

FIELD CRAFT

Stepping stones to surveys

BTO Training Manager Nick Moran considers how to bridge the gap from birdwatching to biological recording.

Survey participation isn't the be-all and end-all of birdwatching but it can certainly add purpose and new insights for the individual, as well as providing valuable data for BTO and other organisations. Despite these clear advantages, we know from talking to birdwatchers that there are three main skill-related barriers to participation in bird (and other biological) surveys: identification, survey methodology and online data entry. Each of these can be thought of in terms of your confidence in your own abilities ('perceived competence') and your current skill level ('actual competence'). This article suggests some tools to help you objectively evaluate your bird identification and surveying skills so that you can check if you are ready for a particular survey, and signposts resources and techniques to help you develop your skills and build confidence.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Bird identification is challenging for all of us – that's part of the fun! Perhaps you are quite new to birding and have yet to master distinguishing the common finches by song and call, or maybe you are more experienced but are perplexed by the identification of immature large gulls. Even the most skilled birders will regularly see and hear things they cannot be sure of, such as a fleeting glimpse of a

► Finches often have a striking appearance, especially in the breeding season, but their calls can be more difficult to tell apart.



▼ A fleeting glimpse of a plain warbler can baffle a birdwatcher, regardless of their skills and knowledge.

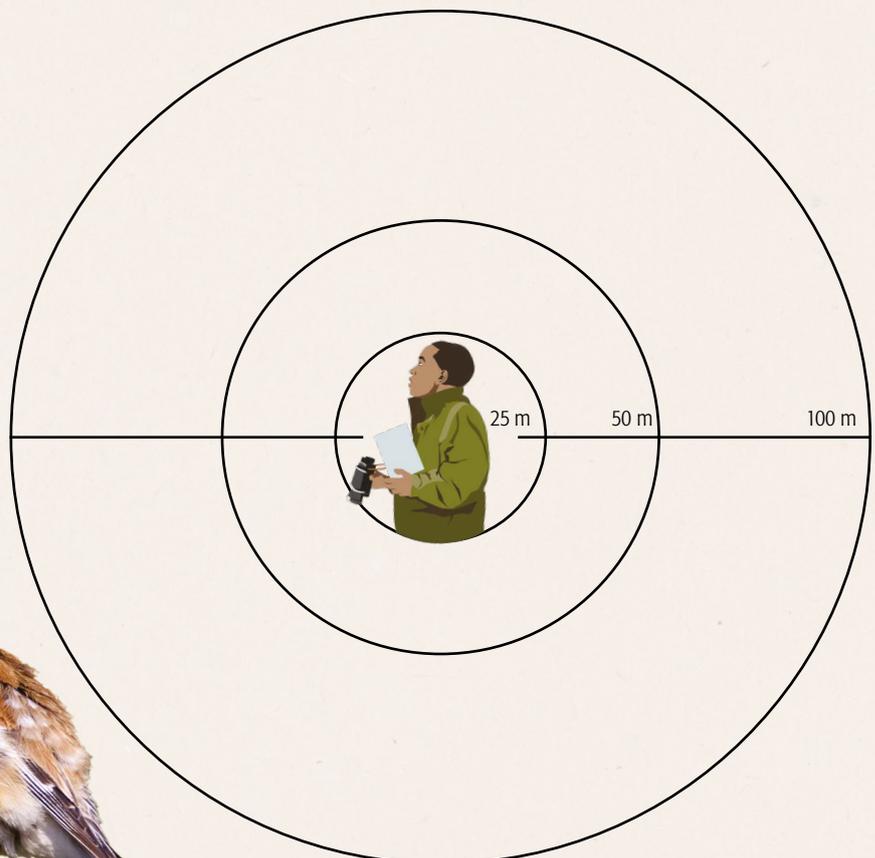
plain-looking warbler or the thin, high-pitched alarm calls given by several of our songbirds. Recognising the inherent difficulty of bird ID is an important first step towards:

- 1. objective self-evaluation** of your bird-identification skills.
- 2. targeting areas** and ways to improve.
- 3. finding projects** to participate in and sites to monitor that are well matched to your current skill level.

Whilst quizzes are not everyone's cup of tea, self-testing by identifying birds from images, videos and sound recordings is a simple and effective way of assessing your skill level. A no-frills approach is to take a bird book, cover the names then identify as many as possible. Alternatively, have someone else show you images or play sounds without giving the name. If structured tests are more to your taste, then Nord University's excellent free

DISTANCE SAMPLING

Take this diagram out into the field with you. Stand in the centre and mark the rough location of all the birds you hear within the three distance bands.



REED WARBLER: AMY LEWIS/BTO, LINNET: LIZ CUTTING/BTO, GREYLAG GEESE: SARAH KELMAN/BTO



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online Bird ID quizzes may be just your thing: quiz.natureid.no/bird/quiz Challenge yourself across four difficulty levels with the option for multiple choice or no suggestions.

A point count is a surveying tool that can be used for testing bird sound identification and for trying distance-sampling methodology (which is used in the Breeding Bird Survey). To do this, copy the diagram on page 24 and find an outdoor location where you are unlikely to be interrupted for 10 minutes. Listen for birds and mark on the circle roughly the location where each bird was vocalising. If you can identify it, write the name. If not, put a question mark and write a brief description of the sound. Try to avoid recording an individual bird more than once. Dating the point count and repeating the exercise in the same spot several times during the spring is a good way to track your progress. You may surprise yourself with how many you already know, and don't forget that there will always be some question marks, even for experienced 'bird-listeners'.

A third way of testing is to visit a location twice or more with another birdwatcher, preferably someone more experienced. For 10–20 minutes, each person should note all the species they positively identify by sight or sound, and any that were unidentified, before comparing notes at the end. If you try this approach, remember that 'actual competence' will vary between individuals and it is always possible to find someone with better identification skills! Over time, however, this should help to

► Our YouTube channel has several series of videos to help hone your ID and survey skills.

highlight any species that you regularly overlook, and any groups that you find particularly hard to identify. Focusing on these then gives you a great opportunity to make big improvements quite quickly.

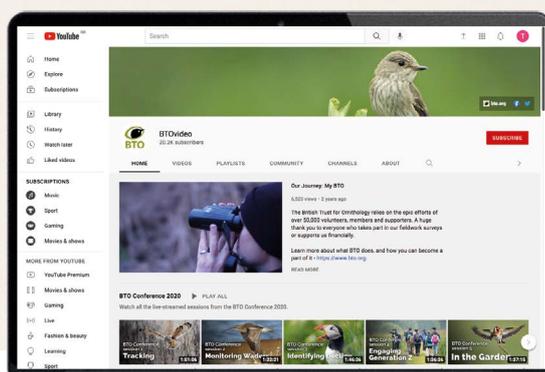
PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

When it comes to counting birds, practice is key! Look out for passing flocks and take these opportunities to estimate the number of birds, then either count them as carefully as possible or take a photograph and check your estimate later. There are some practical tips for counting flocks in a previous Field Craft article (*BTO News* 329).

Last but not least, when it comes to entering data online, all BTO-led surveys have excellent help material. This can be found via the '?' and 'i' buttons on the data-entry pages themselves, in the 'Taking part' menu for each survey and in several videos on our YouTube channel: BTOvideo. The easiest way to find these is by clicking the 'Playlists' tab, then looking for the survey in question. ■

Find out more

For further information, please visit: www.bto.org/develop



Resources and ideas

► BTO Bird ID videos

Check out #BirdSongBasics and our longer Bird ID Workshops on our YouTube channel.

► BTO Surveys videos

Visit our YouTube channel for explanatory videos on our surveys.

► BTO Training courses

Join a course, online or in person.

► BTO News Field Craft articles

There have been 23 Field Craft articles since 2016. Email the Editor for back copies!

► Regional Network

BTO Regional Representatives, BBS/WBBS Regional Organisers and WeBS Local Organisers can provide advice on local squares/sites/surveys, and some may run taster sessions and/or be able to put you in contact with an experienced surveyor or mentor.

► Calling experienced BBS and WBBS volunteers:

Please tell us via BBS Online if you would be happy to take potential volunteers who know their bird ID but need more confidence with the methods on a recce or additional 'pretend' visit.

► BirdTrack

Keeping regular complete lists will help to fine-tune your identification skills for common species and develop a detailed understanding of where and when you are likely to encounter them.

► Join your local bird club

or Scottish Ornithologists' Club branch/Welsh Ornithological Society.