Examples might include:

- Dead adults close to the nest
- Late loss of large young
- Atypically low occupancy at the start of the breeding season
- Occupancy of territories by unusually young / immature birds
- Loss of pairs/active nests during the breeding season

It is important that we can link your observations to any specific Nest Sites for which we have already received your monitoring data for 2023. When you make your response, we would be grateful therefore if you can provide a:

- SRMS Home Range code (if you have inputted via SRMS Online)
- Site name
- Site code (if it has one)
- Grid ref

Please email any remarks to Amy Challis (smc@bto.org) **by 15th January** so that they can be taken on board in the evaluation work. Please include “AI analysis” in the subject line of your e-mail if possible, as that will help with processing emails rapidly as they come in. If you have already supplied specific information about Avian Influenza to the SRMS or direct to NatureScot, there is no need to send this again unless you have additional information to add.

Update on the independent review of the SRMS

In our last issue we mentioned a review of the SRMS, commissioned by NatureScot. This has now concluded with the report making a number of recommendations which SRMG are now working to address.

The report emphasised the importance of the SRMS periodically reviewing its objectives in order to remain relevant. SRMG have been working on reviewing and refining our objectives. We now have an overarching mission and 6 objectives, which are set out below.

Our mission:

Working in partnership to support a network of engaged and dedicated individuals and organisations to robustly monitor the health of our raptor populations and deliver quality assured data and information to make a positive impact for raptors in Scotland.

Objective 1 – Co-operation: To maintain and increase partnership working between the various bodies responsible for collecting, collating and analysing information on Scottish raptors.

Objective 2 – Promotion: To promote raptor monitoring in Scotland, including developing the ‘Raptor Patch’ initiative to encourage new volunteers into raptor monitoring, increasing awareness of the SRMS and volunteer opportunities afforded through the SRSB and other Scheme partners, and increasing the visibility of data and information available from the Scheme.

Objective 3 – Survey and monitoring: To collect, through appropriate survey design, robust data on breeding raptors, owls and raven within Scotland and to improve geographical coverage strategically to deliver SRMS trends reporting and other key needs of SRMS partners.

Objective 4 – Data analysis and reporting: To deliver high and compatible standards for the collation, curation, auditing, analysis and reporting of data annually.

Objective 5 – Data sharing and dissemination: To ensure ongoing availability of SRMS data in line with the SRMS Data Sharing & Use Policy and to seek to enhance the variety of information products for a range of end users to support raptor conservation.

Objective 6 – Sustainability: To ensure the future benefits of SRMS by securing resources to implement and develop its work programme.

These objectives will be used to define the SRMS work plan, which will be discussed and agreed by SRMG at our next meeting in January.

The report also identified a number of priority actions whose delivery would benefit from being developed collaboratively by all partners to increase the impact of the Scheme in future.

- *Extend monitoring coverage to support robust trends production.*
- *Roll out the Raptor Patch initiative fully.*
- *Expand the use of SRMS Online.*

To help increase the collaborative approach, we are looking to organise a first meeting of interested parties in January (see below) and hope you might be interested in getting involved.

The report also highlighted the need to pursue a fundraising strategy for the SRMS to help ensure its longevity. The SRMG have responded by setting up a funding sub-group who will be having their first meeting in January.

Amy - Oot and about

In August I was invited to share experience from running the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme at a meeting in Bangor attended by representatives from BTO, Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales are interested in learning from the Scottish experience to set up their own Welsh raptor monitoring Scheme.

Over the Autumn I have attended several of the SRSG branch meetings, where it is always great to hear firsthand accounts of how the field season has gone from those of you who do regular fieldwork.

Last month I was invited to present on the work of the SRMS to the North of Scotland Scottish Wildlife Trust Group.

Please come and share your views at one of our “ideas sharing” groups

One of the recommendations from the independent review of the SRMS that all partners support is trying to give more opportunities for more SRMS contributors to help guide the work that the Scheme is doing, perhaps through small discussion groups on particular bits of Scheme work. We are planning on holding an initial meeting in mid-January to early-February as a starting point, to talk about the sorts of work areas small groups might like to help us develop. The idea is that these groups will give data contributors and other stakeholders in the SRMS the opportunity to put forward their ideas and help to shape different aspects of Scheme work.

Topics may include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- **Raptor Patch** – the Scheme’s initiative to improve monitoring of under-recorded raptors which we plan to launch fully in 2025.
- **Improving monitoring coverage** to support trends production - to build on the trends work that the SRMS published in November 2022.
- **SRMS Online** – the Scheme’s online data entry system which is our preferred way of receiving data submissions.

This first meeting will be a chance for individuals to contribute on a broad range of topics and decide whether they may wish to become a regular member of one or more “ideas sharing” groups to help develop these work areas in future.

Please get in touch with Amy and let her know if you are interested in being involved.

At this stage, we have not committed to the form that this initial meeting will take or settled on specific dates, as this will be guided by those of you who indicate you would like to take part. When contacting Amy, please express your preference for weekend or evening and virtual or face-to-face.

Changes in SRMG

The Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group (SRMG) comprises representatives from all eight SRMS partner organisations and meets several times a year to oversee the work of the SRMS.

Recently Wendy Mattingley, a long-serving representative has stepped down from her role on the Group and SRMG wishes to recognise the valuable contribution that Wendy has made over the lifetime of the Scheme.

Wendy has represented SRSG on the Group since its inception in 2002. Wendy's quiet and reflective contributions in meetings have been valued by her fellow members of the SRMG. Her knowledge and insight acquired during her long-term studies of Hen Harrier, Merlin and Raven, in particular, have been invaluable when these species were on the agenda. Wendy's views on particular issues were invariably informed from an active fieldworker's perspective. She was able to represent the view from the grassroots membership having been a Chair of the Tayside & Fife branch, (formally the Tayside Branch), for many years. Wendy was the winner of the 2017 Donald and Jeff Watson Raptor Award, an award devised by the Scottish Raptor Study Group specifically to recognise 'A significant long-term amateur contribution to the study of raptors in Scotland.'



In April this year Björn Beckmann joined SRMG. Björn has joined BTO as a Research Ecologist and is gradually taking over from Mark Wilson as the main BTO scientific support for the SRMS, taking a lead on the SRMS data cleaning each year and developing the SRMS work on trends. Mark is now Acting Head of Science for BTO Scotland, and will still have a supporting role going forward. Thank you to Mark for all his work on the SRMS over the last nine years.

Björn has a life-long interest in birds of prey and is delighted to be joining the important work of the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme to support conservation of raptor populations. Björn is a member of the Lothian & Borders Raptor Study Group, helping with Peregrine, Goshawk, Sparrowhawk, Osprey, Red Kite and Barn Owl nest monitoring as a climber.

Before joining BTO, Björn worked at the Biological Records Centre within the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology on national recording scheme data analysis,

contributing to a study of farmland birds (and setting up a Kestrel nest box camera in the office grounds, distracting many staff from working for two months every year).

Previously, Björn worked in Austria, carrying out bird and plant surveys for ecological consultancies and BirdLife Austria, and he was the ringer and climber for a White-tailed Eagle conservation project for many years, and for a Honey Buzzard tracking study. Prior to that Björn worked in a nature reserve in Germany on a Great Bustard conservation project and a Little Owl reintroduction.



Become an Owl Pellet Collector!

We are sharing the following appeal from the Mammal Society and the Barn Owl Trust.



Three young Barn Owls (Zul Bhatia).

Searching for Shrews is a joint project by the Mammal Society and the Barn Owl Trust based on the collection and examination of Barn Owl pellets in order to detect an invasive species - the Greater White Toothed Shrew. This relatively large and boisterous shrew has only just arrived in Britain and is likely to negatively impact our native fauna so monitoring its distribution is really important. We may also discover new information about Barn Owls and their other prey!

We're inviting you to regularly collect pellets, mainly during autumn and winter. How far you go and how often you collect them is entirely up to you. This page describes how to avoid disturbing the owls and what to do with the pellets before you send them to the Mammal Society. Once received, your pellets will be analysed by specially trained citizen science volunteers.

Pellet identification

Barn Owl pellets are about the size of your thumb (usually 3-7 cm long), dark grey or black, cylindrical and with rounded ends. Please visit this [webpage](#) to learn more about identifying Barn Owl pellets.

Collecting pellets and minimising disturbance

Nesting Barn Owls are legally protected against disturbance whilst at or near the nest. Their dependent young are also protected. Although most breeding attempts are started after March 1st and finished by August 31st, nesting has been recorded in every month of the year. Collecting Barn Owl pellets must always be done carefully.

- Only collect pellets that are on the floor. As long as you avoid elevated ledges or cavities you are most unlikely to disturb nesting owls.
- If you are collecting pellets from the floor of a busy building - somewhere that is frequently entered by people or vehicles - you can collect them at any time of year.
- If the building is seldom visited by anyone (where birds are not used to human activity), only go there between September 1st and January 31st and quietly collect pellets from the floor when the weather is not too wet or windy. Avoid all prolonged extreme weather events.
- If the site is a nestbox, a tree cavity, or any other small outdoor cavity, only approach the cavity between 1st September and 31st January. First check there are no live birds or other animals inside. If there are, leave well alone. If the cavity is empty and it is safe to do so, any pellets can be collected.
- If you are clearing out a nestbox that has become too full you can collect pellets while doing the job. Only clear out nestboxes between September and February and do the job in the

evening when the weather is not too rainy or windy. First check that the birds are not nesting and that any owls present are unlikely to be dependant young.

- If you have a licence to disturb nesting Barn Owls, then you may collect pellets while visiting nest sites under licence - as long as doing so does not prolong any disturbance.
- If you discover a Barn Owl site that could contain a nest between 1st March and 31st August and do not have a licence to disturb Barn Owls, then please leave quietly. You can return in Sept-Feb and please follow the guidelines above.
- Health and Safety – old buildings, old floors, and trees can be dangerous and falls are commonplace. Observe all relevant legislation (i.e. Risk Assessment and Working at Height). Avoid working alone and/or at least make sure someone knows where you are and when to expect you back. Know the guidance, know your limitations, and work within them.

How many pellets and how often

You can collect and send in any number of pellets from any number of visits to any number of sites anywhere in the UK. However, we are hoping that most volunteers will send in at least 50 pellets from each site they visit, twice a year. Barn Owl pellets are the most useful because none of the bone has been digested. Please don't send in pellets from other species.

Collection and storage

Pellets are usually collected in carrier bags. If the pellets are dry, simply tie a knot to seal the bag and post within 2 days. If they are wet, or you intend to keep the pellets longer than 2 days please – spread them out on newspaper or cardboard. Once completely dry, put them in a knotted carrier or zip bag and keep in a freezer until you are ready to post them.

Labelling and posting

Before you seal up the bag, put a label in that clearly states the date the pellets were collected, the place they were collected from (address, postcode, OS grid reference, or what3words), your name & email address or phone number. We don't need know the exact location of the Barn Owl site, although we may contact you to find out if we detect Greater White Toothed Shrew in your sample!

If you collect less than 50 pellets on your first visit and intend to get more, please put the labelled bag in a freezer. Add new pellets in a separate bag, with a separate label. Once you have at least 50 pellets in total, put the bag(s) of pellets in a cardboard box and post them to:

Freepost - MAMMALSOC

Thank you reading about Searching for Shrews!

Data Retention – all the information you provide will be retained by the Mammal Society according to its Data Policy and by the Barn Owl Trust according to its Data Policy, not provided to any third party, nor used for any other purpose.

<https://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/sitemap/data-protection-policy/>



Updates to the SRMS Data Sharing & Use Policy

In October the SRMS Data Sharing & Use Policy was updated to remove JNCC from the Policy now that they are no longer a partner. The gatekeeper was updated for SOC and some wording relating to how data are to be shared with National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) was added. The Policy can be found on the SRMS website: <https://raptormonitoring.org/srms-data/datasharing-use-policy>.

Northern England Raptor Forum Annual Review

Readers might be interested to learn that the Northern England Raptor Forum has recently published its annual review. This is the first time that NERF have made the full review available via their website. The report can be accessed via <https://raptorforum.files.wordpress.com/2023/11/annual-review-2022.pdf>. NERF also hold an annual conference each year. The next one will be 16th November 2024 in Calderdale.

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