

The Northern Raven

What are ravens?

The Northern raven (*Corvus corax*) is a member of the crow (corvid) family and is the largest of the many species of corvid found across the world. Globally, there are 11 sub-species of Northern raven of which the UK sub-species is *C. corax corax*.

Where are they found and how many are there?

In the Britain, ravens are found largely in the west, with notable concentrations in Wales, western Scotland, including the Western & Northern Isles (Orkney and Shetland) and western/south-western England. It is thought that there are about 12,000 breeding pairs in Britain. They are often associated with upland habitats but they also occur in low lying areas, especially around the coast.

How many are there in Scotland?

It is thought that there are about 2,500-6,000 breeding pairs of raven in Scotland, with about 12,000 breeding pairs in Britain. This compares with about 100,000–200,000 pairs of common crow and about 25,000 to 40,000 hooded crows, in Scotland. By comparison, ravens are relatively uncommon, although densities may be locally high in some areas.

Where and when do they breed?

Most ravens breed in the west, including mainland Argyll, the Inner & Outer Hebrides, Lochaber and western Caithness & Sutherland, as well as the Northern Isles. A map can be found on the BTO web site. However, birds do breed further east, and there is some anecdotal evidence that numbers are increasing further east. Nests are typically found on upland cliffs, sea cliffs and tall trees.

Ravens are amongst the earliest species to breed in the UK, with many incubating eggs by the end of February, well before many other species have even established territories. Ravens are monogamous and may breed for many years, once birds enter the breeding population. Average breeding success is about 3 chicks per pair each year, though there is limited data to suggest that breeding success has declined in recent years¹.

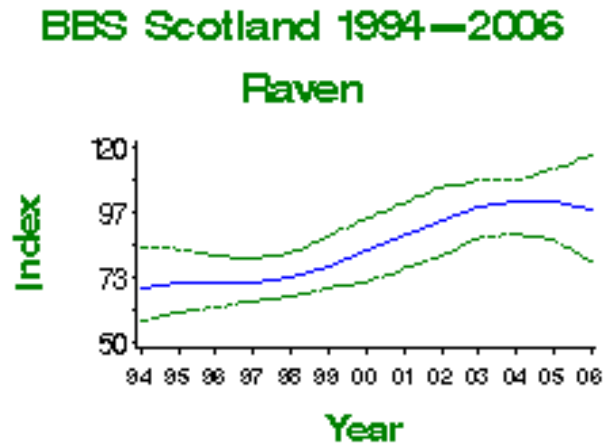
Are numbers increasing?

¹ See BTO web site @ <http://www.bto.org/birdtrends2007/wcrraven.htm>



Data from the annual breeding bird survey (BBS) strongly supports the idea that numbers are increasing in all parts of Britain, although the aggregated data for Scotland may hide declines in some areas, compared to increases elsewhere. There is no sign that the increase has halted, but recent figures suggest a slow-down in the rate of increase.

It is not clear whether range is expanding, though anecdotal reports suggest that this is the case, with reports of birds in areas where they were historically absent until recently. Ravens have been heavily persecuted in the past, and some persecution still continues. Declines in some areas have also been associated with habitat loss, especially afforestation (such as South-west Scotland).



When do they breed first and what do they do before then?

Age at first breeding is often taken to be at about three years old, but some non-breeding flocks have older birds than this, which suggests that finding a mate and establishing a territory can be difficult for some birds. Before ravens find a breeding territory, they aggregate together in large flocks (sometimes known as an “unkindness” of ravens). The role of these flocks is not well understood, but they may be social (finding a mate), or they may be a way of young birds finding food and defending it against adult birds.

Such large flocks may number hundreds of birds, though typically flock sizes are smaller than this over most of the range. Large flocks occur where there are abundant sources of food. Some well-established flocks may move around and occasionally break up into a several, smaller component flocks. It is these flocks that are often of greatest concern to livestock farmers (see below).

Are ravens protected?

As with all birds, ravens are protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981). Unlike carrion and hooded crows, magpies and some other corvids, they are not included on any of the annual General Licences issued by Scottish Government, but licences to take (and kill) birds when they are causing specific problems for farmers, can be issued. Each year SNH does issue a number of such licences, generally in areas where there are large numbers of livestock (especially sheep and cattle).

Do ravens cause declines in wild birds?

The increase in ravens is often seen as being a cause of declines of some upland breeding birds, especially waders such as golden plover, curlew and dotterel. Although one study showed high levels of raven predation on dotterel nests, there was no long term change in numbers attempting to breed, and other evidence supports the view that increases in raven numbers do not cause declines of other species.

Research is currently underway to explore this further, using long term datasets on upland birds (including ravens) to determine whether there is an association between raven increases and changes in numbers of some upland birds. This work is due to report in 2009.

Do ravens kill lambs, and if so, why?

Ravens do kill lambs, and there are well-documented reports across the world, for most species of raven. There is very good evidence to suggest that attacks on lambs are something that has been going on for many years in areas where ravens have been, and still are, common.

Ravens, like all crows, are highly opportunistic, and exploit a wide-range of food sources depending on what is available and when it is available. In addition they are regarded as being among the most 'intelligent' of all birds, and are quick to learn about (and exploit) new food sources. Their habit of feeding in large flocks also means that they can easily tackle potential prey much larger than they are.

What can be done about raven predation on lambs in Scotland?

Management measures are the most effective means of deterring raven predation. This means, where possible, housing ewes giving birth, or close shepherding in lambing parks. Lambing on the open hill or unattended lambing parks, is more likely to lead to problems.

Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981), licences can be issued to take a small number of birds that are causing *serious* damage. SNH is the licensing authority.

Where can I get more information?

Local agricultural and SNH offices can provide information on ravens. Licensing queries should also be directed to licensing@nature.scot. SNH advisory staff can provide information on ravens, their ecology and published information (Andy.Douse@nature.scot).

Information on ravens can be found on the web (see [BTO web site](#)) and the book published by Derek Ratcliffe ([The Raven, TAD Poyser](#)). See also the [Wikipedia](#) entry.

Who can I contact?

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