

Black Redstarts breeding in Britain in 1964-68

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This is the first of what is intended to be a series of quinquennial reports, following the previous summary covering the years 1950-63 (Fitter 1965). During 1964-68 the observed breeding and territory-holding population of Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros* in Britain (actually all in England) continued to fluctuate, as it has done ever since the first big influx in 1942 and 1943 (see fig. 1 and table 1). There have altogether been four peaks, in 1942 (49 territories held), 1948 (63), 1958 (49) and now 1964 with a record 69. The corresponding lows have been in 1946 (24), 1955 (23), 1962 (17) and now 1968 with 24.

The problem is whether these fluctuations are real or merely the result of defective observation. Even now, with a vastly increased network of active observers compared with a generation ago, it is clear that a proportion, and probably a large proportion, of nesting pairs go unrecorded. This is due mainly to their preferred nesting habitat—urban and industrial areas not greatly frequented by birdwatchers. Meadows (1965) demonstrated this nicely when in 1964 he surveyed the industrial lower reaches of the River Lea, on the borders of Essex and Middlesex, and found no fewer than four unsuspected breeding pairs and six other males holding territories. The sudden appearance of Staffordshire in the record in 1964 was also due to the fact that nobody had hitherto bothered to watch birds in the environs of the power station at Bilston. It is significant that during this five-year period Black Redstarts have held territories at seven power stations and a gasworks, but how many more must have been overlooked in these apparently unpromising venues for a field meeting? See Meadows (1970) for further discussion of the problem.

The feeling that not all the observed breeding pairs or territory-holding males are recorded is strengthened by comparing the local bird reports which cover overlapping areas (for example, parts of London and Merseyside or, on a more local level, of Suffolk and Sussex). All too often the report covering the smaller area includes records omitted from what purports to be the comprehensive county report.

On the whole, it seems probable that the fluctuations are genuine, for there appears to be no reason why the admitted imperfections of observation and recording should apparently be cyclical. Moreover, it is probable that most migratory breeding passerine populations fluctuate in a similar way: everyone can remember years in which Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla*, Whitethroats *S. communis* and other warblers are notably common or scarce. Ever since regular nesting began in 1923, the pattern of the various small breeding populations of Black Redstarts in Britain has been the occupation of a site for a period (frequently very short) and then its abandonment, as often as not never to be reoccupied. Assuming that the pairs in question have moved elsewhere, and not come to grief, it may well take some time for an ornithologist to come across them again, and many must breed in such sites for a season or two completely unobserved.

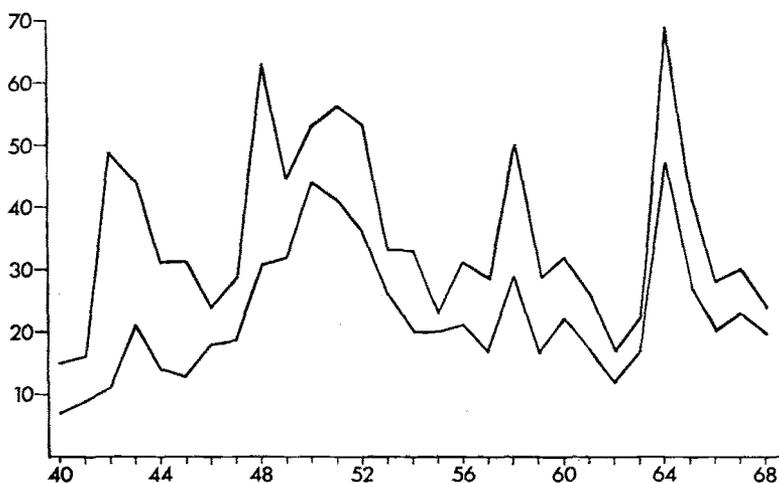


Fig. 1. Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochrurus* in Britain in the breeding season from 1940 to 1968 (years along horizontal axis). The lower line shows the numbers of pairs, whether proved to have bred or not (first two columns in table 1 combined), and the upper the totals of territory-holding males (last column in table 1)

Table 1. Numbers of breeding pairs of Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros*, and of singing males holding territories, in Britain from 1940 to 1968

The first two columns combined (total pairs recorded) and the last column (territory-holding males) are shown graphically in fig. 1

Year	Pairs proved to have bred	Pairs not proved to have bred	Territory-holding males not known to have paired	Total territory-holding males
1940	7	—	8	15
1941	9	—	7	16
1942	8	3	38	49
1943	17	4	23	44
1944	14	—	17	31
1945	10	3	18	31
1946	13	5	6	24
1947	15	4	10	29
1948	26	5	32	63
1949	31	1	13	45
1950	40	4	9	53
1951	35	6	15	56
1952	32	4	17	53
1953	25	1	7	33
1954	17	3	13	33
1955	14	6	3	23
1956	20	1	10	31
1957	14	3	12	29
1958	27	1	21	49
1959	16	1	12	29
1960	20	2	10	32
1961	15	2	9	26
1962	12	—	5	17
1963	14	3	6	23
1964	34	13	22	69
1965	22	5	14	41
1966	17	3	8	28
1967	18	5	7	30
1968	16	4	4	24

SUMMARY OF BREEDING RECORDS IN 1964-68

1964 A return to the high levels achieved in and after 1948, with 34 breeding pairs (the greatest number since 1952) and a grand total of no fewer than 69 territories held, the highest ever recorded. Breeding was proved in nine counties: Berkshire (Windsor), Essex (Stratford), Kent (Dungeness, the Dover-Folkestone area, St Margaret's Bay), Middlesex (City of London, Lea Valley, Shepherds Bush), Norfolk (Great Yarmouth), Staffordshire (Bilston), Suffolk (Dunwich, Ipswich, Lowestoft, Sizewell), Surrey (Croydon, Southwark) and Sussex (Eastbourne, Worthing). Elsewhere there were pairs or singing males at Bedford; Canning Town and Walthamstow, Essex; Kingsgate, Maidstone, Newington and Ramsgate, Kent; Bloomsbury and Brent-

ford, Middlesex; Peterborough, Northamptonshire; Nottingham; Wellington, Shropshire; Hastings and St Leonards, Sussex; and Birmingham, Warwickshire. Thus, apart from the outlying population in London, the great majority of breeding pairs continued to inhabit the coastal strip from Great Yarmouth to Beachy Head.

1965 A much less good year, with little more than half the number of known territories, although breeding was still recorded in seven counties: Buckinghamshire (High Wycombe), Dorset (Portland), Essex (Rainham), Kent (Dover, Dungeness, Littlebrook power station, St Margaret's Bay), Middlesex (City of London, Lea Valley, Paddington, Poplar), Suffolk (Framlingham, Sizewell) and Surrey (Croydon). Elsewhere territories were held only at Windsor, Berkshire; Portsmouth, Hampshire (for the first time definitely in that county since 1945); Ramsgate and St Margaret's Bay, Kent; Cromer, Norfolk; Lowestoft, Suffolk; Beachy Head and Hastings, Sussex; and Birmingham, Warwickshire. Well-known sites apparently lacking in Black Redstarts in that year included Great Yarmouth and Eastbourne.

1966 The population fell lower still, to the level of 1961-63. Breeding was recorded in only six counties: Kent (Dover, Dungeness, Littlebrook), Middlesex (City of London, Poplar, Shepherds Bush, Tottenham), Norfolk (Great Yarmouth), Staffordshire (Bilston), Suffolk (Lowestoft, Sizewell) and Surrey (Croydon). Elsewhere territories were held at Dagenham and Stratford, Essex; Woolwich Arsenal, Kent; Bloomsbury, Middlesex; and Kingston-upon-Thames and Southwark, Surrey. For the first time almost since 1940, none was reported from Sussex, not even a singing male at Hastings.

1967 This year saw a slight recovery. Pairs were proved to have bred in nine counties again: Essex (Becontree Heath, Lea Valley), Kent (Belvedere, Dungeness, Littlebrook), Middlesex (Lea Valley), Norfolk (Great Yarmouth), Northampton, Staffordshire (Bilston), Suffolk (Lowestoft, Sizewell), Surrey (Croydon) and Warwickshire (Birmingham). Other territories were held at Blackwall Point and Dover, Kent; the City of London and Shepherds Bush, Middlesex; Old Hunstanton, Norfolk; and Ipswich, Suffolk. Once again, unaccountably, no occupied territories were recorded in Sussex.

1968 Numbers reverted to below the level of 1966, with breeding definitely established in only seven counties: Essex (Lea Valley), Hertfordshire (Welwyn), Kent (Elmers End), Middlesex (City of London, Marylebone, Park Royal, Tottenham), Norfolk (Great Yarmouth), Suffolk (Lowestoft, Sizewell) and Warwickshire (Birmingham). There were also singing males or pairs not proved to have bred at Littlebrook, Kent; Bloomsbury, Middlesex; Ipswich, Suffolk; Beddington, Surrey; and on the east Sussex cliffs. The astonishing

feature of 1968 was the collapse of the apparently well-established colonies at Dover and Dungeness, Kent, so that the only pair proved to have bred in the whole of the three counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, normally one of the main strongholds, was at a new site at Elmers End, Kent.

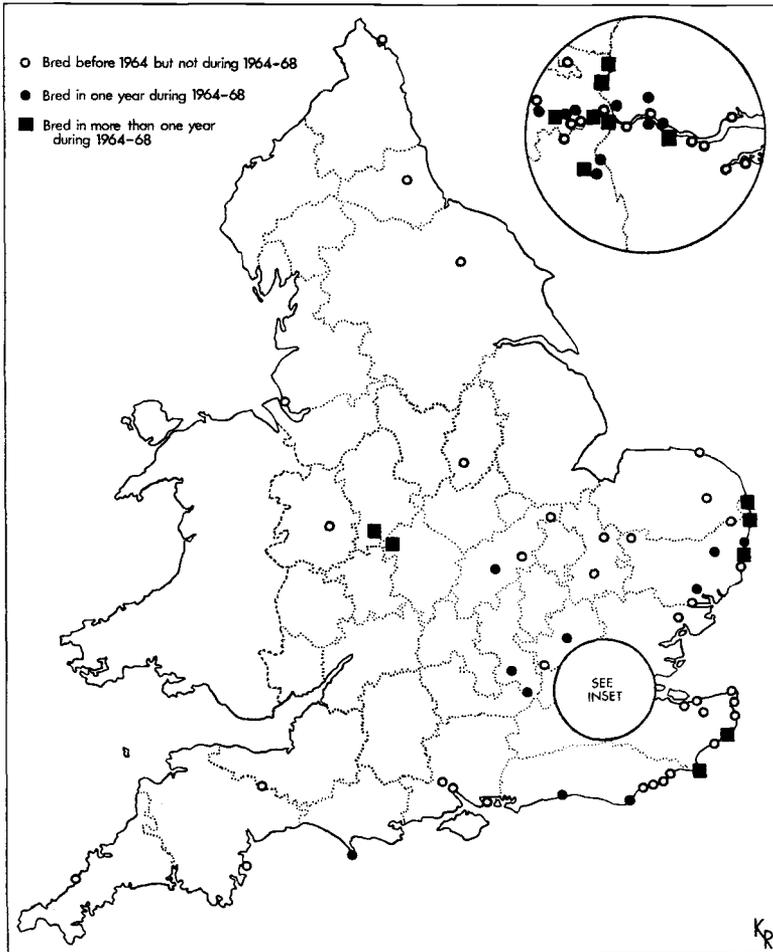


Fig. 2. Proved breeding localities of Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ocbriuos* in Britain up to and including 1968. Note that the centres are now in the London area (see inset), south-east England, East Anglia and the Midlands. Breeding has never been proved in Wales or Scotland, and the most recent records in the west and north were Cornwall (1939), Devon (1949), Shropshire (1963), Lancashire (1950), Yorkshire (1951), Northumberland (1962) and Durham (1845). Apart from the last all the cases of proved breeding are since 1923

ADDITIONAL RECORDS FOR 1949-63

The two 1949 records were omitted in error from the county summaries and fig. 1 in Fitter (1965), although included in Fitter (1950):

- 1949 Single pairs bred at Torquay, Devon; and in the vicinity of Lakenheath, Suffolk.
 1950 Single pairs bred at Liverpool docks, Lancashire; and at Margate, Kent.
 1951 One pair bred at Margate, Kent.
 1958 One pair bred at Wrotham Park, Bentley Heath, Hertfordshire.
 1962 One pair bred on Holy Island, Northumberland.
 1963 Additional singing males at Bow Creek Wharf and Tottenham gasworks, Middlesex; and Aldeburgh, Suffolk.

SUMMARY OF RECORDS BY COUNTIES

Fig. 2 shows the proved breeding localities of Black Redstarts in Britain from the first in 1845 up to and including 1968, distinguishing between those where nesting was established in 1964-68 and those where it had not been known since 1963. Though there have been odd breeding season records in Scotland and Wales, all the proved cases of nesting have actually been in England. Nevertheless, there are still a number of English counties which are not known ever to have held even a singing male, these being Cheshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Huntingdonshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Rutland, Westmorland and Wiltshire; nor has a singing male ever been reliably recorded on the Isle of Wight, despite rumours to the contrary. In the following list, as before, late summer records are given where these suggest the possibility of birds having summered, while † indicates no breeding record before 1964:

†**Bedfordshire** For the second year running a pair was present in Luton in 1964 without proof of breeding. Also in 1964, a singing male in Bedford from 16th June to 20th July.

†**Berkshire** A pair bred at Windsor Castle in 1964 (first county breeding record) and a singing male returned briefly in 1965.

†**Buckinghamshire** A pair bred at High Wycombe in 1965 (first county breeding record). Also in 1965, a male at Marlow on 22nd May.

Cambridgeshire No breeding record since 1958.

Cornwall No breeding or breeding season record since 1939.

†**Derbyshire** A male at Old Brampton from 27th August to 1st October 1964.

Devon No breeding record since 1949. A male at Stokenham on 6th and 9th August 1968.

†**Dorset** A pair bred successfully at Portland in 1965 (first county breeding record). One present at another locality on the coast on 15th June 1967.

Durham No breeding record since 1845 and no breeding season record since 1957.

Essex Bred in the lower Lea Valley in most years. Elsewhere, one was at Harwich from 24th to 31st August 1964 (perhaps a migrant), a pair bred on an industrial estate at Rainham in 1965 but the eggs were taken, a male was seen at Dagenham Docks from May to 1st July 1966, a pair bred at Becontree Heath in 1967, and a female was seen at Walton-on-the-Naze on 18th June 1968.

†**Gloucestershire** An adult male at Up Hatherley on 29th June 1965.

Hampshire Three pairs may have bred at Portsmouth in 1965, when two singing males were also present. The failure to colonise the Portsmouth and Southampton region remains one of the more puzzling features.

†**Herefordshire** No breeding season record since 1958.

Hertfordshire One pair bred near Welwyn in 1968. The nesting at Wrotham Park in 1958 (see ADDITIONAL RECORDS) was the first county breeding record.

Kent Continued to be a main stronghold, with pairs breeding in most years at Dungeness power station and in the Dover area, and at times at Belvedere, Elmers End and Littlebrook power station. Territory-holding pairs were widely distributed along the coast and in the London suburban fringe. In 1968, in striking contrast to the previous 25 years, no pairs were reported even holding territories along the east Kent coast.

Lancashire No breeding season record since 1950, when a pair bred at Liverpool docks (see ADDITIONAL RECORDS).

†**Lincolnshire** One in Lincoln on 26th August 1964.

Middlesex Another main stronghold for more than 40 years, with more breeding during 1964-68 in the lower Lea Valley than in the traditional headquarters in the City of London, which has now been made almost uninhabitable for Black Redstarts by the rebuilding of the bombed areas. During the five years pairs also bred at Marylebone, Park Royal and Shepherds Bush, and singing males were scattered as far afield as Brentford. Many must still be overlooked in the centre and still more in the suburbs.

Norfolk Pairs bred at Great Yarmouth in most years, and Cromer usually held at least a singing male. There was a singing male at Old Hunstanton in 1967 and one, perhaps a migrant, was seen between there and Holme on 26th August 1966.

Northamptonshire A singing male was seen in Peterborough in 1964, and a pair bred in Northampton in 1967.

Northumberland A pair found nesting on Holy Island in 1962 by Dr A. M. G. Campbell (*in litt.*) was the first breeding record north of the Tees since 1845 (see ADDITIONAL RECORDS).

Nottinghamshire A pair at Nottingham in 1964 was not proved to breed.

†**Oxfordshire** No breeding season record since an 'almost certain' one in 1958.

Shropshire No breeding record since 1963. A singing male at Wellington in 1964.

†**Somerset** A male singing at Brean Down on 16th May 1964 may still have been on migration, but in 1967 a female was seen there from 5th August (very early for a migrant) until 22nd October. Single birds were also noted at Sutton Bingham on 26th August 1967 and at Nailsea on 16th August 1968.

†**Staffordshire** Bred at Bilston power station in 1964 (first county breeding record), 1966 and 1967; perhaps also in former years.

Suffolk Continued to hold more breeding pairs than either Norfolk or coastal Essex, usually at Lowestoft and Sizewell power station, sometimes also at Ipswich. In 1964 a pair bred at Dunwich, and in 1965 a pair bred at Framlingham Castle.

Surrey Croydon and its power station continued to be the headquarters of breeding Black Redstarts in the county, with territories also held from time to time at Kingston-upon-Thames and Southwark.

Sussex The original home of continuous nesting by Black Redstarts in Britain almost faded out during this quinquennium, breeding being proved only at Eastbourne and Worthing in 1964, with a probability on the east Sussex cliffs in 1968. No singing males were reported away from those areas, except at Hastings and St Leonards. Why are there never any at Brighton or Hove?

Warwickshire Pairs either bred or held territory in Birmingham in four out of the five years.

†**Wiltshire** A male on Easton Down on 30th June 1966.

†**Worcestershire** No breeding season record since 1961 and the only likely breeding record in the county was no more than a probability in 1954. An immature at Tarlebigge on 26th July 1968.

Yorkshire No breeding record since 1951; no breeding season record since 1961.

†**WALES** No breeding season record since one at Cardiff in 1948.

†**SCOTLAND** No breeding season record since one in Stirlingshire in 1955.

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