

**BIRDTRACK WORKING GROUP ON EXCHANGE OF BIRD RECORDS
AND ON THE PROVISION OF SERVICES FOR BIRD RECORDERS
AND BIRD CLUBS**

3rd Meeting: Saturday 3 June 2006, 0930hrs
The Nunnery, Thetford

MINUTES

Attending: Dawn Balmer (DEB), Iain Downie (ISD), Alan Gardiner (AG), Tim Hodge (TH), Ray Murray (RM), Dick Myatt (DM), Nick Pomiankowski (NP), Rob Robinson (RAR)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Howard Vaughan, Ian Francis and Mark Thomas.

2 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING.

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted as a true record. We reviewed the minutes of the meeting and the following were matters arising:

- TH and NP asked if an individuals sites could be sorted by number of visits, so that most frequently visited sites appear at the top of the list. This would help users who have a large number of sites. ISD said he would look into it. (ACTION: ISD)
- TH asked if we could further discuss the subject of setting up sites for casual records so that they didn't appear in your main sites list. It was generally agreed that this would be a good idea but there were other sites-related issues to discuss (see below). (ACTION: ISD, DEB)

3 REVIEW OF DOWNLOAD FACILITIES FOR LOCAL AND COUNTY RECORDERS

DEB gave an update on the number of counties currently signed up to the BirdTrack Agreement. Fifty-one Clubs have already made a download of data. There are a further 27 recording areas to get on board, mostly in Ireland and Wales but also a few large English counties such as Oxfordshire, Cornwall, Buckinghamshire, West Midlands.

Many county recorders have been impressed by the sheer number of records received through BirdTrack, and the number of new observers that have been submitting records and wouldn't normally do so. Many counties have appreciated the number of records of common species for which they normally receive few records. Those counties undertaking Atlas work have found these records very helpful, even when the species has been recorded as 'present'. A small number of counties found the number of records of common species too many to deal with.

The spreadsheet downloaded by the county recorder contains an 'Edited Records' worksheet. These edited records can include additions, deletions and alterations. Currently, the whole list is presented back to the recorder and not just the edited records. Is there a way of just presenting back the edited records? (ACTION: ISD to investigate).

Still a problem with the number of sites registered with names such as 'My home' and 'My garden'. We discussed the possibility of setting up a check at the site registration stage for names such as those above and to ask the user to give the site a new name. (ACTION: ISD)

DM asked us to check the consistency between the spreadsheet downloaded by county recorders and individual users. There are currently some inconsistencies such as the Time and Count Accuracy field. It was pointed out that the spreadsheets are designed for different uses and maybe have a different format. (ACTION: ISD to standardise output).

There is also a small bug appearing sometimes regarding the number of records to be downloaded. (ACTION: ISD)

4 REVIEW OF VALIDATION STANDARDS AND LOCAL/NATIONAL RARITIES

This seems to be going well. We have received comments from a couple of county recorders who experienced problems uploading the file but these were quickly resolved. So far 11 counties have uploaded validation files. DEB will encourage other counties to do this in the next few months (ACTION: DEB)

5 REVIEW OF OTHER PROPOSED DEVELOPMENTS

a) Site species lists

ISD discussed the idea of being able to produce a list of all species seen at a given site or 1km square. There were a number of problems to consider such as potential rare breeding birds on a site. This idea needs further consideration. (ACTION: DEB, RR, ISD)

b) PDF download

ISD demonstrated on the development version of BirdTrack a new pdf that can be downloaded giving a species list for a given site. This list shows the most commonly recorded species at the site and leaves room to add in new species. The potential for use on staffed RSPB reserves was discussed. It was considered by all to be a good idea and would encourage the recording of complete lists. It was agreed to implement this. (ACTION: ISD). ISD also demonstrate the 'species richness' graph he has been working on – this was of great interest and should be implemented with other upgrades.

c) 10km warning on site registration (completed)

ISD showed the new feature that gives a warning when sites are registered at the 10km level. The idea is to encourage users to register sites at the 1km level where possible.

d) Warning on registration regarding not forwarding records to county recorder

ISD suggested a new warning at the registration stage for those who do not tick the box to allow their records to be passed to county recorders. We have found that some people simple miss this box at the registration stage. This was considered a good idea. (ACTION: ISD)

e) New sites related feature

Given the number of potential new sites related features it may be sensible to produce a new 'button' in the future. This should be discussed further when we have discussed all the implications of site species lists (point a above). (ACTION: ISD, DEB).

6 PROGRESS WITH IMPLEMENTING SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

ISD presented the progress he has made with the supplementary data. ISD suggested a two-stage approach to collecting supplementary data so that the most important information is collected on the first page (species, present, count, breeding status, comment) and extra information on the second page (age/sex and direction of flight). ISD was concerned about the time spent online without submitting data given the current time-out is set to 40 minutes. For some people entering long lists and lots of supplementary data, then 40 minutes may be exceeded. (ACTION: ISD to look into patterns of use of casual obs comments and full visit obs comments).

It was agreed that the breeding status was the most important feature. The comments box was also considered important and it was thought by TH that a box with free format text, accessible from the species list (without clicking an extra icon) may encourage more comments to be entered. However, the comments box accessed by an icon gave more flexibility with regarding to formatting the text and was agreed to be the preferred option.

RR discussed the value of collecting information on direction of flight and how this could be potentially used on maps to show arrival/departure of migrations. This information on direction is particularly important for visible migration watchers and seawatchers. TH pointed out that an extra category was required to show the number of birds present on the ground or on the sea.

There was mixed opinion as to whether details of age/sex/direction should be dumped into the comments field for download by county recorders or split into separate fields.

A single column format was agreed to be the best approach, although it may be possible to make this a user preference.

ISD is to design some sample pages. (ACTION: ISD)

7 DISCUSSION OF UPLOAD FACILITY FROM OBSERVERS TO BIRDTRACK (BTWG:JUN06:1)

The BTO has received a number of requests from current and potential BirdTrack users about BirdTrack providing an upload facility for records from Excel and Access databases. Such data would need to be entered as complete lists, while this may be useful for entering current data (particularly when collection of supplementary data has been implemented), most historical data is unlikely to be. Historical data would be of value in terms of providing information on numbers and distribution of birds, but could not be incorporated into some of the BirdTrack outputs that rely on complete lists.

There is a worry that if we provide an upload facility via Excel that some existing online users may choose to use this rather than the use the website and fill in complete lists. One option discussed would only to accept

records via Excel for records prior to a specific date, such as 1 January 2005, so we only collected 'historical' records this way and not current records.

BirdTrack Steering Group were asked to consider whether provision of such a facility would be useful.

8 PLAN FOR FUTURE WORK OF THE GROUP

Priorities for development are (in order):

- Supplementary data
- Alternative data entry
- Site creation/top local sites
- Sort site dropdown
- Flag doubtful records

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

A number of general comments were made regarding the BirdTrack data entry page:

- In 'My Details and Settings' if you choose a number other than 30 for the minimum number of species to be presented back to you then you get an error message (ACTION: ISD)
- Some users find the current system of colour columns for data entry, with the species going across the page, rather confusing. A single column of species, or two columns with species going up and down would be preferable. ISD commented that changes would have to be made to the data entry page to incorporate the supplementary data fields and this may dictate single column format anyway (ACTION: DEB & ISD)
- The use of 'sub-species unknown' after a number of species such as Herring Gull, Brent Goose etc is rather confusing. Can the species names be simplified and do we really need 'sub-species unknown'? (ACTION: DEB, RR, ISD)

Plans for the next national distribution Atlas were discussed and DEB explained that some preliminary discussions had already taken place between BirdTrack and the Atlas organisers. BirdTrack will be the primary method for the collection of casual records and sites at the 1km (rather than tetrad) were to be used. It was asked if a member of the Atlas team could attend the next BirdTrack Working Group meeting to discuss the plans for the Atlas, so the two surveys may best be integrated.

DEB told the group that she and Simon Gillings had put together a document regarding BTO Policy on publishing records and maps of rare and scarce breeding birds. This was for guidance in BirdTrack but also the forthcoming Atlas. A list of suggestions had been submitted to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel for comment.

Several members asked the group what to do about observers who were submitting doubtful records. DEB suggested they contact her in the first instance. DEB will contact County Recorders to advise them. (ACTION: DEB)

Sites created using the quick set-up are all at the 10km resolution. Members of the group asked it if was possible to get some of these at the 1km site. The problem with some RSPB sites is that they cover such large areas. To improve clarity of site names, ISD suggested that we add the initials 'RSPB' after each site name so Dungeness becomes Dungeness RSPB. This will help identify sites at the local level and may help to distinguish from other nearby sites (eg Dungeness Bird Observatory area). (ACTION: ISD)

DM asked if members of the group could be kept up to date with progress of development in between meetings. (ACTION: DEB, ISD).

10. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Saturday 25th November at The Nunnery. 0930hrs.

Dawn Balmer
10 June 2006