

Please note that these instructions are specific to WINBS and not BBS.

Thank you for your interest in volunteering for the BTO Winter Bird Survey (WINBS), a scheme to evaluate how a wide range of factors influence winter bird populations. The survey measures bird populations alongside habitat and food availability by conducting timed counts from 1-km squares up to four times from mid-September to February. We hope you are able to take part.

Please note this survey differs from BBS in the following ways.

- **Habitat details need to be recorded on each visit.**
- **All birds, whether adult or juvenile, should be recorded.**
- **The recording of mammals remains optional. However, if chosen, we ask you to only record live mammals whilst on transects in Distance Bands, as for birds. There is no need to record field signs.**

The survey is organised via a network of voluntary Regional Organisers (ROs). Your RO will assist you with which square to survey, and will be able to help with any queries. More detailed information can be found on the WINBS website: www.bto.org/winbs.

GETTING STARTED

Once your WINBS square has been allocated, all survey forms and instructions can be downloaded from the BTO website. The Field Recording Sheets and Habitat Recording Form are for taking notes in the field which are to be submitted via the BBS-Online recording system.

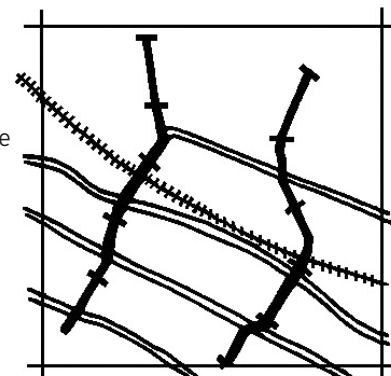
You can download a map of your survey route, showing two 1-km transects divided into ten 200-m sections (numbered 1–10). For existing Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) volunteers using the same squares, please ensure you follow the same routes for your WINBS visits. If your square has not been surveyed before please refer to the guidance on establishing a new route overleaf and submit a route map to the BTO. If you need to change your route, please check with your RO first, then follow the same procedure as for a new route. Any changes made for WINBS will not change routes for the BBS.

You may need to ask permission to access private land on your square, and a standard letter requesting access can be obtained from the WINBS website.

All data from WINBS squares are valuable, even from sites that may appear poor for birds.

Please read the leaflet 'Guidance for Volunteer Fieldworkers', available to view on the BTO website.

www.bto.org/get-involved/volunteer/resources/guidance-for-volunteer-fieldworkers



WHEN TO VISIT

Visit 1	Sep 15 th – Oct 31 st	Visit 3	Jan 1 st – Jan 31 st
Visit 2	Dec 1 st – Dec 31 st	Visit 4	Feb 1 st – Feb 28 th

N.B. There is no visit in November

Visits should be at least three weeks apart

Please make a maximum of four visits to your WINBS square throughout the winter. However, if it is only possible to make two visits, these should be completed during September/October (V1) and either of December (V2) or January (V3). It may be helpful to conduct an optional reconnaissance-only visit in late August and to check the transect route (if a new site) for access. Visits should start at least one hour after sunrise and should be completed one hour before sunset.

WEATHER

Please do not survey in heavy rain, very poor visibility or strong wind. Record weather using the codes shown below. If the conditions change during your visit, select the single category that best represents the overall conditions.

Cloud cover	Rain	Wind	Visibility	Temp (Celsius)
0 – 33%: 1	None: 1	Calm: 1	Good: 1	< 0 °C: 1
33 – 66%: 2	Drizzle: 2	Light: 2	Moderate: 2	0 – 10 °C: 2
66 – 100%: 3	Showers: 3	Breezy: 3	Poor: 3	> 10 °C: 3

RECORDING BIRDS (STANDARD METHOD)

Using the Field Recording Sheets, record all birds you see or hear as you walk along your route at a slow, methodical pace. You can pause to scan for birds, but should not stop for long periods. Try to keep to the same timings for each visit, but as a rough guide, each 1-km transect should take around 45 minutes.

- Record birds in the appropriate 200-m transect section (1–10), as shown on your route map. Each transect section is a separate box on the Field Recording Sheet.
- Please use the standard two-letter BTO species codes, shown on the back of the long-version Field Recording Sheets, or via the BTO website: www.bto.org/survey-essentials.
- Record all birds to the sides of your transect line, even if they are outside the square boundary. Don't record birds that are behind you as you start a transect, or beyond the end of the transect as you finish.
- Don't record the same bird twice, e.g. a Blackbird heard calling from several sections. If a bird is at the boundary of two transect sections, record it in one or the other, but not both.
- There is no need to record the activity or sex of the birds.
- Please record all free-flying birds – including juveniles – as well as feral and escaped species.
- Don't forget to note the date, and the start and finish times for each transect.
- Be aware of recording the same mobile flocks more than once along your transects (e.g. foraging group of finches). If unsure only record maximum counts.
- Always attempt to make an estimate of the number of birds, even if it is difficult. We cannot interpret 'c100', 'at least 50' or '>200', for example. An estimated count is much more valuable.

DISTANCE BANDS

Please record **birds** and (optionally) **mammals** in one of the following Distance Bands, according to where they are **first** noted:

- Within 25 metres either side of the transect line.
- Between 25 and 100 metres either side of the line.
- More than 100 metres either side of the line, including birds outside the 1-km square boundary.
- Birds in flight only, at any distance. Record by marking the species code with an arrow, e.g. BZ

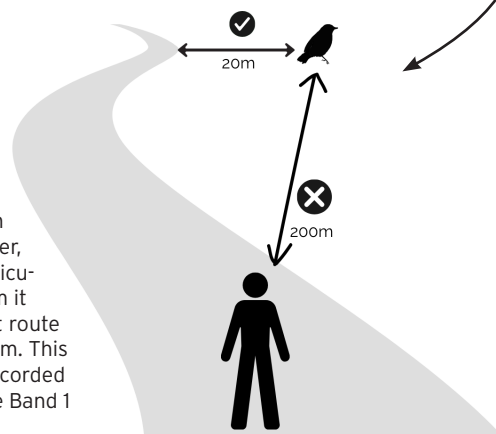
- Distances are measured at **right angles** to the transect line (not you as the observer). A bird seen 200 metres ahead of you but within 25 metres of the transect line should be recorded in Distance Band 1, in the appropriate transect section.
- Skylarks in display flight (possible in the winter) and hovering Kestrels should be recorded in the relevant Distance Band.
- The approximate locations of Distance Band boundaries can be viewed on your online route map.

Section of a completed Field Recording Sheet

100m		25m		25m		100m	
3	2	1		2		3	
PH		B.				3 Roe	
						Deer	
				5 WP			
8 RO	3 S.	Y.				25 RE	

In this example, mammals have been recorded using full names, though abbreviations/ codes (see overleaf) may also be used.

In this example, the bird is 200m from the observer, but the perpendicular distance from it and the transect route (grey) is only 20m. This bird would be recorded against Distance Band 1 (0–25m)



HABITAT RECORDING

Habitat recording is an **essential part of WINBS**. Please record the habitat features in your square on **every visit** using the habitat recording sheet. This is particularly important for documenting the availability of stubbles and other bird food sources which are likely to be ploughed in later in the winter.

- Habitat is recorded separately for each of the ten transect sections, but unlike BBS, up to 100m either side of your transect.
- Please tick all habitat features that apply to your transect (e.g. ploughed (bare earth in large clumps), seedmix/game strip - with maize, game hoppers/feeders (active), hedgerow without berries etc).
- Please record the ground conditions for each transect (e.g. frozen, snow).
- If your square or transect section does not contain any of these farmland features, please tick **Relevant Habitat Recorded**.
- When submitting your data online, use the check boxes to record the relevant features.

MAMMAL RECORDING (optional)

Although the main aim of the WINBS is to record birds and habitats, it would be useful if you could also record sightings of mammals on your WINBS square, as these can be used to refine our mammal population trends.

- While carrying out your bird surveys, please **count all live mammals** seen during your WINBS visits.
- Record all live mammals within Distance Bands within each transect section, as you do for birds.
- Any estimate of the numbers of a particular species on your survey visits (no matter how rough), is more useful than recording 'too many to count', 'present', '>100' etc.
- There is no need to make other types of mammal record (e.g. field signs, dead animals, etc.).
- There is no need to make special visits to count mammals.
- The main species of interest are the more observable mammals, such as those listed below. There is no need to make a special effort to look for small mammals, bats, etc.

Did you look out for other mammals? Recording mammals is optional; when entering data, please enter 'Yes' if you looked out for mammals (even if you saw none), or enter 'No' if you did not participate in mammal recording. This allows us to properly infer real absence (a zero count) from an absence of recording.

Species codes. You may wish to use the following numerical or three-letter species codes on the Field Recording Sheet, though you may find it easier to write full names. If you are sending data to be entered on your behalf, please ensure any mammal counts can be unequivocally attributed to a single species.

Badger	15	BAD	Grey Squirrel	05	GSQ	Rabbit	03	RAB
Brown Hare	01	BHA	Hedgehog	11	HED	Red Deer	07	RDE
Brown Rat	14	BRA	Mink	57	MIN	Red Fox	06	FOX
Cat (domestic)	61	CAT	Mountain/ Irish Hare	02	MHA	Red Squirrel	04	RSQ
Chinese Water Deer	71	CWD	Muntjac	10	MUN	Roe Deer	08	ROE
Fallow Deer	09	FAL	Otter	58	OTT	Sika Deer	70	SIK

SUBMITTING YOUR MAMMAL DATA

- Submit your counts directly via BBS online, using the same data entry method as for birds.
- If sending records on paper, please just use the Field Recording Sheet - there is no need for a separate form, as used for BBS.
- When entering data online, if you state that you did not look for mammals you will not be able to input mammal records for that visit, and this cannot be edited at a later stage.

RETURN OF DATA

Submitting data online. Please enter your data through BBS online, if possible, as this reduces errors and makes processing data more efficient. Data should be entered by 30th April 2026.

- You can access the BBS online system by going to www.bto.org/bbs and clicking 'view and enter data'.
- Or go direct to BBS online at www.app.bto.org/bbs
- Please enter your records as soon as possible after completing each visit.
- You will be able to use your normal BTO username and password, but your RO will first need to set you up with your square online. Existing BBS volunteers, covering their BBS squares for WINBS will be able to register their wish to survey their square from August 2025.
- You can enter and edit bird, habitat and mammal data and you can view all data submitted for your square.
- You can view, print and submit an electronic map of your transect route. This will not change any associated BBS routes for the square.
- You should enter your records directly from your Field Recording Sheets, and you do not have to summarise any counts - the system will add together counts automatically.
- Detection type is not required for this survey and has been disabled.

Submitting data on paper forms. If you are sending in data on paper, please complete your Field Recording Sheets and Habitat forms as soon as possible after each visit and return them to BTO HQ (address overleaf). There is no need to use a Count Summary Form, as used in BBS. Before you send them, please ensure that:

- All of your entries are legible and easily interpretable.
- Your two-letter BTO bird species codes are correct - e.g., was it a Greenfinch (GR) or a Golden Pheasant (GF)?
- Your entries are all easily attributable to a single Distance Band (if your in-field entries overlap the lines, please correct them so that they fit entirely within the Distance Band).

- If you are recording mammals, please ensure that live mammal counts are also in the Distance Bands. If you are using the numerical codes, please ensure that it is clear which is the count and which is the code. E.g., '7x01' (seven Brown Hare), rather than '71' (one Sika Deer). You may prefer to use the three-letter codes above or full names for mammals, in which case, please make these obviously attributed to a single Distance Band.
- All your visit details (date, times, weather etc.) are completed and use the correct format or codes.
- You make every effort to write clearly and legibly.

Please submit your records as soon as possible after your final visit. Your completed forms, or online submission, will be acknowledged once received at the BTO HQ.

If you are providing name, address and other personal details, BTO will store and use your personal details in line with our published Privacy Policy. You can specify your preferences surrounding the way we contact you at any time. For further details, see www.bto.org, or email info@bto.org, or phone 01842 750050.

If you have any queries about the WINBS, please contact your Regional Organiser or the WINBS National Organiser at BTO (The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU, Tel: 01842 750050, Email: winterbirds@bto.org), or visit our website: www.bto.org/winbs.

Finally, thanks again for volunteering for WINBS, and we hope that you enjoy taking part in the survey!

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ESTABLISHING A ROUTE ON A NEW SQUARE

If your square has been surveyed before, you can download the route taken by the previous observer (also available via BBS-Online), showing the two 1-km transects which are divided into ten 200-m transect sections (1–10).

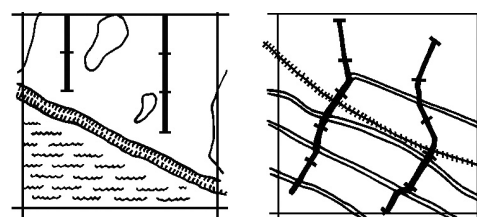
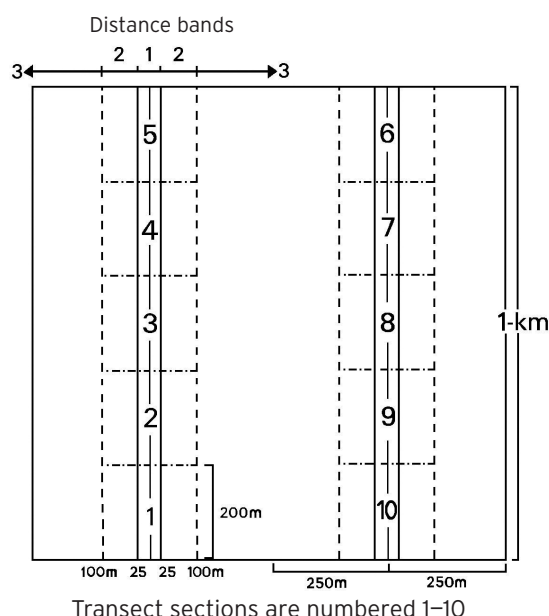
If your RO informs you that the square has not been surveyed before, you will need to establish a transect route. The route should ideally consist of two parallel lines, running roughly north-south or east-west, each 1 km long. Transects should be roughly 500 m apart and 250 m in from the edge of the square. Each transect should be divided into five equal sections 200 m in length, making a total of ten, numbered 1–10. It is important to note where each transect section starts and ends.

Please map your route using the online system.

When planning a route, please note that:

- Each transect should be 1 km long. Only transects that are completely straight, and perpendicular to the square boundary, should touch the square boundary at both ends.
- Minor intrusions into adjacent squares are acceptable.
- At no point should the two transects be closer together than 200 m.
- If access is restricted, it is acceptable to cover fewer than ten transect sections (i.e. the route can be shortened). However, if fewer than four transect sections can be covered, please report the square to your RO as uncoverable.

Diagram of an 'ideal' WINBS route



In practice, your transect lines are likely to deviate from the 'ideal'. Examples of acceptable transect routes are shown above.

Acknowledgement.

The Winter Bird Survey is largely based on the field methods of the Breeding Bird Survey, and its online data entry system. The BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey is a partnership jointly funded by BTO, JNCC and RSPB, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers. Thank you.