

Cheshire and Wirral Bird Atlas

INSTRUCTIONS AND GUIDANCE FOR THE WINTER ATLAS

The aim of the Winter Atlas is to record the presence or absence of every species in every tetrad of Cheshire and Wirral, and the habitats being used. Approximate counts of any significant concentrations, and notes of any major feeding flocks or roosts, will substantially add to the value of the records. Wintering birds have never been mapped in detail in the county, and this Atlas will be a key tool to help their conservation.

Fieldwork for this survey is planned to cover three winter periods (mid-November to the end of February), from November 2004 to February 2007. We hope to achieve as good coverage as possible during the first year of the survey, so please carry out the fieldwork in your chosen tetrads during winter 2004/05. If you cannot do so, please let your Area Coordinator know as soon as possible.

In some ways the winter survey is easier than in the breeding season. An early morning start is not essential; much of the identification will be by sight, although knowledge of calls is very useful to locate some birds; and some species become more conspicuous than when they are breeding.

Most observers are surveying tetrads that they have already covered for the breeding season, and can use the tetrad map provided then. If you are doing a new tetrad, please contact your Area Coordinator or me or David Cogger to be sure that you have it identified correctly. There are still unallocated tetrads for which volunteers are requested: please contact David Cogger to offer to cover a new tetrad.

All of the Area Coordinators are the same as in the list circulated in April, except for SJ37 (now Phil Wollen) and SJ69 (now Rob Smith). Recorders in those areas will be given contact details, which are also on the Atlas website.

Fieldwork

The basis for recording is the tetrad, a 2x2km square defined by the even-numbered lines on the National Grid. Use of an Ordnance Survey map is essential; the 1:25000 series is recommended, and a GPS device is very helpful.

Please feel free to visit your chosen tetrad as often as you like and to spend as long as you want on surveying. The *minimum* to achieve reasonable coverage is to visit twice, once from 16th November to the end of December, and once from 1st January to the end of February. The two dates should be at least four weeks apart. Please enter on the recording form the dates of your visits and the approximate length of time taken. Write the date as, e.g. '2 January 2005' rather than 2/1/05, to avoid confusion with American-style date formats which put the month first. We aim to get as complete coverage as possible, so please plan to visit every type of habitat within the tetrad that is likely to hold any different species. To stand a reasonable chance of finding all species, each visit should last *at least* two hours. To do your survey, it is better to avoid the extremes of weather, especially wind and rain – most birds are harder to detect, and survey work is much less enjoyable – but sometimes it is not possible. Fieldwork should be conducted during periods when the birds are most likely to be detected, by sight and sound. For instance, many birds feed most actively in the mornings, but afternoon visits will be needed to find the roosts. In winter, many birds are much more mobile than during the breeding season, and many species flock together, especially for feeding or to roost. A roost can be a daytime gathering, for instance of waders, but usually means a night-time communal concentration. Night-time roosts can often be located by watching a group of birds (thrushes, finches, corvids, Starlings, etc) as they fly off together in late-afternoon.

Extra visits can be made at any time. Please try to make a visit at night to find the nocturnal species: owls' calls, for instance, often can be heard from far away on clear, still nights.

Record every species that you see or hear that is using the tetrad (for feeding, resting, etc.), and put an entry in the 'code' column for each species found. There are only four codes: U = species Using tetrad; C = feeding Concentration; R = Roost; F = Flying over (not using tetrad). Birds in flight require some care in interpretation. For instance, a Kestrel hovering or a Dipper flying along a stream are 'using' the tetrad(U), while a skein of geese flying over or a flock of Starlings on their way to roost are not 'using' the tetrad and should be entered as 'F'. When you see a significant concentration of birds, please note in the 'Code' column of the recording form C = feeding Concentration or R = Roost, and provide a count if possible of the maximum number: enter this in the 'Count' column. The count should be the maximum seen together, not the sum total throughout the tetrad. What is regarded as a 'significant concentration' varies greatly from one species to another, so please use your own judgment: for most species, any group of more than a few birds visible (or audible) together should be recorded. Some birdwatchers almost automatically count every time they see a flock of birds, whilst

others are not used to counting birds. Please do not worry too much about getting *accurate* counts; approximate figures are fine. Flocks of birds not obviously feeding or roosting should be entered as ‘ U ’ with an approximate count in the ‘ Count ’ column. This might apply, for instance, to a flock of Starlings or thrushes chattering in the tree-tops, or gulls in a field that are not feeding or asleep.

Any additional comments can be very helpful in interpreting records. Please use the ‘ comments ’ column alongside each species or the box at the end of the form.

An asterisk * on the recording form indicates a species for which a ‘ county rarity ’ reporting form should be completed.

If you are undertaking WeBS counts in an area that spans more than one tetrad, please note the counts separately for the individual tetrads so that they can be incorporated into the Atlas, and fill in the counts on an Atlas record form. Submit the WeBS information in the usual way to your WeBS organiser.

If you are covering a tetrad on the boundary, shared with another county, please visit the whole of the square and record birds in all of the tetrad, even though some of it is not in Cheshire and Wirral.

Supplementary records from other tetrads

Records from areas other than your chosen tetrad are very important. Please use a ‘ Supplementary Records Form ’ for these, unless you have a lot of records for one tetrad, in which case you will find it easier to complete a standard Atlas record sheet. A particular example where observers will collect supplementary records is when surveying near to the edges of your tetrads, where birds may often be seen over the ‘ boundary ’, and using many footpaths and roads usually entails going out of your chosen tetrad into adjoining ones. Other records can come if you live in a different tetrad from the one you are surveying; or if you regularly watch birds somewhere else. Anyone travelling about the county can also contribute valuable supplementary records: some people carry the recording sheets with them in a car. All of these sorts of records are welcome. Please do not assume that someone else has submitted the record.

‘ Offshore tetrads ’ – most tetrad surveyors can skip this section!

There are an extra 21 tetrads around the coasts that contain no land, so they were not part of the breeding season survey. But they contain areas exposed at low tides, or areas that remain covered by water, and sometimes hold some bird species that are not found elsewhere in the county, so they will be included in the Winter Atlas. The ‘ offshore tetrads ’ are

Dee: 18U, 18X, 19Q, 19V, 27J, 27N, 28A, 28B, 28F (Dawpool Bank)

North Wirral: 29A (western edge of East Hoyle Bank), 29B, 29G, 29L, 29S, 29Y

Mersey: 38N, 38S, 38V (Eastham Sands), 38W, 39G and 48K (Dungeon Banks)

It is difficult to give most of these tetrads a name as there are no features marked on Ordnance Survey maps. This set has been defined by adding one tetrad offshore from those used for the breeding bird survey, limited where appropriate by the county boundaries with Merseyside or Flintshire. The county boundaries are ill-defined around our coasts so please include birds anywhere in the tetrad, even if they appear to be in the other county.

Recording in these offshore tetrads can be tricky. For safety, observers are advised not to go onto any tidal areas, and recording should be done from the shore. It may be difficult to judge which tetrad birds are in, especially when there are no landmarks in the distance, and it is often difficult to tell how far away birds are. This work requires an element of judgment from observers: please do not spend too much time with a map or GPS trying to decide on the exact location of offshore birds. Regular observers should liaise with the relevant Area Coordinator. Occasional observers should please pass your records to the Area Coordinator with as full details as possible (time, state of tide, any landmarks used, etc).

It can be difficult to observe birds on the water, so seabirds in flight over the sea can be included, provided that they are attributed only to one tetrad. We do not want to omit significant records, but must strive to avoid obvious double-counting. It is recognised that birds such as waders that use one area for feeding and another for roosting will be counted twice, but do not include the areas that they fly over between feeding and roost sites. WeBS counts will be separated into their constituent tetrads and incorporated into the Atlas, so there is no need to duplicate WeBS.

Habitat recording

One of the main uses of the Atlas data will be for conservation of birds. To do this, it is important to link the birds to their habitat. Please try to visit every significant habitat type within the tetrad. This may require maps and some local knowledge

to identify suitable areas. Local landowners will be able to help if there are, for instance, ponds, woods or reedbeds that are not visible from a road or footpath.

Most of the habitat codes are the same as used for the breeding bird atlas work, with four additions:

- H5 Open Sea
- E7 Farmland – stubble (the remains of last season's crop left in the ground, not ploughed)
- E8 Farmland with hedge – taller than about 2m (a little above head height)
- E9 Farmland with hedge – shorter than about 2m

Ignore any hedgerow trees in your estimate of hedge height. Please use several habitat codes in combination if appropriate. For instance, finches feeding in a field that then fly into a tall hedge are E1 E8 whilst a woodpecker making its way along the hedge is just E8. Any extra information on habitat (e.g. species of livestock, dominant crops) is valuable and should be entered in the 'comments' boxes.

These four codes are additional to those on the laminated cards circulated in March 2004. A complete list of the habitat codes is on the Atlas website.

Access to land

Before entering any land away from public rights of way, please ensure that you have the owner's permission to do so. The 'right to roam' introduced in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act does not give anyone free access to farmland and certain other types of site: permission must be obtained. In the first season of the breeding bird Atlas, many tetrad surveyors found that landowners were very interested in the survey and often provided valuable local knowledge and data. We are keen to build on this 'good PR' for birds by ensuring that landowners are aware of the Atlas. Even when you have had permission for the breeding bird Atlas, it is a good idea to contact the landowners to check that it is still all right for you to visit in winter. The 'letter of introduction' provided can be used as an aid to obtaining permission. In case of difficulty, your Area Coordinator or the Atlas Coordinator may be able to help.

We have received valuable assistance from the Cheshire County Council Public Rights of Way Unit. In return they have asked to us to inform them of any footpaths we find which are blocked or otherwise inaccessible. If you find one, please contact David Cogger on 01606-832517, e-mail memsec@cawos.org, and give as accurate a grid reference as you can. Any such footpaths in the Wirral should also be reported and will be passed on to the appropriate body.

Safety

Please bear in mind the safety aspects of surveying in winter. The survey is meant to be enjoyable as well as constructive but it is a winter Atlas Survey and all fieldworkers should be aware at all times that weather conditions can deteriorate quickly and become potentially dangerous to the unwary. You are advised to check a local weather forecast before undertaking fieldwork; always wear appropriate footwear and clothing; and take a supply of food and drink with you. When visiting remote areas always tell someone where you are going (leave a note in your vehicle as well) and how long you are likely to be away. Stick to your advised route wherever possible. If you have a mobile phone, take it with you.

All fieldworkers are volunteering to take part in this survey as part of their hobby, and do so at their own risk. CAWOS are not responsible for and do not maintain any of the land that the volunteers will use and therefore cannot be held responsible for any injuries to their members or others. Surveyors who cause damage to third party property or injury should have cover under their own household insurance for their personal liability.

Finally ...

This survey is a chance not only to get to know the birds of an area much better, and probably to come up with some surprises, but also to contribute to a major project that will see your work published and put to good use for conservation. If you have any questions, please ask your Area Coordinator, look on the Atlas website, or contact the Atlas Coordinator. We hope that you enjoy the Atlas work.

If you are submitting Atlas Survey Record Cards on paper, please return them to your Area Coordinator by 31st March each year. Electronic records are preferred, using the spreadsheet supplied, and should be sent by 30th April, to atlassubmissions@cawos.org, with a copy to your Area Coordinator. Copies of the electronic forms can be downloaded from the Atlas website (www.cheshireandwirralbirdatlas.org).

Atlas Coordinator: David Norman, Rowswood Cottage, Ridding Lane, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 6PF (01928 711064; atlascoordinator@cawos.org).