



The past and present status of the Wryneck in the British Isles

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The past and present status of the Wryneck in the British Isles

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INTRODUCTION

IT IS WELL RECOGNISED that the numbers of several bird species breeding in the British Isles have been becoming smaller in the last 30 years, the Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*) among them. In 1953, the B.T.O. agreed to aid an investigation of the status of the Wryneck in the British Isles, and this survey covers the years 1954 to 1958 inclusive. It was conducted on a county basis, except for Scotland, Ireland and part of Wales.

The past status has been gauged by a fairly comprehensive search of the literature in the Alexander Library of the Edward Grey Institute, Oxford, and in particular, of the county histories and reports. An attempt was made to consult all relevant references (these have not been quoted), but doubtless many have been overlooked. I shall be glad to have errors and omissions pointed out to me, especially if the latter are from unindexed general works. A serious difficulty in assessing the past status of a single species is that one has to rely almost entirely on such published data, and there are, inevitably, long intervals during which no county histories are published and little from which to judge when a change of status may have taken place. In the case of the Wryneck, it is unfortunate that there has been no county bird report for Kent until quite recently.

The survey of the Wryneck's present status was also conducted on a county basis. Observers were asked, privately or by circulars through their county societies, to record every Wryneck seen during any one year, and to make special efforts to find nest-sites and obtain breeding data.

It must be kept in mind when analysing data obtained in this way that such data have been obtained unevenly from both the country as a whole and from each county. The apparent distribution of a species to some extent reflects the distribution and attentiveness of observers, which vary from year to year; while some counties have been better organised than others for disseminating requests for information and for organising the response. This leads to two opposing biases. One is that a county may be credited with having numerous breeding Wrynecks on the basis of only three or four scattered individual reports; the other that a county may be credited with merely a small localised population because only one observer makes a report. This applies both to the past and to the present, but it is probable that the bigger error is in crediting a county with a widely distributed population when in fact the Wryneck breeds in

only a few localities. On the other hand it is possible that where the Wryneck is now considered to be uncommon it may only be more overlooked than previously; for it is certainly a species which, though not particularly shy and one easily detectable by ear, is both cryptically coloured and secretive by habit. In the Thames Valley in the Maidenhead-Cookham area between about 1930 and 1945 a single careful observer estimated the Wryneck population at about 30 pairs. This was two or three times the total numbers in the rest of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire combined both previously, during and after those years.

An important difficulty in assessing the status of the Wryneck arises directly from its secretive habits and the fact that it is more often heard than seen. In addition, and this is not always taken enough into consideration, on completing the clutch, both birds of the pair become silent. In my own experience and frequently in correspondence, breeding has been considered to have been interrupted and the birds to have departed because calling has ceased in mid-May. In fact this is a strong indication that breeding is proceeding successfully, and should encourage the observer to search for the nest-site, perhaps more easily found 2-3 weeks later when the parents are making their frequent journeys between the nest and the source of ants used as food for the young.

A further difficulty arises because individuals of a pair sometimes range widely, usually early in the season; but it is as well to remember not only that both sexes call perhaps equally often, but also that the individuals of a pair may be heard calling at points at least half a mile apart and can then mistakenly be reported as two singing males.

Isolated records in the breeding season also provide difficulties. For example, breeding has never been proved to take place in Scotland; yet in Inverness-shire in June 1951, a Wryneck was recorded singing, and again in 1952 at two different sites in late May and late June.

The analysis which follows must therefore be judged with all these shortcomings in mind. In estimating the status it has only been possible to be comparatively certain of general trends in each county, estimated over periods of 10-20 years.

The data obtained during 1954-58 have been analysed for each year. This has been done by dividing the records received into six categories: 'proved breeding' (B), 'probably breeding' (P), 'possibly breeding' (S), 'just possibly breeding' (T), 'migrants' (M), and birds of 'unknown status' (U). The division into these categories, except for the proved breeding pairs, has been on the following arbitrary basis:—

- March*—26 *April*, any records regarded as if migrants (M);
 27 *April*—14 *May*, single records taken as evidence of just possibly breeding (T), two as of possibly breeding (S), three as of probably breeding (P);
 15 *May*—31 *July*, single records as of possibly breeding (S), more than one record as of probably breeding (P).

- 1 August—20 August, single breeding records as of just possibly breeding (T), more than one as of possibly breeding (S).
 21 August onwards, any records regarded as if migrants (M).

Although arbitrary, these operative dates are based on the general breeding behaviour of the Wryneck in the British Isles, with a deliberate bias in favour of a breeding as opposed to non-breeding status.

Most Wrynecks arrive in this country in the first or second week of April, a few in late March, and many in the second half of April and early in May. Calling is most frequent in the last week of April and the first half of May, and if a pair is likely to breed, both sexes (and it needs to be emphasised again that both sexes call) will be heard frequently on successive days, especially in the early morning. A single record during the period 27 April to 14 May is inconclusive; but there are a large number of such records and it is just possible that they refer to breeding birds which are subsequently overlooked, rather than to migrants. During this same time, when courtship and egg laying are proceeding, it has not seemed an unreasonable exaggeration to consider that two records in the same area, one or more days apart, indicate that a pair was possibly intending to breed. For three or more records the category changes from 'possibly' to 'probably' breeding. Equally, after 14 May it is reasonable to consider that more than one record probably indicates a breeding pair.

Wrynecks quite often have two broods (*pace* Bannerman, 1955) and calling may recur between the fledging of the first brood and completion of the clutch of the second brood, most commonly in late June or early July. Single records in July are therefore difficult to assess, but bias in favour of such calling indicating possible breeding has again been allowed.

Single records in the first three weeks of August are again very difficult to judge, but, though the young are likely to have dispersed, migration is unlikely to have started. It is not known how much adult birds call, whether having bred or not, at this time of year (while reports for birds on migration or in winter are mostly contradictory); but it is just possible that calling is from birds breeding very late, probably with replacement clutches as a result of predation. Sight records, of course, might be of young or adults which had bred nearby. Such records however are not very common.

The last week of August and the first week of September are the commonest weeks for migrants to be seen at observatories. A few migrants are seen as late as October, but most migration is over by the third week of September.

At the beginning of a 5-year survey such as this, the response by observers may be excellent, but the search and recording tends to be less thorough in the second half of the programme. It remains to be seen whether the falling off in records in 1957 and 1958, truly indicates

a further decline of the Wryneck as a breeding species. It is hoped that a careful repeat of the survey in 1964 will provide better evidence.

PAST STATUS

In Ireland the Wryneck has never been more than a rare vagrant, and in Scotland has never been proved to nest although it occurs annually as a passage migrant, more commonly in autumn than spring, and on the east than on the west coast. In Wales it was a breeding species in scattered localities, especially in the northeast and southeast, up to the end of the last century, but has become extremely rare even on passage in the last 40-50 years.

In England at the beginning of the last century, the Wryneck was a breeding species in all counties excepting Cornwall and Northumberland, in neither of which has it ever been recorded as more than a rare passage migrant. It seems however never to have been common north of a line joining the Dee estuary and the Wash, nor yet in Cheshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire (particularly in the north of these counties), nor in Devon and Somerset.

In the north of England, the Wryneck was regular in both Cumberland and Durham until the 1830's by when it had apparently become much less common, and at about the same time was noted as decreasing in Lancashire. As early as the 1830's a definite reduction in numbers was also noticed in Derbyshire, Essex and Suffolk, and a few years later in the Isle of Wight (Fig. 1 and Table 1). It was disappearing from Yorkshire, except in the south and southeast of the West Riding, in the 1860's or earlier, and has been recorded in the breeding season only rarely since then. By about this time it was also very rare as a breeding bird in Lincolnshire.

In the second half of the 19th century a marked decline in numbers was evident over most of the country except Surrey, the south coast from east Dorset to Kent and apparently in Herefordshire. Where numbers are greatest, a reduction is more difficult to detect, but by 1915 the decrease had become noticeable even in the southeast (except in Sussex where there was an apparently sudden disappearance of the species about 1920), and also Herefordshire. The decline continued and by 1953, the year before the survey began, Wrynecks were numerous only in Surrey and Kent, but still regular in small numbers in the Breck country along the Suffolk-Cambridgeshire-Norfolk border, on the Berkshire-Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire borders along the Thames Valley, and in parts of Essex. Elsewhere it would apparently breed sporadically in very restricted areas, for example in Herefordshire, Devonshire and Hampshire.

Figures 1-5 show the approximate dates when major decreases in numbers were noted in the main breeding areas of the Wryneck in this century. It gives a general impression of how the decrease spread from the west and north to the southeast corner of England.

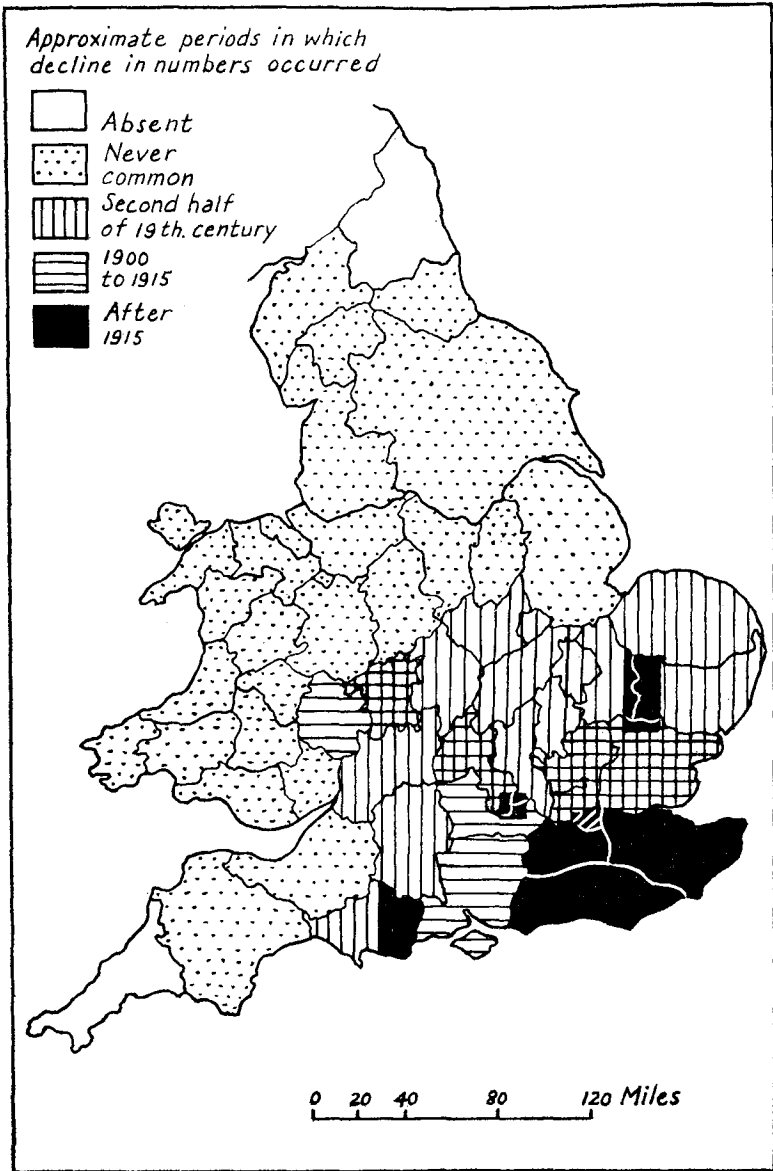


FIGURE 1. Changes in breeding distribution of the Wryneck in England in the last 150 years.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

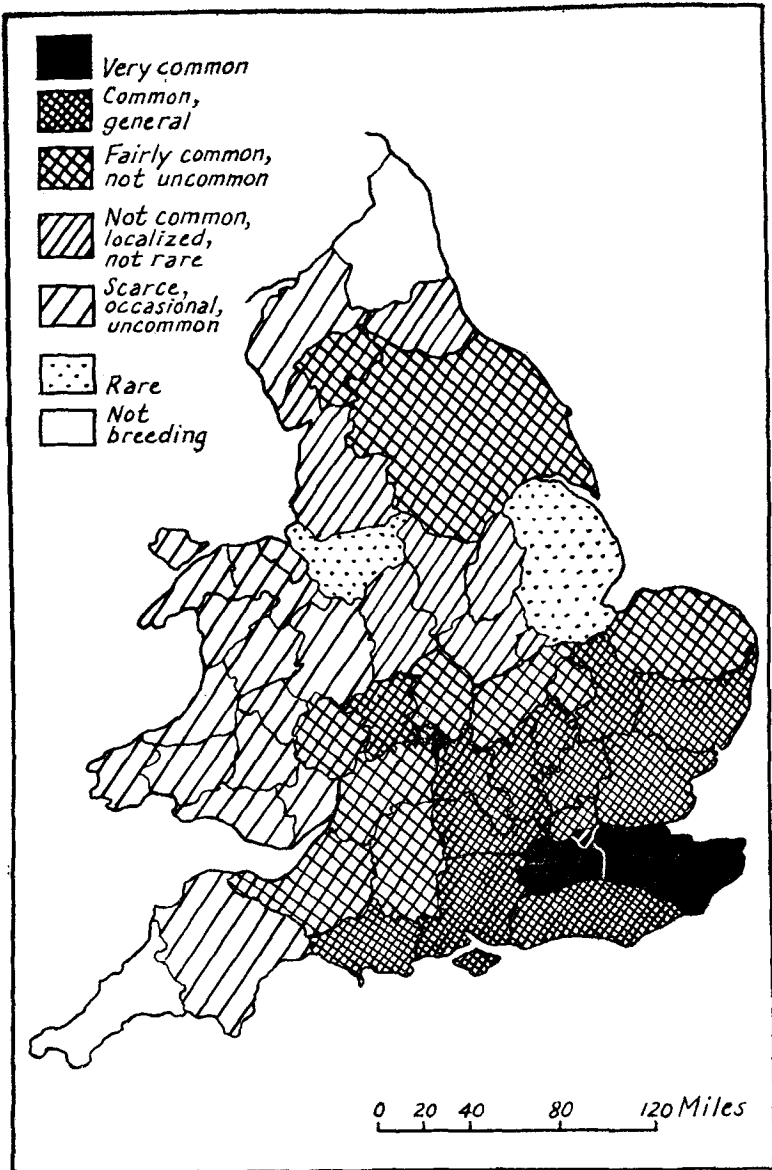


FIGURE 2. Breeding status of the Wryneck in England about 1850.

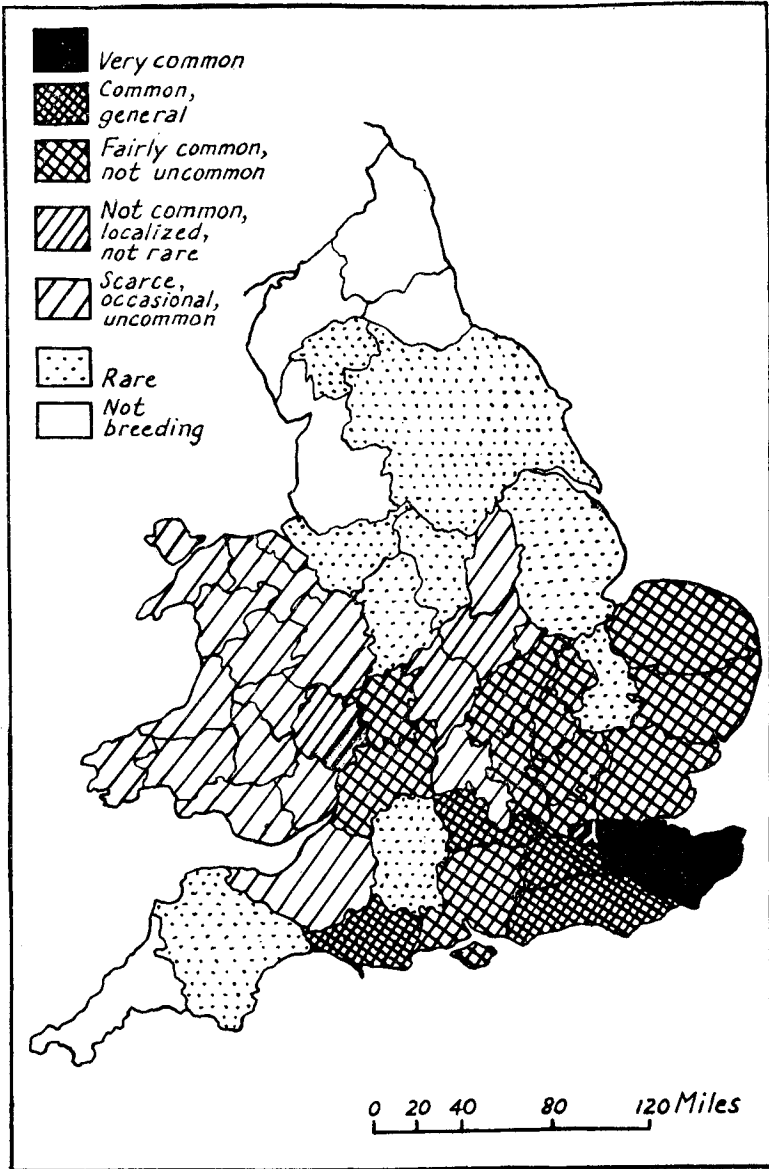


FIGURE 3. Breeding status of the Wryneck in England about 1900.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

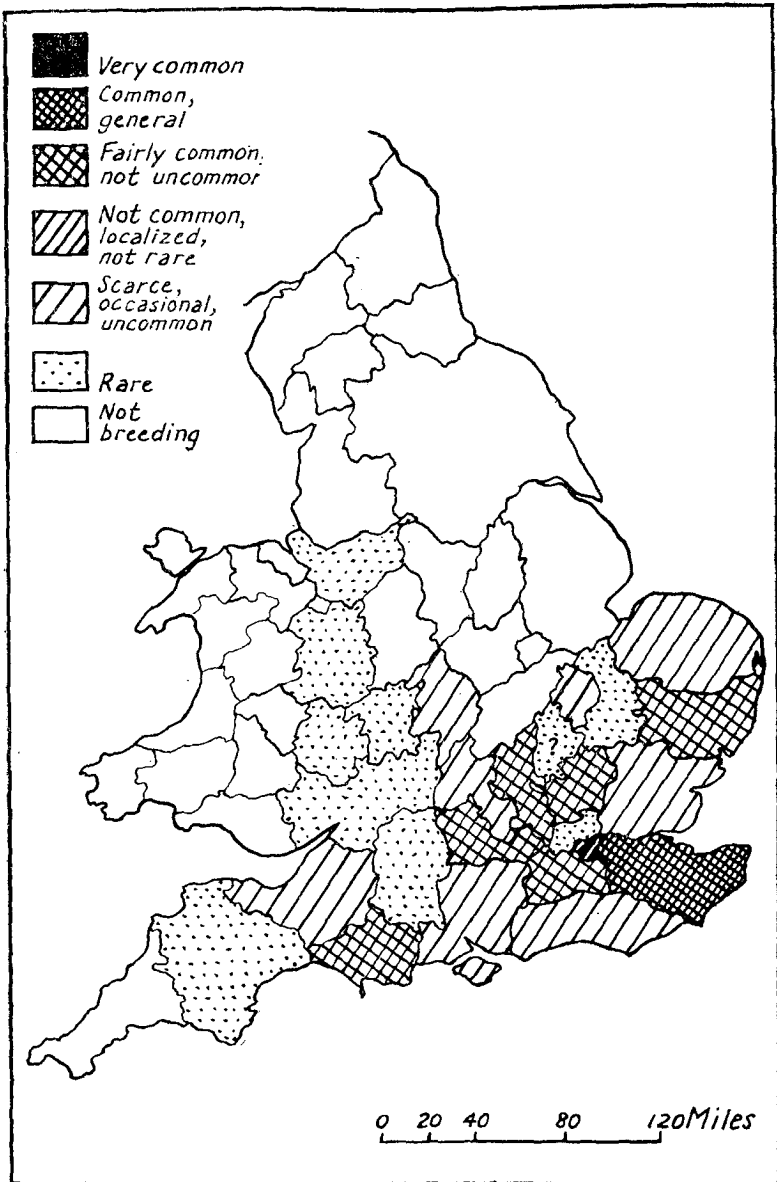


FIGURE 4. Breeding status of the Wryneck in England about 1925.

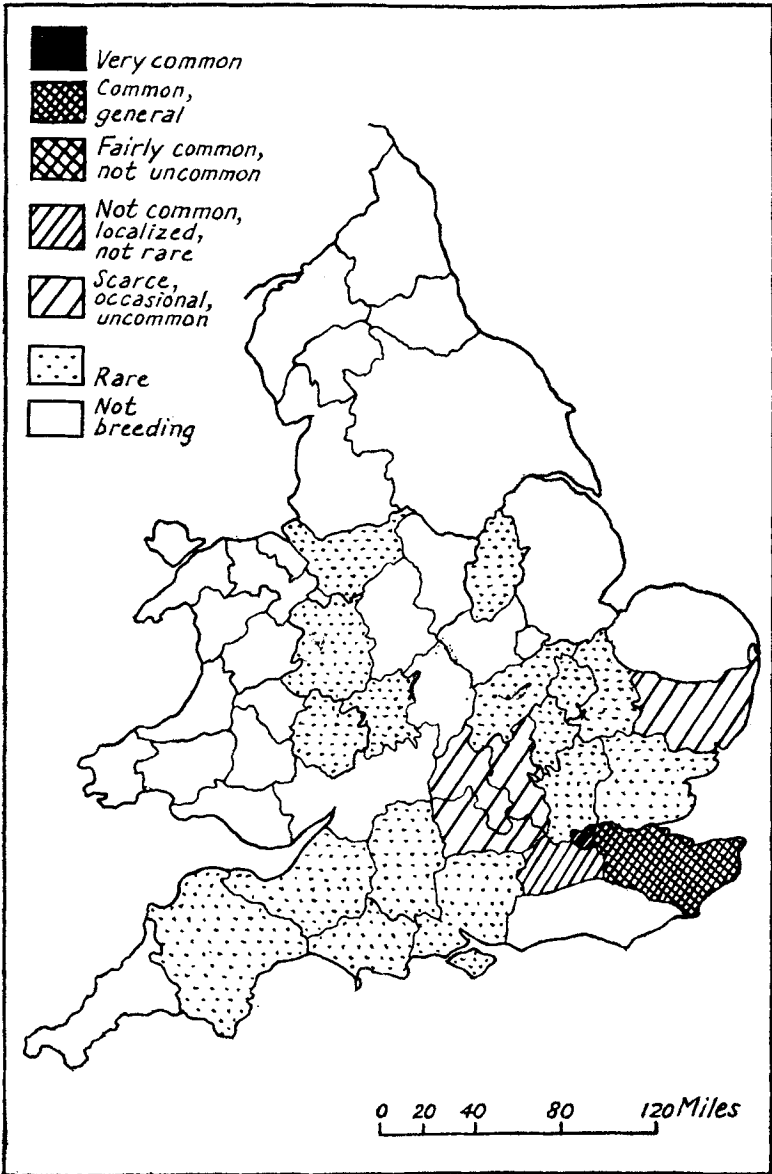


FIGURE 5. Breeding status of the Wryneck in England about 1950.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

TABLE I—APPROXIMATE DATES OF MAIN DECLINE IN NUMBERS OF THE WRYNECK IN ENGLAND

	1800-1899	1900-1915	After 1915
WHERE NEVER COMMON			
Derby	1831-1881		
Nottinghamshire	Before 1900		
Staffordshire	1844-1893		
WHERE FORMERLY COMMON			
Bedfordshire	Before 1900		
Buckinghamshire	1868-1905		Before 1920
Cambridgeshire	1880-1900		
Dorset—West	1888-1895		
—East			1920-1934
Essex	(1832)	1910	
Gloucestershire	Before 1900		
Hampshire		Before 1913	
Herefordshire		1908-1921	
Hertfordshire	1896-1912	Before 1916	
Huntingdonshire	?		
Kent			1916-1935
Leicestershire	Before 1907		
Middlesex	Before 1900		
Norfolk	1884-1900		
Northamptonshire	Before 1902		
Oxfordshire	1855-1889	1912	
Rutland	Before 1907		
Suffolk	(1832), 1894		
Surrey			1910-1920
Sussex			1920
Warwickshire	Before 1901		
Wiltshire	1875-1900		
Worcestershire	Before 1890		1912-1934
'STRONGHOLDS' IN 1953			
Middle Thames Valley			
Kent			
Cambridgeshire-Suffolk border			
Surrey			

The summary of the past status of the Wryneck up to 1953 which follows is arranged by English counties in alphabetical order, followed by the past status in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

ENGLAND

BEDFORDSHIRE

Common until at least 1885, and still frequent as a summer visitor in 1900, though noted as decreasing. Since then there have been no published records until one in June and July 1947. By 1953 was considered a very rare summer visitor or passage migrant.

BERKSHIRE

Common in 1868 and still common at least locally in 1906. A fairly sudden decline occurred in the northeast about 1912, but was never as common there as in east and south. Still common locally in 1916 but much less so by 1931. On the other hand, a single observer interested in the species estimated that there were 30 pairs around Maidenhead in 1935 (compare Table I), that numbers had increased

BIRD STUDY

in the preceding five years, and that it was equally common 10 years later, though evidently less frequently heard in some years. By 1953 had disappeared from the north and west, but was still breeding uncommonly and very locally in the south and east.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Common in 1868, but nowhere common by 1905, though considered present in most districts. Numbers had decreased further by 1920 especially in the east and south, though still regular and noted as increasing near Amersham. Again considered on the increase near Amersham in 1931, by when it had ceased to breed in the north and was regular only in the southeast. By 1947 was confined to the southeast where it was still regular up to 1953.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Common 1827-1869 and still common but becoming more scarce up to 1880. By 1900 had ceased to breed regularly and by 1904 was described as a rare summer visitor, though records in 1909 and 1910 from the Cambridge 'Backs' were of birds presumed breeding. By 1934 was not known to breed at all except possibly on the Breckland border, and by 1953 was considered to be a rare passage migrant unlikely to breed anywhere in the county.

CHANNEL ISLANDS

GUERNSEY

Very common in 1869 but much variation in numbers annually. Still considered common in 1903, but numbers decreased steadily until a sudden drop in 1938. No records since 1942.

JERSEY

Extremely common in 1885, but much rarer by 1911, and becoming scarcer annually up to 1919. A record in 1927 was the first for several years. Has only been recorded a few times on passage since then and is now only a rare vagrant.

ALDERNEY

Common in 1903 and supposedly still so in 1920, but there have been no records since 1923.

CHESHIRE

Never more than a very rare breeding species or passage migrant, but curiously enough nested in 1934.

CORNWALL AND SCILLY ISLES

Never recorded as breeding, only as a rare passage migrant, more often in the Scillies than on the mainland, though this probably reflects a greater concentration of observation in the Scillies.

CUMBERLAND

Regular, probably local, in Lakeland up to 1830's. The last breeding record was in 1863. Was still called a casual and uncommon autumn visitor in 1886, but had nearly disappeared by 1892. Only three records of migrants in the last 60 years.

DERBYSHIRE

Recorded regularly in 1803-1831, probably only locally, but was rare by 1881. Continued as a rare and local breeding bird up to 1905, mostly in the south and southwest. No records in the past 50 years.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

DEVON

Possibly breeding locally in 1829, considered scarce generally in 1839 and very rare by 1865. Considered to be a rare straggler in 1895 and 1906 though possibly breeding very locally, and may have nested again in 1919. Nested in the southeast of the county in 1924 and 1925 and was considered to be spreading from the east into the southwest in 1931, but there are only 17 records (all probably passage migrants) up to 1948 when breeding was once more proved. May still nest locally, but by 1953 was probably only an irregular and uncommon passage migrant.

DORSET

Well-known and regular throughout the 19th century but probably decreasing in the west by 1900. Still common in the east in 1920 and not uncommon (though probably local) in 1934 but said to be decreasing; by then rare in the west. Sporadic breeding has been recorded up to 1950, but is now probably only an irregular passage migrant.

DURHAM

Not uncommon in the 1830's, but had declined 'lamentably' by 1840, although in 1846 was still considered not uncommon in some summers (probably locally). By 1890 was only a rare passage migrant. No records between 1909 and 1953.

ESSEX

Probably common in the early 19th century, but reported as becoming scarcer by 1832, although 'heard in all directions' a few years before. The decrease subsequently became more general, but breeding still occurred regularly (though very locally) up to 1890's. A further reduction became apparent 1906-1912. Was described in 1929 as only a scarce summer visitor. Still breeding regularly in 1937 but only in the southeast, and by 1953 was only recorded breeding occasionally, but as a regular passage migrant.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

In 1829 considered to breed in very uncertain numbers and yearly to be diminishing; yet in 1902 the county was described as 'visited by large numbers of Wrynecks', mostly perhaps in the Severn Vale and in parts of the Forest of Dean. Has always been scarce on the Cotswolds. It has not been recorded breeding this century but documentation is extremely poor. By 1953 had evidently become a rare passage migrant.

HAMPSHIRE AND ISLE OF WIGHT

Common in I.o.W. in 1845 but gradually becoming more rare and local by 1860. Still considered fairly common on the south mainland and in I.o.W. in 1900 both as a breeding bird and as a passage migrant, but on the decrease by 1913. By 1937 there were only a few sporadic breeding records. The last four breeding records were in 1940, 1944, 1946 and 1950. By 1953 apparently only a passage migrant, but could possibly be breeding here and there, especially near the Surrey borders.

HEREFORDSHIRE

In 1888 and again in 1908, considered to be regular, generally distributed but varying in numbers. Sporadically recorded up to 1921. Between 1923 and 1941 seen once, and one pair nested; in 1945 one, perhaps two pairs nested. By 1953 could be considered only a rare visitor.

HERTFORDSHIRE

Plentiful and well distributed throughout the 19th century but becoming less common in the early 1900s. Reported as increasing at Harpenden in 1919, still abundant at Berkhamsted in 1920 and fairly common at Haileybury in 1926. Since

BIRD STUDY

then, recorded as breeding annually in quite a few places, but was becoming very local by the 1940's. Recorded as breeding in only one locality in 1953, but had by then become an uncommon species.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE

Almost no documentation up to 1926 when it was considered to have become scarce where it used to be fairly common, and thought to be still regular along the River Ouse. No further records up to 1953 except two possible breeding pairs in 1949 and possibly one in 1950.

KENT

Common in the 19th century, especially in orchards. Accounts differ for 1900-1916 but the population was evidently fairly large though fluctuating locally. Few records after 1916 until 1935 by when it had evidently decreased generally. By 1947 the decrease was noted as most marked in the east and northeast. In 1953 was still generally distributed but not in large numbers, most often recorded in the extreme east and south, but having possibly increased in some localities during the preceding five years.

LANCASHIRE

Apparently a regular visitor and in 1849 recorded as 'common' but on the decrease. By 1885 was considered to be almost extinct. Occurred twice in autumn 1908, bred in 1912, but has not been recorded since then except on spring passage in 1948, and by 1953 was considered as only a rare summer vagrant.

LEICESTERSHIRE

Poor documentation but there are scattered notes of breeding and it was probably fairly widespread, though not common, in mid-19th century. Sparingly distributed by 1907. No records since then up to 1953.

LINCOLNSHIRE

Very rare in 1872 as a breeding bird, and still so in 1914, being mainly found in the southwest. No records of breeding since 1914. Now only a rare and irregular passage migrant, usually on the coast. All records since 1914 have been in late August or in September except one in October.

MIDDLESEX

Considered in 1866 to breed regularly, but had become less common by 1900, though still regular in some localities up to 1912. By 1935 had gradually ceased to breed, though still seen regularly in early summer and supposedly on migration. Very few further records, but probably still breeding locally up to 1953.

NORFOLK

Regular in the 17th century. Not uncommon throughout the 19th century becoming perhaps less so by 1886. Breeding in several localities early this century, gradually ceasing to be regular between 1907 and 1927. By 1930 considered very much scarcer and confined as a breeding bird to only a few localities in the extreme southwest. By 1953 probably not breeding anywhere. Scarce but regular on autumn passage.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Considered not abundant at the end of the 19th century, but tolerably common, at least locally in 1902. Recorded singly in 1904, 1905, 1912 and not again until 1952 when two pairs apparently nested, and again one pair in 1953, one in 1954 and possibly one in 1957, although considered to be only a rare visitor.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

NORTHUMBERLAND

Never more than a rare passage migrant.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

A local breeding bird at the end of the 19th century, but seen only occasionally by 1907. No further records up to 1953 except of a possible breeding pair in 1944.

OXFORDSHIRE

Considered to be common about 1855, not plentiful in 1877 and not at all common in 1889. Scarce generally in 1902, but apparently more common in some places than others. In 1912 there was evidently a sudden further decline; nevertheless in 1935 it was found to be regular in quite good numbers in the southeast (see Berkshire). By 1953 had almost ceased to breed.

RUTLAND

Nesting reported sporadically at the end of the 19th century. In 1907 thought to be sparingly distributed but overlooked. No records since.

SHROPSHIRE

Probably a scarce but regular visitor in the 19th century, but by 1899 only found sparingly in the south, rarely in the north. Nested regularly to the north of the Wyre Valley up to the 1930's, bred or probably bred in the county in 1931, 1937, 1941, 1950, 1952, 1953. Evidently in 1953 a very local summer visitor mainly in the south.

SOMERSET

Somewhat local in the latter part of the 19th century, and probably never common in the county as a whole. Has been recorded sporadically this century, mainly up to 1925, rather less so since then, but nested 1942-44. By 1953 probably only a passage migrant.

STAFFORDSHIRE

Considered to be not rare in the north in 1844, but rare by 1893 and as still breeding occasionally in 1908. No records since 1909 until two birds appeared in the breeding season in 1947. No further records up to 1953.

SUFFOLK

Supposedly decreasing annually in 1832, but regular at Aldeburgh in 1870, and in 1884 recorded as common or not uncommon in all districts, breeding but not abundantly. Decrease noted again by 1894, and by 1900 was plentiful only perhaps in the Breck. In 1932 still described as generally distributed and not uncommon, especially in the Breck; but by 1950 had become an uncommon visitor, though there are several breeding records continuing up to 1953.

SURREY

Heard 'in every direction' in 1834 and still common in rural areas in 1900, even very abundant locally. In 1910 thought to be scarcer, at least than 50 years previously. In 1912, Frohawk (1912) considered the apparent scarcity in that year was due to insecticides. In the London Parks records became fewer after 1920 and were rare by 1937. By 1938 was probably more scarce everywhere. In 1948 there was an undoubted decrease in several areas and by 1953 could probably only be found regularly in the northeast, and perhaps on the Hampshire boundary.

SUSSEX

A 'familiar and well represented' species in 1890 and 1905. In 1920 an 'unaccountable and appreciable decrease' started, leading to it being scarce in 1934 and almost extinct by 1938, except as a rare passage migrant. Said to have nested as recently as 1944, but now found only on migration.

BIRD STUDY

WARWICKSHIRE

Reported as regular locally in 1875 and 1886. Though on the decrease in 1901, was still regarded as local rather than rare. There are very few records since reported as having left the Birmingham area by 1913; but a nest was recorded in 1920. Now probably only a rare passage migrant.

WESTMORLAND

Not uncommon locally in 1861, but the last three records have been 1870 (shot), 1920 (early April) and 1951 (mid-June). Now probably only a very rare passage migrant.

WILTSHIRE

Regularly heard in several places in 1855. There are only sporadic and local records for the second half of the 19th century and up to 1953, but documentation is poor. Nested in 1950.

WORCESTERSHIRE

Common in the 19th century in some districts such as Malvern, though much less so by 1890 in others such as Evesham. Between 1912 and 1934, from being widely dispersed, but nowhere very common, became greatly reduced in numbers and by 1947 was only a scarce and irregular visitor. The southeast of the county appears to have been abandoned first. No further records up to 1953.

YORKSHIRE

Regular and not uncommon in central and south Yorkshire in the first half of the 19th century, thereafter rapidly becoming more scarce and mainly confined to the south and southeast of the West Riding. In this century recorded in the breeding season only in 1909 and in 1943 (a bird with fledged young). By 1953 only a passage migrant in irregular numbers more often on the coast than inland.

SOUTH WALES

BRECONSHIRE

Fairly regular in the Usk and Wye Valleys up to 40-50 years ago, otherwise the only record is of a pair in the Usk Valley in 1926, though no nest was found. No records since.

CARDIGANSHIRE

A very rare passage migrant in mid-19th century; not recorded since.

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Possibly fairly regular in very small numbers on spring passage up to 40-50 years ago and may have bred in 1904. No recent records.

GLAMORGAN

Two 19th century breeding records and possibly another in 1913. A spring migrant in very small numbers, irregularly recorded up to the 1920's.

MONMOUTHSHIRE

At the end of the 19th century was a regular spring passage migrant and summer visitor, probably more than one pair breeding annually in the southwest until at least 1900. Occasionally reported 1920-1930, not since.

PEMBROKESHIRE

Two 19th century breeding records, otherwise recorded only at Skokholm in 1938 and 1949.

RADNORSHIRE

Rarely seen in 19th century and only once in the last 50 years, in 1946.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

NORTH AND CENTRAL WALES

In mid-19th century was occasionally recorded breeding, especially in Denbighshire and Flintshire, but was only rare and local. By 1919 only occurred irregularly in the east and very rarely in the west, probably only on migration. In the 1930's possibly still a rare passage migrant in the east, but there have been no records since.

SCOTLAND

Has never bred. An occasional visitor to the lowlands and elsewhere, but is mainly an irregular passage migrant on the east coast, though inexplicably a bird was recorded singing in June in Inverness-shire in 1951, and again, one in May and another in June 1952. A fairly regular passage migrant in Shetland (Fair Isle) but very rarely recorded in Orkney.

IRELAND

An irregular vagrant during migration. Only 10 records 1877-1953, of which eight were in autumn.

PRESENT STATUS

The numbers of pairs proved to be breeding in each year after 1953 were extremely small (Table II); from 1954 to 1958 respectively they were 26, 14, 23, 12 and 15 pairs.* Adding the records of probable, possible and just possible breeding birds (which are in fact nearly all of only single birds), the figures become 121, 106, 117, 72 and 65 respectively. A few of the spring records placed in the migrant category may have been early breeding birds later overlooked; and if it is also considered reasonable to assume that two out of three breeding pairs were unrecorded, the estimate of the breeding population for the British Isles was about 365 pairs in 1954, about 325 pairs in 1955, about 365 pairs in 1956, about 220 pairs in 1957 and about 205 pairs in 1958. These are probably over-estimates. Unfortunately, there are no comparable figures for any earlier years since the published records do not sufficiently cover such important counties as Kent and Surrey in which the great majority of recent records have occurred.

TABLE II—TOTALS OF BREEDING AND POSSIBLE BREEDING RECORDS
OF WRYNECKS 1954—1958 IN THE BRITISH ISLES BY COUNTIES

<i>County</i>	<i>Proved breeding pairs</i>	<i>All possible breeding records</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Proved breeding pairs</i>	<i>All possible breeding records</i>
Kent	60	307	Dorset	0	4
Surrey	8	54	Worcestershire	0	2
Suffolk	6	37	Somersetshire	0	2
Berkshire	4	16	Northumberland	0	1
Buckinghamshire	3	10	Herefordshire	0	1
Oxfordshire	3	4	Warwickshire	0	1
Middlesex	3	5	Bedfordshire	0	1
Hampshire	1	9	Devonshire	0	1
Norfolk	1	5	Sussex	0	1
Northamptonshire	1	2			
Essex	0	13			
Hertfordshire	0	5	Total	90	481

*Details in table form are available from the author or the B.T.O. office on request.

It is safe to say that during the 5 years of the survey between 150 and 400 pairs of Wrynecks bred annually in the British Isles, almost entirely in the southeast corner of England. The 1958 total was probably less than 200 and might easily not have exceeded 100; but it is not possible to be more definite nor to say whether a decrease has taken place in the breeding population between 1954 and 1958. The apparent decline could be due to the falling off of observations to be expected during a survey such as this; but in 1958, although definite breeding records were above those in 1955, the total of all, even remotely possible, breeding records is barely half that of 1954. This suggests that search may have been as diligent in the fifth year as in the second year, and that an actual reduction in numbers of Wrynecks occurred.

The breeding distribution between 1954 and 1958 is shown in Table II. It shows clearly that the main concentration was in the extreme southeast, in Kent, with pockets in Surrey, the middle Thames, the Norfolk-Suffolk boundary, Middlesex, Hampshire and Northamptonshire. North of the line joining the Wash and the Dee estuary, including Cheshire, Leicester and Rutland, records were of migrants only, except for one surprising observation in Northumberland in June 1955 when a Wryneck was seen in the same place as a bird had been found dead in the third week of August in 1954. The summaries which follow give the status of the Wryneck between 1954 and 1958, and are arranged geographically, working roughly from the north to the south and from west to east of its present probable breeding range. The arrangement of some counties in groups has been made for the sake of simplicity, but the records have in most cases fallen fairly naturally together.

SHROPSHIRE, STAFFORDSHIRE, HEREFORDSHIRE, WORCESTERSHIRE, WARWICKSHIRE

Only four breeding season records (Herefordshire 1954; Warwickshire 4 June 1955; Worcestershire 11 July 1954 and 25 June 1957). There were four records outside the breeding season which might possibly have referred to breeding birds. At the most can only be a very rare summer visitor to these counties.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

One pair was proved to breed (1954), and a single bird was recorded late in the breeding season (25 July 1957). No other records, and although possibly overlooked in isolated localities, is evidently a rare summer visitor.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE, HUNTINGDONSHIRE and BEDFORDSHIRE

Only one breeding season record (26 June 1958 in Bedfordshire). If breeding occurs at all it is probably very localised. There were only two records outside the breeding season, one in Huntingdonshire and one in Cambridgeshire, both in autumn. Is apparently only a very rare summer visitor or passage migrant to these counties now.

NORFOLK

One proved breeding pair (1955), and only four other breeding season records; but 77 migrants were recorded in autumn and one in spring, almost all on the coast. If it still breeds there must be very few pairs. Otherwise a regular autumn migrant in varying numbers.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

SUFFOLK

The county with the third highest number of proved breeding pairs (6), but none of them in 1958. Of the 31 other breeding season records, only four were in 1957 and 1958. The evidence for breeding at present is inconclusive, but it is possible that one or two pairs still nest near the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk borders.

There were 41 records in autumn, and two in spring of which one might not have been on passage. Is evidently a regular passage migrant in varying numbers, mainly in autumn.

WALES

There were no breeding season records, and it seems unlikely that the Wryneck breeds anywhere in Wales now, though observers are few. At Bardsey there were four autumn and one spring migrant records; otherwise was only recorded in autumn, once on Skokholm in 1956 and again in 1958, and once at Rhosili, Glamorgan in 1958.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

No breeding season records and only one record outside the breeding season (10-13 September 1956). Is now probably only a very rare passage migrant.

OXFORDSHIRE

Two pairs proved to breed in 1954 and one in 1955. Otherwise only a single breeding season record (15 May 1954) and one seen on 13 April 1957. Pairs may well be overlooked breeding in the Thames Valley near the Berkshire and Buckinghamshire borders, but is now only a very rare visitor.

BERKSHIRE

Two pairs bred in 1954 and two in 1956 but none since. Of the 12 other breeding season records all were in 1954 and 1955 except one in 1956. Outside the breeding season there have been six records (30 April 1955, definitely disappearing north; 24 March, 21 April and 16-25 October 1956; 18 April 1957 and 3 April 1958). Apparently no longer breeds, though a concentrated search in the Thames Valley bordering the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire boundaries might well provide more records.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

One proved breeding record each for 1954, 1956 and 1958. Of the seven other breeding season records six were in 1954 and 1955. There were two migrant records, 18 July 1955 and 15 April 1956. May still breed near the Oxfordshire and Berkshire borders but is now distinctly rare even on passage.

HERTFORDSHIRE

No breeding records, and only five in the breeding season and one record in March and one in early April. Although breeding regularly up to and including 1953, does not appear to have bred since, and is only rarely seen on migration though possibly overlooked.

ESSEX

No proved breeding pairs but there are 13 records in the breeding season, of which one in 1957 and three in 1958 suggest breeding may have taken place. A regular passage migrant on the coast in varying numbers (total 24 of which 14 were in 1958) depending on the weather. Three of the migrant records might have referred to overlooked summer residents.

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SOMERSET

Only two breeding season records, both in 1955 (10-17 May and late June), one of which is very suggestive of actual nesting. There were four records outside the breeding season, three in 1954 (all in late August) and one in 1955 (21 April). May still breed very locally, but is probably only a rare passage migrant.

WILTSHIRE AND HAMPSHIRE

There are no records for Wiltshire except of one seen on 2 October 1957.

In Hampshire one pair bred and one probably did so in 1954, three more probably bred in the next two years, while one possibly bred in 1955 and two more in 1958. Breeding may still continue near the Surrey and Berkshire borders. There were six records of passage migrants, two of them possibly referring to summer residents.

MIDDLESEX

There were three proved, one probable and one possible breeding records in 1954; thereafter only three migrant records, all in autumn. Is evidently now only rarely seen and probably does not breed.

SURREY

Eight pairs were proved to breed (the second highest county total), and there were 12 probable and 34 possible or just possible breeding records. Of these 54 records, only six occurred in 1957 and seven in 1958. Of the 14 migrant records seven might possibly have referred to summer residents. Is undoubtedly overlooked, especially near the Hampshire border, and perhaps equally so in semi-rural areas; but numbers have certainly declined very considerably recently.

SCILLIES, CORNWALL AND DEVON

Only one breeding season record, in Devon 30 May-2 June 1954 at the locality where it nested in 1948. There were 22 migrant records, mostly from the Scillies in 1956, but three in Devon could possibly have referred to summer residents later overlooked. May still breed very locally in Devon, but is otherwise only an uncommon passage migrant in the peninsula.

DORSET

Only four breeding season records, one of them a probable breeding record in 1956. There are 10 records of migrants at Portland Bill observatory, all in the autumn, with two other autumn and five spring records elsewhere. Probably occurs most years on passage, but probably does not breed, though it may well be overlooked especially on the Dorset border near the New Forest.

SUSSEX

No breeding records and only one record in the breeding season (1954). There were 12 migrant records, one of them possibly referring to a summer resident. Is now probably only an uncommon passage migrant, though it may be overlooked in the north and east on the Surrey and Kent borders.

KENT

The main breeding area now, containing about three-quarters of all breeding records, and the only county where one can be certain of finding more than one or two breeding pairs. Breeding appears to be fairly widespread, but is sparse in the south near the Sussex border, and does not extend much onto the North Downs. The fact that more records come from near big towns such as Canterbury, Maidstone and Gillingham than elsewhere presumably reflects the distribution of observers.

There were 73 migrant records, less than half of which were from bird observatories, and some of which may have been early breeding birds.

STATUS OF THE WRYNECK

DISCUSSION

The main finding of the survey is that by 1958 the Wryneck was extremely scarce in the British Isles compared with a century or more ago, merely confirming what was already known; though it was not entirely expected that the largest total of proved nesting pairs in any one year would be quite as low as 26.

The second point of importance is that the reduction in numbers has not been sudden or dramatic. A decline was remarked on at the extreme north of the breeding range well over 100 years ago, and became noticeable elsewhere gradually, spreading from the north and west to the southeast, in a way very comparable with the decline of the Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*) (Peakall, 1962). Clearly there has been a gradual contraction of the westernmost part of the Wryneck's range, and there has been a probable decrease in population over much of Europe.

A reduction in range can be due to some factor or factors working on the population of a large area such as the whole of western Europe, in which case the reduction in numbers would be noticeable first where the species was least common, i.e. at the periphery; or on the periphery itself. Such factors are many and inter-related. The survey was not organised to try to show reasons for the disappearance of the Wryneck from England and indeed none has come to light. The fact that the decline spread from the north and west into the southeast would seem to rule out possible adverse changes such as an increase in predation pressure or competition, loss of habitat, and increased use of insecticides. It is possible, however, that changes in availability of food, running concurrently with the known climatic changes of the past century may be responsible. It is hoped to deal fully with these possibilities and the population changes on the Continent at a later date and when more data have been collected and analysed in detail.

SUMMARY

The past and present status of the Wryneck is given on a county basis for the British Isles, based on a search of the literature and a survey organised for the B.T.O. for the years 1954-1958. There has been a gradual decline in numbers over the past 100 years, spreading from the north and west to the southeast, which at present is the main stronghold. Possibly as few as 100 and at the most about 200 pairs bred in England in 1958, mainly in Kent. It is hoped to discuss the possible causes for the change in status at a later date.

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