

Summary of the 2019 Bittern breeding season

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 2019.

2019 breeding season

In 2019 there was another annual increase in the number of booming males, following the pattern of a year-on-year increase since 2006. **A minimum of 200 boomers were recorded at 90 sites, compared to 189 boomers at 83 sites in 2018. On RSPB reserves, 102 confirmed boomers were recorded, up from 92 in 2018.** There were encouraging increases in the Fens and NE England, to record levels (since regular annual monitoring from 1990). Booming was also reported from six 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 2019.

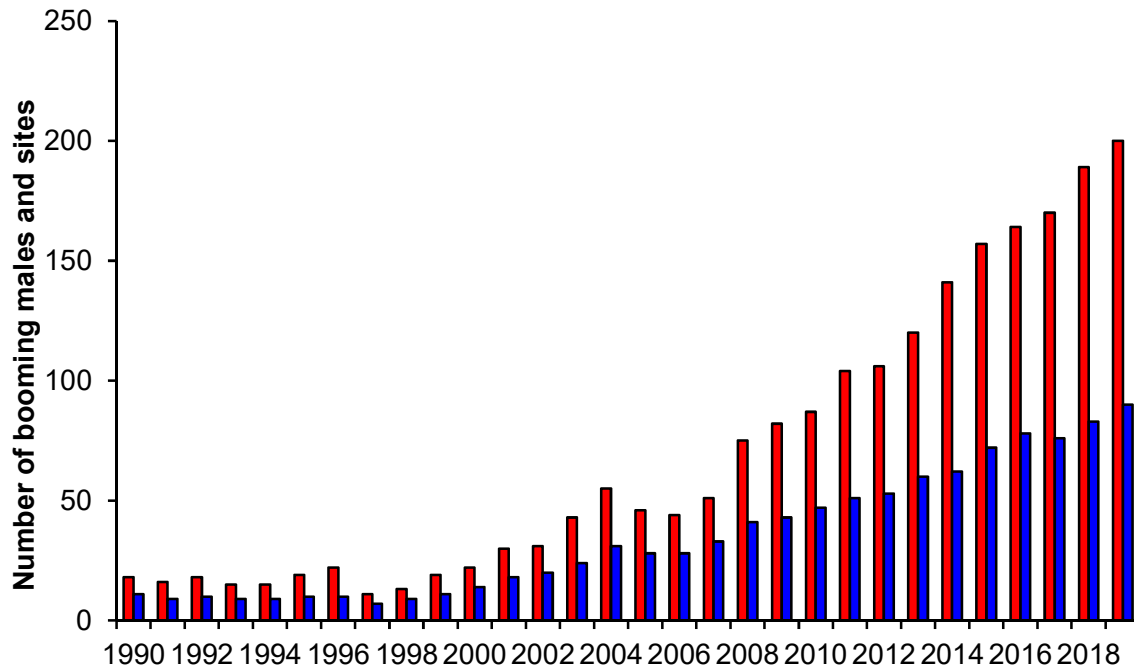


Table 1. The minimum number of booming male Bitterns in the UK since 2006 and the number of occupied sites involved each year (with the maximum figures shown in brackets).

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Males	44 (63)	51 (63)	75 (87)	82 (100)	87 (106)	104 (128)	106 (129)	120 (139)	141 (154)	157 (178)	164 (183)	170 (184)	189 (207)	200 (210)
Sites	27 (35)	33 (40)	41 (47)	43 (55)	47 (58)	51 (63)	53 (65)	60 (70)	62 (69)	72 (83)	79 (91)	76 (88)	83 (93)	90 (94)

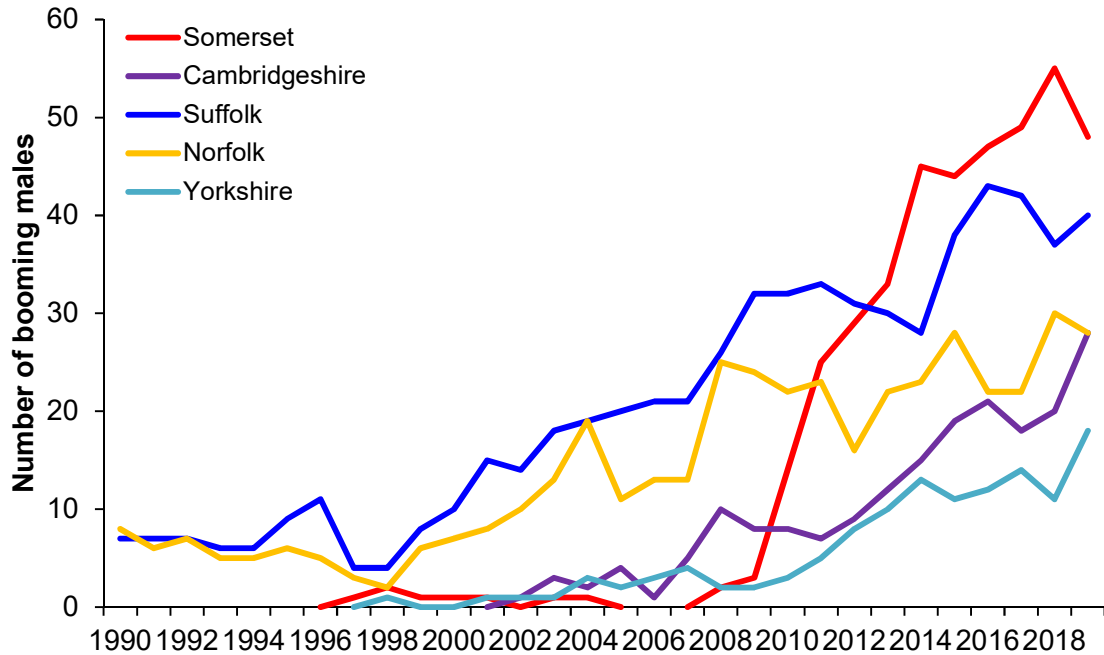
Table 2. The minimum number of booming males within regions in England, and in Wales, between 2006 and 2018 (maximum booming numbers are shown in brackets).

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Somerset	0	0	2 (3)	3 (5)	14 (17)	25 (28)	29 (34)	34 (35)	45 (49)	44 (45)	47 (49)	49	55	48
The Fens	2 (3)	6	12 (13)	12 (14)	14 (16)	15 (19)	15 (17)	16 (22)	23 (25)	26 (31)	29 (30)	28 (31)	35 (39)	43 (44)
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	28 (32)
NE England	7 (9)	9	8 (9)	6 (8)	6 (8)	9 (10)	10 (15)	13 (19)	16 (18)	13 (15)	13 (18)	16 (20)	16 (18)	26 (29)
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)	21
SE England	1 (2)	1 (2)	2	4 (5)	4 (5)	4 (5)	5 (7)	3 (4)	7	8 (9)	8 (9)	8 (10)	9	9 (10)
North Norfolk	3 (4)	3	4	5	5 (6)	3 (4)	3 (5)	3 (4)	4	6 (7)	5	5	5 (6)	4
E Midlands	0	0	0 (1)	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	1	2	3	1 (2)	3 (4)	4	2 (3)	2
SW England	0 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0 (1)	0	1	0 (1)	2	2 (3)	5	4 (5)
Midlands	0	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	2 (3)	3	5	1 (2)	3 (7)	0 (2)	3	3 (4)	5
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)	2
Wales	0 (1)	0	0	1 (2)	0 (1)	0	0 (1)	0	0	1 (2)	3 (4)	5 (6)	7	8
UK	44	51	75	82	87	104	106	120	140	157	164	170	189	200

The number of confirmed booming males in Somerset dropped by 13% this year, from 48 to 55 boomers, although more sites were occupied. Of the 48 booming males in Somerset, 38 were on the Ham Wall (RSPB), Shapwick Heath (Natural England) and Westhay Moor (Somerset Wildlife Trust) reserves in the Avalon Marshes. A further five boomers were found at other sites in the Avalon Marshes and there were also five boomers at other sites elsewhere in the Somerset Levels. Booming numbers in the Fens and NE England increased by 23% and 56% respectively – for the first time, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk held the same number of boomers in 2019. There was a slight recovery on the Suffolk coast but a slight drop in the traditional stronghold of the Norfolk Broads. Encouragingly, there was a boomer at Cley NWT reserve for the first time since 2010 and an increasing number of boomers at sites such as Langford

Lowfields (Nottinghamshire) and Dungeness (Kent). There was further encouraging news from Wales in 2019 with eight booming males recorded.

Figure 2. Annual change in the number of booming males in key counties for breeding Bitterns, between 1990 and 2019.



Bittern monitoring in 2020

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 2020, 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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