

Hertfordshire Bird Atlas



Mapping the distribution of Hertfordshire's birds

Volunteers' Newsletter

Issue 5 - March 2010

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.

Fieldwork for the third winter season was clearly hampered by the severe weather in late January and February, but we are still making good progress. Paired Timed Tetrad Visits have been completed in 81% of the Hertfordshire tetrads, and only 63 have recorded less than 31 species. I'd like to thank everyone who has given their birding time in support of this project. Over 520 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 third breeding season starts on 1 April 2010 and we have plenty of work to do to ascertain the breeding status of all species in each tetrad across the county. The core breeding season spans the months of April to July inclusive, and Timed Tetrad Visits should be confined to this period. However, confirmed breeding records (see box for status codes) outside of this period are welcome, especially for early- or late-breeding species.

Plans for 2010 Breeding Season

Except in a few well-covered areas, the focus of attention this year should be on completing tetrad species lists and improving the breeding status in tetrads where you carried out TTVs in 2008 or 2009.

Many tetrads have fewer than 30 species recorded, and in most squares it ought to be possible to exceed that. In the breeding season it is quite possible that the timing of your TTVs was too early for the detection of some species. That is acceptable for the TTV component (and will be taken into account in the analysis), but please do visit your square again this year to find those missing species.

These gaps are particularly noticeable for nocturnal species; owls, Woodcock and, although unlikely, Nightjar. So please try and make an early morning or dusk visit this spring.

Please remember that we need a breeding category of at least "Possible breeder" for a record to be included in the atlas, and with the exception of a few species, most of your breeding season records can be coded as "H" (in suitable Habitat). If you forgot to include breeding status codes on your online TTV submission, it is possible to add those later via the "[View/Edit my records](#)" link on your Bird Atlas Data Home page. Alternatively you can submit a new Roving Record for the species with a date and breeding evidence code. If you are contributing to the atlas via BirdTrack, then you can add the codes retrospectively on the "[View/edit species lists](#)" or "[View/edit casual obs](#)" links on your BirdTrack Data Home page.

Even for easy to prove species we are still lacking "Confirmed breeder" evidence. For example, in the previous (1988-92) breeding atlas, 100% of tetrads had probable or confirmed breeding for Robin. With the data submitted to date, only 78% of those tetrads with Robins present have achieved "Confirmed breeder" status. A bird with the distinctive, spotty, juvenile plumage is a good sign that it was bred close by and can be coded as "FL".

Other species will require more effort, and we appreciate that some, such as Skylark, are particularly difficult to get definitive evidence of breeding, even though a "Probable breeder" code of "T" will be easy.

Breeding Evidence Status Codes

Select a code that best represents what you have seen. Categories further down the list infer a higher level of evidence of breeding. Except M and U, all must relate to individuals in potentially suitable breeding habitat. Only use F on Roving Records forms and not Timed Tetrad Visit forms.

Non-breeder

- F Elying over
- M Migrant
- U Summering non-breeder

Possible breeder

- H Observed in suitable nesting Habitat
- S Singing male

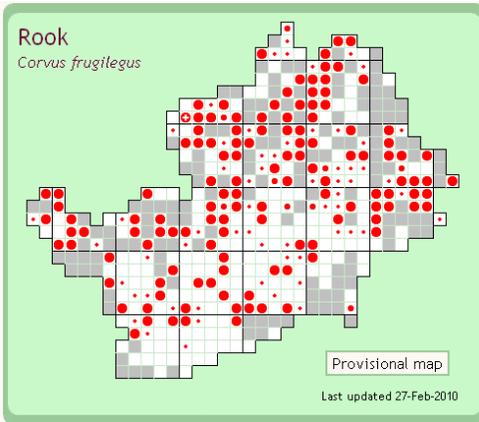
Probable breeder

- P Pair in suitable nesting habitat
- T Permanent Territory (many individuals on 1 day or 1 individual for at least 1 week)
- D Courtship and Display
- N Visiting probable Nest site
- A Agitated behaviour
- B Nest Building or excavating nest-hole

Confirmed breeder

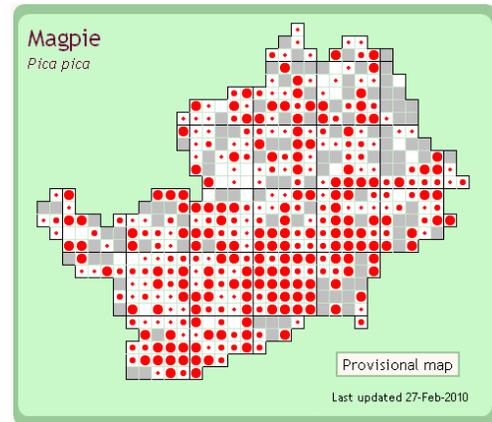
- DD Distraction-Display or injury feigning
- UN Used Nest or eggshells found from this season
- FL Recently FLedged young or downy young
- ON Adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating Occupied Nest
- FF Adult carrying Faecal sac or Food for young
- NE Nest containing Eggs
- NY Nest with Young seen or heard

Obtaining Breeding Evidence - some tips



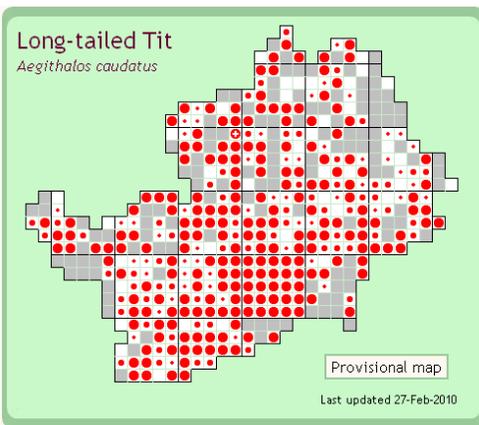
With the late spring this year, now is a good time to get breeding evidence for corvids before the leaves make it impossible to see the nests. If you don't already have Confirmed Breeding status for Rook (see left), then a check of all likely rookery sites in early April should allow you to detect that a colony is active and even see birds sitting (code ON). Rookeries may be quite small and located in just a single tree, but usually there will be more than one nest.

Magpies (right) will also be very obviously re-furbishing previous nests or building new ones which can be recorded as Probable breeding (code B). You might even be able to see the female sitting in the nest come mid-April.



Carrion Crows do not normally breed colonially and the nest is often high in a solitary tree. Once the female is incubating, if you time your visit perfectly you can often see the bird's tail protruding over the edge of the nest (code ON).

Once fledged, all corvids can move some distance from the nest, so do not use code FL for young birds late in the season.

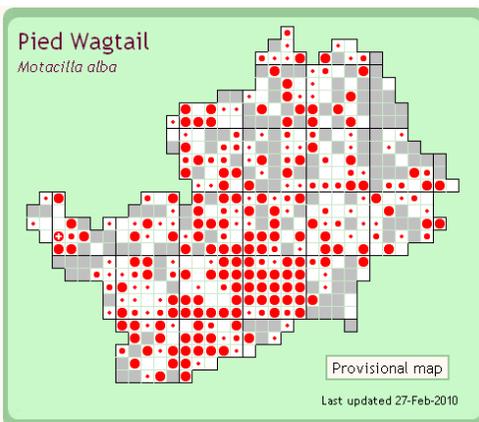
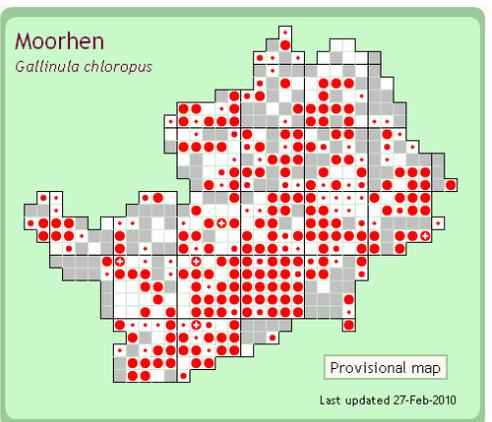


Long-tailed Tits (left) are early breeders and can be seen carrying nesting material (lichen, spiders web, feathers) in late March (code B) long before the brambles, in which they often breed, have developed any leaves. The well-camouflaged nest will become increasingly difficult to see as the season progresses, but if you do find one early in the season, keep track of its location, so that if you see birds in the vicinity later in the spring you can record a status of ON. Be careful to use the code FL, only for recently fledged young (when their tails may not be fully grown), as they can form roving family parties. As the summer progresses, these parties can merge into larger flocks, which can range widely from the nest sites, so these flocks should not be recorded as confirmed breeding in the tetrad.

Starlings and Great Spotted Woodpeckers are two species for which proof of breeding should be easy to obtain. However, timing is crucial. The young of both species are very noisy in the nest in late-May or early-June (code NY), becoming noisier and more persistent as they approach fledging. If you are surveying more than one tetrad, then use the cues from one tetrad to seek out the breeding evidence in other tetrads, as the breeding will generally be well-synchronised.

The easiest way to confirm breeding for Moorhen (right) is to see the very young downy birds with their parents (code FL). This species will often breed on very small farm or roadside ponds, so be sure to check all suitable waterbodies in your tetrad (subject to access restrictions). You might be lucky and also find breeding Little Grebe.

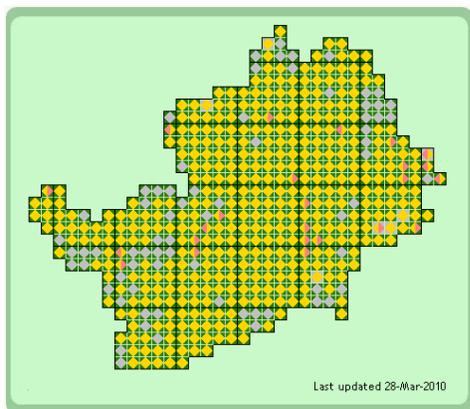
Mute Swan nests are usually fairly obvious and often in traditional locations, but we still have some tetrads where breeding is recorded as only Possible or Probable. First eggs are usually laid in early- to mid-April, so any bird sitting after that date can be recorded as Confirmed breeding (code ON).



When they are feeding young, Pied Wagtails (left) and Grey Wagtails can be very obvious whilst collecting insects to feed their chicks, often accumulating large numbers of flies in their beaks. So if you see a wagtail in late-May or early-June, it is worth stopping to see what they are doing. This is sufficient and the easiest way to confirm breeding (code FF), as they can be very wary of revealing the location of their nest.

Carrying food for young (code FF) is also a good way of proving breeding for Blackbird and Song Thrush, and if you see this, even in your own garden, be sure to check whether breeding has been confirmed for that tetrad. Or just submit the record anyway, as it is better for us to eliminate duplicate evidence than to miss a record.

Third winter season achievements



Despite the weather which curtailed activities in the second half of the season, we are making fantastic progress on our first county tetrad-scale winter atlas. As of 28 March we have paired counts (that is one in November/December and one in January/February) for 396 (81%) 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.

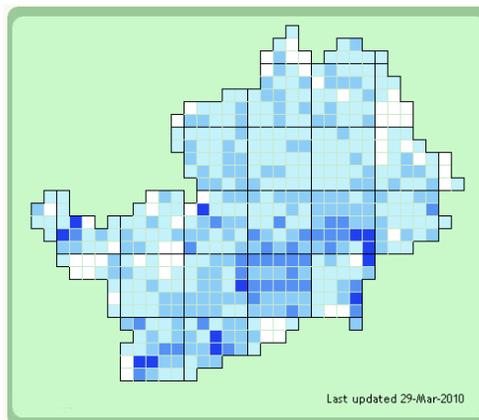
For a small number of tetrads (shown as yellow/red diamonds), one or other of the two counts was not completed (or results have not yet been received) and will need to be finished next winter. The plan is also to complete TTVs in the remaining 71 outstanding tetrads in the 2010/11 winter.

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 expecting to be able to do some analysis of these data at a local level, and are looking at the best ways to do this.

We do now have some winter Roving Records from each tetrad, even those where no TTV work has been done. These records are the main way of establishing a species list for each tetrad, allowing us to produce distribution maps. Higher species counts are expected in areas with a greater diversity of habitat and, of course, the key wetland sites in the county will have the greatest. These show up as the darker blue squares in the map on the right - Amwell NR and Tring Reservoirs currently have over 100 species recorded.

Scarce Breeding Species

We are very conscious of not 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 reassurance 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.



Collaboration between the Herts Bird Club and the BTO

The Herts Bird Club is very pleased with the level of support that the British Trust for Ornithology is offering to local bird atlas projects in hosting the online data entry service, providing regular copies of the accumulated data and giving guidance on analysis techniques. Ken Smith and I attended a local atlas day at the BTO headquarters in February, where we shared ideas with other county atlas organisers and heard initial thoughts on how the BTO will be analysing all the records and counts you have been collecting.

The Hertfordshire Bird Atlas Website

The availability of the internet gives us an 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. Last years breeding season data received by 27 February and all winter records that were available on 29 March are 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, don't forget that 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.

In preparation for this coming breeding season, a recent enhancement to the maps now includes "Confirmed breeding" records from March and August. Further additions are planned to help target under-recorded areas as we near the end of the fieldwork.

Call for Outstanding Data

If you still have completed TTV forms or any paper Roving Records for the 2009/10 winter season (or indeed any past season), please let me have them as soon as possible. It would be a shame to have to repeat field work merely because your results have not been submitted.

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