

Volunteers help birdlife thrive in Dunster Forest

NEST boxes are being installed in the Dunster Forest by volunteers from all walks of life.

The initiative, marking National Nest Box Week from February 14-21, brings the total number of owl and nest boxes in the forest to well over 50.

Nest boxes are important for breeding pairs as more traditional nesting sites such as ruined buildings and hedgerows are fast disappearing.

Outside the breeding season, nest boxes provide a safe and weather-proof roosting site for a wide variety of birds.

The Crown Estate, which owns and manages the forest, is working hard to diversify the woodland structure to increase habitats for wildlife while growing commercial crops of timber.

This work is also helping to increase woodland bird populations since the RSPB highlighted a significant decline in woodland bird populations.

Graham Smith, forest manager on the estate, said: "Ensuring a variety of tree species and having

trees of various ages increases biodiversity and with this week's strategic positioning of nest boxes, this will have a positive effect on declining bird species such as the pied flycatcher."

Crown Estate countryside manager Andrew Player stressed the importance of the work carried out by the volunteers who include retired shopkeepers, teachers, an ex-military officer and local students.

"We currently have ten regular volunteers, who collectively spend about 50 hours a month on various tasks around the estate," said Mr Player.

"People participate for a number of reasons, but usually to keep active, to meet new people, to learn about conservation and to do their bit to look after this part of the world."

There is a planned increase in the amount of work for volunteers over the course of the next few months including monitoring the new nest boxes, wildlife surveys and volunteer ranger work.

Anyone who would like a taste of what the work entails should contact Andrew Player on 01643 821309. The conservation volunteers meet every second and last Thursday in the month.