

INSTRUCTIONS – WINTER 2013/14

In this survey, observers are invited to set up routes for winter walks to record thrushes, their habitat and their feeding activity. For further details, please see www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/winter-thrushes.

The survey is **online only**, operating through the BTO website, but observers who lack access to the internet may submit paper forms and maps, which will be input to the online system by BTO volunteers (see *Postscript*, page 4).

This document is designed to be printed out and used for reference during fieldwork in 2013/14, the survey's second winter. It has been clarified and expanded but the instructions have not changed significantly from those issued for the survey's first winter in 2012/13. Additional information is shown in bold italics.

Choosing and registering a site

Begin by choosing a site anywhere in the UK, Isle of Man or Channel Islands, where you can set a route for a winter walk and where you can always expect to observe thrushes feeding during the winter period. Sites with a variety of potential thrush habitats and feeding locations are ideal.

Sites must be registered for the survey using the survey's online data-entry pages, to which you will need to log in. Use your existing username and password for BTO online surveys (BirdTrack, BBS, WeBS, etc), if you have one, or register as a new user.

WTS sites are based loosely on 1-km squares of the Ordnance Survey British and Irish national grids. You will be asked to set a nominal 1-km square, which should be the square in which most or all of the route lies. You may set up as many sites as you wish. The 'Choose a square' screen shows you which squares have been selected already and whether any parts of your region are especially in need of cover. ***It does not matter if the square you wanted has already been chosen by someone else: more than one observer is welcome to contribute data from the same nominal square.***

BBS observers are welcome to register their BBS squares and transect routes as WTS winter walks – provided that this will have no impact on their normal BBS spring surveys. Where practical, please include the journey between your two BBS transect lines as part of the WTS route.

'Core' squares

Some squares have already been selected randomly, by the survey organisers, for synchronised midwinter surveys. The design of the random sample means that data from the 'core' squares are more valuable than those from self-selected (and therefore non-random) squares. Where you can do so, therefore, please give priority to this part of the survey.

BTO Regional Reps and other regional organisers (ROs) have been asked to find observers to cover as many as possible of these core squares for midwinter counts. If you have been asked by your RO to cover a particular core square, and you are willing to do so, the RO may assign the square to your WTS home page, or you can 'choose' that square for yourself.

If your self-selected square happens to be part of the random sample, you will be invited to offer midwinter coverage of this square (the 'core' count) to your RO. Core squares are also suitable for coverage at other times during the winter

All core counts will be valuable in the survey's second winter, whether or not a core count was made in that square in winter 2012/13.

Selecting and mapping a route

The route for each square should be kept the same throughout all your WTS visits, across both winters. The route does not need to be confined to the nominal 1-km square, but both it and the area that you are surveying must lie within a 1-km buffer around the nominal square. A circular route that brings you back near to the starting point is ideal, because it avoids you retracing your steps unproductively.

A length of about 1.5–3 km or 1–2 miles would usually be about right but, if many thrushes or groups of thrushes are likely to occur, a shorter route might be more manageable (minimum 1 km). It should be a route to which you would expect to have access at any time: it should not cross growing crops, for example, or places where access might sometimes be unsafe (eg with presence of livestock, or high water levels). Please be sure to obtain access permission to cross any private land, and please take careful heed of the BTO's Health & Safety Guidelines at www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/taking-part/health-safety.

A mapping tool ('Square setup/Map square') on the survey's online pages enables you to mark the route with a few clicks of the mouse. **End the route with a double click and use the green tick to save it to the database.** The line that you mark (in 'path mode') will tell us the location and the precise length of your route. You can use 'Printable survey form' to produce a printable version of this map, which you can pan and zoom to show your route at the largest possible scale, and print some off for use on your field visits. At some point after your first survey visit or recce, you can go back to the mapping page and use 'polygon mode' to indicate the extent of your survey area – ie the area visible from your route and searched for thrushes on each visit.

Tips for using polygon mode are: (1) include the whole of the route itself within the polygon; (2) draw a simple closed shape first, save it to the database and then edit it progressively to add extra nodes and drag them to their required positions; (3) if making detailed edits, save your work regularly.

The final map you draw will be applied to all the WTS visits you make to that square, across both winters. If you are repeating a survey and need to change the route significantly, please contact us first at winter.thrushes@bto.org to discuss options.

Collecting the data

The survey will collect its data only from complete walks of the routes. Submissions are not required for partial walks, nor for any casual observations made on survey routes or elsewhere.

When to visit

Routes can be walked as often as you wish during the survey period, which is mid September to mid April. About once a month would be ideal, to allow some turnover of birds between successive visits, but there are no stipulations and no minimum requirements. The core sites, however, must be surveyed during the specified midwinter period (27 Dec to 10 Jan in both winters), even if no other visits are made.

Routes might normally take around 1–2 hours to complete, depending on their length and on how many thrushes are present. You would need to start in time to complete your route during daylight hours. Mid to late morning is likely to be the best time of day for making observations of feeding birds, and is recommended for the midwinter core counts. Clement weather is preferred and good visibility is essential.

Procedure for each visit

The aim is to record thrushes (and optionally Starling and Waxwing), together with their habitats and their activities. There is no general habitat recording and no habitat recording where no relevant birds are detected. **WTS will collect no information on any other bird species in 2013/14 but we recommend that, during each WTS walk, you collect a 'complete list' for submission to BirdTrack.**

You need to print a copy of the map you have created for your route, and a copy or two of the survey's Field Sheet (downloadable from the survey's Resources page), to carry with you in the field. Especially important for reference is the table of coding options on page 2 of the Field Sheet.

Placing markers

The aim is to walk the route, scanning the area that you can see into for any thrushes that may be present, and placing a marker onto your route map to show the position of each thrush or group of thrushes you encounter. The physical features visible on your route map (buildings, trees, hedges, etc) should enable

you to place the markers quite accurately. Your markers should be numbered sequentially, thus matching the rows on the survey's Field Sheet.

Every thrush you see from your route should be included at one of your markers; markers may, if you wish, also be placed to record Waxwing and Starling, but recording these species is optional. Please be sure to tell us, on the main 'Enter data' page, whether or not you have recorded all the Starlings and Waxwings you saw. Whether birds are inside or outside the boundary of the nominal 1-km square is immaterial but, if you have drawn a polygon to indicate the area you are covering, all your markers should lie within it.

Markers represent rows of data you will be adding to the WTS database, each having a location (derived automatically from the position of the marker), a species and a count of birds that were behaving in a particular way. Markers can relate to any number of birds, provided they are all the same species and share the same activity. Multiple markers, placed close together, must be used for mixed-species flocks or where birds in the flock have different activity categories. Each new bird or group of birds in a different place will also need at least one new marker. Note that a maximum of 50 markers is available for each visit. Hints for using markers are below:

- *Birds will normally react to your presence, perhaps by stopping feeding or flying away in alarm. Your aim should be to record, without making any assumptions, the birds' position and activity before they were disturbed. For example, if part or all of a flock of Fieldfares flies up from a field on your approach, you should record the whole flock as feeding on the ground, and note the type of field.*
- *To reduce the need for markers, treat birds as groups wherever possible, rather than as individuals. Make use of the 'scatter' column to indicate how widely the birds described under each marker were dispersed: a single centrally placed marker can cover birds (of the same species and doing the same thing) distributed over lengths of up to 200 m of hedge (or another linear feature) or across areas of ground up to 200 m in diameter.*
- *Integrate activities over the period that you are watching the birds. For example, if at any one moment only half the flock are feeding but, over several minutes, all have been feeding at some time, record the whole flock as feeding.*
- *As far as possible, each bird should be recorded only once, so that the total count from all your observations is a good estimate of total birds in your survey area. Thus you should ignore birds that you have already recorded. Alternatively, it is also OK to delete your first observations and record the birds again, for example if you are able to note more detail of their activities in the second sighting. Either way, your final results should aim to include every individual of the species you are recording, but only once each.*

Recording data against each marker

As you place each marker, record the species, number and scatter of birds that it relates to, and detail their habitat and behaviour, against the printed marker number on the Field Sheet, using the 'coding options' printed on the form. Your completed map should just show your numbered marker points, with all the details of each observation recorded on your Field Sheet.

'Count' should be your best estimate of the actual number of birds involved at each marker. It must be a simple whole number, not a range. You may precede your number with 'c' to indicate uncertainty but do not record counts or estimates in any other formats.

Use the remaining columns provided to record any relevant data, by assigning categories from among those listed in the table of coding options on the back of the Field Sheet. Abbreviations for each category (printed in bold type) are suggested, to assist you. One category (only) can be entered per cell. Data for species, main activity and habitat are mandatory. For birds that are feeding, please assign categories whenever possible to describe feeding location and food.

Hints for using recording categories are below:

- *The categories that are listed are designed for straightforward analysis of the resulting data and are not meant to be fully comprehensive. Please select the categories that are the best fit to your observations.*
- *Habitat categories are to be applied at small scale, so as to be relevant to a particular bird or group of birds. Broader habitat information will be available to the survey from other sources and so need not be recorded in the field.*
- *Categories for feeding location and food are needed only for birds that are feeding. Where the birds are not feeding, these columns should be left blank.*

- ‘Woodland’ is meant to apply to blocks of woodland larger than a few hectares and containing ‘interior’ as well as ‘edge’ habitats. For small copses, hedgerows, lines of trees and scattered or isolated trees or bushes, use the most appropriate habitat category other than ‘woodland’ and (if feeding) the relevant category for feeding location.
- There is a ‘comments’ box where you can add information for the options marked ‘specify’, record direction for flying birds, or make other brief comments.

Recording the data online

Once you have collected your data onto the Field Sheet, the final step is to enter them all online, using the survey’s specially designed web application. First, you will need to log back in to the BTO’s online surveys or specifically the Winter Thrushes Survey.

Your site (or sites) will be listed for you with their nominal 1-km references. Choose the site and begin entering your data. The aim is to copy the exact positions of all the labelled markers from your field map to the map on the screen, and to enter the details of species, count, habitat and behaviour for each marker from your Field Recording Sheet into the recording boxes provided. This will enter the full details of the birds and their positions directly into the survey’s online database.

- Begin by clicking ‘add an observation’. Click the numbered marker to bring up the map and then drag the marker to its required position.
- The on-screen markers are the conventional pushpin design where the tip of the line at the very bottom of the symbol marks the point of interest. Zooming in will allow you to place markers close together, eg for a mixed thrush flock at one location.
- Fill in the recording boxes in the same order as the columns on the Field Sheet. The available recording options vary, depending on the entries you have made for activity and habitat. Please revise these earlier entries if you find that an option you wish to use for feeding location or food is not available.
- For birds flying over, the only detail required is flight direction, which should be filled in from your notes in the ‘comments’ box.

When you have entered data for your markers, press ‘Submit’ to send your data to the central database. You will be able to edit them later if necessary. **Any problems detected at the submission stage are reported back to you in red and with red outlines to any boxes that need your attention prior to resubmission.** Once all your data are successfully entered and you are happy that no further editing is required, you can destroy or recycle your map and Field Sheet.

Postscript for non-users of the internet: contributing to the survey on paper

The survey is billed as online only, because all data will be entered via the online system. Observers without internet access can contribute to the survey, however, through their BTO Regional Rep (whose contact details can be obtained from BTO HQ) or WTS Regional Organiser. Please use the following protocol:

- Send your intended square and a map of your proposed route to your RO for approval, stating roughly how many visits you intend to make during the 2012/13 survey period.
- The RO, or staff at HQ, will register your site online and will supply you with a survey pack consisting of one copy of an aerial map of your route and one Field Sheet per intended visit and single copies of these instructions and of the BTO’s Health & Safety Guidelines.
- Please return completed maps and Field Sheets to your RO at the end of your field season.
- The data will then be input on your behalf by the RO or by another BTO volunteer.

For help and guidance with Winter Thrushes Survey and its online system, please contact your BTO Regional Rep (www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/regional-network/rn-directory) or WTS Regional Organiser, or email winter.thrushes@bto.org. Thank you for your interest in WTS!