

Rooks

I'm sure we all take Rooks for granted – after all, they are just those common, big, black noisy things that nest in big groups in the top of trees. And they have a most unattractive bare face and baggy trousers!

But really they are very interesting birds and there seem to be many unanswered questions about them. Why do some rookeries last for hundreds of years while others come and go? Why do they often choose to nest in apparently unsuitable locations (think of the rookery over the road at Solbury Farm on the road to Haverfordwest) when there are loads of other trees to choose from? And why do they often choose a group of trees in a village or next to some man-made structure – think Dale, Herbrandston or St Brides Castle?



There is currently a Rook Survey under way which, whilst not answering these questions, will at least give us information as to whether they are thriving or not. There are certainly a lot of sites where rooks used to nest and no longer do and some well-known rookeries seem to have drastically shrunk (e.g. Dale) – but there are also new sites springing up all the time.

Rooks are quite omnivorous but their main source of food is soil invertebrates – creepy crawlies such as leatherjackets, chafer beetles and worms. They hack at the ground with their heavy sharp bill in order to find these delicacies. Starlings also feed on exactly the same things – and their populations have plummeted. So have Rooks gone the same way? We don't have the answers yet – watch this space. Incidentally, the “omnivorous” description means that they eat seeds, and they do eat planted grain. For many years they were commonly shot, and indeed still legally can be shot in England (under general licence) though not in Wales (as far as I can tell).

In our windy corner of the world most Rooks have to rebuild their nest each year and they can do this remarkably quickly. We counted one rookery on 15th March and found 78 nests. 10 days later it had 104 nests!

During nest site selection and nest building, rookeries can be very noisy, later to quieten down a bit when the birds are on eggs. Only for the volume to ratchet up a number of notches when there are young in the nest! And then it all goes quiet when the young fledge, until the next spring.

In the late summer Rooks will roost communally with other corvids, notably Jackdaws and even Crows. These roosts can be huge – maybe thousands of birds. They all fly in together from pre-roost sites in a long raggedy line just before dusk – you can hear the rustle of the wings as they pass low overhead. When we lived in west Berkshire, we lived close to a roost and right underneath a roost flight path. It was quite an experience, and the dense mass of birds interfered with the TV reception! Mark Cocker writes about this in his book *Crow Country* but it is not something which is often mentioned.

For a map of rookeries found during the survey go to the Pembrokeshire Bird Blog <https://pembsbirds.blogspot.com/> and click on the Avifauna tab.

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