

Ring Ouzel Monitoring at Stanage-North Lees 2023

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report details the results of Ring Ouzel nest monitoring and protection carried out in 2023 on the Stanage-North Lees estate.

This work is part of a project covering the wider area of the Eastern Edges (predominantly the continuation of Stanage and Bamford edges to the north, and Eastern Moors Partnership land to the south).

1.2 The Ring Ouzel

The Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus* is a migrant summer visitor to the UK, returning to upland areas from North Africa each spring. Ring Ouzels are typically associated with rocky moorland habitat, such as that found on the gritstone edges of the Peak District.

On the Peak District's eastern edges, the Ring Ouzel population is characterised by its close association with areas popular for recreation uses such as rock climbing and walking, and areas of high visitor numbers more generally.

The Ring Ouzel is of significant conservation concern in the UK due to severe breeding population declines, and moderate breeding range decline, over the last 25 years.

1.3 Nest Monitoring and Protection

Each year I lead a team of volunteers who help to locate and monitor Ring Ouzel nests along the Eastern Edges. Nests which are considered at risk of disturbance are identified and, where necessary, signs are erected – either to temporarily restrict access to climbing routes, or divert people away from the nest area. The work is carried out in conjunction with Peak District National Park Authority staff at Stanage-North Lees and Eastern Moors Partnership staff.

This builds on the work of Bill Gordon, the former Stanage-North Lees estate warden, who began signing nests in the early 2000s, and developed a collaboration with the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) to protect nests. BMC volunteers continue to play a key role in the nest monitoring, along with members of Sheffield Bird Study Group and other local "ouzelers".

2 Nest Monitoring

Nest finding and monitoring work was carried out by myself, Mark Anderson (PDNPA) and volunteer nest monitors.

The season started with an apparent increase in pairs over recent years, with Apparent North, Overstones, Popular End and Plantation all occupied, and possible pairs in the south Plantation and Causeway area.

An early sighting of one of last year's ringed birds (now a 2cy male with two blue rings) at Popular End was a welcome sight (see Section 4 for further details).

As things settled down, the pair at Overstones became elusive and despite a report of the female carrying nesting material, no nest was found. It seems likely that if this pair did attempt to breed they failed before the chick stage as no food carrying was ever observed.

The Popular End pair again nested in a busy climbing area, and despite signs being deployed at the earliest opportunity (first stages of nest building), their first nest was abandoned, coinciding with a busy bank holiday weekend, during egg laying. It seems likely human disturbance was the primary cause. Their second nest was in the exact same location as last year's (successful) nest, however this was also abandoned sometime during incubation. While disturbance was a possible factor, subsequently the (ringed) male moved to Higger Tor and paired with a new female, suggesting perhaps that the Popular End female may have been predated and this was the cause of the abandonment.

The Plantation pair were the only pair on the whole of Stanage Edge (including Stanage North) to fledge a complete brood of 4 young, and it may have been them who moved along to Robin Hood's Cave for a second brood (though a ringed juvenile present in the Robin Hood area, likely from a Bamford brood, could indicate they had moved from further afield).

The late failure of the Robin Hood pair completed a disappointing season for Stanage as a whole, despite promising early numbers of birds in the North Lees territories. The number of pairs returning and breeding at Stanage North was also unusually low.

North-Lees territory outcomes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Ring Ouzel territories & outcomes – Stanage-North Lees

Territory	Breeding	Outcome
Apparent North	Confirmed	Failed (predated, egg stage).
Overstones	Probable	Reported seen with nesting material. No nest found.
Popular End	Confirmed	1: Failed (abandoned, likely disturbance). 2: Failed (abandoned).
Plantation	Confirmed	Fledged 4.
(Robin Hood's Cave) Late pair, possibly Plantation pair.	Confirmed	Failed (predated, chick stage).

Productivity figures are given in Table 2 below, alongside figures from previous years.

Table 2. Nest success analysis – Stanage-North Lees

Year	Pairs	Nests	Clutches hatched	Broods fledged	Fledged young	Fledged young per successful nest	Fledged young per pair	Nests fledging young	Hatched nests fledging young
2023	3	5	2	1	4	4	1.33	20 %	50 %
2022	2	3	3	3	10	3.33	5	100 %	100 %
2021	3	5	5	5	15+	3+	5+	100 %	100 %
2020	4	4	3	2	6+	3+	1.50	50 %	67 %
2019	5	7	3	3	11	3.67	2.20	43 %	100 %

After a number of years of declining pairs but two years of good productivity, this year marked a low in the number of young fledged at Stanage.

3 Signing and Disturbance

Four of the five monitored nests this year required signs. All were found during nest building, and thus signs were placed at the earliest opportunity.

The Plantation nest was high on the crag (but above an accessible ledge) and was the least vulnerable to disturbance in any case. Climbing routes on two buttresses were restricted and no disturbance was noted or reported.

The nest at Apparent North was close to a popular path as well as near to boulder problems. Signs were arranged to divert people on to a different path and restrict one bouldering buttress. It is possible the nest area was still subject to people regularly walking nearby, as it was on a small buttress with a number of small paths above and below. The nest was well concealed in a deep break, and the female was observed to sit very tightly during incubation and appeared well suited to tolerating people in the general vicinity. A stoat or weasel seems the most likely predator of the eggs considering its position, and disturbance is considered unlikely to have been a factor.

The two Popular End nests were both heavily signed in busy climbing areas, and the abandonment of the first nest during laying and over a busy period suggests human disturbance is the likely cause. While this may have been a cause for the second attempt, the movement of the male and disappearance of the female suggests that predation of the female may have been the cause of abandonment here.

4 Colour Ringing

4.1 Background

This marks the second year of the scheme to colour-ring Ring Ouzel chicks in the nest, and sightings of returning 2022 birds are detailed below, in addition to this year's ringing totals.

4.2 Ringing

Ringing was carried out by licenced ringers from Sorby Breck Ringing Group.

With only two nests surviving to ringing age, only 7 chicks were ringed at Stanage-North Lees this year, and unfortunately with the failure of the Robin Hood nest before fledging, only 4 ringed chicks are known to have fledged.

A further 36 chicks were ringed at other sites on the eastern edges, of which 34 fledged, giving a total of 38 fledged colour-ringed chicks for the whole area.

4.3 Re-sightings

Table 3 shows the colour-ringed ouzels which were sighted in 2023 across the project area.

Table 3. Returning colour-ringed Ring Ouzels

Ring combo	Sex	2023 territory	Location ringed in 2022	Notes
B/B	Male	Stanage Popular End	Unknown (one ring missing)	Moved to Higger Tor after failed breeding at Stanage.
R/Y	Female	Burbage North	Stanage (Cowperstone)	Missing blue top ring (initially present and reported).
B/Y/R	Male	Bamford Gully	Higger Tor	
B/O/W	Male	Whinstone Lee Tor	Stanage (High Neb)	
B	Female	Burbage Valley	Unknown (two rings missing)	Probable breeding but nest not found.
B/R/R	Female	Bamford Wrinkled Wall	Stanage (Cowperstone)	

5 Summary

After a promising start to the season, with a higher occupancy rate of territories than in recent years, this turned out to be a disappointing year for Ring Ouzels at Stanage. This was replicated further along the edge, with Stanage North also having a poor year.

While I don't think this can be attributed to any one factor, a combination of extended dry weather impacting food availability (possibly also resulting in increased predation as other species suffered?), predation and disturbance all were likely contributors. It is perhaps due to the dry weather (limiting food availability) that, unusually, many pairs at Stanage and in the wider area, did not make a second breeding attempt after a failure. It was at least welcome to see ouzel activity along more of the edge at North Lees this year, with Plantation occupied, and activity recorded to the north and south on occasions, even if no additional breeding pairs were confirmed.

Overall across the Eastern Edges, results were mixed, with Bamford Edge doing well in terms of numbers and productivity, Burbage slightly down on recent years, and Curbar the only occupied territory south of Burbage Valley.

The return of six colour-ringed birds from last year was at the high end of our expectations and provided our first hints of the proportion of birds returning to the area, and how birds move around in the season. While we were not able to ring as many chicks this year, the total number has been significantly bolstered and we can hope for more returnees next year.

Kim Leyland
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