

BMC climbing restrictions for nesting birds policy

Introduction

The BMC is the national representative body for climbers, hillwalkers and mountaineers. BMC members state that contact with nature is an important part of their enjoyment of the outdoors, and the BMC is committed to protecting both the landscape and wildlife of upland and crag environments and also people's freedom to enjoy them.

The BMC recognises protected or rare nesting birds create potential conflicts between access and conservation, and acknowledges it plays an important role during the nesting season through the education of the climbing community and the agreement of voluntary climbing restrictions where appropriate.

This policy sets out the principles that have been followed with success by the BMC in agreeing voluntary restrictions in order to make this process transparent to climbers and partner organisations alike.

History and context

The BMC pioneered climbing restrictions for cliff nesting birds, starting in the 1970's and evolving ever since into the current extensive voluntary system in place across England and Wales, in collaboration with numerous partner organisations.

Today, this long established voluntary system provides a flexible, immediate and effective means of agreeing restrictions and communicating information to climbers at minimal cost. Self-regulation is at the heart of any voluntary system and is only effective if it can be shown to be reasonable and proportionate and the community consequently buy into the restrictions agreed. The system as it stands is demonstrably successful because the BMC and its partners follow a 'least restrictive option' and 'evidence based' approach, which climbers trust to be fair and as a result is widely adhered to.

It has also become clear that disturbance by recreational users is only one part of a much wider issue for sensitive bird species. Habitat loss, food availability, predation, land management and persecution/theft are also significant contributing factors to the breeding outcome of nesting birds, and should be considered within the context in which restrictions are agreed.

As well as following agreed restrictions, climbers are a very useful asset in a number of other ways:

- Regularly providing information on difficult to access cliff nesting birds.
- Volunteers helping with bird surveys and monitoring.
- Volunteers assisting bird ringing in locations that require technical skills to access, in collaboration with licenced ringers.
- The BMC encourages the climbing community to report information about persecution or theft to the police and other relevant organisations.

Key principles

1. BMC voluntary restrictions are only agreed for Schedule 1 species, regular dense nesting colonies of sea birds and certain other locally or nationally rare bird species (such as those listed as protected features of SSSIs).
2. The BMC does not agree precautionary restrictions which attempt to second guess the behaviour of nesting birds. Restrictions must be evidence based, consider the value of access and recreation alongside conservation value and always follow the least restrictive option.
3. Giving appropriate time and space for the birds to nest successfully, whilst not unnecessarily restricting larger areas or for longer periods than are required to give the birds a good chance of nesting success.

4. For a new nest site, there must be evidence of birds on location, displaying nesting behaviour before a restriction can be agreed.
5. Where there is an established nest site that has been used and monitored for two or more seasons prior, restrictions that roll on each year may be agreed. Regular monitoring of the site is still required to ensure the birds do arrive and nest as expected. If birds fail to nest within the normal period in which the species could be expected to establish a nest, the restriction would be lifted immediately.
6. Any restrictions agreed between the BMC and partner organisations/landowners will be displayed on the BMC's Regional Access Database (RAD – www.thebmc.co.uk/rad), which is the official source of access information for climbers in England & Wales.
7. The exact geographical extent and dates of a restriction will always vary based on the species, individual birds and location on the crag. Good communication, sharing of information and negotiation between partner organisations, landowners, BMC Access Officers and/or local BMC Access Volunteers is crucial to ensure an appropriate restriction is agreed. BMC staff and volunteers commit to share any information received about potential nest sites with our partners and we expect the same in return to ensure everyone is informed and up to date.
8. Monitoring of nest sites within a restricted area is required to ensure that the nest site is occupied and to assess the progress of the birds over the season. If the nest fails or the young fledge early, the restriction should be lifted early. If the young fledge later than expected, the restriction can easily be extended through agreement with the BMC.
9. Site notices may sometimes be used, depending on the circumstances. Appropriate language which encourages good behaviour rather than threatening legal action should always be the default where public signage is required. Signs must be taken down immediately when a restriction ends, particularly if the restriction is lifted early. This is crucial to ensure on site information correlates with information displayed on RAD to avoid confusion.
10. For certain crag nesting species such as kestrels and tawny owls, which are not Schedule 1 but do frequently nest on crags, the standard approach would be to notify climbers to avoid the specific route(s) the birds are nesting on, but a wider restriction would not be considered appropriate.
11. Abundant and robust species (such as jackdaws) that routinely nest on crags but which are not susceptible to disturbance would not normally necessitate any restriction. However climbers are always advised to climb quickly past the nest site and minimise disturbance on any nest sites for these species of bird.

Case studies: successful, established voluntary climbing restrictions

LAKE DISTRICT

Bird species:	<i>Peregrine, raven, sea bird colonies</i>
Partners:	<i>Natural England, Lake District National Park Authority, Fell & Rock Climbing Club (local guidebook producer), local birders, BMC officers & volunteers</i>
Established:	<i>1980's</i>

Restrictions are agreed and managed through a sub-group of the Mountain Liaison Group (a meeting of landowners, conservation bodies and representatives of recreational users addressing issues affecting the mountain environment in the Lake District).

Prior to the new nesting season, monitoring data collected on nesting success of known nest sites from the previous year is reviewed and discussed to agree appropriate initial restrictions for the coming season for regularly occupied sites. As the season progresses, the sites are monitored and restrictions adjusted for any changes (i.e. no occupancy/failure/fledging early or late/newly identified sites) through agreement between the group, usually via email.

All representatives are able to contribute and are conscious of the need for proportionate and reasonable restrictions which are justifiable to the climbing community. The result is a successful system working across the National Park with simple and effective communication between all parties to ensure the right information is quickly disseminated to climbers.

PEAK DISTRICT (EASTERN EDGES)

Bird species: *Ring ouzel*

Partners: *RSPB, National Trust, Peak District National Park Authority, BMC officers & volunteers*

Established: *2000*

This area is incredibly popular with rock climbers, walkers and many other recreational users across the country, whilst also providing a stronghold for ring ouzels - a species in decline both in its range and numbers across the UK.

Monitoring work is carried out by the recreation community (mostly climbers and walkers) under professional supervision (currently provided by an RSPB ecologist, also a climber) as they migrate each spring to nest on the eastern Peak District's gritstone outcrops and heather moorland. In addition to monitoring and locating the nest sites, climbers advise on detail and discuss with the ecologist the likelihood of disturbance and whether a restriction is required or not. Nests away from popular climbs are typically left unsigned so as not to attract attention from birdwatchers and photographers.

Despite very high levels of recreational use in this area the Ring Ouzel population continues to do well and buck the national trend of decline. Climbers have engaged with the project at all levels and enforce the restrictions far more effectively than resources would otherwise allow. The partnership is widely seen as an exemplar and has been featured on both BBC Countryfile and Springwatch.

PEMBROKESHIRE COAST

Bird species: *Chough, peregrine, sea bird colonies*

Partners: *Pembrokeshire National Park Authority, Ministry of Defence, National Trust, BMC officers & volunteers*

Established: *1990s*

A wide variety of bird species nest on many of the cliffs used by climbers along the Pembrokeshire coast (large sections of which fall within a military training area) including several crags with ledges favoured by large colonies of nesting sea birds such as guillemots and razorbills. Here there is significant risk of losing large numbers of eggs/unfledged young if the colony is disturbed, causing a mass exit from the nesting ledge.

The BMC works alongside its partners to monitor and review these sites to ensure that restrictions are in the right place and the birds are present each year. Nests are often first noted by climbers who then often assist with the placing of restrictions and signage. In some cases where peregrines and choughs are concerned, the birds show little reaction to climbers and close working between the BMC and National Park rangers has made it possible to restrict a very small area (to within one or two routes either side of the nest).