

Summary of the 2018 Bittern breeding season

This report provides a brief summary of the results of the Bittern Monitoring Programme in 2018. Although there have been no full-time Bittern monitoring field staff since 2011, it was again encouraging to see the excellent coverage of sites across the country. Many thanks to all the volunteers, conservation site staff and landowners who helped to monitor sites in 2018.

2018 breeding season

In 2018 there was another annual increase in the number of booming males, following the pattern of a year-on-year increase since 2007. A minimum of 188 boomers were recorded at 82 sites, compared to 166 boomers at 72 sites in 2017. The number of booming males in Somerset again increased, from 49 to 55 boomers, and there were increases in the Fens and the Norfolk Broads to record figures (since regular annual monitoring from 1990), although there was a slight drop this year on the Suffolk Coast. Booming was also reported from five new sites, and there was another increase in Wales.

Figure 1. The minimum number of booming male Bitterns (in red) in the UK and the number of occupied sites (in blue) between 1990 and 2018.

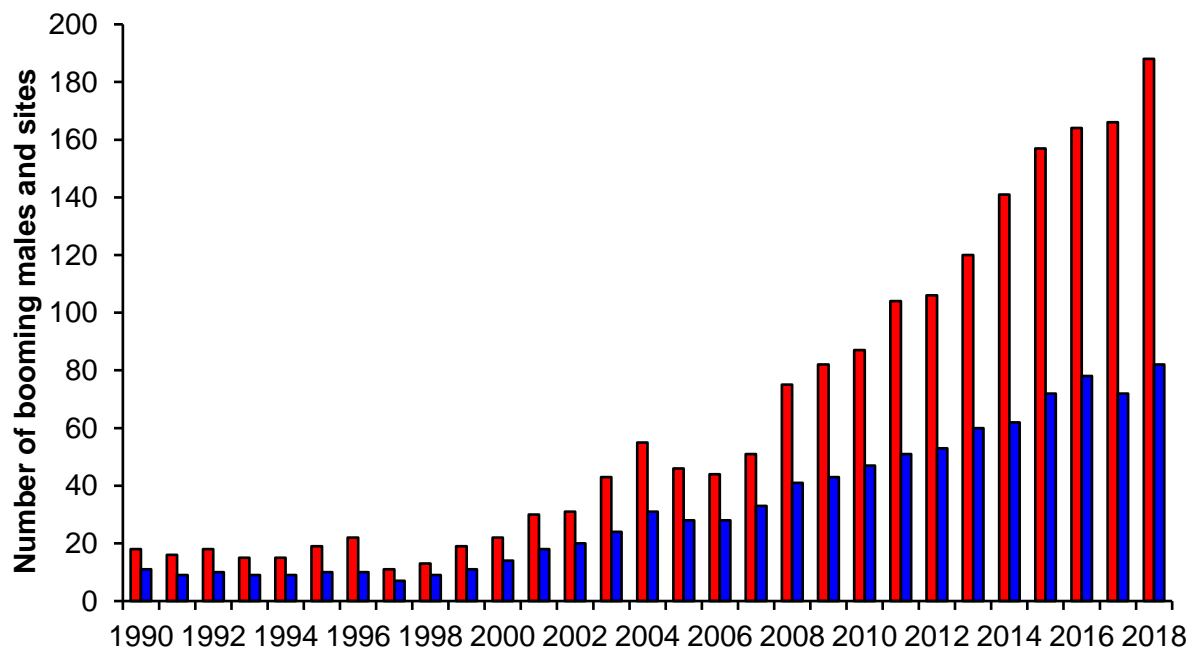


Table 1. The minimum number of booming male Bitterns in the UK since 2006 and the number of occupied sites involved each year (with the maximum figures shown in brackets).

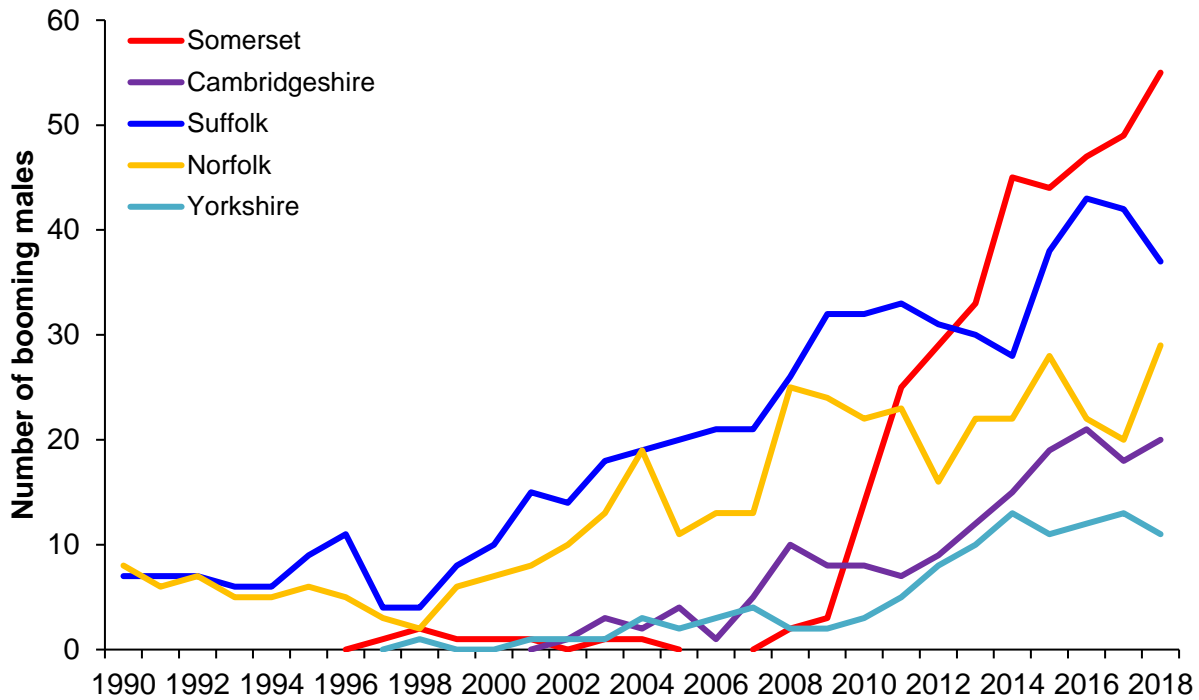
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Males	44 (63)	51 (63)	75 (87)	82 (100)	87 (106)	104 (128)	106 (129)	120 (139)	141 (154)	157 (178)	164 (183)	166 (176)	188 (205)
Sites	27 (35)	33 (40)	41 (47)	43 (55)	47 (58)	51 (63)	53 (65)	60 (70)	62 (69)	72 (83)	79 (91)	72 (80)	82 (92)

The 55 booming males in Somerset were mostly on Ham Wall (RSPB), Shapwick Heath (NE) and Westhay Moor (Somerset Wildlife Trust) in the Avalon Marshes. There were also five boomers at other sites elsewhere in the Somerset Levels. Booming numbers in the Fens increased again in 2018, after a slight drop in 2017. There was also an encouraging increase in the traditional stronghold of the Norfolk Broads, but a decline on the Suffolk Coast. There was further encouraging news from Wales in 2018 with seven booming males recorded, up from five in 2017.

Table 2. The minimum number of booming males within regions in England, and in Wales, between 2006 and 2018 (maximum booming numbers are shown in brackets).

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Somerset	0	0	2 (3)	3 (5)	14 (17)	25 (28)	29 (34)	33 (35)	45 (49)	44 (45)	47 (49)	49	55
Suffolk Coast	20 (29)	20 (25)	24 (27)	28 (31)	26 (29)	25 (30)	25 (27)	25 (27)	21 (22)	32 (35)	36	33	26
The Fens	2 (3)	6	12 (13)	12 (14)	14 (16)	15 (19)	15 (17)	16 (21)	22 (24)	25 (30)	29 (30)	27 (29)	34 (38)
Norfolk Broads	10 (12)	10 (17)	21 (25)	19 (23)	17 (20)	20 (25)	13 (15)	19 (19)	18 (20)	21 (22)	17 (22)	16 (17)	23 (29)
NE England	7 (9)	9	8 (9)	6 (8)	6 (8)	9 (10)	10 (15)	13 (19)	16 (18)	13 (15)	13 (18)	15 (18)	16 (18)
SE England	1 (2)	1 (2)	2	4 (5)	4 (5)	4 (5)	5 (7)	3 (4)	7	8 (9)	8 (9)	7 (9)	9
North Norfolk	3 (4)	3	4	5	5 (6)	3 (4)	3 (5)	3 (4)	4	7 (8)	5	5	5 (6)
E Midlands	0	0	0 (1)	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	1	2	3	1 (2)	3 (4)	4	2 (3)
SW England	0 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0 (1)	0	1	0 (1)	2	1	5
Midlands	0	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	2 (3)	3	5	1 (2)	3 (7)	0 (2)	3	3 (4)
NW England	1 (2)	2 (3)	2	2 (3)	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (3)	1 (3)	2	2	1 (2)	1 (3)	3 (5)
Wales	0 (1)	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	0 (1)	0	0 (1)	1 (2)	3 (4)	5	7
UK	44	51	75	82	87	104	106	120	140	157	164	166	188

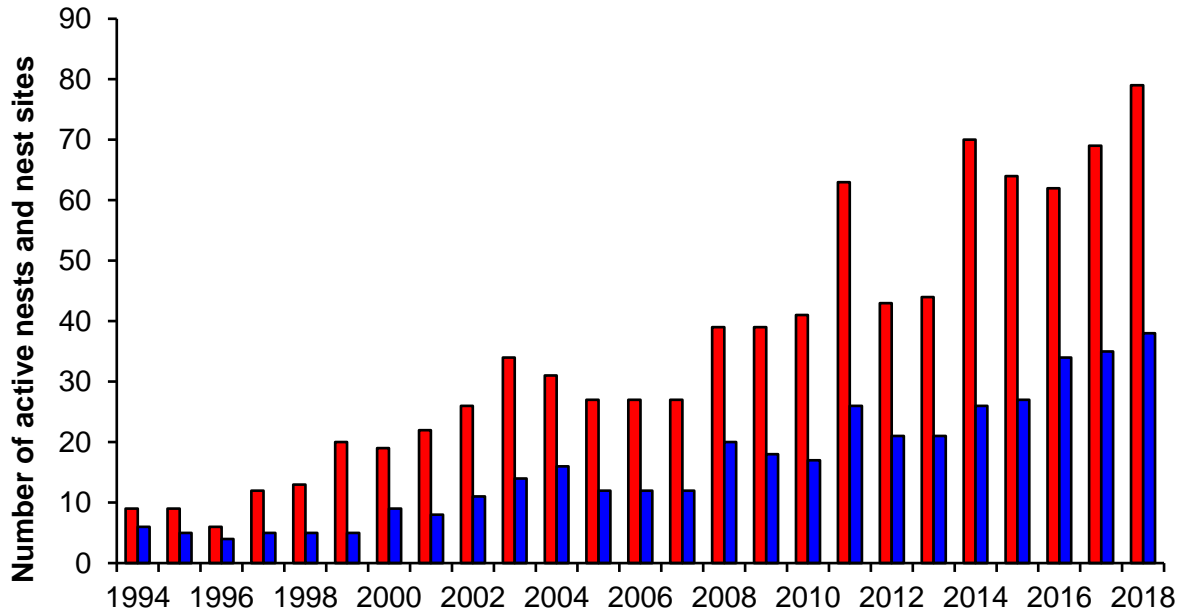
Figure 2. Annual change in the number of booming males in key counties for breeding Bitterns, between 1990 and 2018.



It was not possible to monitor all sites for nesting activity in 2018, which has now been the case since the last full census in 2011. No attempts are made to visit any active Bittern nests, but long watches to look for regular female feeding flights are undertaken at many sites, so the nesting figures quoted in this report are only for nests where females are feeding young. These methods for recording active nests have been followed since 1994. From the sites monitored in 2018, confirmed or probable nesting activity from a minimum of 79 nests was recorded at 37 sites, the highest annual total since monitoring of nests started in 1994 (Fig. 3).

It was a mixed year for nesting attempts this year. There was another increase on the Suffolk coast with 17 nesting attempts, up from 11 in 2017, despite the number of boomers dropping here. Numbers in the Norfolk Broads dropped slightly, but it is difficult to monitor nesting attempts here. There were encouraging increases in nesting attempts in the Fens and particularly in Yorkshire. Elsewhere, over 20 nests were again recorded in Somerset and there were nesting attempts at two sites in Wales. Nesting activity was recorded for the first time at Brading Marshes on the Isle of Wight. On a positive final note, the number of nesting attempts in 2018 is the highest recorded since nest monitoring began in 1994.

Figure 3. The number of confirmed and probable Bittern nesting attempts (in red) and sites (in blue), between 1994 and 2018.



Bittern monitoring in 2019

Please be aware that RSPB will not have dedicated Bittern monitoring field staff on the ground again this year. The RSPB will, however, still be coordinating Bittern monitoring across the country next year, through the Bittern Monitoring Programme, an **Action for Birds in England (AfBiE)** project. Under the **AfBiE** agreement, a conservation partnership between Natural England and RSPB, it is proposed that there will be periodic, rather than annual, full surveys every few years from now on.

For 2019, we would request that the many volunteers, conservation site staff and landowners continue to monitor sites for booming males and nesting attempts as has happened this year. Given the increasing number of successful nests reported across the country, it is increasingly likely that new and formerly-occupied sites will become occupied by booming Bitterns in the near future. The RSPB will aim to collate all the records, with the intention of producing a similar report next year. To report any observations this season, or to request a copy of the survey methods and recording forms, please contact me on the details below.

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