

Rooks and their castles



Rooks are extraordinarily faithful to their traditional rookery sites. I can only believe that they have nested around the site of the present Waitrose in Lewes for a very long time. All that is left there for them now is a large horse chestnut right outside the entrance, but the rooks continue to nest there, much to the annoyance of some visitors and the pleasure of others.

In 2009 I got called in because Waitrose wanted to pollard the tree and were concerned to ensure that this would not affect any bats that might use it. I reported that I didn't think the proposed works would affect bats but, along with a number of other people, did express concern about the rooks. And I was present when the works were carried out in November 2009, when growth was cut back to the main trunks. The representative from Waitrose, Lewes District Council's Tree Officer and the tree surgeons all had to take some flak from the public, mostly on behalf of the rooks. Thus the birds could not nest there in 2010 but, with just two years' new growth, they were back in 2012.

A fascinating book about rooks (and others of the crow family) can be found in *Crow Country* by Mark Cocker (Vintage Books, 2008). Much more than a natural history book, this is an account of the author's and his many predecessors' attempts to find out more about this remarkable bird. At one point he pays homage to someone who had been counting local rook colonies for 25 years. Well, by 2008 I had only been counting our local rook colonies for 22 years – but now it is 26!

Actually I only recorded counts of two colonies in 1987, which is a pity since that was the year of the Great Storm. I was counting all the main colonies by 1989 and, with all the various outlying nests or subsidiary colonies I can find, have counted each year since. Even so, the number of nests can be surprisingly difficult to count, particularly when in pine trees or holm oak, and so maybe it took a few years to get my eye in, but the numbers went up towards the mid 90s (so maybe the big storm did have an effect) and then fluctuated gently between a maximum of 224 nests in 1999 and 166 in 2011 in four or five year cycles, but with a slight slow decline. Unfortunately that minimum count of 166 in 2011 coincided with the year of the National Rook

Survey. In Sussex (Sussex Bird Report 64, 2012), the survey found a decline of 21% since the last survey in 1996 (and the Plumpton figures show a decline of 22% over the same period), but it will be interesting to see if 2011 was a particularly bad year. Indeed, if I compare the 1995 and 2010 counts, the decline is only 11%. The Sussex survey also showed a 32% decline since an earlier survey of 1975.

Various reasons for the declines have been offered, including increased urbanisation, changes in farming practice, and weather patterns. The land owner for one rookery once told me that I wouldn't find so many nests these days because he liked rook pie, but he doesn't seem to have had a major impact on his rookery; I'm sure he was just trying to wind me up – but he never invited me to dinner. Indeed, the people who live with these rooks do express a wide range of attitudes towards them: most find them interesting and amusing; some are not so keen on their partying early in the morning or leaving rather a mess on the car. And if one now-deceased resident's belief has any truth in it, the fact that many of the birds nested quite low last year suggested that it was going to be a bad summer!

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