

Summary of the 2017 Bittern breeding season

This report provides a brief summary of the results of the Bittern Monitoring Programme in 2017. 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 2017.

2017 breeding season

In 2017 there was a very slight increase in the number of booming males since 2016, following the pattern of a year-on-year increase since 2006. A minimum of 166 boomers were recorded at 72 sites, compared to 162 boomers at 78 sites in 2016. The number of booming males in Somerset increased by two, from 47 to 49 boomers, although there was a slight drop this year in the core areas in eastern England; Suffolk Coast, Norfolk Broads and The Fens. Booming was also reported from three new sites, and there was another increase in Wales this year.

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 2017.

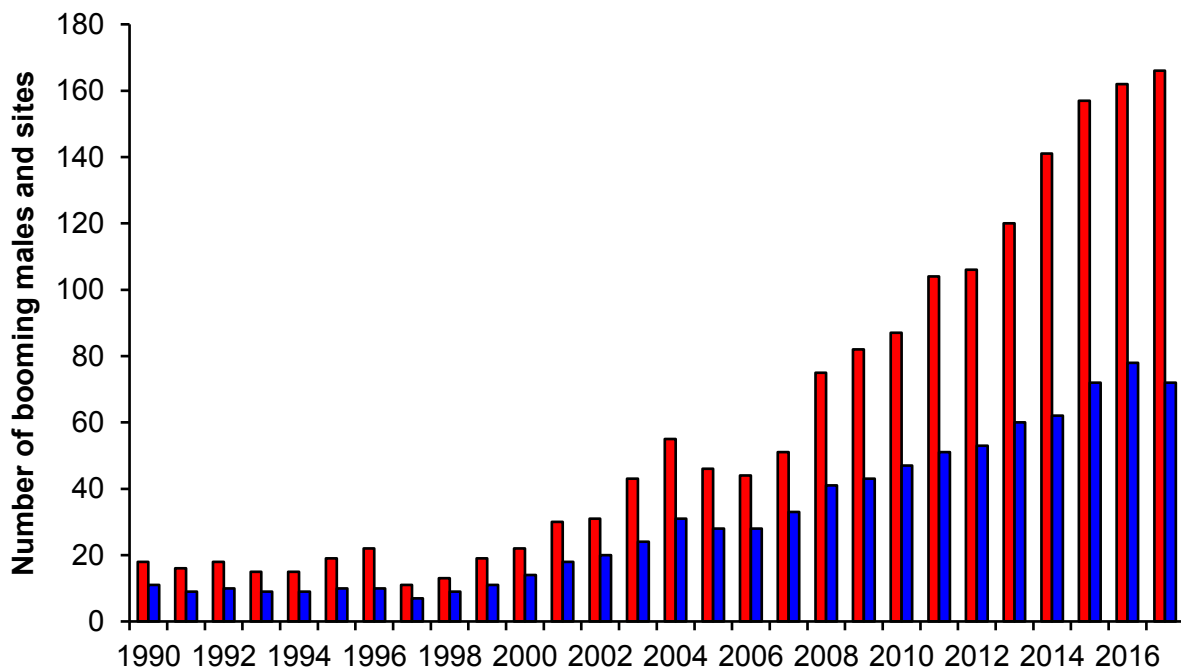


Table 1. The minimum number of booming male Bitterns in the UK since 2004 and the number of occupied sites involved each year (with the maximum figures shown in brackets).

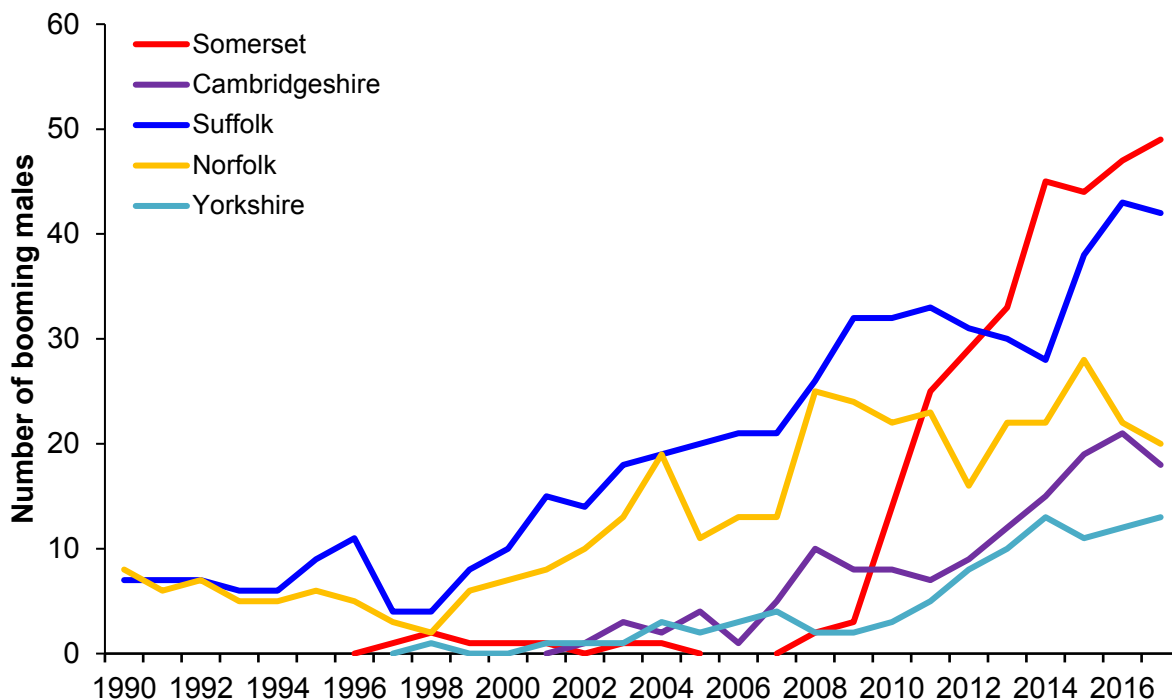
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Males	55 (65)	46 (54)	44 (63)	51 (63)	75 (87)	82 (100)	87 (106)	104 (128)	106 (129)	120 (139)	141 (154)	157 (178)	162 (179)	166 (176)
Sites	31 (33)	28 (30)	27 (35)	33 (40)	41 (47)	43 (55)	47 (58)	51 (63)	53 (65)	60 (70)	62 (69)	72 (83)	78 (87)	72 (80)

The 48 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 three boomers at other sites elsewhere in the Somerset Levels. Booming numbers in the Fens dropped slightly in 2017, the first year-on-year decline since 2006. There were also slight decreases in the traditional strongholds in the Norfolk Broads and on the Suffolk Coast in 2017. These declines may be explained by the 2016/17 winter in the east of England being much drier than average (from Met Office data). There was further encouraging news from Wales in 2017 with five booming males recorded, up from three in 2016.

Table 2. The minimum number of booming males within regions in England, and in Wales, between 2004 and 2017 (maximum booming numbers are shown in brackets).

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Somerset	1	0	0	0	2 (3)	3 (5)	14 (17)	25 (28)	29 (34)	33 (35)	45 (49)	44 (45)	47 (48)	49
Suffolk Coast	19 (20)	20 (24)	20 (29)	20 (25)	24 (27)	28 (31)	26 (29)	25 (30)	25 (27)	25 (27)	21 (22)	32 (35)	36	33
The Fens	2 (3)	4	2 (3)	6	12 (13)	12 (14)	14 (16)	15 (19)	15 (17)	16 (21)	22 (24)	25 (30)	28 (29)	27 (29)
Norfolk Broads	17 (22)	8	10 (12)	10 (17)	21 (25)	19 (23)	17 (20)	20 (25)	13 (15)	19 (19)	18 (20)	21 (22)	17 (22)	16 (17)
NE England	9 (10)	9 (12)	7 (9)	9	8 (9)	6 (8)	6 (8)	9 (10)	10 (15)	13 (19)	16 (18)	13 (15)	13 (18)	15 (18)
SE England	3 (4)	0 (2)	1 (2)	1 (2)	2	4 (5)	4 (5)	4 (5)	5 (7)	3 (4)	7	8 (9)	7 (8)	7 (9)
North Norfolk	2 (3)	3	3 (4)	3	4	5	5 (6)	3 (4)	3 (5)	3 (4)	4	7 (8)	5	5
E England	0	0	0	0	0 (1)	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	1	2	3	1 (2)	3 (4)	4
SW England	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0 (1)	0	1	0 (1)	2	1
Midlands	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	2 (3)	3	5	1 (2)	3 (7)	0 (2)	3
NW England	1	1	1 (2)	2 (3)	2	2 (3)	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (3)	1 (3)	2	2	1	1 (3)
Wales	1	0 (1)	0 (1)	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	0 (1)	0	0 (1)	1 (2)	3 (4)	5
UK	55	46	44	51	75	82	87	104	106	120	140	157	162	166

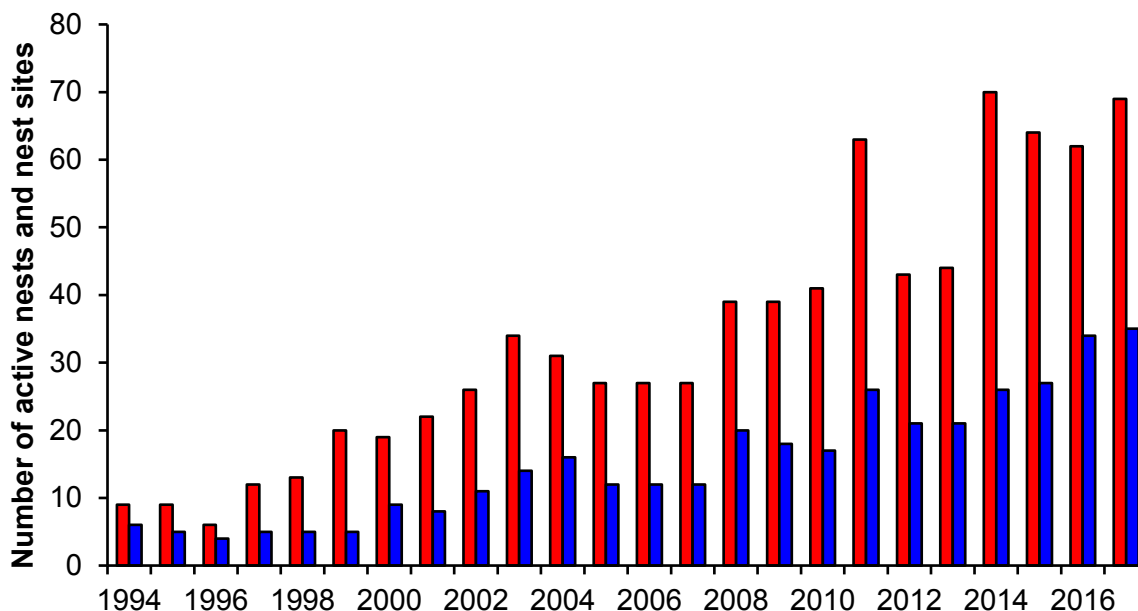
Figure 2. Annual change in the number of booming males in key counties for breeding Bitterns, between 1990 and 2017.



It was not possible to monitor all sites for nesting activity in 2017, 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, 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 2017, confirmed or probable nesting activity from a minimum of 69 nests was recorded at 35 sites, the second highest annual total since monitoring of nests started in 1994 (Fig. 3).

It was another poor year for nesting attempts in East Anglia, which may be linked to the drier than average 2016/17 winter, although there was an increase on the Suffolk coast with eleven nesting attempts, up from only five nests in 2016. Numbers in the Norfolk Broads remained stable but there was another drop in the number of reported nesting attempts in the Fens. Elsewhere, over 20 nests were recorded in Somerset and there was nesting again on Anglesey, following the first confirmed nest in over 30 years here in 2016. On a positive final note, the number of sites with nesting activity in 2017 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 2017.



Bittern monitoring in 2018

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 2018, 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 of 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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