

Hertfordshire Bird Atlas



Mapping the distribution of Hertfordshire's birds

Volunteers' Newsletter

Issue 7 - April 2011

Despite some challenging weather, fieldwork for the fourth winter season has gone extremely well. Paired Timed Tetrad Visits have been completed in 99% of the 491 Hertfordshire tetrads, and all have now recorded more than 30 species. I'd like to thank everyone who has given their birding time in support of this project. Almost 650 people have contributed results from Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) or provided Roving Records (RRs) through the Bird Atlas 2007-11 website (www.birdatlas.net), on paper or used BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.org) by mapping their sites to a specific tetrad. This was the final winter season of the national project.

The Hertfordshire Bird Atlas

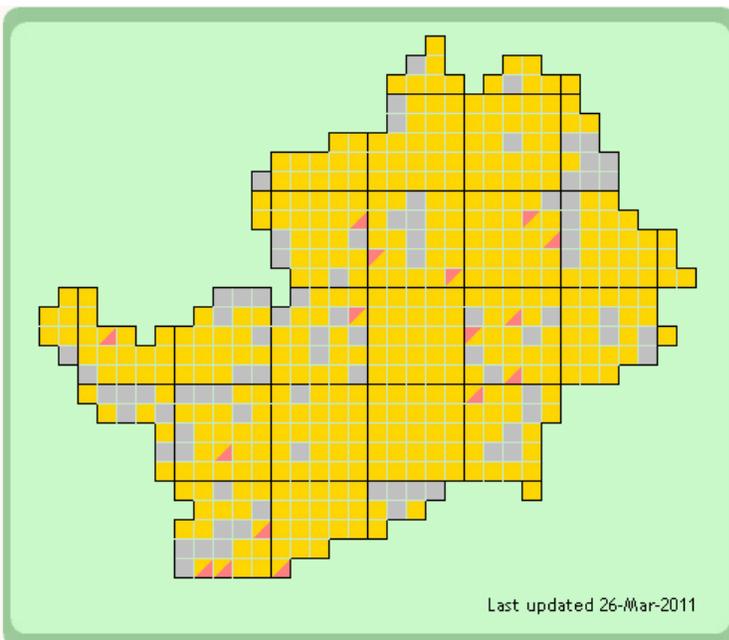
The Hertfordshire Birds Atlas is a tetrad scale distribution atlas project for both winter and breeding seasons and is running alongside Bird Atlas 2007-11, the new atlas for the whole of Britain and Ireland being organised by the British Trust for Ornithology in collaboration with the Scottish Ornithologists 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.

The fourth breeding season starts on 1 April 2011 and we still have 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 on page 2 for status codes) outside of this period are welcome, especially for early-breeding or late-breeding species.

Fieldwork for the Hertfordshire Bird Atlas will continue into a fifth winter (2011/12) and the following breeding season, to do some targeted work in less well recorded areas.

Plans for 2011 Breeding Season

The focus of attention this year should be on carrying out the remaining Timed Tetrad Visits. We are aiming for 100% coverage within the four years of the national project which finishes at the end of this breeding season. Many of these tetrads, shown in grey below, already have observers allocated, but there are still some available, in under-watched parts of the county, where you never know what you might find.



Fieldwork Status

Winter Season

TTVs planned	982
TTVs completed	976
Records from TTVs	17687
Extra Roving Records	5848
Extra records from BirdTrack	871
Total records	24406

Species recorded 183

Breeding Season

TTVs planned	982
TTVs completed	798
Confirmed breeding records	8684
Probably breeding records	6115
Possible breeding records	6653
Total records	21452

Presence records 3044

Species recorded 223

If you have completed your TTVs in previous years, they do not need to be repeated, but you might want to consider helping out elsewhere in the county. If you have previously been given a tetrad and are no longer able to carry out the fieldwork, please let us know as soon as possible so that we can re-allocate them promptly.

Many tetrads still 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 83% 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 Flying over
- M Migrant
- U Summering non-breeder

Possible breeder

- H Observed in suitable nesting Habitat
- S Singing male

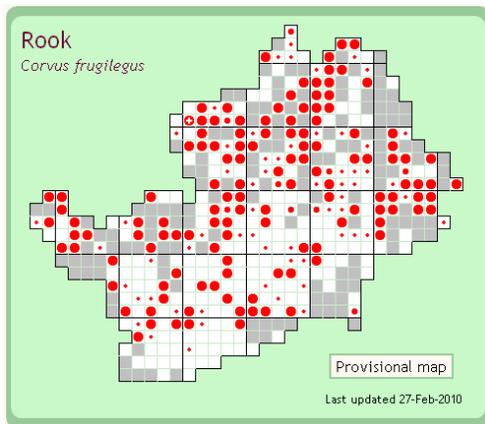
Probable breeder

- 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

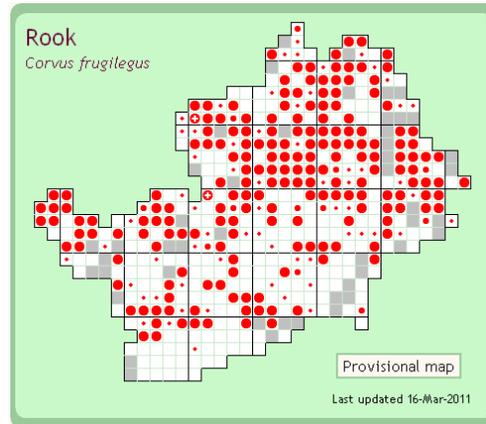
Confirmed breeder

- 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

Breeding Season Progress



In the March 2010 Newsletter we appealed for more records of breeding Rooks, highlighting the gaps in the map (left). I am pleased to report that the current map (right) is looking much better with many of the "Possible" records now upgraded to "Confirmed". It seems likely that the species is absent from the white squares, but the grey squares have had insufficient work to confirm or deny presence.

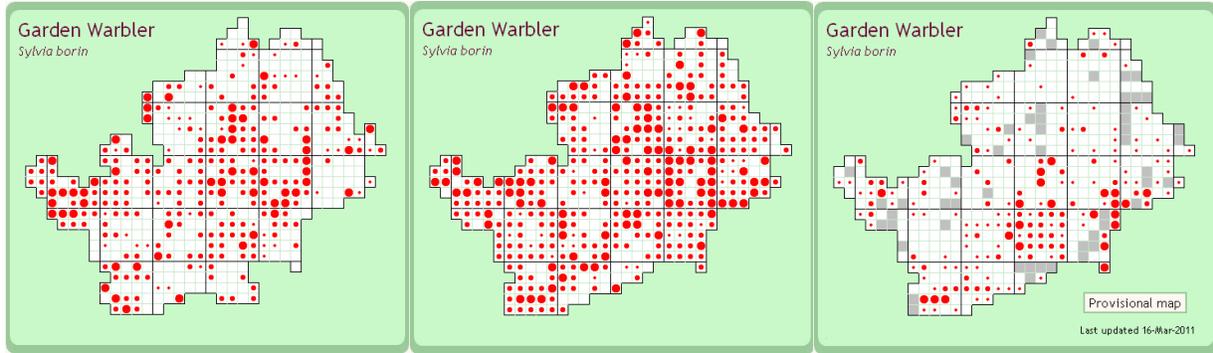


Although we have only completed three of the five breeding seasons of the new Hertfordshire Bird Atlas, the results for some of the migrant warblers are worrying. The table on the right shows the numbers of tetrads in which these species have been recorded with Probable or Confirmed breeding evidence.

It is not surprising that Willow Warbler has shown such a contraction in distribution, as other BTO monitoring schemes (Breeding Bird Survey, Constant Effort Scheme) have already highlighted its plight in Southern Britain. However, such dramatic declines for Garden Warbler (77%) and Lesser Whitethroat (69%) were not expected. Maybe this is an artefact of the effort that has gone into undertaking TTVs rather than searching for breeding evidence, and hopefully will improve in the next two years.

Species	Probable + Confirmed		
	1967-72	1998-92	2008-10
Sedge Warbler	183	150	38
Reed Warbler	60	73	50
Blackcap	389	481	315
Garden Warbler	239	346	79
Lesser Whitethroat	208	334	103
Whitethroat	413	442	305
Chiffchaff	400	462	264
Willow Warbler	436	482	102

The maps below show the changes in distribution for Garden Warbler. Clearly there was a substantial expansion between the first atlas which finished in 1972 and the second, carried out between 1988 and 1992. There appears to be an almost complete loss from former stronghold in the higher ground in north and west of the county.

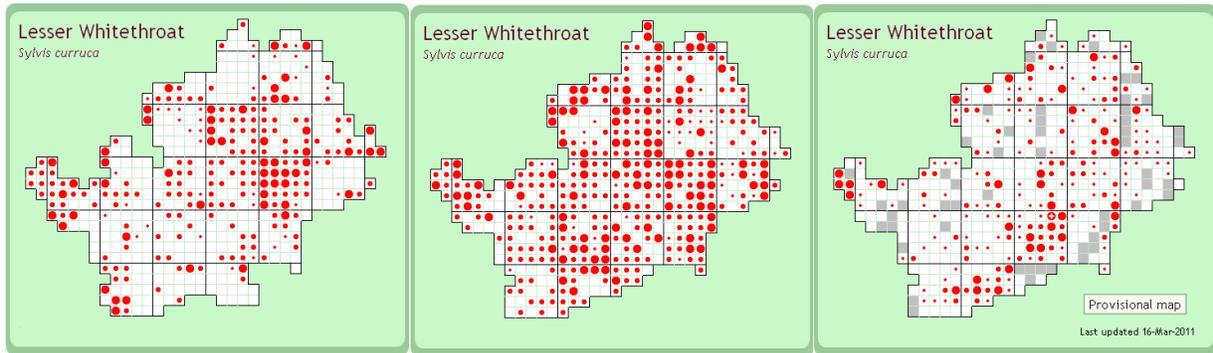


1967-72 (six seasons)

1988-92 (five seasons)

2008-10 (three seasons)

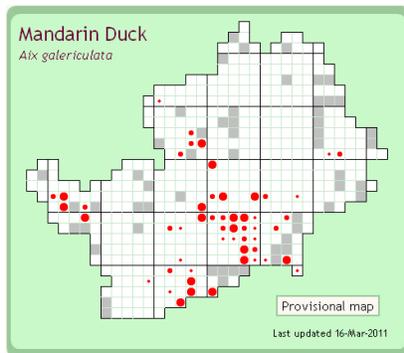
The picture for Lesser Whitethroat is somewhat different and appears to be more of a general thinning-out than a contraction in range, possibly showing a preference for the clay soil types in the south and east. More work is needed to confirm this suggestion.



1967-72 (six seasons)

1988-92 (five seasons)

2008-10 (three seasons)

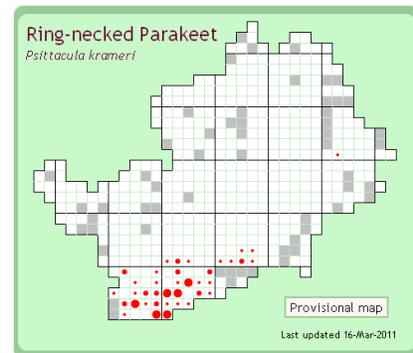


Mandarin Duck

Aix galericulata

Provisional map
Last updated 16-Mar-2011

The scope of the new atlas includes feral and introduced species and two introduced species that seem to be spreading are Mandarin Duck (left) and Ring-necked Parakeet (right). We have collected about twice as many Probable and Confirmed breeding records of Mandarin Duck in the first three years of this atlas compared to 1988-92. Ring-necked Parakeet was represented by just one Possible breeding record in 1988-92, and now seems firmly established in the south of the county. This could herald a further range expansion.



Ring-necked Parakeet

Psittacula krameri

Provisional map
Last updated 16-Mar-2011

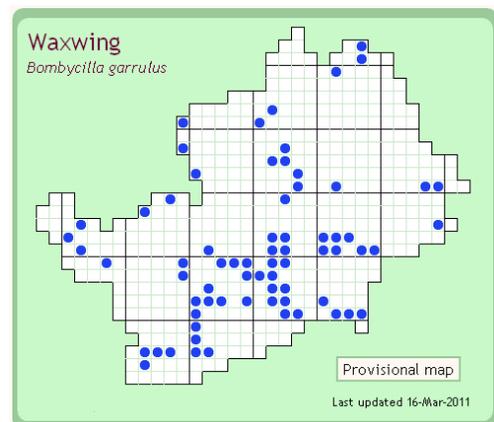
All records of both these and other non-native species (e.g. Black Swan, Muscovy Duck) are of value, so please don't ignore them during your fieldwork.

Call for Outstanding Data

If you still have completed TTV forms or any paper Roving Records for the 2010/11 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.

There's no doubt that the 2010/11 winter has been one of the best in recent times for Waxwings, but have you submitted your sightings as Roving Records for the atlas? The map on the right shows where Waxwings have been submitted for Hertfordshire over the past four winters - most of those coming from the last winter.

Although we will be reviewing and incorporating the records submitted to the Herts Bird Club it will take a while to reformat those for uploading to Bird Atlas 2007-11, so if you saw Waxwings in the county last winter and they are not shown on the map please submit them as Roving Records at <http://www.birdatlas.net>.



Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

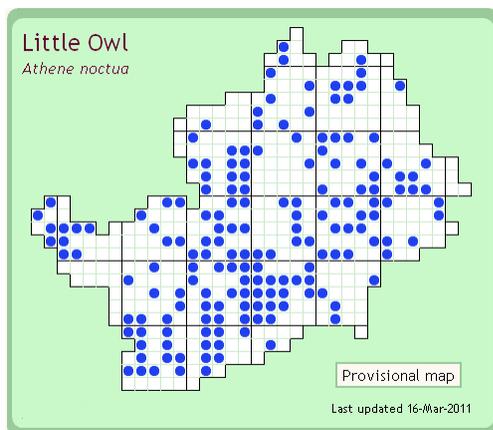
Provisional map
Last updated 16-Mar-2011

Fourth winter season achievements

Almost all the outstanding winter TTVs were completed; as of 26 March we have paired counts (that is one in November/December and one in January/February) for 487 (99%) of the 491 Hertfordshire tetrads.

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 with the help of the BTO are looking at the best ways to do this.

We have now received winter records for at least 30 species in each tetrad and the species density map (right) clearly shows the wetland "hotspots" - the darker blue squares - Amwell NR (TL31R), Tyttenhanger (TL10X) and Tring Reservoirs (SP91B) currently have over 100 species.

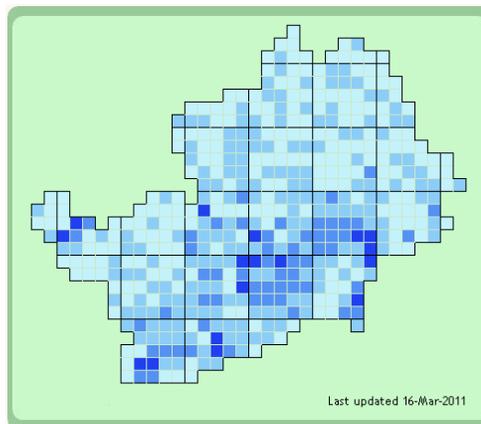


The lower numbers of species - paler blue - in the north is to be expected.

These records are the main way of establishing a species list for each tetrad, allowing us to produce distribution maps, such as that for Little Owl, shown on the left.

Before next November we will be assessing the amount of fieldwork that has been carried out in each tetrad and taking a look at the species lists to decide whether or not to do some "top-up" work in 2011/12. This might mean carrying out 2-hour TTVs where only 1-hour counts have been done so far.

We hope to be able to keep this fieldwork to a minimum in order to be able to contribute to any national survey work next winter. There are tentative plans to investigate numbers, timing and distribution patterns of thrushes in the winter months, particularly focused on our winter migrants - Redwing and Fieldfare.



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 and all winter records that were available on 14 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.

The maps and recording cards now include Confirmed breeding records from March and August, and species that have been located in four of the eight adjoining tetrads are indicated on the maps with a four-way arrow , and on the recording cards with "Adj.". These might be obvious species on which to target your time.

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. Although the national project ends in 2011, many counties are extending their own tetrad-scale projects beyond this, as we are. The BTO is intending to continue to maintain the data entry website as a means of capturing atlas records beyond July 2011. We are also in discussions regarding the online system for entering TTVs, if we decide that some of these could be improved.

What next?

Both the BTO and the Herts Bird Club have been very aware of not overloading birders during the period of the atlas, and single-species surveys have largely been suspended during this period. I am really pleased that we have managed to maintain numbers of BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) plots at an acceptable level to enable us to monitor population numbers on an annual basis. If the atlas fieldwork was your first introduction to BTO surveys, and you enjoyed it, then you might also enjoy participating in the BBS.

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