



Ground Nesting Bird Encounters



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1. Introduction

- 1.1. Many areas surveyed by SARG include habitat favoured by ground nesting bird species. Reptile surveys in particular are prone to the occasional, albeit accidental disturbance of legally-protected ground nesting birds.
- 1.2. There are three species of ground nesting birds, protected by schedule 1 that could suffer from accidental disturbance. These are the woodlark, the Dartford warbler and the nightjar.
- 1.3. Woodlarks prefer barren habitat devoid of cover so are less likely to nest in reptile survey areas, however care should be taken when crossing bare ground.
- 1.4. Dartford warbler nests are almost impossible to locate without years of expertise, so little can be done to further mitigate the low probability of disturbance.
- 1.5. Nightjars prefer to nest in areas eminently suitable for reptile survey and are infrequently flushed by the accidental disturbance of a surveyor.
- 1.6. This guide aims to describe the protocols to be adopted, should you encounter a ground nesting bird during a SARG survey.
- 1.7. Remember your survey training and always look where your foot will contact the ground, this is for your safety and the safety of any vulnerable animals or plants.

2. Likely bird species

- 2.1. Pheasants are frequently flushed from nests during surveys, however as an introduced species which is not protected by law, no further action is required. Pheasants explode from the ground in a startling manner, simultaneously calling and flapping wings noisily.
- 2.2. The nightjar has a medium brown colouration, appears very aerodynamic in form and makes almost no noise on take-off except for a couple of wing beats. A nightjar female may click or hiss in disapproval from a nearby perch or fly around you 'growling'.
- 2.3. Should you believe that you have disturbed a nightjar from the ground, it could be either a male roosting (white flashes on the wings) or a female flushed from a nest. Even if you identify a male bird, this could indicate the presence of a nest within 25m. Females are mostly responsible for incubation.

- 2.4. Nightjars can nest from the end of May until the end of September (much of the reptile survey season). There are usually two eggs or chicks. Eggs are incubated for 18 days, and the young fledge 21 days from hatching. Hence a nest is active for a little over a month.

3. Nightjar encounter protocol

- 3.1. As soon as the bird is flushed, try to identify the ground location it was flushed from and fix this in your mind.
- 3.2. Move to a location where you can see the bare ground from where the bird was flushed. Do not approach closer than 3 metres, as chicks have superb camouflage and it is possible to accidentally trample the nest.
- 3.3. Attempt to determine whether or not a nest exists. This will be determined by the presence of eggs or chicks, as there is little or no form to the nest structure itself. Chicks over 12 days old are capable of running from the nest to nearby cover.
- 3.4. If a nest is detected, log the location on your GPS unit. Marking the location by creating a waypoint is faster and more accurate than writing down the grid reference. If convenient, take a photograph of the nest area to help rediscover the site should the BTO wish to ring chicks.
- 3.5. Re-trace your steps away from the nest to a distance of at least 50m.
- 3.6. Now make a note of the location and contextual notes. E.g. species, gender of bird, nest contents (if any) and habitat within which the nest was located. Also note the last refugia number visited prior to the encounter.
- 3.7. If you are continuing your reptile survey, make a judgement as to whether the next refuge is close enough to disturb the nest site (~50m). If so, miss out any tins which risk further disturbance. Continue the survey making a wide pass around the nest site.

4. Reporting

- 4.1. Report your survey as normal, but please send an additional email to the SARG Reptile Officer reptiles@surrey-arg.org.uk with all the details noted about the encounter.

5. What actions are taken?

- 5.1. SARG will inform the British Trust for Ornithology by submitting a formal sighting report via the BirdTrack website. If a nest containing chicks or eggs is detected, we will directly inform the relevant county recorder or ringing coordinator as per the table below.

County	Coordinator	Contact
Surrey	Richard Denyer	richard.a.denyer@ntlworld.com
Hampshire	Keith Betton	keithbetton@hotmail.com
Berkshire	Richard Burness	records@berksoc.org.uk
West Sussex	Mark Mallalieu	recorder@sos.org.uk

- 5.2. We will also inform the land owner or manager to ensure that any habitat management or planned site activities do not pose a risk to the nest site.
- 5.3. Thirdly, SARG will temporarily remove refugia from the survey system that may risk disturbance of the nest site by subsequent surveyors. On SARG survey maps, an area of up to 50m from the nest site will be shown as a blackspot, to be avoided whilst surveying.
- 5.4. Eventually SARG will create a Ground Nesting Bird Encounter app to automate this process.

We are grateful to The Surrey Bird Club and the Hampshire Ornithological Society for contributing expertise to this guide.