

Hertfordshire Bird Atlas



Mapping the distribution of Hertfordshire's birds

Volunteers' Newsletter

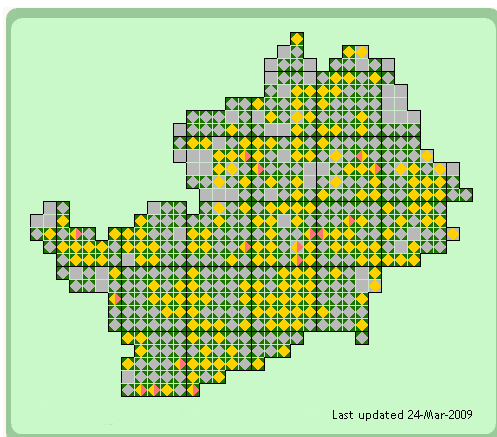
Issue 3 - March 2009

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 in both the winter and breeding seasons.

Having now completed the second year of winter fieldwork we are starting to get a feel for the winter distributions. The winter season data is accumulating at about the rate I would have expected, so we are on track to complete this project in the planned four years. I'd like to thank everyone who has given their birding time to support this endeavour. Almost 400 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.

Fieldwork for the second breeding season starts on 1 April 2009 spanning the months of April to July inclusive, and will continue during those months until July 2011. Winter fieldwork will also run for a further two years from the start of November to the end of February.

First Breeding Season Achievements and 2009 Plans

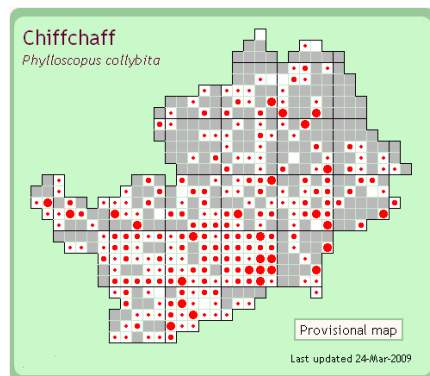


With the data already entered on the Bird Atlas 2007-11 or submitted on paper, we have paired counts (that is one in April/May and one in June/July) for 182 (37%) of the 491 Hertfordshire tetrads - shown by the yellow diamonds in the map on the left. The counting element of the fieldwork is complete for those tetrads - TTVs do not need to be repeated every year. For a small number of tetrads (shown as yellow/red diamonds), one or other of the two counts was not completed and will hopefully be done in this forthcoming breeding season.

These timed count results will be used for the national atlas to calculate relative population estimates, although different analysis techniques will probably be used for different species. We are also hoping to be able to do some analysis of these data at a local level.

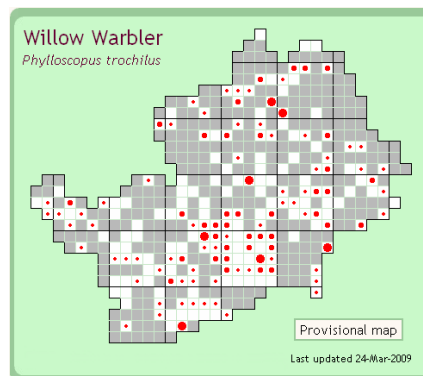
We have at least one Roving Record from a further 243 tetrads, as marked in green on the map. These records are the main way of establishing a species list for each tetrad, allowing us to produce distribution maps for each species in the breeding season and compare those distributions to the results of the 1967-72 and 1988-92 local atlas projects.

Of the 11,400 tetrad-species registrations, over 30% represent confirmed breeding records, reflecting a massive amount of dedicated recording effort put in during the 2008 breeding season. For 2009, I'd like the focus of attention to be on completing work in the already allocated tetrads; that is finishing the Timed Tetrad Visits and seeking to find the highest breeding status by observing and recording evidence according to the standard codes. Different species begin breeding at different times in the season, so you'll need to plan to make several visits during the season. Whilst April might be a little late to see Long-tailed Tits nest-building, many of our migrant species will not have arrived in the county by then. If you are covering several tetrads, you can learn from one what might be easy to find in another at that time. Starlings, for instance, are very noisy in the nest and first broods often hatch in the same week.



The differences between the fortunes of two of our summer migrants; Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler are already becoming apparent. Red dots indicate the three levels of breeding evidence and grey shaded squares have not received enough attention to be sure that the species is absent.

The Chiffchaff has been found in 96% of the surveyed tetrads, but Willow Warbler in only 55%. In the previous (1988-92) atlas, Willow Warbler was found everywhere and proven to breed in 56% of the tetrads.



Scarce Breeding Species

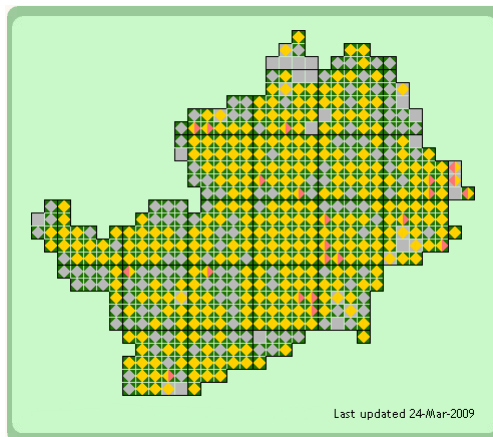
We are very conscious of the concern of revealing the breeding locations of some scarce breeding species and recent colonists, and in general have followed the national guidance in producing tetrad-scale maps, with some further local restrictions. The current policy is available on the Resources page 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.

Two Years of Winter Season Data

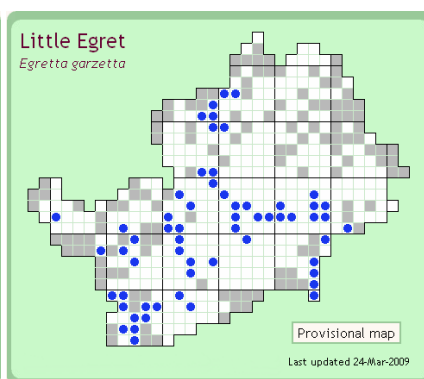
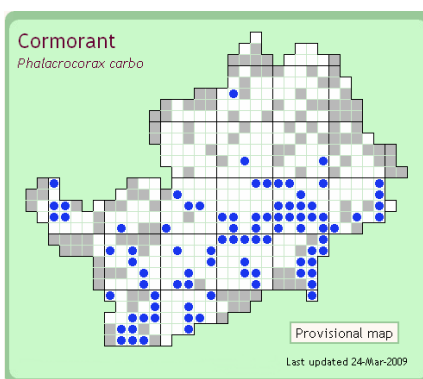
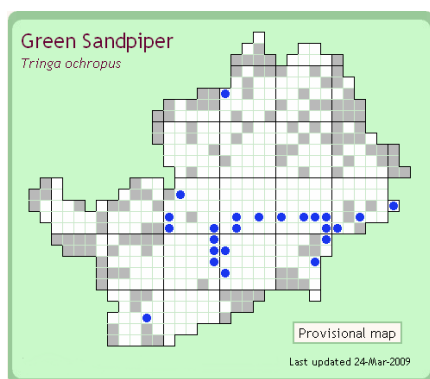
Building on the solid start in 2007/08, the number of tetrads with both winter TTVs completed has risen from 213 to 308 after the second season, representing 63% of the target total (yellow diamonds in the map on the right). A further 22 tetrads have data available for one of the visits. The plan is still to get paired two-hour winter TTVs done in all 491 Hertfordshire tetrads.

Almost all of that data is available to view on the Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website, although there is a small backlog of paper records that remain to be entered. In all there are 7,268 species records from TTVs and a further 10,754 records from Roving Records or derived from BirdTrack lists. Only 18 tetrads, mainly on the periphery of the county, have no atlas records submitted. These will be the focus of attention next winter.

A total of over 75 species have been seen in eleven tetrads, with TL31R, which includes most of Amwell Nature Reserve (managed by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust), amassing 105 species. Several of the other wetland tetrads are not far behind. These totals do not include a small number of species which, in accordance with the national guidelines, we are not revealing at the tetrad scale.



The following three maps illustrate the distribution information we have gathered in the first two winters for a selection of wetland species. Blue dots indicate presence, but the grey shaded squares have probably not received enough attention to be sure that the species is absent. However Green Sandpiper does seem to be absent from most of north Hertfordshire and the far west, where it was present at the time of the first national winter atlas (1981/82 - 1983/84). Cormorant, on the other hand has spread widely into central Hertfordshire as a wintering species. At the time of the first winter atlas and even the previous breeding season atlas (1988-92) Little Egret was virtually unknown in the county - there being only seven records up to 1992. Now it is seen regularly in all the major river valleys, with the possible exception of the upper Stort.



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 is also regularly updated with the accumulating results for the current atlas. All winter and breeding season data that was available on 24 February is now included. New data loads are announced on the home page and the current record totals are shown on the Status page. If you are planning to visit an unfamiliar part of the county you can now print a customised recording form for the tetrad, to take with you. These show which species have already been reported, and the level of breeding evidence acquired.

Call for Outstanding Data

If you still have completed TTV forms or any paper Roving Records for the 2008/09 winter season (or indeed the 2008 breeding season), please let me have them as soon as possible.

How to Contribute

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