Ravens *Corvus corax* breeding in Worcestershire – 2019 update

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I can add six new nest sites this year, thanks to help from other birders. Despite this, the number of nesting pairs in Worcestershire appears to be stabilising over the past few years as former sites are abandoned (Table 01):

Year	Confirmed	Possible
2019	14	6
2018	13	4
2017	15	4

Table 01. Nesting pairs of ravens reported in *Worcestershire Record*

Moreover, the 2017 and 18 figures missed some well-established nests that were subsequently reported to me, raising the possibility that both were under-estimates, and that the actual population may have slightly declined.

So, does this signal a pause or even the end of the dramatic increase in raven range and abundance in this corner of England? The BTO's annual Breeding Bird Survey (Harris *et al* 2019) provides some longer term population trends over larger areas and broader timescales (Table 02):

	England	South West England	Wales
1995-2015	+130	+125	+34
1995-2016	+68	+36	+34
1995-2017	+50	+6	+35

Table 02. Long-term percentage changes in raven populations from The Breeding Bird Survey annual reports, 2016 – 2018.

There is no data for the West Midlands covering these periods, and the South West is the only English region available, hence its inclusion. Of course, the use of 1995 as the base year shows raven numbers in England are still increasing, but the rate of increase is clearly slowing, and the latest figure, unlike the previous two, does not reach statistical significance. The South West trends are another stark illustration of this phenomenon.

The Welsh numbers are particularly interesting, because this expanding population was considered to be the source of the original explosion in raven numbers along several western English counties. It now seems that the expansion has stalled and the population has been stable for the past three years. Time will tell if this is happening in Worcestershire.

The results of this year's survey in Worcestershire are shown in the same format as previous years (01). "Confirmed" breeding sites are where adults and the nest, or with young were observed, and "possible" breeding sites are where adults were displaying territorial behaviours by a suspected nest site. Once again, a "confirmed" record does not imply successful breeding, as information on success or failure is incomplete. It refers to observed breeding attempts rather than successful fledging. However, any observations that do exist have been added to Tables 03 and 04 below.

One record from Storridge has been added for interest. It is only c.200 metres over the border (in Herefordshire) but the pair are often seen using the resources of Old Storridge Common, and have been known to do so for several years.

PROBABLE

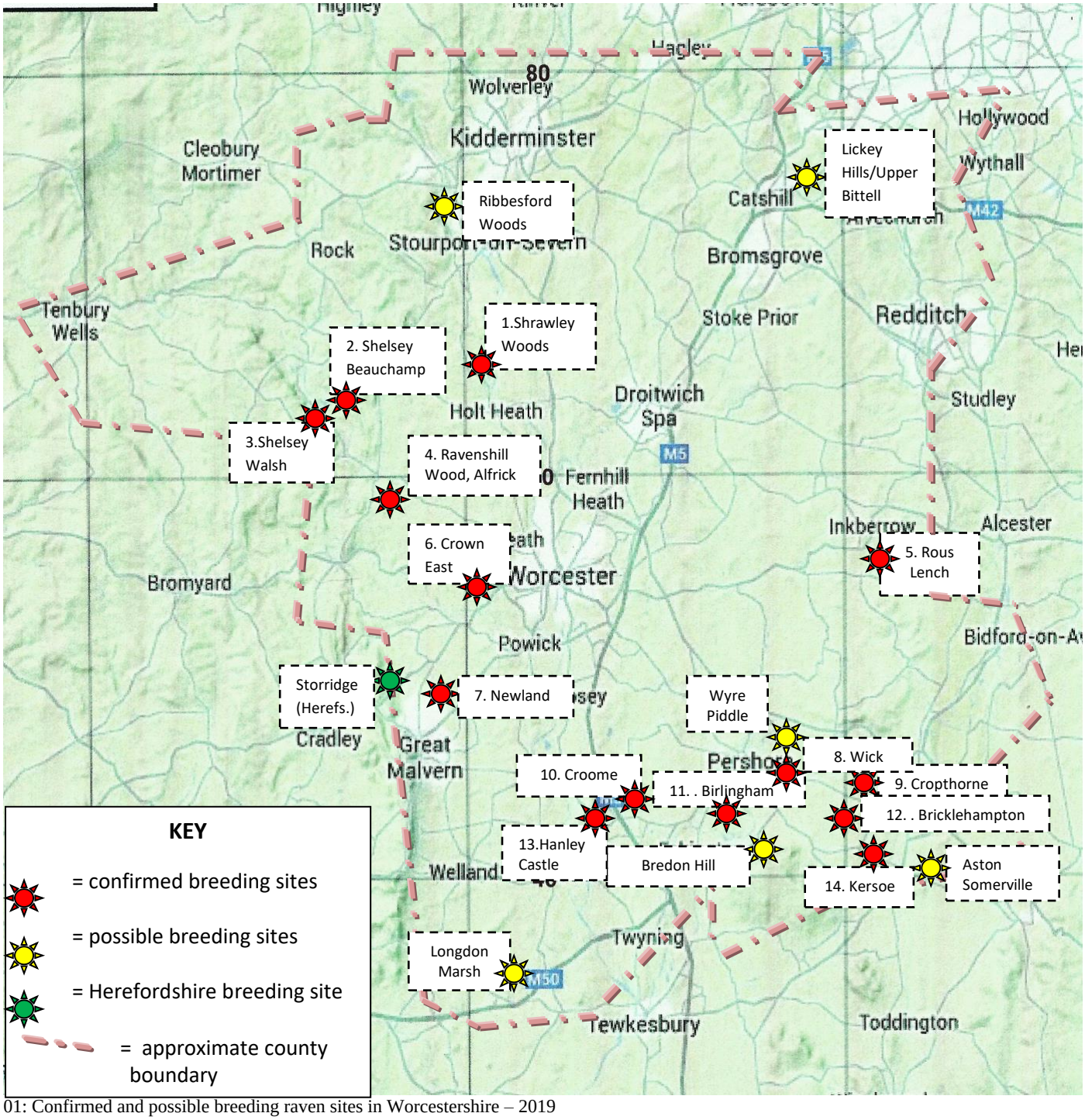
1.	Shrawley Woods	Traditional nest defended actively by both adults and three fledged young seen in May.
2.	Shelsey Beauchamp	Nest in tall conifer actively defended by two adults in early May.
3.	Shelsey Walsh	Traditional nest intact and one fledged young seen, defended actively by adults in early May.
4.	Alfrick	Adults defended nest in Ravenshill Wood and one young seen in May. Nest used in previous years.
5.	Rous Lench	Nest seen and defended actively by adult in April. Both adults and one young seen in May.
6.	Crown East, Worcester	Adults noisily defending nest area in late April. Nest seen in mid-May but any young already fledged and not present. Site used in previous years.
7.	Newland	Nest seen in North Wood. However, no young raised and adults moved away by late April. Reasons unknown.
8.	Wick	Nest seen with two/three young late April.
9.	Cropthorne	Nest seen in Smokey Lane, aggressively defended by adults. Two young seen in May.
10.	Croome	Nest in traditional tree with at least two fledged young defended by both adults in late April.
11.	Birlingham	Four well grown chicks visible in nest in tall cedar in late April.
12.	Bricklehampton	Alternative nest used with young visible and defended by adult in April.
13.	Hanley Castle	Nest seen in tall conifer with sitting female in April. However, site abandoned by mid-May and reasons unknown. Site previously used for several years.
14.	Kersoe	Nest seen with two adults defending in April.
	Storridge (Herefordshire)	Nest in conifer defended by two adults. Old Storridge Common is frequented by this pair.

Table 03. CONFIRMED breeding sites 2019 are where adults and the nest, or with young were observed CONFIRMED

POSSIBLE

Upper Bittell/Lickey Hills	Resident pair still present but nest site not yet located.
Ribbesford Woods	Two adults defending area in June. Nesting observed in this location in previous years.
Wyre Piddle	Nesting activity observed around private grounds in this and previous years. Adults and young seen near this location later. To be surveyed earlier next year.
Bredon Hill	Ravens frequently at St. Catherine's Farm, but nest not located.
Aston Somerville	Adults seen in proximity to suspected nest site in February. Possible juvenile seen in same location in June. Site is not accessible.
Longdon Marsh	Two adult pairs seen in April. Breeding occurred in this location last year, but nest not yet found.

Table 04. POSSIBLE raven breeding sites 2019 where adults were displaying territorial behaviours by a suspected nest site



01: Confirmed and possible breeding raven sites in Worcestershire – 2019

02. Shrawley Wood. Well-feathered raven chicks May 2019

The spacing between these nests is interesting. In Derek Ratcliffe's brilliant study of this species in 1997[4], he asserts that within a largish area, breeding density can be linked with the availability of food. The mean nearest neighbour distance between nests was lowest in the upland sheepwalks of central Wales during the 1970s at 1.7km, with equivalent figures for the north coasts of Cornwall and Devon in the 1930s at 1.81km, and 2.44km in Shetland in the late 1980s/early 1990s. These environments held multiple advantages for ravens such as sheep carrion and sea bird nesting colonies but these scarcely apply in our county. And yet close proximities do exist between several of the current nest sites, for example 2.25km at Shelsey Beauchamp and Shelsey Walsh, and the same between Cropthorne and Bricklehampton. However, it is reasonable to speculate that the food waste previously dumped at the Throckmorton landfill site was a factor behind the enhanced breeding density in the south east of Worcestershire, although suitable breeding sites might be another. But the Throckmorton feeding opportunity has ceased, and it will be interesting to see how the established local pairs adapt (or do not) to the loss of that bounty.

Ravens are successful generalists, and have already demonstrated their ability to thrive in lowland agricultural England, so may simply exploit other local resources.

Once again, I would warmly welcome any sightings or observations from *Worcestershire Record* readers to add to the reliability of these annual surveys. It is unlikely that Rous Lench holds the only breeding pair in the east of the county.

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