



Rooks and their castles. An Update.

The Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) is a communal breeder, building their bulky nests primarily made of twigs in tall trees. They start the nest-building relatively early in February, although the breeding process actually starts much earlier in Autumn when pair bonding begins.

Rookeries tend to be built in clumps of suitable trees so that the nest is at least 3 metres from the ground but no particular tree species is favoured over others. Tree selection is primarily down to availability of suitable trees. Rooks will avoid nesting in the middle of large woods, preferring instead the woodland edges. It is presumed that this is because it provides easier access to the fields for feeding.

Although Rooks are highly gregarious the chief unit is in fact the pair. Pair bonds are established in Autumn when females are attracted to “singing” males and confirmed when she finally accepts food from the male. After pair-bonding the two birds stay in close company.

Nests are built by both sexes and it takes about a week. Quite often one partner will collect twigs and materials for the lining while the other will stay and guard the nest. Rooks are not averse to pinching twigs from neighbouring un-guarded nests! In fact, epidemics of thieving can suddenly break-out and can sometimes be directed at a single, unfortunate pair in the colony.

Once the nest has been built a clutch of 2-6 eggs will be laid. First eggs are laid in mid to late March. The male then provides food for the female while she does all the incubation.

Incubation takes 16-18 days. The young are fed by both parents, although only the male for the first 2-4 weeks of the 30-36 days until fledgling.

As many of you will know, Tony Hutson surveyed the rookeries in the area for many years. He wrote about it in the Parish Magazine in March 2013 and you can read his excellent article at <https://plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com/nature-notes-2013.html>.

Tony started the survey way back in 1987 and recorded two rookeries at the site of the old school in Plumpton (9 nests) and one south of Riddens Lane (22 nests). Those rookeries are still going strong today with 21 and 23 nests respectively this year.

Over the intervening years Tony kept track of rookeries in 16 different locations around the two parishes and it's interesting to see how they formed, grew and then quite often disappeared again. Only 7 of those 16 rookeries managed to get to 20 nests or more and there are only 3 of those 7 left now.

Overall, the 25-year population trend for Rooks in the UK is downward with a 10% reduction although there are some signs of improvement with the trend over the last 5 years showing a 5% increase. Rooks are not a bird of conservation concern as they are still widespread and numerous. Unfortunately, in Plumpton and East Chiltington the downward trend is worse than the national trend with nests now at about 50% of the levels in 1998. That could just be due to rookeries moving just outside of the local area.

The two biggest rookeries were sited at Plumpton Place and Stanton's Farm, with previous maximums of 83 and 96 nests respectively. However, these rookeries are now much smaller with fewer than 20 nests.

The Wildlife Group is determined to build-on Tony's excellent work and continue to monitor the rookeries every year going forward. Any reports of any new rookeries would be much appreciated and you can email details to plumptonwildlife@gmail.com.