



A Nest-box fit for a King (Arthur)

Think nest-boxes and you think Blue Tits, Great Tits, or perhaps Pied Flycatchers, but you probably don't think Chough! Strange as it may seem Choughs have taken readily to specially designed nest-boxes as Tony Cross and Adrienne Stratford report.

If you were to think of a bird with a significant proportion of the UK population using nest-boxes, the Chough might not immediately spring to mind. In Wales, however, we now have over 5% of the breeding population of approx. 260 pairs regularly using purpose built nest-boxes or artificial nest-ledges, with a resultant increase in the local breeding population of over 300% in one area.

AN UNLIKELY NEST-BOX SPECIES

In 1990, observations of a pair of Choughs attempting to build a nest under an unsuitable overhang on the cliffs near Aberystwyth, first alerted us to a shortage of natural sites. Choughs prefer a fairly sizable cavity, usually on a slightly overhanging cliff face, or a ledge in a sea-cave, quarry or mine-shaft but in some areas the local geography is not favourable for the formation of such sites, even though suitable feeding areas exist all around. They will use buildings, although in Wales this habit is pretty much confined to disused quarry

buildings and not farm outbuildings as occurs on Islay - unfortunately much potentially suitable habitat remains unoccupied as a result. In 1992, Tony Cross, Mick Green and Clive McKay organised a contract with the Countryside Council for Wales to survey all existing Chough nest-sites in Mid Wales and examine the potential for increasing the number available. All coastal cliff sections were walked and all old mine workings and quarries inspected. A total of 11 occupied coastal sites and 10 occupied inland sites were located and on some stretches of the coast surveyed few suitable, but unused, sites existed, whereas inland there were nine historic and five apparently suitable sites which remained unoccupied.

PROVIDING NEW NEST SITES

In mineshafts and caverns, ledges were created where there weren't any and nest-boxes, designed by Tony Cross, were erected at both coastal and inland cliff sites. In total, 18 potential new

An adult Chough inspects one of the nest-boxes. These need very careful siting if they are to be used by the birds.



TONY CROSS

inland sites and 11 new coastal sites were created. At inland sites, there was no uptake of improved sites and indeed the number of breeding pairs continued to decline, despite an overall upward trend elsewhere. Since the start of this study, the Chough has ceased to breed in Montgomeryshire and has declined from 5 breeding pairs in inland Ceredigion (Cardiganshire) in the late 1980's to just a single pair in 2007. The reasons for this decline are unknown, but land improvement and predation of young birds by Peregrines and Goshawks are suspected as the primary causes. Uptake at several coastal sites however, was nearly instant, with others only occupied after several years. No fewer than seven of the original 11 new coastal sites were eventually used. Additional nest-boxes have been erected in years since and a few of the original ones have now gone, as the cliffs have crumbled and fallen into the sea. Constant monitoring is vital because if a nest-box should fall down or be taken over by another species, the Choughs will remain faithful to the territory but may be unable to breed. The specially designed nest-boxes have occasionally been used by Barn Owls, Kestrels and Jackdaws, but Choughs are by far the commonest occupants.

CAREFUL PLACING LEADS TO SUCCESSFUL NESTING

Because of the threat posed by egg collectors, for which the Chough is a favoured target, we have never erected nest-boxes in easily accessible sites and all sites require either a long ladder or a rope and harness to access. Despite this we lost at least one clutch to egg-collectors in 2007 and possibly one in 2005. Apart from this, however, breeding success at nest-box/nest-ledge sites is as good as or better than that at natural sites in the same area and to date we have had 22 different nest-box/nest-ledge locations occupied with 335 young Choughs reared. Since 1991, we have been conducting a large-scale colour-ringing study on Choughs in Wales with virtually all of the young reared in nest-boxes and many more from natural sites, individually colour-ringed. So far, we



A brood of young Choughs, raised in one of the nest-boxes is colour-ringed to allow individuals to be identified once fledged.

have marked over 100 adults and 3,000 chicks in Wales and as a result, 54% of the breeding birds in mid and North Wales are now individually recognisable. A vast databank of re-sighting history exists (over 15,000 confirmed sightings) which we hope to analyse in the near future. Preliminary results show that adults are extremely site faithful and can be long-lived (we have had several birds in excess of 15 years of age). Ringing has also shown that, in common with many other species, the most dangerous time in a Chough's life is when it first leaves the safety of the nest. Although juvenile survival rates vary considerably due to weather conditions, on average perhaps 50% of all young birds don't survive the first month, less than 25% survive to see in the new year and perhaps only around 10% will survive to breed themselves.

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If you see a colour-ringed Chough

All sightings of colour-ringed Choughs in Wales and Cornwall are welcomed, as are records of birds visiting known or potential nest-sites. This work has shown that providing nest-boxes can greatly benefit Chough populations where natural sites are in short supply, however, siting the boxes is by no means simple. If you are considering installing nest-boxes for Chough, we would be happy to provide advice based on our experience. As nest-boxes erected in mid and North Wales could affect our long-term colour-ringing project, we would appreciate prior consultation. Please contact us via the feedback site at www.ecologymatters.co.uk