

By Roger Dickey of the Army Ornithological Society

The Britain and Ireland Bird Atlas 2007-11 and the MOD Bird Count – Conflict or Collusion

Those members of the Service ornithological societies who are also members of the British Trust for Ornithology or Scottish Ornithologists' Club will be aware of one of the largest projects about to challenge the birding population of this country for many years – the compilation of data for the new Britain and Ireland Bird Atlas. Indeed many members may have taken part in the highly successful pilot surveys. The Atlas Working Group has now been able to formulate the basis of the Atlas field methodology and developed an approach that gives broadly similar methods in summer and winter and has a good balance of methods for different levels of involvement and skill. There remain some important areas of development, particularly as we consider how best to incorporate the methodology into the MOD Bird Count, but below are some of the key points provided by Simon Gillings, the BTO co-ordinator, beginning with a reminder of what the Atlas aims to do and what the fieldwork aims to provide.

Aims of the Atlas

- To produce dot distribution maps showing in which 10-km squares each species winters or breeds.
- To produce maps showing broad patterns across Britain and Ireland of relative abundance during winter and the breeding season.
- To measure changes in distribution and abundance patterns since earlier Atlases.
- To fulfil these aims, Atlas fieldwork must provide:
- A complete species list for each 10-km square in winter and breeding season.
- A measure of (relative) abundance for each species in each 10-km square in winter and summer.

Seasons

Winter = beginning of November to end of February; 4 winters, 2007/08 to 2010/11.

Breeding Season = beginning of April to end of July; 4 seasons, 2008 to 2011.

Tetrads

- A tetrad is a 2-km x 2-km square. There are 25 tetrads in a 10-km square.
- Universal convention for referring to tetrads is EJPUZ-DINTY. Starting with 'A' in the bottom left (south-west) corner, go up each column and finish with Z in the top right (north-east) corner (there is no 'O'!). Hence EJPUZ-DINTY is what you read on the first two rows.

General principles for both seasons

- Fieldwork will comprise a balance between 'Roving Recorders' and 'Timed Tetrad Visits' – the two together providing the total species list and evidence of breeding, whilst the latter will also provide the required abundance data.
- It is essential to stress the equal importance of both approaches.
- Roving Recorders will have a very free remit – simply to provide records of species with the aim of amassing comprehensive species lists for 10-km squares. For example, these might arise through one-off 'casual' type records (e.g. a bird flying over a training area, something seen when going to work), a day's birding through several 10-km squares, or dedicated searches of the habitat in a 10-km square for hitherto missed species.
- Timed Tetrad Visits are more structured:

- Each Timed Tetrad Visit will comprise a compulsory 1st hour, and an optional 2nd hour, during which individuals of each species seen and heard will be counted. There will also be space on the form to continue beyond 2 hours to search for species not already encountered, and to seek evidence of breeding.
- In a season (winter or summer) there will be two such visits, one early and one late. For winter this means one visit in Nov-Dec and one in Jan-Feb. For the breeding season this means one in Apr-May and one in Jun-Jul. A tetrad need only be surveyed in one summer and one winter.
- The aim will be for each 10-km square to receive Timed Tetrad Visits to at least 8 tetrads in summer and at least 8 in winter. Ideally, these would be the same 8 tetrads in summer and winter.
- The choice of which 8+ tetrads to survey is up to the individual observer, (but will be co-ordinated over MOD land where possible). However, to facilitate comparison with the last breeding Atlas, it would be beneficial if those tetrads visited last time (which was also the observer's choice) were revisited. BTO will provide lists of these tetrads to local organisers and DE EST. There is also some merit in squares containing a BBS square receiving an independent Timed Tetrad Visit to enable comparisons between BBS and Atlas counts.

Evidence of breeding

- Among BTO Regional Representatives polled, there was widespread support for adopting the 3-level system for evidence of breeding. Thus we will follow the European Bird Census Council and most local atlases in requesting the evidence of breeding (e.g. singing; bird with food; nest with eggs). This information will be sought from Timed Tetrad Visits and Roving Records. Further information will be given on how to record such information without detracting from other activities. Evidence of breeding is also being built into BirdTrack as an optional field to facilitate further data capture.
- Tetrad-scale population estimates (optional)
- BTO would like to encourage observers to provide an approximate estimate (possibly in a category of abundance as we currently do in the MOD Bird Count) of the tetrad's population of each species they encountered during their timed visit. This will be optional for the atlas work. This will be easier for some species or some squares than for others. For instance, a tetrad visit that includes the only lake in a tetrad will easily be able to give an estimate of the Coot population in the whole tetrad - it will probably simply be the number seen during the visit. On the other hand, estimating the number of Skylarks in a tetrad might require some mental extrapolations (e.g., I saw 15 skylarks during my visit, and maybe covered a quarter of the tetrad, so I reckon there are around 60). We hope that given suitable advice, observers will take to the idea of estimating such figures. It is important to get across that these estimates need only be approximate yet they will still provide extremely useful information when amassed across Britain and Ireland. BTO will provide further guidance and full instructions on this in due course and this will be passed on as quickly as possible.

Future developments

Now that we have the broad shape of the field methods BTO will begin working on draft instructions and forms and these will be adopted and adapted for the MOD Bird Count. All these will be developed alongside online recording forms and applications for BTO Regional Reps to input and manage their data and I will be working closely with DE EST and the Service ornithological societies to ensure that we are contributing to the best of our ability. In due course there will be a phase of testing the instructions, forms and online applications through selected observers and local organisers and I hope, some of the Conservation Groups. There are some tricky aspects of the methods to refine, including how best to record coastal squares, modification of the methods in extremely remote areas, and how to compensate for data inside and outside the training

areas. I will be providing further details over the coming months and at the AOS/DE EST Survey Techniques Study Day at Longmoor Camp on 1 Apr 07.

Conflict or Collusion?

There is no doubt that this has the potential to be one of the largest collaborative projects, on MOD and national scale, undertaken by the Service ornithological societies. The effort required is enormous and just a little daunting at this stage but the three organisations, RNBWS, AOS and RAFOS, along with the MOD Conservation Groups have a chance to make a significant contribution to this national project and adapt the methodology in later years, or remain in the cold with a stand alone methodology for the next 5 years. I would hope that we opt for the former.