

Hertfordshire Bird Atlas



Mapping the distribution of Hertfordshire's birds

Volunteers' Newsletter

Issue 2 - October 2008

The Hertfordshire Birds Atlas is a tetrad scale distribution atlas project for both winter and breeding seasons and is running alongside Bird Atlas 2007-11, the new atlas for the whole of Britain and Ireland being organised by the British Trust for Ornithology in collaboration with the Scottish Ornithologists Club and BirdWatch Ireland. In Hertfordshire we are aiming to survey all 491 tetrads (2km x 2km squares) which include part of the county - as was done in the 1988-92 breeding atlas - but this time in both the winter and breeding seasons.

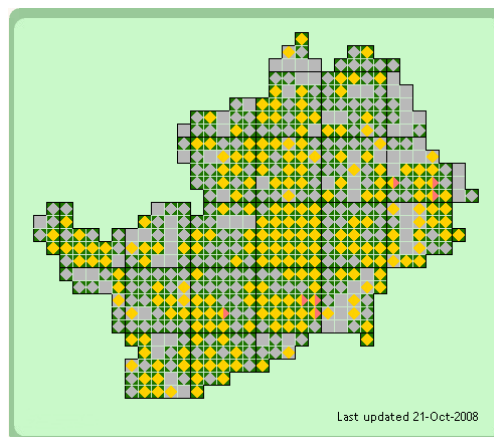
After only one year of fieldwork I am pleased to report that we have made a fantastic start, and I'd like to thank everyone who has helped to make this first year so successful - THANK YOU. Over 270 people have contributed results from Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) or provided Roving Records (RRs) through the Bird Atlas 2007-11 website (www.birdatlas.net) or on paper, or have mapped their BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.org) sites to a specific tetrad.

The winter project restarts on 1 November 2008 spanning the months of November to February inclusive, and will continue during those months until February 2011. Breeding season fieldwork will also run for a further three years from the start of April to the end of July.

First Winter Season Achievements

With data already entered on the Bird Atlas 2007-11 or submitted on paper, we have paired counts (that is one in Nov/Dec and one in Jan/Feb) for 213 (43%) of the 491 Hertfordshire tetrads - shown by the yellow diamonds in the map on the right. Some of these are only one-hour counts, and I'm considering whether or not we might need to repeat these as two-hour counts. Otherwise this element of the fieldwork is complete for those tetrads - TTVs do not need to be repeated every year. For a small number of tetrads, the late winter count was not completed and will hopefully be done this winter (shown as yellow/red diamonds). This timed count data will be used nationally and locally to calculate relative population estimates, although different analysis techniques will probably be used for different species.

We also have at least one Roving Record from a further 196 tetrads, as shown in green on the map. These records are the main way of establishing a species list for each tetrad, allowing us to produce distribution maps for each species and compare those distributions to the results of the 1967-72 and 1988-92 local atlas projects.



The grey tetrads show where no recording has yet been done, or no data has been received. So if you have results from last winter that you have not submitted, please do so as soon as possible, to avoid duplication of effort.

Second Winter Season Plans

Based on the excellent level of TTV coverage achieved last winter, the Herts Bird Club Scientific Committee has decided that we should attempt to get paired 2-hour winter TTVs done in all 491 Hertfordshire tetrads. We are working on techniques to analyse this data at the tetrad scale.

For the second winter season, which starts on 1 November 2008, I have asked the network of 10km square stewards to help assess whether or not further fieldwork needs doing in tetrads which were started last year. If you feel that you have already found all the species in your tetrad in the winter and would like to take on a new area, please get in touch by requesting a vacant tetrad through the Bird Atlas 2007-11 website, via the relevant 10km square steward (see Contact Us page on Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website) or to me directly. Alternatively, please re-visit your tetrad or tetrads through this winter to find those missing species. As a rough measure, in Hertfordshire, I'd expect even the most remote arable tetrads to contain 30 species, and those with significant water-bodies to exceed 50. I'd also be surprised if the ten most widespread resident species (Woodpigeon, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Magpie, Carrion Crow and Chaffinch) were not found in almost every tetrad.

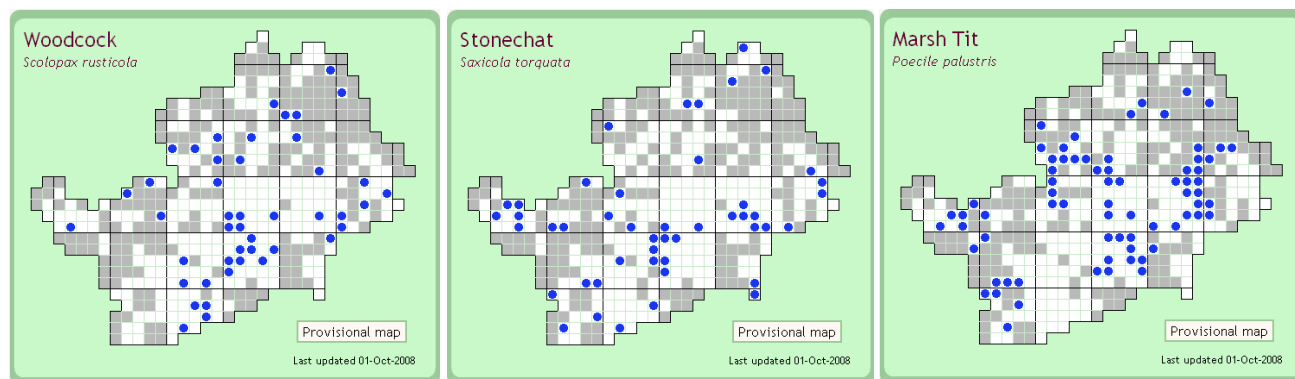
Please enter your records on the Bird Atlas 2007-11 website if you are able to, as that will enable us to keep the Hertfordshire website as up-to-date as possible, and provide the feedback that I hope will keep you looking for those extra species.

If you would like to help out with some "atlas-days" to target the less well covered areas of the county, please get in touch, even if you don't have your own transport, as we should be able to drop you off and pick you up a couple of hour later after completing a TTV.

Preliminary Winter Results

In the previous Newsletter, I showed preliminary maps for the two species of Partridge and commented that at that time (data up to 8 January 2008) Red-legged Partridges were 5 times more widespread than Grey Partridges. With more data having been received for north Hertfordshire, the ratio is now 3 to 1, but Greys are still scarce south of a line from Bishop's Stortford to Tring.

The following three maps illustrate what can be achieved through winter bird-watching in areas that, but for the atlas, would probably not have been visited. Blue dots indicate presence, but the grey shaded squares have probably not received enough attention to be sure that the species is absent. The 45 tetrads with Woodcock records exceed each of the winter totals published in the 2003-05 bird reports, and probably still understate the distribution, considering that 46% of the tetrads need more work. The winter of 2007-08 was clearly a good one for Stonechats in the county, but how many of these 47 records might have gone undetected without the atlas work? Marsh Tits are probably under-recorded in Hertfordshire and have suffered a decline since the 1988-92 breeding atlas, so their detection in 71 (25%) of the tetrads that received a reasonable amount of coverage, is encouraging news.



Breeding Season Progress

To briefly summarise the results received so far for the first breeding season, we have paired TTVs (that is one in Apr/May and one in Jun/Jul) for 173 (35%) of the 491 Hertfordshire tetrads, and whilst this is understandably lower than the first winter season, we are still well on track to complete this project in four years. A further 20 tetrads had one of their two counts completed, and will need follow-up next year. Only 57 tetrads have no records whatsoever. Of the 10,700 tetrad-species registrations, almost 30% represent confirmed breeding records, reflecting a massive amount of dedicated recording effort put in during the 2008 breeding season. Only 16 tetrads have more than 60 species recorded, a threshold exceeded by over 150 tetrads in the 1988-92 atlas, and whilst we do expect to see some changes, there is clearly more work to do.

We are very conscious of the concern of revealing the breeding locations of some scarce breeding species and recent colonists, and in general have followed the national guidance in producing tetrad-scale maps, with some further local restrictions. The current policy is available on the Resources page of the Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website, and we hope that this gives you the necessary re-assurance that your records will be dealt with appropriately. When the time comes to reproduce these maps in print as part of a new Hertfordshire avifauna, a further assessment will be made by the Herts Bird Club Scientific Committee, with if necessary, input from the Rare Breeding Birds Panel.

The Hertfordshire Bird Atlas Website

In contrast to the previous atlases, the availability of the internet provides a major opportunity to provide information about the aims of these projects and to provide timely feedback. The Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website (www.hertsatlas.org.uk) provides access to the tetrad-scale maps and species lists from the previous two breeding atlases and 10km results for the 1981-84 winter atlas.

The website has now been augmented with preliminary results for the current atlas. All winter season data that was available on 27 June is now included, along with Breeding Season data entered online before 4 September. More frequent updates are planned through this winter, and there are also plans to add new types of map to the site to help the targeting of under-recorded areas, so please keep an eye on the news on the home page. If you are planning to visit an unfamiliar part of the county this winter you can now print a customised recording form for the tetrad, to take with you. This shows which species have already been reported.

Data Validation

By making the most of the online data capture facilities developed by members of the BTO Information Systems Unit, on the Bird Atlas 2007-11 website, and supplying the few paper records for manual data entry, we are fortunate that all our tetrad-scale data is held in a single location. This will make it significantly easier for us to validate the data and that, following extensive testing, an online interface to do that will shortly be available to me and a small number of local helpers.

This may mean that, on the Bird Atlas 2007-11, you may start to see queries on your "Data Home" page. This does not mean that those doing the validation don't believe you, but rather that the species has been recorded in an unusual place, possibly in relation to the other records we have received, or is a Hertfordshire rarity, for which no supporting details have been submitted. Atlas records for species assessed by the Herts Rare Birds Panel will undergo the same level of rigour as previously. We might also need to query unusually high counts, or the reported breeding status, to ensure the quality of the data. Please don't take these queries personally.

More Help Still Needed

If you are not already helping with this important project and would like to get involved, please contact me by email at hertsbto@hotmail.com or by telephone on 01279 755637.

Chris Dee - Hertfordshire BTO Regional Rep. and Hertfordshire Bird Atlas Organiser