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Garden BirdWatch and BirdTrack

We're regularly asked how BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net) and Garden BirdWatch (www.bto.org/gbw) fit together, and in particular, whether or not bird records should be submitted to both. As Nick Moran (BirdTrack) and Mike Toms (Garden BirdWatch) explain, the two schemes complement one another perfectly, allowing you to look after your birdwatching records and us to maximise their potential for research and conservation.

Garden BirdWatch is our way of studying the changing fortunes of garden birds. To do this we ask you to collect observations in a systematic manner, spending a similar amount of time each week watching your garden and recording what you see. It is this consistency in recording effort that is key. **BirdTrack** is a free web-based tool that enables you to keep records of the birds that you see when out and about birdwatching. These can be casual observations – perhaps a record of a flock of Waxwings in the town centre – or they can be a complete list of all the birds seen at a particular place – for example, a visit made to a local nature reserve one Sunday morning.

WEEKLY GARDEN RECORDS

In order to track the changing use made of gardens by birds and other wildlife, and indeed to make comparisons between different types of garden, GBW depends on the consistent effort that you put into the recording. We are interested in the species using the garden and its resources so our rules on what to record and how to record it are fairly strict. The survey is designed to answer a series of specific questions.

Although we encourage you to record many different species, Garden BirdWatch concentrates on a suite of core species, which we assume all participants can identify.

This allows us to produce robust outputs for the core species, outputs that can be used for research and for underpinning conservation action.

OUT AND ABOUT

Use BirdTrack for recording the birds that you observe in the wider countryside and treat it like a birdwatching notebook, noting down other details such as the age/sex of the birds you see, the direction that they were flying in or whether or not they were breeding.

The most powerful BirdTrack records are those submitted as complete lists because these can be used to reveal the arrival and departure times of migrants. Such lists are designed to capture records from active birdwatching, where you record everything that you see and hear. Since Garden BirdWatch has strict rules about which birds to record, it will not provide a complete list and, of course, it only looks at the garden habitat. You can, however, use BirdTrack to record birds seen from your garden but not eligible for inclusion (perhaps because they were simply flying over or were recorded outside of the recording period you had defined).

BirdTrack includes a useful tool in the form of the 'Explore My Records', through which you can interact with your records. You can review your observations by any combination of date, location and

species, so if you are the kind of person who likes to keep a life list or a year list, adding your sightings to BirdTrack provides a quick and easy way to do this. At the same time, your records are available for research and conservation uses. The system also delivers your records direct to the County Bird Recorder for inclusion in local bird reports (if you so wish).

HOW WE USE THE TWO SYSTEMS

Records collected through the two schemes actually sit alongside one another in the same database. This means that we can use them for other projects with ease, for example Bird Atlas 2007–11. It also means that there is no need for you to enter GBW observations twice, once in each project. Going forward, we plan to deliver combined results back to you, so that, for example, your year list contains all of the birds you have seen, regardless of which project the record was submitted through. ■

"I submit my Garden BirdWatch count each week and use BirdTrack to store my birdwatching notes from further afield. I also use BirdTrack to keep a note of birds seen in the garden but outside of my Garden BirdWatch recording period, for example the Hobby seen flying over one summer."

Mike Toms