

# Ornithological Sites Register

## Title

Ornithological Sites Register 1973-1977

## Description and Summary of Results

By the 1970s there were a variety of nature reserves and other sites with some degree of protection (eg SSSIs) many of which were known to hold important numbers of birds, although some of the information was only anecdotal. Fieldwork for the 1968-1972 Breeding Atlas had put observers out into all parts of the UK (and Ireland) and, although they gathered no information specifically related to individual sites (at least for the atlas itself), nothing outside the breeding season, and little or none on such as numbers of birds on any sites, they had often visited known "good" sites and had also identified others which were important on at least a local scale. Some of these were undocumented and perhaps even worthy of some protection. Hence a proposal was made to document these sites specifically, and create a register of sites of ornithological importance which would be properly documented. This would enable the conservation organisations to have specific information available when they needed it for whatever purposes. It was also realised that this would be an ideal way to harness the enthusiasm generated by the atlas project. An effort was made to identify and record all places of regional, national and international importance for birds all over the UK. It was decided that the national project could not cover all those of only local significance although information on some of these was retained. The final list of sites submitted in 1978 to the Nature Conservancy Council and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (about 4000 sites in all) certainly contained the great majority of sites of outstanding ornithological importance to nature conservation in the UK and many more of considerable significance. Nevertheless there were undoubtedly some important sites which were overlooked.

Sites were specifically not restricted to natural or semi-natural areas. Artificial sites such as gravel workings, clay pits and sewage works, were often included although specifically urban sites were not. No preference was given to threatened sites or those with some protection already. The aim was for a balanced review, but the exact selection of sites was left to local observers.

Reasons for considering a site to be important, and most displayed at least one of these, included: presence of rarities (although it was specifically noted that these should not be emphasised too much); presence of large or important numbers of one or more species (breeding colonies, winter or passage numbers); a high species diversity; a breeding community of special interest with or without rare species; a locally scarce community; presence of a species on the edge of its range; a representative sample of particular community; and sites with special documentary history eg Wytham Woods (Oxfordshire), Brent reservoir (London). The main sites were easy to identify but local ones were more difficult.

The main habitat types covered were: woodland and scrub; "field" vegetation; wetlands (ie vegetation associated with fresh water); freshwater bodies; open habitats (not coastal);

coastal; and a miscellaneous category which included such as farmland, hedges, disused railways, parkland, golf courses, buildings etc.

Following the data collection it was realised that there was actually rather little published information about what bird communities occurred in the various habitats in the UK, and that the species lists and numbers compiled by this project were an ideal dataset to investigate what constituted the bird communities in each one in more detail. So the Nature Conservancy Council provided some more finance to enable the results to be analysed and published as a book describing all the main bird communities and habitats in more detail than had been done previously.

Since the project the data collected have been used extensively for conservation purposes, and within a very few years the work had more than justified itself in the use for planning and site protection purposes, as well as helping to identify a few hundred new sites which should potentially become reserves or gain some form of statutory protection. Also many detailed studies have used the data as a baseline.

### **Methods of Data Capture**

Observers were asked to document sites they considered of ornithological value, and a specific effort was made to identify all sites of regional, national and international importance for birds although those purely of local significance were not necessarily included in the final national list.

Observers were requested to submit data on individual sites on a standard form.

Information included: site details; area; altitude and aspect; grid reference; years and seasons surveyed; status of site; a sketch map; habitats (on a standard classification); description of the site; main ornithological interest; general comments; and a species list divided into passage, breeding, breeding season non-breeders and wintering birds.

Observers could submit the form in confidence if they felt it necessary.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

There were three main objectives: 1) compilation of a list of the most valuable localities in each county for birds; 2) collation of detailed information on these listed sites; and 3) assessment of relative ornithological importance of each site.

### **Geographic Coverage**

All of the UK.

### **Temporal Coverage**

Surveys of birds on sites were conducted all the year round 1973-1977, mainly 1973-1976, although recording of new sites and of any changes continued into 1978.

**Other Interested parties**

The project was started with a 6-month contract from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. In this time a provisional list of potential sites was compiled for nearly all counties and some more detailed information for about 1000 sites. Later the BTO itself financed the continuation of the project and then a grant from the Nature Conservancy Council allowed it to be completed.

**Organiser(s)**

Rob Fuller as a staff member

**Current Staff Contact**

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**Publications**

The criteria developed following the project and which can be used to assess the importance of a site were summarised in:

Fuller, R.J. 1980. A method of assessing the ornithological interest of sites for conservation. *Biological Conservation* 17: 229-239.

The data were summarised and published as a book describing the bird communities in UK: Fuller, R.J. 1982. *Bird Habitats in Britain*. T. & A.D. Poyser, Calton.

The project was noticed in most issues of *BTO News* of the time, in particular a major report in number 98 (February 1979). In addition to this issue the project was noted specifically in *BTO News* numbers 58, 59, 62, 66, 67, 69, 70, 72, 73, 75, 76, 78, 85, 90, 91, 103 and 120.

Apart from the actual publication the most important results of the project were the individual site cards documenting the birds recorded and the habitats present. Copies of these were deposited with both RSPB and NCC.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

9 archive boxes, 11 card drawers, and 6 Transfer Cases contain data cards, copies of summaries sent to NCC and RSPB, analyses and papers etc. All have been scanned.

**Notes on Access and Use**

As information on some sites was submitted in confidence, specific permission is required to access and consult the data cards of this project.

**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**