

Hertfordshire Bird Atlas



Mapping the distribution of Hertfordshire's birds

Volunteers' Newsletter

Issue 4 - October 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 two years of breeding season fieldwork and two years winter fieldwork we are half way through the project. The breeding season data has accumulated a little slower than I would have wished, but with continued effort in the next two years we should be able to complete this project in the planned four years. It is important to remember that, unlike in the winter when presence records are sufficient, for a record to contribute to the breeding atlas, evidence of at least "H" (Observed in suitable nesting habitat) or "S" (Singing male) is required. I'd like to express a big "thank you" to 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.

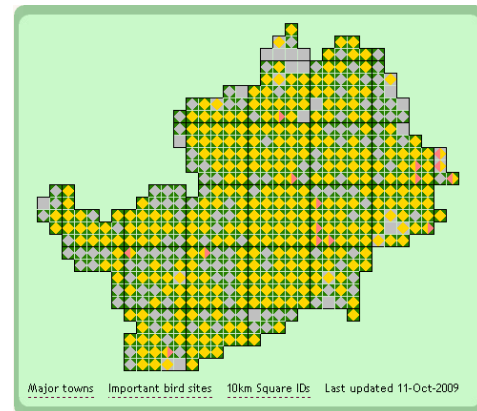
Fieldwork for the third winter season starts on 1 November 2009 spanning the months of November to February inclusive, and will continue during those months in 2010/11. Breeding season fieldwork will also run for a further two years from the start of April to the end of July.

Plans for the Third Winter Season

With the arrival of some late data from last season, the number of tetrads with both winter TTVs completed now stands at 318, representing 65% of the target total (yellow diamonds in the map on the right). A further 15 tetrads have data available for one of the visits (yellow/pink diamonds). The target is still to get paired two-hour winter TTVs done in all 491 Hertfordshire tetrads, and we are optimistic that we can get the remaining TTVs carried out this winter.

All winter data entered by 18 June is available to view on the Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website. In all there are 8,116 species records from TTVs and a further 10,965 records from Roving Records or derived from BirdTrack lists. Only 18 tetrads, mainly on the periphery of the county, have no atlas records.

The first priority this winter is to complete TTVs in tetrads that you have already volunteered to take on, and then to establish a complete winter species list for those tetrads. That may mean making visits to habitat that you were not able to cover in the TTV. If you have not already recorded owls, then please make a dusk or evening visit to listen for them.



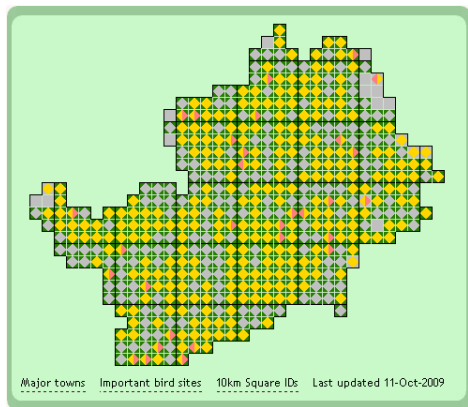
If you have completed an early (Nov/Dec) and late (Jan/Feb) winter TTVs in your allocated tetrad(s) and are confident that you have as complete a species list as possible, please consider taking on another tetrad this winter, by contacting the atlas organiser (Chris Dee) or your local 10km square co-ordinator. The Bird Atlas 2007-11 website (www.birdatlas.net) is the best indicator of where tetrads are available, although the Hertfordshire Bird Atlas website (www.hertsatlas.org.uk) is also being updated as more tetrads are allocated. The tetrad allocation map is on the Status page, and square co-ordinator contact details are on the Contact Us page.

Expeditions

Nowhere in Hertfordshire can really be considered to be "remote", but there are still some areas on the borders of the county where the lack of local birders means that we need to apply a different approach to getting atlas fieldwork done. This winter we will be having some "atlas days" where we will try to co-ordinate car-sharing from other parts of the county to deploy a team of observers to concentrate on a couple of areas. The idea would be to do a two-hour TTV and, if necessary, additional birding on the way back to a pick-up point, going on to meet up at lunch-time to share experiences. Possibly a second TTV could be done in the afternoon. The same team would repeat the activity for the late counts in January or February. Please contact Chris Dee (details at the end of this newsletter) if you can help on either of these days and on a date to be arranged for the late visit.

Sunday 22nd November: Markyate area - up to 7 tetrads in the north of TL01
Sunday 13th December: north-east Herts - up to 10 tetrads in TL43

Second Breeding Season Achievements



With the data entered on the Bird Atlas 2007-11, we have paired counts (that is one in April/May and one in June/July) for 264 (54%) 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. In a few tetrads (shown as yellow/pink diamonds), one or other of the two counts has not been done and will hopefully be completed in 2010.

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.

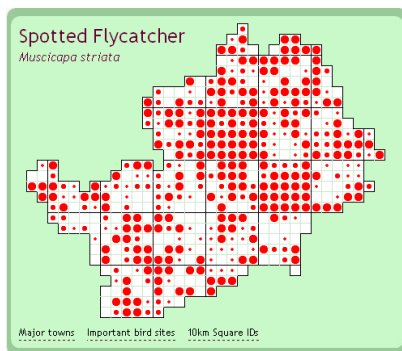
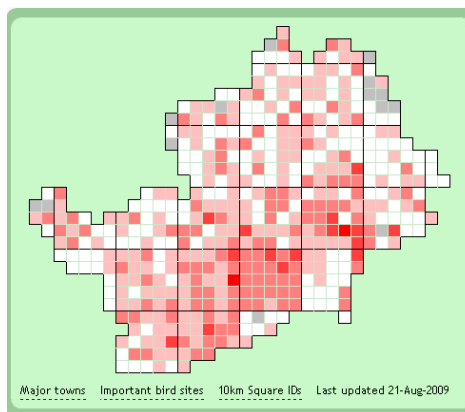
We have at least one Roving Record from a further 185 tetrads, as marked in green on the map. These records are the main way of establishing a species list for each tetrad, allowing us to produce distribution maps for each species in the breeding season and compare those distributions to the results of the 1967-72 and 1988-92 local atlas projects. Only 12 Hertfordshire tetrads have no breeding season records whatsoever.

Of the 16,800 tetrad-species registrations, over 35% represent confirmed breeding records, reflecting a massive amount of dedicated recording effort put in during the 2008 and 2009 breeding seasons.

Coverage is still uneven across the county, and the map on the right shows the numbers of species recorded in each tetrad – brighter red indicating more species. White tetrads have 30 or less species recorded and grey shows tetrads with no records – a total of 190 tetrads.

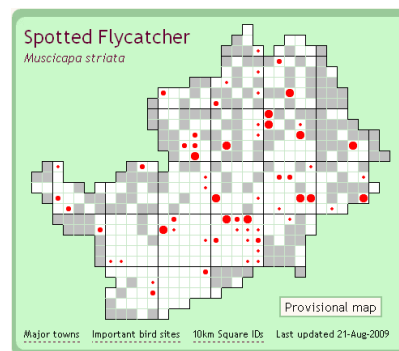
We have good coverage across the centre and south of the county – where the main population centres are. But there are still gaps in the north and around the borders of the county. By comparison only 13 tetrads recorded less than 31 species in the 1988-92 breeding season atlas.

The species totals represented on this map do not include some scarce breeding species and recent colonists, the locations of which are not being revealed at the tetrad level. The list of species for which this has been done may seem a little strange in a Hertfordshire context, including some which are not difficult to locate in the breeding season such as Gadwall, Kingfisher and Cetti's Warbler but also some for which we have more genuine concerns about revealing their precise location (Red Kite, Long-eared Owl, Firecrest). In general we have followed the national guidance in producing tetrad-scale maps, with some further local restrictions. This stance will be reviewed prior to final publication.



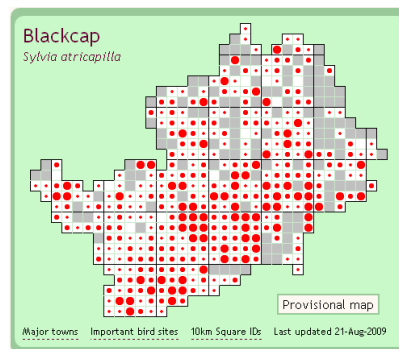
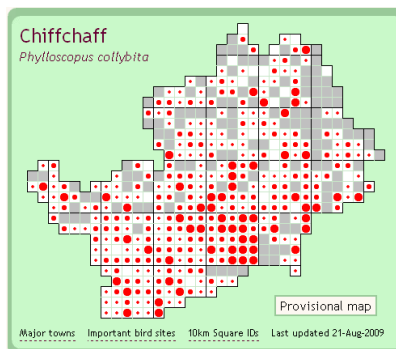
The changing fortunes of one of our summer migrants, the Spotted Flycatcher, is well illustrated by the data received so far. Red dots indicate the three levels of breeding evidence and grey shaded squares have not received enough attention to be sure that the species is absent.

The map on the left shows the situation in the 1988-92 breeding atlas, whereas that on the right shows the breeding evidence from this project, albeit from only two years fieldwork. It is clear that there has been a significant decline.



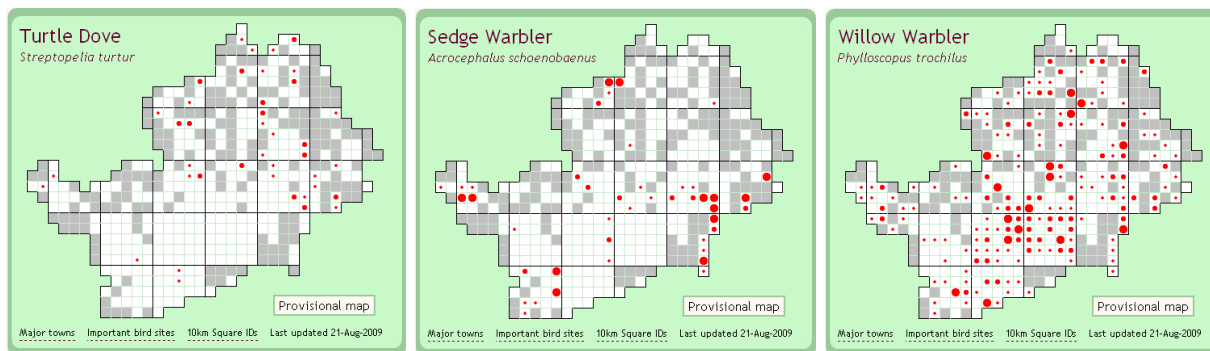
This contrasts with the pattern for Chiffchaff (below) and Blackcap (below right), which have been located in almost every square surveyed, similar to what was found in 1988-92. Although there is still some work to do to confirm breeding, it seems that the breeding season distributions of these species, both of which winter in the Mediterranean basin, will not have changed over the past 20 years.

The assessment of breeding likelihood is based on the observation of breeding activity, using a common set of criteria. For example, the sight of a pair of birds (easier for Blackcap than Chiffchaff) in suitable habitat would be coded as "P", indicating Probable Breeding, indicated by the medium-sized red dots. Large red dots indicate Confirmed Breeding, using evidence such as seeing recently fledged young (code "FL"), adults entering or leaving a nest site (code "ON") or an adult carrying food (code "FF").

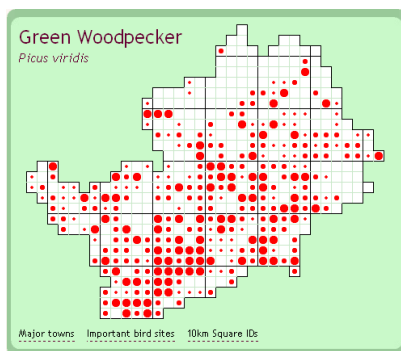


Three other trans-Saharan migrants; Turtle Dove, Sedge Warbler and Willow Warbler are also proving more difficult to find than in the two previous county atlases, carried out 20 and 40 years ago. Maps from the first two years of this project are shown below. Not a single proven breeding record has been received for Turtle Dove, compared with records in 44 tetrads twenty years ago and in 149 tetrads 40 years ago. In the 1988-92 county Atlas, Sedge Warblers were found in 34% of the county's tetrads. This time, so far, the species has only been found in 14% of those tetrads that have been surveyed.

The decline of the Willow Warbler in England has been well documented; largely through ongoing national sample surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey and the Constant Effort Scheme operated by ringers. These surveys measure the relative change in numbers and give some indication of changes in breeding range, but only through detailed distribution atlas work such as this can we understand the scale of range changes in Hertfordshire. In the previous county atlas Willow Warbler was found in all except two tetrads and proved to breed in 56% of those. The white areas on the current map (below right) indicate where observers have looked, but failed to find the species in these first two years.

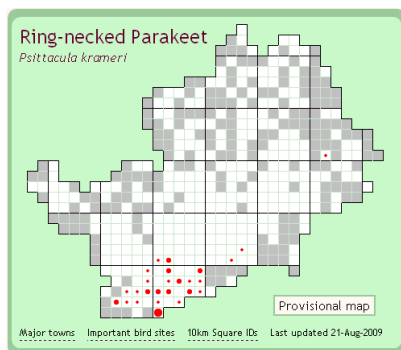
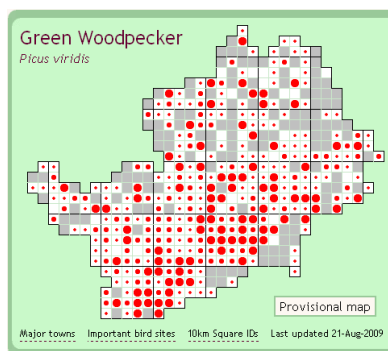


On the other hand, there are species that are showing range expansions - some more popular than others.



The Green Woodpecker has already been located in more tetrads during this project (right) than between 1988 and 1992 (left), with an obvious spread into the north-west and east of the county.

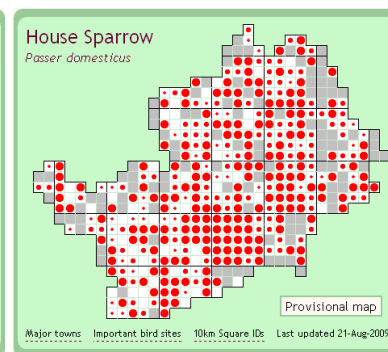
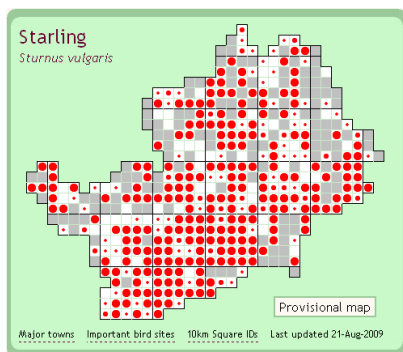
Of the other woodpeckers, the distribution of Great Spotted (not illustrated) seems relatively stable. Confirmed breeding for Lesser Spotted has been found in 23 tetrads compared to 177 in the previous atlas, but this illustrates the value of intensive atlas work, as no more than 7 breeding sites had been reported in 2005 to 2007.



The Ring-necked Parakeet was seen in just one tetrad in the centre of the county in the 1988-92 fieldwork. The current distribution is shown on the left, as it clearly spreads from the south-west. The winter distribution shows an even greater spread that might be indicative of birds seeking out potential breeding areas. Proof of breeding has been established in only one tetrad (TQ19A) but observers are encouraged to monitor likely looking nest-holes during the breeding season to establish whether or not they are being occupied. The species has a long incubation period (22-24 days) and the chicks are fed in the nest for up to 7 weeks, so adult birds visiting a likely hole over a period of time would count as an "Occupied Nest", one of the criteria for Confirmed Breeding.

We are also taking the opportunity during work for this atlas to assess the status of other non-native species. So records of Bar-headed Goose, Black Swan, Helmeted Guineafowl and even Indian Peafowl (Peacock / Peahen) are of interest. We are following the national guidance on revealing locations of the controversial Monk Parakeet, showing only winter season records at the tetrad scale.

Two of our most widespread resident breeding species, Starling and House Sparrow - both nationally Red-listed - still appear to be well distributed (right). They have been reported from almost every tetrad that has been surveyed, but there is a shortage of proven breeding records. Confirmed breeding for Starling is particularly easy evidence to obtain, when the noisy nestlings are begging for food, and adults can often be seen removing the white faecal sacs after delivering a meal. If you see or hear this evidence wherever you are in the county please check the website maps and if missing, submit a Roving Record.



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 being regularly updated with the accumulating results for the current atlas project. All winter data that was available on 18 June and breeding season data that was available on 18 August is now included. During the fieldwork periods, new data loads are announced on the home page and the updated total numbers of records are shown on the Status page.

Also available from the Status page are a set of maps that show how we are progressing with the fieldwork. The Species Density maps are particularly useful in identifying under-recorded areas, and these are automatically updated as new data is loaded. The brighter the colour (red on the breeding season map and blue on the winter map) the more species have been recorded, and if you hover your mouse over the map, you will see the tetrad designation and species count. You can click on the map to see the species that have been recorded, access a map of the tetrad and print a customised record card to help you focus your time in the field.

We are also planning further enhancements to the website to allow us to better target observer effort in the latter stages of the project.

The New Hertfordshire Avifauna

The last county avifauna, *The Birds of Hertfordshire* by Tom Gladwin and Bryan Sage, was published in 1986 and included bird records up to 1982 and selected records from the next two years. The results and analysis of the 1988-92 tetrad atlas data was published in *The Breeding Birds of Hertfordshire* in 1993.

Once fieldwork for this atlas is complete we intend to combine the publication of its results with a new county avifauna and work has already begun on deciding how that will look. A small working group comprising Mike Ilett, Ken Smith, Jack Fearnside and Chris Dee has been formed to plan the content and structure of the new publication. We are keeping our eyes on emerging technology, but the current thinking is that it will be a printed book, although it is possible that some of the more detailed mapping data may be published in compact disk (CD) format. We have a draft list of chapters and have had some good discussion of the structure of the species accounts.

For some species, maps showing the changes in distribution over the three atlas periods will be an important part of the species accounts, but for others, long-term monitoring data, such as from the Breeding Bird Survey or local Constant Effort Scheme sites will be included. We are also hoping to make good use of the count data from the Timed Tetrad Visits from the current atlas to re-assess the county population estimates last published in *The Breeding Birds of Hertfordshire*. For the first time we will be able to assess the winter populations. The Herts Bird Club Rare Birds Panel has also been discussing how we will treat Hertfordshire rarities.

Clearly, the publication of such a book is a major undertaking for the Herts Bird Club, and the working group will be approaching potential authors of species accounts and supporting chapters as the plans crystallise.

Following the successful publication of *Dragonflies and Damselflies of Hertfordshire* and *The Moths of Hertfordshire*, and the pending publication of a new *Flora of Hertfordshire*, the Hertfordshire Natural History Society has agreed to publish the new avifauna.

Call for Outstanding Data

If you still have completed Timed Tetrad Visit forms or any paper Roving Records for the 2009 breeding season (or indeed the 2008/09 winter season), please let me have them as soon as possible. Timely submission of results, allows us to better establish how work is progressing and minimises the risk of effort being expended on obtaining species records or breeding that we already have.

If you signed up to help with the atlas two years ago, have not managed to contribute so far and now find that you do not have the time to help, then please let us know. To ensure the success of the project, we would prefer to know now, in time to draft in other observers, rather than discover this at the end of the four years and end up with gaps in the coverage.

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