

Drones and the Heronries Census



DRONES AND THE HERONRIES CENSUS – February 2023

The BTO are aware that drones can be an effective method to survey some heronries, and we have been asked by a number of volunteers if they can use drones. However, the BTO's third party liability covering volunteers may not currently cover the use of drones for surveys.

Therefore, **Heronries Census volunteers should not use drones to carry out Heronries Census counts unless they have their own third party liability cover and have checked and confirmed that it will cover them if they use their drone for the Census.**

Should you choose to use a drone for the Census under your own insurance cover, you must be registered and the operator must have a flyer ID if the drone weighs 250g or more or if the drone has a camera (even if it weighs less than 250g). You must follow all the relevant rules in the drone code (<https://register-drones.caa.co.uk/drone-code>) for the appropriate drone category and flight category. You should also observe the following two additional guidelines if you are carrying out a Census count:

- The drone code states that flights should not be flown where they might cause disturbance to wildlife. We have contacted the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to seek clarification on this clause with particular reference to heronries, and they have confirmed that drones can be used to monitor heronries provided we are confident that they will not cause disturbance. This seems to be the case from the previous flights above heronries that we are aware of, and at some sites where counts can only be carried out by closely approaching the heronry it is likely that a drone flight will cause considerably less disturbance than a traditional survey. However, we ask that you exercise caution about possible disturbance as follows: (1) You should fly at as high a height as possible in order to obtain adequate images to count occupied nests whilst remaining within the drone code rules; (2) Should you observe any signs of disturbance, you should stop the flight immediately. Details should then be sent to the National Census Organiser so that we can update our guidelines in order to prevent further similar incidents occurring in the future.
- The drone code also states that you can fly over adjacent land without access permission provided you are not breaking any other drone code rules and have permission to be on the land from which you are taking off or landing. However, you should not overfly a heronry unless you have specific permission from the owner of the land on which the heronry itself is situated. Although doing so would, strictly speaking, not be breaking the drone code, it will risk damaging existing relationships with the landowner and potentially preventing future access for both the Heronries Census and other BTO survey work.