

## Tips on how to submit Atlas records.

After working through validations over the last few months, the organisers of the BTO/SOC Atlas in Lothian & Borders would like to share some tips on how your records can most effectively help this project fulfil its goals of mapping the distribution, numbers and breeding status of birds in southeast Scotland in both winter and the breeding season.

Many of you will by now have had emails from one or more of us asking for clarification on some of your records – these result from us ensuring the accuracy of the data submitted through a rigorous validation exercise.

Please read through this document and help us produce a robust and reliable dataset for our area.

### **Queries identified fall into four categories:**

*ID (identity of the species) - we want to be absolutely sure that the correct species has been entered. Often this is because the wrong species name has been selected by accident (e.g. Honey Buzzard instead of (Common) Buzzard. Sometimes observers believe they have seen a species which is very uncommon in the area, like Willow Tit, or in a tetrad without suitable habitat for that species, like Red Grouse in arable fields – although for the latter the species might be correct but the Grid Ref given is incorrect (see below).*

*GR (grid reference/location) - where it seems possible that the incorrect 10km square or tetrad has been given, we need to check the location as the Atlas must map occurrences correctly. This might be noticed in a record of a Mute Swan where there is no water in the tetrad, a seabird away from the coast or a record of a land bird occurring in the middle of the sea, or a Red Grouse well away from normal moorland habitat..*

*No. (number) – a query in this category is usually just to confirm that the correct number has been entered, For a species that usually occurs in low numbers in an area like perhaps Blue Tit, it is unlikely that an observer would be able to count as many as 100 in a tetrad within a one or two hour period.*

*BS (breeding status) – for the breeding season it is essential that **every** record has a breeding status applied, even birds which you do not believe are breeding in a tetrad. There are 2 non-breeding codes available, M for migrant and U for everything else. But almost all records will actually refer to birds in potential breeding habitat (code H). This has been a very common oversight and is expanded on below. The value of the Atlas to conservation is greatly reduced if the best record for a species in a tetrad is for non-breeding! More information and guidance is given on this topic below.*

## Background and examples

1. The validators in Lothian and Borders have completed a large proportion of all submitted records, and the number rises weekly. So far, possible errors which generate queries account for only about 2% of records. Most are easily resolved and the process of issuing these queries is progressing. This note is to try and give some background explanation into the process and help reduce queries in the future.

2. Much of what follows has been written before in our various communications with volunteers, for example in the comprehensive examples for Breeding Codes, included in the Breeding Season Instructions on the SE Scotland Atlas website. [http://www.the-soc.org.uk/se-atlas/sesa2\\_local\\_instructions.htm](http://www.the-soc.org.uk/se-atlas/sesa2_local_instructions.htm).

In communications with observers where queries have been raised, we have tried to expand on specific problems even though it involves some repetition. Data on common queries are listed below.

### 3. Breeding season records

Surveys in the breeding season are worth far less if they don't indicate the breeding status of a species. In the light of our recent validation experience, one point that we must emphasise is that a most important point of the breeding season survey is to boost the category of breeding records as high as is justified by the evidence. There is a code for every bird and every circumstance during the breeding season. The box should **not** be left blank.

If you have a record queried under **BS** (breeding status code) it means either you have not submitted a code, or we think you could have submitted a higher code.

Unless you enter code **M** (migrant) or **U** (present/summering but not breeding in that tetrad) then the minimum code will be **H** (present in suitable breeding habitat).

Thus the code **H** should be used as the lowest indication of breeding, but if two birds of different gender or merely several birds of the species are seen, then an advance to **P** may be justified. In the same way **S** (a single singing bird) can usually be boosted to **T** if singing occurs in a subsequent visit at the same spot or simultaneously with other cock(s). Both these changes move the record from **Possible** to **Probable Breeding**.

The highest category, **confirmed breeding**, can be most commonly determined in insectivorous birds if they are carrying insects. Just watching for a few minutes at the right moment often reveals that they must be feeding young (**FF**)

If the Rooks which feed in fields in your tetrad are not known to have a colony in your tetrad then you should use code **U**, even if they included juveniles being fed. The only sensible code for Rook is one of the confirmed breeding codes (usually **ON** Occupied Nest) in the tetrad that the rookery occurs in, or **U** for other records. Code **U** for present/summering but not breeding should similarly be used for such birds as gulls seen feeding in a field, at a land-fill site or roosting on a reservoir for Grey Heron when no heronry could be found, and for hirundines where no nest sites are known.

The use of **M** for a bird which is known to breed in the area at that time of year and when there is a suitable breeding habitat is problematic. **M** should only be used for birds which are on passage, such as flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare, or passerines on the coast where suitable breeding habitat does not exist.

In roving records only (i.e. not on TTVs), code **F** can be used for an over-flying bird. But remember flight can apply to several bird activities, which merit using a different code. If a raptor was hunting in a place where it might also breed it almost certainly justifies the code **H**: if displaying then use **D**. It is something for the volunteer to decide. We accept that you could leave it as it is, if you think it was just flying over the tetrad, rather than using the airspace for other reasons.

#### 4. Editing records

You can, I'm sure you know, change or add to a record by going into **'View/edit'**. The bird atlas policy is for the observer to make changes if he/she agrees that they are necessary. Validators can't change them.

This is how to edit or add a **breeding code** after having submitted a Timed Tetrad Visit record containing mistakes or omissions.

The sequence is as follows:-

- *Go to 'View/Edit my records'*
- *Click on the visit to be altered where it says '5 of 5 pages done'*
- *For the species you require, Click on 'edit' in last column.*
- *Alter or add 'breeding code'*
- *Click on 'submit altered species details'*
- *Check, then click 'Confirm species list'*
- *If you have more editing to do click on 'Back to general summary' and repeat the process.*

I know that it may be tedious if you have to edit an entire page, but it does work. If the change doesn't not show up immediately, try pressing button F5.

You can also edit all your Roving Records to add in a breeding status code.

- *Go to 'View/edit my records'*
- *You'll see a table showing the number of Roving Records you have entered for each year and season.*
- *Click on the number in the breeding season column.*
- *You'll now see a table listing all the 10-km squares you have visited and the months you have entered records. Click on the number against the 10-km square/month you want to edit*
- *You'll get a list of records on the screen.*
- *Click on the DATE to edit/delete a record.*
- *Alter or add the breeding code*
- *Click on 'submit altered species details'*
- *Check, then click 'Confirm species list'*
- *If you have more editing to do click on 'Back to general summary' and repeat the process.*

#### 5. Early & Late Breeders

Some species such as Crossbill, Raven, Mallard and Rook may start their breeding activities during the winter recording period. By the time a first breeding season visit happens some may have fledged young or dispersed. Thus there is a facility for breeding codes to be entered during winter on Timed Tetrad Visits and Roving Records. It is important to capture the records of those species which are habitual early breeders rather than the thrushes that are street-light serenaders.

During the four month recording gap between summer and winter, late breeders may be missed. Some hirundines and pigeons are examples which have extended breeding seasons. Roving Records will allow these exceptions to be noted. August can also be a good month for confirming breeding by some waterfowl on ponds, Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Mute Swan, Moorhen and Coot are common birds which are often easy to prove breeding late in the season,

#### 6. Time spent in a tetrad

Breeding season visits do need considerably longer than winter ones to reach a satisfactory level of coverage and it is unlikely that a single hour in summer will capture an adequate number of records and sufficient levels of proof of breeding.

A visit of one hour may capture 60% of the species in a tetrad. A further hour may boost it to 80%. Our aim is to record as many breeding species with a 'proved' breeding status as possible and this may take a further visit or visits later in the season, even in a subsequent year or years.

Upland tetrads, especially in winter, may have so few species present that searching for longer than an hour is often a waste of time which could be used more effectively in an adjacent tetrad.

Directed roving records may be the answer, in the later years of the project, to record more elusive species or to visit small pockets of habitat, and we will be encouraging you to help us with this in the future.

## 7. Colonial species

If you have omitted filling page 5 which deals with colonial species it will be identified by a red cross. Even though you did not see any colonies you need to open the file and then close it to register a nil return. This confirms that you have not registered any colonies in this tetrad.

Early instructions did not make this entirely clear.

Register a nil return on pg.5 by going into 'add TTV'.

Remember too that a normal list entry is required additionally for a colonial species.

## 8. Rare Birds

Our rules allow us to accept rarities only if they have passed through the validation process of the BBRC, SBRC or Lothian/Borders BRC. Only then can we validate the record.

Look in the Local Bird Reports for lists of these rare species, or at:

- <http://www.the-soc.org.uk/lothian-recorder.htm> (Lothian)
- <http://www.the-soc.org.uk/borders-recorder.htm> (Borders)

## 9. Missing Visits.

If you have submitted data for only one visit in a season for example because of illness or by missing the time slot, it is quite OK for you to do the missing visit in the following year. Two visits per season are mandatory (except in remote tetrads) but you do not have to repeat the visit you have already made.

The only exception allowable is for very remote areas where one visit for 2hrs plus is acceptable, if the alternative is not to have any records at all. Consult the organiser for this permission.

## 10. Naming problems.

If you report a Common Redpoll you will be quizzed. The Redpoll most commonly seen in our area is the Lesser Redpoll. If there is doubt in your mind about the exact species then the list also allows you to enter Redpoll (Common/Lesser). However, Common Redpoll is a scarce and localised winter visitor in SE Scotland, and a species requiring a description for acceptance.

A similar problem exists for the 3 species of Crossbill (though we would normally only expect Common Crossbill in this area, with Parrot Crossbill a rare vagrant) & the two sub-species of Pied/White Wagtail. If in doubt, take the all embracing option.

I'm sure you will know that it is only on the sea cliffs of north and west Scotland that Rock Doves can be reliably noted as such. In our recording area we have to record them as Feral Pigeon.

Hooded Crow is notifiable to the rarities committee in Lothian. Carrion/Hooded crosses are not, but confusingly they will exist in all intermediate shades, so this default identification is a best option if in doubt. In the final Atlas maps of hybrid crows will refer to the fact that some of these could be pure or almost pure Hooded Crows.

### **11. Wrong Tetrads**

Other than 'typo' errors, one mistake appears to be quite common in coastal tetrads. When counting birds on the sea, the tetrad should be the one in which the bird is, not necessarily the one where you are. If an observer is not constrained by boundaries as in a TTV, it is easy to bundle all records into one identified site. This can happen in a roving record when you pass from tetrad to tetrad.

### **12. Roving Records & BirdTrack**

Try to make your record as comprehensive as possible. Use a tetrad designation to identify your site plus an unambiguous name. Give the number of birds seen. In the breeding season do give a breeding code. In BirdTrack you can define your site at the 10-km, tetrad or 1-km level depending on whether your site falls entirely within these areas.

### **13. Nocturnal visits**

Nightjar, Grasshopper Warbler, Owls and Woodcock are often best recorded at night (dusk). If suitable habitat exists on your 'patch' a visit at sundown in the breeding season is often successful. Remember to use the NILNOCT entry if a visit is made and nothing recorded.

### **14. Postscript.**

In the light of all this you may want to review some of your past records. If you have had any record(s) queried don't imagine that you alone have been singled out for attention. Everyone is under scrutiny, so that we ultimately have an atlas which stands every test for accuracy.

### **15. The Future**

We trust that you are enjoying the atlas work and may contemplate taking on some new tetrads during the remaining 3 years. We are sure that Mark or Ray would be delighted to allocate more to you. In the next three years we will have to concentrate on more remote sites.

If a TTV is not to your fancy, a roving record visit, particularly to a site which has been neglected or one which has far fewer records than expected would be valuable. We can make suggestions as to where effort is needed.

'Blitz' teams sharing vehicles will be organised to reduce costs and survey remote places. It may also be possible to organise accommodation overnight at Outdoor Centres. Keep in touch on this.

Finally, we hope that these points will help you in your record submissions over the remaining two and half years of the survey. If you have any questions, please contact your local organisers: Ray Murray (Borders) [raymurray1@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:raymurray1@tiscali.co.uk) and Mark Holling (Lothian) [mark.holling@btinternet.com](mailto:mark.holling@btinternet.com).

***Southeast Scotland Atlas Committee  
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