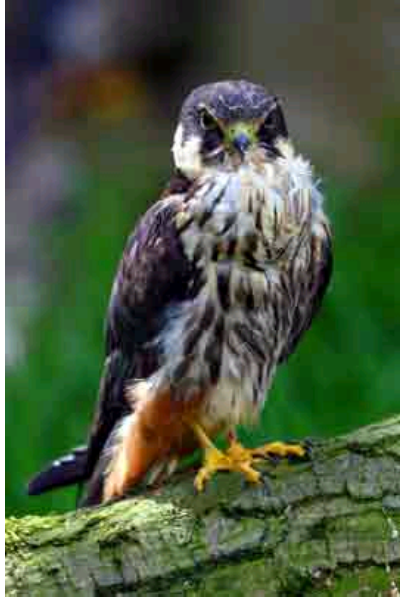


Hobby

The hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) catches dragonflies as well as hirundines such as martins and swallows



This small dark falcon, which looks like a large swift, catches dragonflies in flight and eats them on the wing.

Its long narrow wings and relatively short tail help it to be very agile and aerobatic. The plumage is slate grey above, with dark longitudinal stripes below and red under-tail coverts. The chin and cheeks are white with a prominent moustachial stripe. Young birds are browner and lack the red under-tail coverts.

Length: 30-36cm; wingspan: 82-92cm

Status in UK

2,200 pairs, increasing; GREEN listed; summer visitor, normally arrives in the south of England in late April/early May

Population trends

Towards the end of the 19th century hobbies were confined to England south of a line from the Severn to the Humber. There were occasional records as far north as Yorkshire and even Perthshire.

During the first half of the 1900s their range contracted and the first *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland: 1968-1971* indicated about 100 pairs confined to heaths and downs in south-central England. Their absence from East Anglia was explained by the lack of crows and magpies, as they take over their old nests.

Over the next 20 years numbers and range increased and it now appears that hobbies nesting in farmland and woodland may have been overlooked during the first atlas survey, so the population was some 500 - 900 by the late 1980s and by the late 90s the population was thought to be at least 1360. The reasons for this rapid

population increase, which has now reached 2200, are suggested as an increase and northerly movement of dragonflies and more crows and their nests. Thus the hobby seems to have benefited from climate change.

Habitat and distribution

They favour warm areas rich in flying insects, such as heaths, wetlands and farmland with hedgerow trees and woods.

They breed throughout southern England, the north Midlands and the eastern counties to the Scottish border, south-east Wales and south-east Scotland. One of the largest concentrations of hobbies in the UK can be seen on passage in May at Shapwick Moor National Nature Reserve, which adjoins the Hawk and Owl Trust's Shapwick Moor Reserve on the Somerset Levels.

Breeding

Usually takes over old crows' nests, but will use baskets secured in trees. They show a strong preference for Scots pine for their nests, but will breed in a variety of broadleaf trees and other conifers.

Feeding

Prey is taken on the wing, often by hawking over water. It feeds mainly on insects, including dragonflies, large beetles, moths and even swarming ants. It takes birds in flight, particularly swallows, martins and swifts, as well as skylarks and pipits; occasionally catches bats.