

Rooks and Rookery Survey – spring 2019.

Love them or not, Rooks are colourful characters and not just another black corvid! In a good light, they sport a fine glossy purplish sheen on their plumage and wear diagnostic shaggy, plus-four, baggy trousers. Their pale bills probe and aerate the land as they search for earthworms, invertebrate larvae and beetles but, being omnivorous, they also take some seeds and a vast variety of other foods to balance their diet.

Above all, it is their behaviour that can be fascinating. It is usual for them to be monogamous, though there are always exceptions; amid a breeding flock one can generally pick out the paired couples. They are highly sociable birds and gregarious in their behaviour; this is best observed at the beginning of the breeding season. As in many wildlife (and human) communities, a variety of behavioural features are displayed: body posturing and bowing, tail fanning – all giving messages. Mutual support and allopreening by bonded couples is readily observed; also competition with others – at Rookeries this can sometimes lead to the theft of nesting material and twig wars. A raucous cacophony of expressive vocals can reveal squabbling and bickering; there are sometimes disputes as they form a hierarchy creating some dominant birds and consequently the odd outcast.

As the winter weather gives way to spring they act as natural barometers, returning to their nesting sites with thoughts of the breeding season. They prefer to nest colonially, and their stick nests typically built in the crowns of several adjacent trees are often re-used year after year. February is when Rooks begin to check out their nest sites but this is weather dependant. They generally choose clumps of trees and copses near to open landscape. Groves of trees in towns or villages are only usually chosen if there is easy access to open fields and the surrounding countryside. March to April is when nests are refurbished or replaced; soon after, the eggs are laid and incubating starts. Nest counts are more easily undertaken before leaf burst and best between: 15th- 30th April. (Only the female incubates and broods whilst the male does all the food gathering initially.) It is not always easy to distinguish the number of occupied nests; some old or abandoned nests can pose difficulties for the surveyor if only able to count from below rather than viewing with binoculars from a good vantage point where one can see the sitting females.

[N.B Although you may often see Rooks flying around in a mixed flock along with Jackdaws, you can be assured that all the birds sitting on the stick nests will be Rooks; Jackdaws always nest in tree-holes, chimneys, rock crevices etc, never in the open nests of a Rookery!]

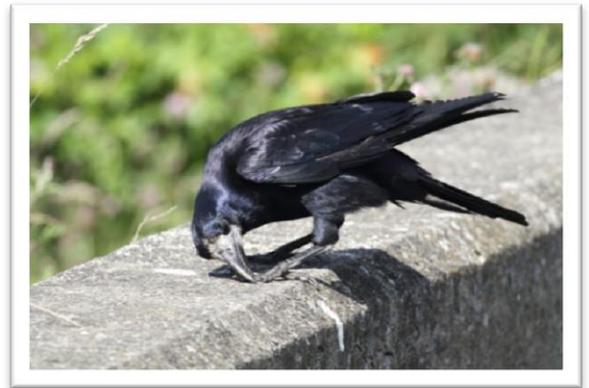


Photo by Kind Permission of Alan Jack

A national website of Rookeries has been established (www.rookeries.uk) and several NNBC members have participated over the last two years surveying a total of 14 sites in North Northumberland with a count total of 394 nests. The number of nests at each colony varied from 7 to 61. If you would like to volunteer (or resurvey rookeries visited last year) **please contact Rosemary Bell (coordinator)** via NNBC's own email address: ringouzel@northnorthumberlandbirdclub.co.uk It would be good to resurvey last year's colony counts and add further sites if possible please – are more people willing to volunteer?

Please submit information as follows:

- 1) Rookery Name.**
- 2) O.S. Map Reference.**
- 3) Date of count.**
- 4) Number of Occupied Nests in Colony.**
- 5) Tree species supporting nests if known.**

Please send any queries or completed data via NNBC address ringouzel@northnorthumberlandbirdclub.co.uk

With thanks for any offers!

Rosemary Bell