

Nightingale 1980

Title

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Description and Summary Results

Britain is at the northern edge of the breeding range of the Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* and is one of several summer migrants which were thought to have declined in numbers over the course of the 20th Century. It had been lost completely, as a breeding bird, in some counties. However there have been few quantified data, and it is not clear whether factors on their breeding grounds or their wintering areas were responsible for the changes.

In three consecutive springs, 1969-1971, ornithologists in Kent organised nighttime censuses of singing Nightingales, and demonstrated the feasibility of the approach, and encouraged the BTO to conduct a national survey along similar lines in 1976. However this census was not considered a complete success, largely due to cold and wet weather at night in the first half of the counting season which resulted in inadequate cover in some areas, and because the important counties of Kent and Sussex were not covered adequately. A repeat survey in 1980 was therefore decided upon, in order to check and expand upon the 1976 results and to enable their significance to be assessed.

A total of 4770 singing Nightingales was reported representing an apparently remarkable increase of nearly 48% over the total found in 1976. Birds were found in all counties represented in 1976 except for Gwent and Staffordshire, and with the addition of Cheshire, Dyfed and Dumfries & Galloway (a bird heard on 29 May by two visiting observers, but no further visits were made). It was thought that 1980 was a "good year" for the species -- several observers noted that numbers were higher in 1980 compared to most years in the 1970s, but it is probable that the 1976 figures were considerably underestimated.

The number of 10-km squares occupied in 1980 was 432, comparing very poorly with the 639 recorded during the 1968-1972 Breeding Atlas. This difference could be partly the result of the cumulative effect of the five Atlas seasons, but it is likely there had been a real range contraction (especially in the west) and, possibly, locally inadequate coverage in 1980.

The increases compared with 1976 were not uniform over the country. For example in 1976 Norfolk and Suffolk held 7% of the national total but 14% in 1980, while the proportion in Kent and Sussex fell from 43% in 1976 to 38% in 1980. In general increases occurred in the northeast and southwest with less increase in the more central parts of the range.

Methods of Data Capture

The methods used followed closely those employed in the 1976 survey, with minor modifications suggested, usually by observers who had taken part in that. The aim was to check all likely sites for the species and to record the presence or absence of Nightingales so that the 1980 results could be compared in detail with past and future surveys. Sites could be any size provided they fell within a single 10-km square of the National Grid, and were

defined by a site name, a central six-figure grid reference, and the approximate size. It was stressed that negative records would be of value provided that the sites were properly described.

Since it is one of the very few single-brooded passerines in Britain, the Nightingale has a relatively short song period. The recommended dates for the 1980 census were 1-31 May, chosen to eliminate as far as possible the inclusion of birds still on passage.

Habitat description at night in unfamiliar territory had proved difficult in 1976 and as the present survey was unlikely to add significantly to what had already been learned on the subject, habitat recording was made an optional extra. A few observers used a tape to aid detection of birds.

Observers were asked to visit a site more than once if possible and, although many of them did so, the number of single entry cards was still high. In sites visited more than once, a different number of singing males was often recorded on each occasion; in such cases the maximum count was the one used in the final analysis. In a few instances access to woods known to hold Nightingales was refused and the observer submitted an estimated figure based on past experience and local knowledge; these estimates have been accepted and included in the overall total.

Some general publicity about the survey in the press, radio and television noted birds at several sites otherwise unrecorded -- in Sussex an extra 40 birds were recorded as a result.

Purpose of Data Capture

To obtain an accurate and up-to-date, estimate of the total numbers of Nightingale males singing.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain, although in practice mainly in the southeastern quarter.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1980 with counts requested during May.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised, run and funded by the BTO.

Organiser(s)

Peter Davis as a volunteer.

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Davis, P.G. 1982. Nightingales in Britain in 1980. *Bird Study* 29: 73-79.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 99, 104, 106, 112 and 113.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

BTO Windows network central area.

Computer data -- outline contents

The file SITETOTALS1980.xls contains the numbers of birds (males) found on each site.

Other files in this directory contain sites, names of people covering them and numbers on each visit date.

Computer data -- description of contents

The subdirectories contain:

Survey Data -- the data files from both 1999 and 1980 surveys. SITETOTALS1980.xls (and SITETOTALS1999.xls) contain total numbers of birds on each site. Other files contain such as who surveyed and when.

The other directories are almost exclusively for the 1999 survey.

Information held in BTO Archives

3 Transfer Cases containing data and letters. All have been scanned.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis