

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

4th Meeting: Saturday 25 November 2006, 0930-1600hrs at The Nunnery, Thetford

MINUTES

Present: Ian Francis (IF; RSPB), Alan Gardiner (AG; Herts), Tim Hodge (TH; Chair, Kent), Dick Myatt (DM; Northumberland), Nick Pomiankowski (NP; Staffs), Stephen Baillie (SRB; BTO), Iain Downie (ISD; BTO) Simon Gillings (SG; BTO) and Mark Grantham (MJG; BTO).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Ray Murray and Howard Vaughan.

2. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting were approved.

3 MATTERS ARISING

- (d) It was generally felt that the figure of 20% of users who hadn't ticked the box to allow their records to be forwarded to recorders was high, though it was presumed that few of these would be regular contributors. To capture these users though, it would be easier to do this at the registration stage, but would be harder with users already registered. An annual reminder pop-up box was suggested as an alternative, detailing the importance of ticking this box. The current agreement is also rather wordy, but needs to be so to cover the partners legally. SB suggested that this text could be looked at again, but it did apply to all online surveys so had to be cleared with all partners. TH and NP suggested a reminder pop-up would suffice, and perhaps being coded to appear every year [**ACTION: IS Unit**].
- (g) The problem of uploading historical data was that in most cases these would just be casual records, as most packages didn't cater for complete listing. In future, users may want to add in their historical records. Several observers are using other software and don't want to input twice. TH mentioned that many observers send records to KOS, which are then entered onto their database, and many of these casual records will be of greater importance in the Atlas era. DM also mentioned that groups of observers could use the same user-id, and this could be extended to people sending in paper records to a central recorder. [**ACTION: Leave on the to-do list**].
- (h) The use of 'subspecies unknown' had caused some confusion, and TH gave Stonechat as an example, where it was assumed that all records related to the common race unless otherwise stated. For the average user this potentially merely causes confusion instead of clarity. A similar example was Herring Gull, where many observers won't know the difference between the races. SG also mentioned the need for a code for fly-by Redpolls unidentified to species. [**ACTION: The naming of species should be reviewed by the BirdTrack Team, though this would have to stay in line with more general BTO coding across schemes, and may be best left until Dawn Balmer returns from maternity leave. (However, this issue has been raised again recently by other schemes (including WeBS online application) and may need further attention in the much nearer future)**].

4. PLANS FOR NEXT ATLAS AND LINKS TO BIRDTRACK

SG gave a short presentation outlining the methodology for the new Atlases and the links between the Atlas and BirdTrack.

SG emphasised the two-way flow of records between the Atlas work and BirdTrack. Atlas fieldwork will be in two main methods: timed tetrad visits and roving recorders. It was the latter records that would link in with BirdTrack, as the timed visits should be considered a separate survey in their own right. ISD suggested that the two websites (www.birdtrack.net and www.birdatlas.net) would have some commonality, so it was easy for users to switch between the two. NP suggested that the casual records sent to county recorders would be of increased value to the Atlas and could be fed into the system via BirdTrack. BirdTrack recorders could target areas not yet surveyed if coverage maps could be produced nationally and perhaps also locally.

SG confirmed that due to the nature of the project, national results would only be fed back every six months, whereas local results could be fed back more frequently to encourage users to fill in the gaps in coverage. SB mentioned the spatial resolution of results, which would be at the 10km square level nationally, and SG confirmed that this might be at the tetrad level locally. TH mentioned that for conservation purposes, the 1km level might be needed, though access to many 1km squares for coverage would be difficult. It would also be difficult to cover a whole tetrad in the one-hour suggested, but this is fine at the big-picture scale.

SB mentioned whether the BTO would feed back web content to county websites, and TM mentioned similar feedback for newsletters as well.

The problem of possible duplication within records submitted on paper was mentioned, but not considered a major problem.

5. **REVIEW OF LATEST RELEASE OF BIRDTRACK (BTWG:NOV06:1)**

ISD demonstrated all of the new features included in the latest release for comment.

AG suggested that the addition of breeding status to the species list pages wasn't obvious enough, hence didn't encourage submission of this [**ACTION: IS Unit to improve**].

All agreed that the Google maps were an excellent new development, and would reduce the errors associated with site selection. ISD pointed out that the Isle of Man wasn't covered at the street map level, and this should be investigated with Google or with online user groups. DM mentioned that it can be difficult to navigate down to the local level, and AG agreed that we should regularly remind people how to use the system most efficiently.

When using the facility to enter casual sites, it was suggested that the text should be rewritten, to make it clearer if a site was to be added as a main or casual site [**ACTION: MJG to rewrite text**]. When setting up several sites, the default Google map level was zoomed out nationally, and DM wondered if information on zoom-level could be kept within the session [**ACTION: IS Unit will investigate**]. DM also suggested that the quick-site options should be made available in the casual records setup, and SB suggested that the three current lists could be combined to this end [**ACTION: IS Unit**].

The filter box for entering additional species is also not intuitive and needs to be explained better (e.g. use of reg-ex). The header for the window (JSP page) is also confusing [**ACTION: MJG and IS Unit to review the wording in this area**].

The definitions used for breeding status may be confusing, but are needed. The box below the choices needs labelling as well to make its use clearer. The issue of birds present but not breeding (e.g. Swift, Grey Heron) perhaps also needs addressing. In the download to recorders, NP suggested that it would be useful to have the top level coding as well to make the status clearer (i.e. Possible – U). A pdf download could also be made available to recorders detailing all of the breeding status codes [**ACTION: MJG to draft**]. DM also suggested that the pop-up box be enlarged slightly to remove the need for scroll bars

[**ACTION: IS Unit**]. The prompt to not enter colons in the comments box also now needed rewording [**ACTION: MJG to reword**].

DM suggested it would be useful for the top 50 county sites to be selected directly from a Google map, and SB mentioned that this list could perhaps now be extended as we had gone down the line of using a pop-up box. AG thought that 50 sites per county was enough for now. MJG mentioned the clash between county names and bird club regions, and most thought that it was fine to just use the county name and not the club region name [**ACTION: MJG and IS Unit to discuss Google mapping of sites and rewording of county names**].

The downloads for recorders had caused some confusion, and TH highlighted the problem of a single species being edited on a long list. On download, the whole list was then returned again, and it wasn't obvious which records had been edited. ISD confirmed that this is because the whole list had to be revalidated after editing. It was thought that it might be possible to match old and new lists, but as the submission ID had changed this might be problematic [**ACTION: BirdTrack Team to take forward**].

6. REPORTS FOR BIRD RECORDERS AND CLUBS

A general discussion focussing on the results that could be made available at the county level followed. IF thought that county trends of proportional presence on lists would be good (with results similar to the regional results already available), but MJG noted that for many counties there might not be enough records to generate reasonable graphics. Tables of monthly maxima for different sites may be more useful, though there are perennial problems when dealing with count data (dealing with present only and null counts). GBW type trends over time would also be useful. It was also thought that the production of a dummies guide to getting results out of BirdTrack would be useful to users. [**ACTION: MJG to produce guide and update help functions**].

It would also be interesting to compare the current year's observations with the average from previous year, making it easier to pick up annual trends.

7. EASE OF USE OF DOWNLOAD FACILITIES FOR RECORDERS

NP confirmed that all information in downloads is useful, but it was recognised that not all recorders would be IT literate. A filter on the download facility would also be useful (TH) though it would be difficult to set this up for every requirement. The basic filter could include all ticked species from a set list (i.e. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Barn Owl) or ticked common species where there are additional comments. There is also the possibility of using county validation to filter some records (early/late dates, high counts etc...). NP suggested the development of an Excel guide for county recorders, including simple filters and sorting. This will be discussed at the next meeting, but it would be useful if those present could give examples of how they currently filter downloads. In general, it took several hours (often over several evenings) to sort downloaded data, including going through all additional comments. TH also had the problem of renaming sites to familiar, standardised names. [**ACTION: Further discussion needed**].

8. ISSUES CONCERNED WITH RECORDING LOCATIONS IN BIRDTRACK (BTWG:NOV06:2)

The current system was discussed where sites are defined by a single grid square. It was suggested it would be useful to have a clickable map of sites, as records really are from a site and not a grid square. A central grid could be used to identify the site, but the boundary is the important piece of information. If a site covers eight grid squares, then it needs to be queryable on all squares or the site as a whole. Birds can also be seen way outside grid square boundaries but are still counted by BirdTrack (i.e. seawatching records). It would thus be

useful to allow users to assign the records from their sites to different attributes. The option would be to assign each site to an individual tetrad, 10km square or known (pre-defined) site.

TH outlined the concept of parent-daughter sites, where nested levels of site naming allow more simple queries to be done. Assigning a 'bird club name' to a site would be similar to this. This standardised name could be attached to the site by the BTO automatically, the county recorder when downloading (via an online system) or by the user themselves (as outlined above). If site names could be standardised then records could be automatically downloaded onto a database without the need for editing.

Within specific grid squares, recorders don't necessarily record accurately. It might also be an option to allow users to set up tetrads as sites.

9. PROVISION OF BIRD LISTS FOR SITES

If lists are to be provided for specific sites then records of rare breeding species will need to be excluded in most cases. Listing Bittern as a breeding species at one site would be expected, but should be restricted at another. This may also prove difficult for resident breeding species, where listing them in the winter may reveal breeding location (i.e. Cirl Bunting). It was suggested to try this at the largest sites first (i.e. RSPB reserves) and to work downwards.

10. GETTING RECORDERS TO SUPPORT BIRDTRACK

There is a need to emphasise that recorders can upload their validation in chunks, making the job much easier.

With reference to local rarity descriptions, it was suggested that the description box could be moved to a more obvious position on the page, as these were often filled in poorly. One other option would be to show a pop-up box with an example description. It was also mentioned that the 'Is this record 100% certain?' may be redundant, but this does still appear on current county rarity forms anyway. [**ACTION: IS Unit to redesign**].

11. GETTING RECORDERS AND CLUBS TO HELP WITH PROMOTING BIRDTRACK

Further ideas for promotion of BirdTrack were suggested, including more promotion within RSPB groups and reserves, county Wildlife Trust publications, and a flash demonstration on the homepage to encourage more users to register.

We should sell the fact that BirdTrack feeds into all manner of conservation work at various levels. MJG also suggested further promotion in county bird reports, and TH suggested that a colour page could appear on the inside back page of the upcoming Kent Bird Report.

12. WORK PLAN FOR SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

Recommended developments were highlighted, and priorities assigned as below:

Highest priority: - addition of standardised site names to sites (linked in to the mapping of main site locations)

High priority: - reminder to users to release records to the county recorder
 - addition of grid reference accuracy to sites

Low priority: - supplementary data (age, sex etc.)

- Lowest priority:
- selective download for recorders
 - editing within recorder download
 - Atlas proof of breeding
 - quick site setup from casual records form
 - species lists for defined sites
 - upload facility for individual observers and bird clubs
 - results reporting at the county scale

13. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Saturday 30 June 2007.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mark Grantham, Iain Downie & Stephen Baillie

13 December 2005