

Dartmoor Ring Ouzel Survey

2021



Ring ouzel foraging for nestlings or fledglings in acid grassland near Manga Hill © Fiona Freshney

Breeding season report by Fiona Freshney

January 2022

The Dartmoor Ring Ouzel Survey in 2021 was undertaken on an unfunded basis, co-ordinated by Fiona Freshney, with fieldwork undertaken by Fiona and a range of interested local birders, many of them Devon Birds members. Efforts resulted in good coverage of the consistent stronghold Tavy Cleave, and a minimum of two visits to all historic breeding sites, with COVID having a lesser impact on fieldwork than in 2020.

The following people (in no particular order) contributed survey effort or submitted sightings during the season, allowing this long-term monitoring project to continue: *Charlie Elder, Annabelle Strickland, and John, Fay Charlesworth, Angus Doulton, Chris Marcol, Charles Tyler, Jude Dinham-Price, Barry Rankine, Mike Daniels, Ian Brooker, John O'Connell-Davidson, Hilary Marshall, Stella Tracey and Rob Hubble, Jonathan Aylett, Nick Baker, Nik Ward, Tony John, Bob Barrow, Kate Ashbrook and Debs Deveney*. There were few incidental records submitted during the 2021 breeding season. Many apologies if I have over-looked anyone who contributed. Additional thanks go to Helen Booker (RSPB) for continued support and providing the population chart, ensuring consistency with previous years of survey.

Summary

Approximately twenty people contributed to the survey effort in 2021. All recent and historic breeding sites received at least two visits and some of them more. For example, survey coverage was good within the Tavy Cleave stronghold with six visits made between early April and mid-May. Ideally there would have been slightly greater coverage of the West Okement Valley. This site is always challenging to survey because of its size which means birds can be missed, although in many previous years there have been more incidental records submitted at least indicating presence.

The aim of the 2021 survey was to locate breeding pairs, determine their nesting status and if possible, observe whether any chicks successfully fledged. Records of all breeding season sightings, including potential passage birds, were collected.

Survey visits were made to: Tavy Cleave, the West Okement and Black Tor, West Mill Tor, Red-a-ven, Taw Valley, Steeperton and Oke Tor, Lakedown, Great Nodden/the River Lyd/Arms Tor, Warren House to Headland Warren, Manga Hill-North Teign, East Dart and Fur Tor. Independently, the Burrator Biodiversity Project conducted a breeding bird survey of two tetrads within the Burrator Reservoir catchment. In addition, Charlie Elder wrote a piece for the Western Morning News about the plight of the Dartmoor ring ouzels, requesting any sightings by the public be sent to him to forward to the Project. Sadly this did not produce additional records.

In 2021 the survey resulted in ring ouzel records from seven broad locations, but the only evidence of breeding was at Manga Hill, which indicated that the breeding attempt had been successful. Additionally, there was some early activity in the Challacombe to Headland Warren to Warren House area (a pair and a single male on 2nd April and a male in a gulley near Bennetts Cross on 7th April), but no evidence of ring ouzel breeding activity in this location was identified later in the season. In previous years it has been common to see ring ouzel appear at Headland Warren Farm in mid to late March, spend several days foraging in the fields in that area, before moving-on to breeding sites elsewhere on the moor or continuing their passage further north.

Whilst up to two further males were recorded in Tavy Cleave over several weeks in April and early May, no evidence of breeding activity or obvious territorial behaviour was observed and the males then departed. After mid-May there were sightings of single males in four separate locations. None of these was deemed likely to be breeding and the timing of the departure from Tavy and the subsequent sightings, rather suggests that these might have been one or both of the unattached Tavy males moving around the moor. A ring ouzel was also heard in the West Okement Valley on 13th April but following visits to the Valley failed to locate any ring ouzel.

No ringed birds were seen on Dartmoor during the 2021 season which may mean that the eight year old female that nested in Tavy Cleave in 2020 is now dead; eight was very elderly for an ouzel !

The result from this survey reinforces the clear decline in the population reported in 2020.

1. Introduction

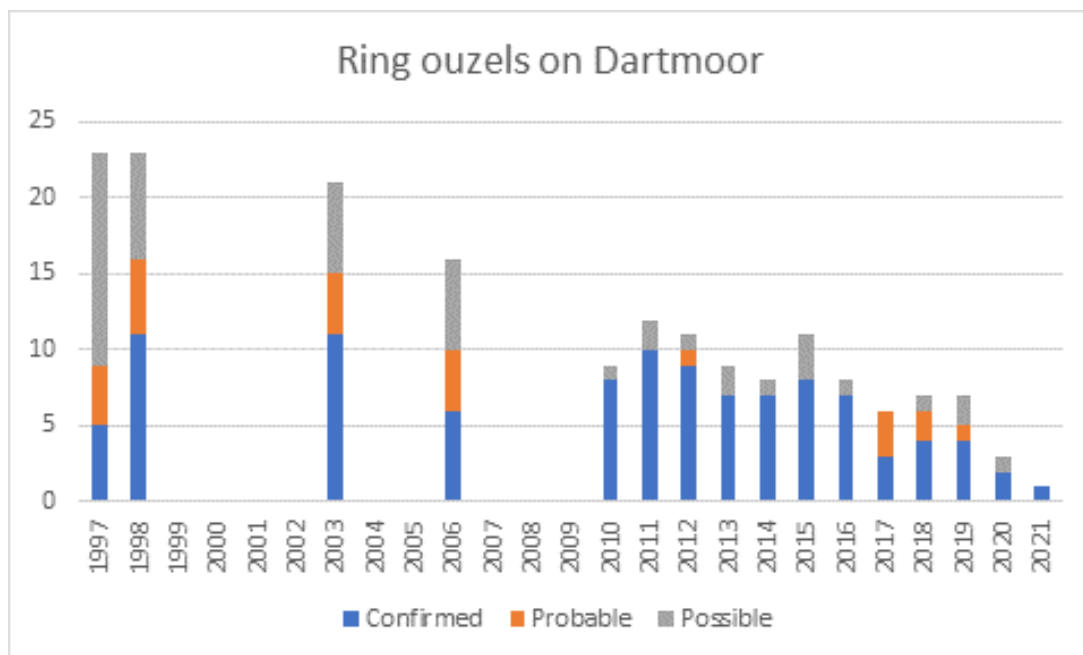
Since 2010 the Dartmoor ring ouzel population has been monitored annually. Between 2010 and 2015 the fully-funded surveys were managed by the RSPB, with annual reports produced by Nick Baker, Fiona Freshney and Helen Booker (Senior Conservation Officer, RSPB). From 2016 a more 'light touch' survey approach evolved, with more limited funding provided by Devon Birds and in 2017, an additional private funder. These latter surveys were run by Fiona Freshney through her role at the Devon Biodiversity Records Centre on behalf of a Devon Birds – Devon Wildlife Trust partnership and involved considerable volunteer input. Between 2017 and 2019 volunteer surveys were co-ordinated by the RSPB hosted Dartmoor Moorland Bird project. Since 2020 the survey has been entirely undertaken by volunteers with Fiona co-ordinating survey efforts.

The survey approach is detailed in earlier reports, but simply involves visiting historic sites, spending time scanning from vantage points (for as long as observers are able) whilst listening-out for singing males and 'chacking' birds. No nest finding has been attempted in the last few surveys, rather surveyors have attempted to identify behaviours suggestive of breeding.

2. Results and Discussion

Following the rather depressing 2020 outcome of only two confirmed breeding pairs within the whole of Dartmoor, 2021 was no better with only one confirmed, but successful breeding attempt at Manga Hill. The number of sightings, other than in Tavy Cleave, were minimal and none of these suggested any possible additional breeding attempts.

The graph below, provided by the RSPB, shows the downward trend in the Dartmoor ring ouzel population. At just one breeding pair, the population really is hanging-on by a thread and the most fragile of threads at that.



Numbers of confirmed, probable and possible ring ouzel breeding on Dartmoor since 1997

3. Site accounts

Tavy Cleave was visited on approximately ten occasions by a range of surveyors between April and the end of June. From early April two ring ouzel were present, initially thought to be a pair as one was clearly a male and the other potentially a very dark female with a well-developed gorget. However, subsequent visits revealed two males with no sign of a female. The two males were seen by several different observers in April, either loafing or quite mobile throughout the Cleave. Ger Tor appeared a focus and up-river of Ger Tor, just beyond the 'dog-leg' in the river. Neither demonstrated strong behaviour that indicated breeding and whilst at least one remained in the Cleave until 9th May, both had disappeared by the 11th and there was no further ouzel activity reported.



One of the Tavy Cleave males by Mike Daniels



Hew Lake – the only breeding site on Dartmoor in 2021.

Manga Hill – Six visits were made to this site, with no breeding activity observed until early June, when a male ring ouzel was spotted on grasslands above the North Teign with a beak full of invertebrates. The bird flew up slope in the direction of the gorse covered slopes of Hew Lake and was then watched returning from its destination to the grassland feeding area. A female ouzel was seen flying from Hew Lake, also collecting food. The pair were observed flying back and forth, emerging from slightly different parts of the gorse slope. The birds were not in the usual location at Manga Hill above the River Teign, but focused on Hew Lake, hence potentially being missed during earlier visits. They were collecting large amounts of food and so large nestlings or even fledged young were suspected. This was confirmed on the 13th June when a further observer felt that at least three fledglings were being fed in different locations in the gorse. Unexpectedly, an additional male was observed foraging in one of the 'paddocks' on the Manga Hill side of Teignhead farm. The bird did not appear to be paired-up; maybe one of the roving Tavy males?

West Okement and Black Tor – About five visits of varying levels of intensity were made to this area from April onwards and a male ring ouzel was heard singing briefly on 13th April, raising hopes, but there were no further records from during the season.

Headland Warren – Warren House – On 2nd April a pair and a single male were seen near Challacombe and Headland Warren Farm and there was a further sighting of a male in gullies near Bennetts Cross

on 7th April. Then there was a big gap, despite several survey visits being made to the area, until 28th May when a male was seen in the Warren House area over a period of about 1.5 hours, but showing no signs of being part of a breeding pair. This is a large and complex site, and it has previously been challenging to pin-down nesting attempts despite receiving records of ring ouzel in the area across the season. It is conceivable that there was a breeding pair in the area, but the lack of sightings by volunteers or incidental records from others, suggests not.

Red-a-ven – This site only received two survey visits with no birds have been seen in the Red-a-ven for over 5 years.

West Mill Tor – Only a couple of visits were made to this site. No breeding has been proven there since 2012. West Mill Tor seems much more heavily visited than it did ten years and parking is available just below the Tor so very accessible. It is possible this level of activity has made the tor less suitable for nesting.

Taw Valley – Belstone to Oke Tor to Steeperton – No ring ouzel were seen in this area. Only three official survey visits were made. There have been no ring ouzel pairs recorded here since 2014 and no incidental sightings submitted. It is quite a well visited area and it might be expected that some records might have been received from the general public.

Great Nodden, Lyd, Doe Tor Brook – This area was visited twice over the season with no evidence of ring ouzel.

Lakedown – Visited at least three times. No ring ouzels seen.

East Dart – Visited twice; no ring ouzels seen.

Burrator catchment – Survey visits were made to two tetrads within the catchment but no ouzels were recorded. However a male ring ouzel was reported foraging on grassland at Cuckoo Rock on the 2nd May; flushed into a large sycamore tree and then lost from view. [The observer checked the site again on 5th May but could not relocate the ouzel. Another observer made a further visit with no luck. This early in the season it could still have been a passage bird, or maybe a Tavy male; we have no exact date for the two males abandoning Tavy Cleave

Fur Tor – At least one visit; no ouzels seen, but there has been no recorded ouzels there during the last ten years of monitoring and the habitat is not particularly suitable, lacking dwarf shrub cover.

Haytor – This area wasn't methodically checked but breeding has been rare here despite plenty of suitable habitat. The level of recreational pressure is unlikely to favour ring ouzel. The last breeding attempt (unusual in that there had not been breeding recorded from the area for several decades), may just have been a lucky attempt; an early nest in a reasonably quiet location before the summer visitors descended. Since the outbreak of COVID, Haytor, like other accessible parts of Dartmoor, have experienced a significant increase in footfall, accompanied by increases in 'wild camping', bouldering and heavy use all year round.

Other sightings: a male flying up the River Plym from Trowlesworthy Farm towards Legis Tor warren on 26th April, and a male at near Dr Blackall's Drive near Aish Tor on 13th June. It is fairly unusual to get south moor sightings during the breeding season, but at this late a date it was potentially just an unpaired, 'wandering' male.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that we are monitoring the last days of the ring ouzel on Dartmoor. Whilst it is impossible not to harbour a tiny grain of optimism that there will be some form of recovery in 2022 or beyond, evidence of decline and disappearance of ring ouzel elsewhere in the UK provides little to keep that hope alive. Ring ouzel have been lost from both Exmoor and Shropshire in the last 20 years; in the latter there were only about twelve pairs by 1999, all on the Long Mynd, by 2003 only one breeding pair and in 2004 only a single male was recorded. Since then there has been no evidence of breeding in Shropshire.

Despite the gloomiest of outlooks I suspect there will still be some of us that will spend a few days out and about in their old haunts in 2022 just hoping....