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NORTH WALES BREEDING BIRD ATLAS NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2011

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We have been very busy over the past few weeks planning our final fieldwork season and now there are only a few days to wait. For some of our resident birds, spring has already arrived and you may have seen evidence of courtship activity, nest building etc. We have achieved so much in the last three years and the preliminary results are already of considerable interest to our conservation partners but a more complete picture is still required. Our priority for this last breeding season is to encourage everyone to help gather **Roving Records with breeding codes** for the tetrads with no, or very few records (see map on page 3) and to have confirmed breeding evidence for many species in the remaining tetrads where we only have Possible or Probable breeding evidence so far. The majority of the North Wales data have come from around 160 dedicated volunteers and now we have to focus this coming season's effort very clearly. We have identified a range of ways in which you can help without duplicating valuable effort and it is very important that you contact us in advance of visiting target tetrads and we look forward to hearing what you have planned. This is the year when we have to make every record count.

Anne Brenchley and Geoff Gibbs

Update on progress

The map below shows the overall results based on records received by November 2010. We know that one or two datasets are still not in the system and few further records were input over the Christmas period.

Total coverage 2008-2010

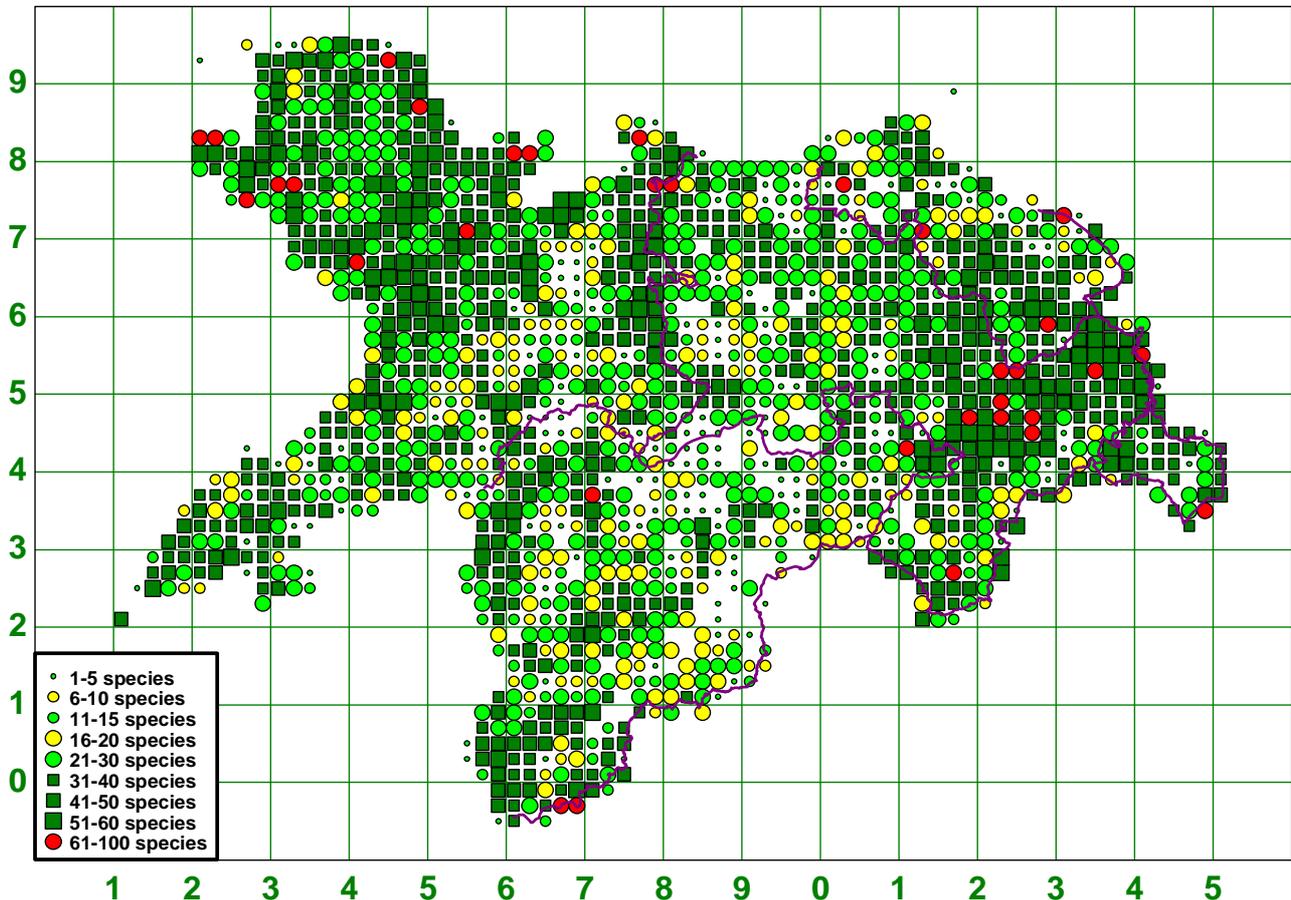


Table 1 shows the number of records received. Unfortunately 35.59% of records cannot be used for our Atlas because they have either been provided at the 10km scale (the right scale for the national Atlas but not for us) or are just sightings with no associated breeding codes. Then more than half of the records with breeding codes have to be discounted because they are duplicates, which was always inevitable.

Table 1 Total numbers of records received

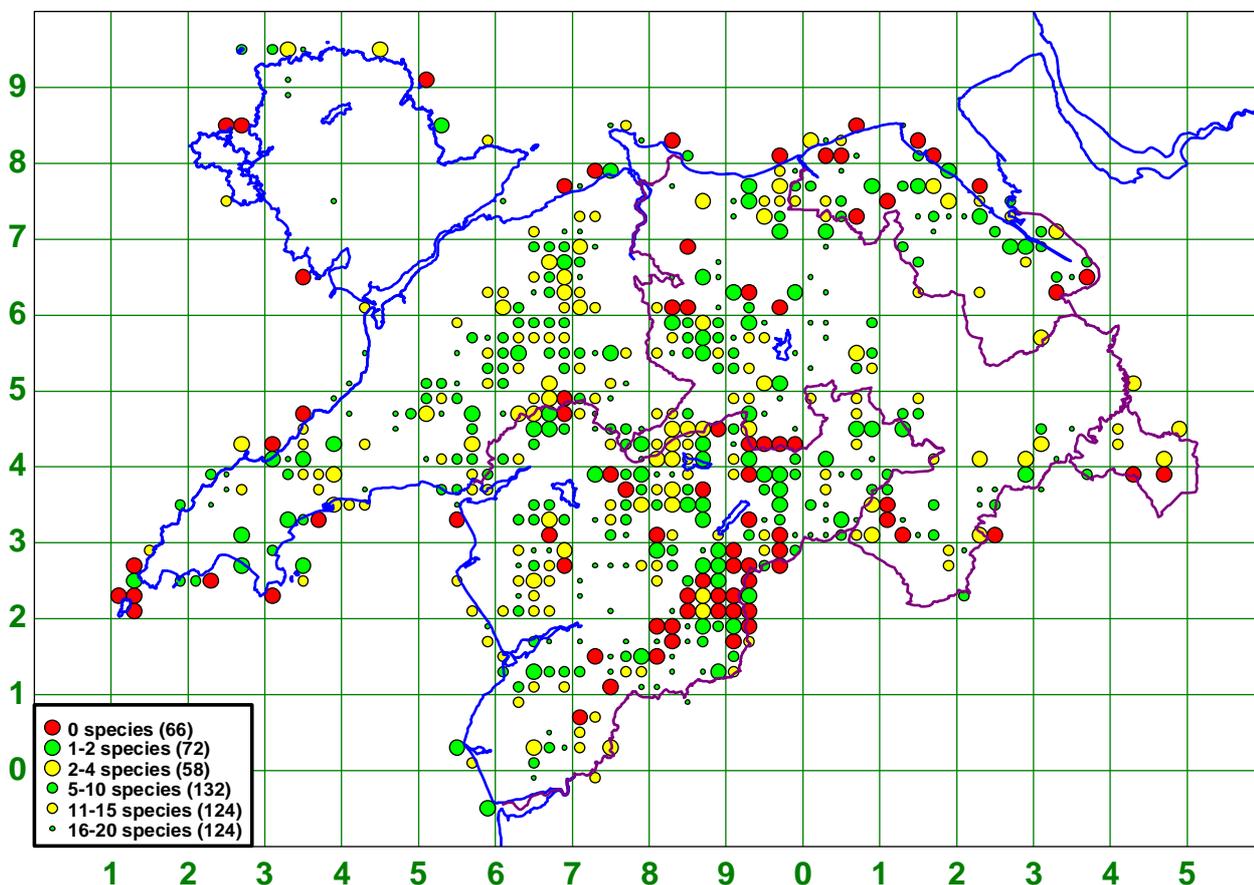
	2008		2009		2010	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Records at 10 km level	1,658	3.25	5,409	4.85	7,573	4.09
Records with NO codes	21,599	42.28	38,755	34.77	58,307	31.50
Records with codes	27,832	54.48	67,307	60.38	118,622	64.09
Records with codes after duplicates have been removed					49,527	26.84
Total	51,089		111,471		184,502	

So, from the total of 184,502 records so far we can only use 49,527 (just 26.84%) for mapping species in the North Wales Breeding Bird Atlas. This equates to 27 species per tetrad, which on the whole is quite a good position to be in after three years of hard work.

We are even able to improve this situation without having to leave our armchairs. Table 1 showed that there were over 58,000 records with no breeding codes. Many of these records came from TTVs, particularly those done in 2008 and 2009 when the importance of adding breeding codes was less appreciated than it is today. It is possible, using guidance from the national Atlas Coordinator Dawn Balmer, to give some of these records possible or probable breeding codes and we may be getting back to some of you to ask you to examine previously entered TTV and other records (see article on page 8). We are also doing the same with Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) records, which by their nature are meant to indicate breeding birds are present in survey squares.

However, even with this armchair recording, we are unlikely to significantly change the areas in need of targeted effort this coming season. The following map shows the tetrads with the least records. Some tetrads, on the boundaries of our area, have very little land in our counties so can be ignored unless we have sufficient observer time to check them. They are definitely not priority tetrads! So, if you are able to spend time in one or more of the tetrads in the map, below, please first check the website for the latest tetrad information and then contact Anne (NE Wales), Geoff (NW Wales) or Peter (Anglesey) before going to survey. We can ensure that you go where effort is most needed and that you don't all go to the same area leaving others still uncovered by the end of the 2011 breeding season. Please note that we also need many more records of confirmed breeding in each tetrad.

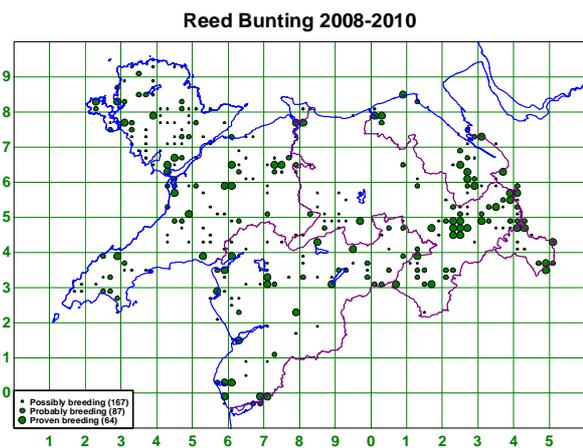
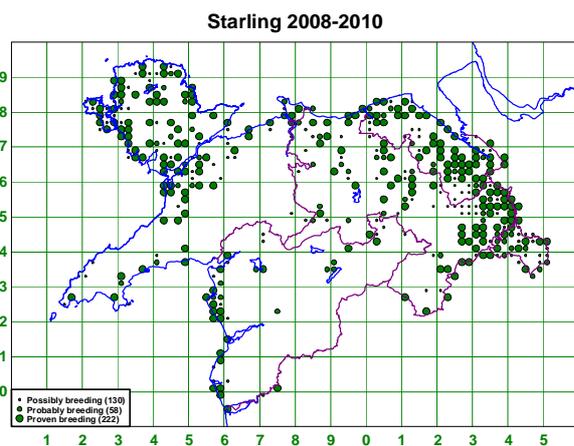
Tetrads with few records 2008-2010



This atlas project has been a huge undertaking – with 1796 tetrads to cover. In many English counties, where local atlases are also being undertaken, there have been several observers for each tetrad. We know that this is not the case in North Wales. We are operating on around 3.5 tetrads per observer assuming all observers (560) are putting in equal effort. However, we are actually reliant on a core band of around 160 keen observers who have contributed over 100 records. This equates to about 11 tetrads per observer. Of these 160 keen observers, 26 people have submitted 1000+ records and if we keep up the level of survey effort this coming season but target this effort as best we can, we should have a good overall picture for the majority of species. However many records you have already contributed, please add more as every new breeding record is a real bonus!

Provisional Results

Here are just two examples of species maps after three of the four breeding seasons. Starlings used to be a fairly widespread breeding species across North Wales but the provisional map indicates that it has disappeared across much of our area, especially more rural locations. The picture for Reed Bunting may be quite realistic but if you can discover breeding birds in other areas then do send in those Roving Records. Maps for most of the protected species (except those where the information is too sensitive) and Biodiversity Action Plan species have been placed on the website so do look at those. Maps for all but the most sensitive species will be available on request (from Ian Spence) after 10 April, so if you want to target any of your favourite birds, you can use these maps to help create more dots on the map.



Adult Starling by Richard Ford



Male Reed Bunting by John Oliver

Some other interesting facts and figures show that Wren is our most widespread breeding species, closely followed by Chaffinch. By the time the final breeding season results have come in, there will probably be very few tetrads where these two species cannot be found.

Top 6 Species

Species	No. Tetrads
Wren	1353
Chaffinch	1351
Carrion Crow	1325
Blackbird	1315
Robin	1260
Willow Warbler	1200

The best tetrads show that a combination of good varied habitat, managed specifically for birds and a large amount of recording effort produce the best results. However, in the top ten there are some more surprising areas such as the best tetrad in Anglesey is that east of RSPB South Stack but the reserve itself comes in at No.5 with 71 breeding species. Gresford Flash near Wrexham is not a bird reserve although this is a very well watched area, as are SJ24I and 24J at Ruabon Moor/World's End, which come in at No.6 and 10 respectively. With a bit more effort can we find some hidden gems in North Wales?

The best tetrad for breeding species by BTO Area

Tetrad	Location	BTO Area	No. breeding spp.
SJ37B	RSPB Inner Marsh Farm	Wirral & Mid Cheshire	87
SH28G	Pont Hwfa/Breakwater CP	Anglesey (Ynys Mon)	73
SJ35L	Gresford Flash, Wrexham	Clwyd East	71
SN69Y	RSPB Ynys hir	Cardigan	69
SH77Y	RSPB Conwy west	Caerarfon	69
SH87D	RSPB Conwy east	Clwyd West	62
SH73D	Llyn Trawsfynydd east	Merioneth	61

We have met with CCW and the RSPB, who have been fascinated by some of the preliminary results and are already discussing how our data can be used for defining future research and habitat management projects.

Sponsorship – the latest news – Species need friends

Our species sponsorship programme has got off to a great start and we now have sponsors for 60 species and have raised over £8400. However, there are still around 100 species in need of friends. Which is your favourite species? Many of the common garden birds are still in need of support (e.g. Blue Tit, Long-tailed Tit and even Robin) and maybe sponsoring a species would be a nice gift, a way of celebrating a special event or just remembering a special person. If you would like to know which species are still available for sponsorship do look at the North Wales Bird Atlas website or phone your local Atlas organiser. We look forward to hearing from you.

Robin by Annie Kerridge



The 2011 breeding season – the final push!

1 Target under-recorded tetrads Use the species records map on page 3 to identify tetrads with less than 20 species recorded or if you are recording on Anglesey – less than 30. Aim to spend a few hours bird watching in a particular tetrad this spring/summer, spreading your time over two or more visits so that you can record residents, summer visitors at both the beginning of the season and later on when evidence of probable or confirmed breeding may be easier to collect. You do not have to book a tetrad on the online system if you are just doing Roving Records but in order to reduce any possible duplication of effort we are operating an informal allocation system this season and we would recommend that you tell your either Geoff Gibbs, Peter Stuttard or Anne Brenchley that you have decided to target a particular tetrad. We want to put all your valuable time to best effect. If you did TTVs in 2008, 2009 or 2010 you may wish to revisit your tetrads to pick up further species and gather breeding evidence. For those of you keen to record on Anglesey we will be putting together a similar map which shows all those tetrads with less than 30 records; this will be put on to the North Wales Atlas website shortly.



2 Champion your favourite species Choose a particular species and use the preliminary distribution map for that species (available on the website or from Ian Spence) to target areas where the gaps are but where you feel the species might occur. Using the map for a widespread but elusive species such as Bullfinch, or Treecreeper could be a good way to target tetrads where more recording effort is needed: spend long enough in a suitable tetrad and your effort is likely to be rewarded. Some species have short windows: Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler arrive in the second half of April, have one brood and depart in June; also continue fieldwork in July

because Spotted Flycatcher families can be very conspicuous then and Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer are still singing. Many resident species start breeding in March so you can start recording now. All records with valid breeding codes from March through to October will be used for the Atlas.

3 Focus on a particular habitat Our rivers are under-recorded and we could do with more records of Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Kingfisher, Common Sandpiper and colonies of Sand Martin. Some woodland species have quite short periods of singing activity and so an early visit to identify the songsters may need to be followed up by a later visit when patient observation may reveal a nest site or parents feeding young. Other habitats to visit could include sea cliffs, local farmland or even urban town centres.

4 Check out your home tetrad Look up the current species list, using the 'Any square summary' option on your online Atlas homepage, for the tetrad covering your home, village or any place that you visit regularly and see whether you can add to the species list or improve the breeding evidence. If you have nest boxes in your garden, have the occupants been recorded? We are short of **Confirmed** breeding records and I am sure that many of you could add to our records by just observing and recording birds at home as well as being willing to travel further afield to fill in gaps. If you are not sure which tetrad your local patch is in, look under the menu 'taking part' at the top of the Atlas web pages and choose 'Atlas Tools'. Here you can type in any four-figure or six-figure grid reference and obtain the tetrad

grid reference. Then simply transfer this grid reference to the 'Any square summary' page to get your list of all the species that have so far been recorded in that tetrad.

5 Be nocturnal Recording of owls is always likely to be incomplete but we can try our best. Go out locally at dusk or after dark and listen out for owls. Listening from your car at a strategic spot is a good way to do this, or even listen from your own open window at home. Even better, you could make an evening of it and make a car journey around several tetrads. Take a friend. You can always visit a local hostelry to celebrate your efforts!



6 The monthly challenge

MARCH – some corvids (Rook, Magpie and Carrion Crow in particular) are busy nest building and spotting this is relatively easy. Sparrowhawk and Goshawk can be seen displaying over woodlands, Ravens are displaying and being very vocal. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers call persistently this month and if you know of sites where this now increasingly rare species might be found or used to inhabit in recent years then an early morning visit may be repaid by an invaluable record. Do remind yourself what this species sounds like and we recommend a very good internet resource: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/a/>

APRIL – waders such as Snipe, Lapwing and Curlew are displaying this month. Long-tailed Tits are nest building and Song Thrushes are still very vocal. Pied Flycatchers start to arrive in the middle of April and their song period is quite short so do visit some suitable woodland this month.

MAY – Pied Flycatchers continue to sing into early May. Wood Warblers are also at their most vocal and have a very distinctive song. Look out for Yellowhammers along mature field boundary hedges and listen for Reed Buntings around your local wetland. Ring Ouzels sing this month but males may be quiet if there is no competition in the vicinity. Playing bird song recordings in suitable habitat may prove rewarding as the male answers back.

JUNE – Early in the month, Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers are noisy when you are near a nest with young. Swifts will be really active on nice summer days and screaming will indicate that breeding pairs are around. Once birds start to feed young it should also be relatively easy to observe adults going up into the eaves of suitable buildings and then Confirmed breeding (ON – Occupied Nest) can be given. Seabirds will be at their most active and any suitable coastal habitat should be investigated. Nightjar and Woodcock will be active in suitable habitat and a dusk excursion may prove rewarding, especially in the forestry plantations with clearings. Finally towards the end of this month young Buzzards will start their persistent calling and Confirmed breeding can be established.

JULY – Breeding Swallow and House Martin should be easy to spot this month. Bullfinch families start to appear and this is the month that searching for Long-eared Owls (the young make hunger calls that sound like a repeated 'squeaky gate') could be fruitful.

Further hints and tips on how to find particular species will appear regularly on the North Wales Atlas website and we will be emailing out reminders on a monthly basis.

Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs) – Review and Revisit

Many of you have done TTVs for the national Atlas over the past three years. We appreciate that your priority at the time was to count birds and perhaps not to note breeding evidence but some of this TTV information could now be turned into useful information for our local Atlas.

1. Firstly, by using the Any Square Summary facility on the Atlas website, look at the tetrad in which you did your TTV. This will identify all the species recorded in that tetrad and the levels of breeding evidence, if any, recorded so far. You might like to print this off for reference.
2. Then look at your TTV data by clicking on the View/Edit My Data button and finding your Early and Late visit data. In hindsight could you upgrade any species records with no breeding codes to either S or H (Possible breeding)? Could you go even further and upgrade some species to T (birds holding territory)? The BTO guidance is that if you record 5-6 birds singing on either the Early or Late TTV then you can assume that species to be holding territory. Equally if you record the same species on both the Early and Late Visit, in approximately the same location then again you can assume that species to be holding territory and is, therefore, a Probable breeding species.

Please **Review** your TTVs by the **end of March** so that anyone visiting this tetrad in the coming breeding season knows the absolute up to date situation and does not duplicate effort. Then please consider **Revisiting** your tetrad later in the breeding season and try and spend some time observing the birds to gather Confirmed Breeding.

Volunteer Events

We held three very successful volunteer training/celebration events after Christmas. The first was at Dolgellau, hosted by Dave Anning the BTO Regional Rep. for Meirionnydd. 18 people attended to hear about progress with the Atlas, both national and local and then spent some time networking and planning the 2011 breeding season's fieldwork whilst enjoying a healthy lunch. This formula was repeated in Ruthin, hosted by Anne Brenchley and Ian Spence, in early February with an amazing 39 attendees and again in Llangefni two weeks later when Tony and Karin White helped by Peter Stuttard, Geoff Gibbs and Ian Spence who gave the talks.



Delegates at the Ruthin event (left) and Dave Anning talking with volunteers at Dolgellau (above).

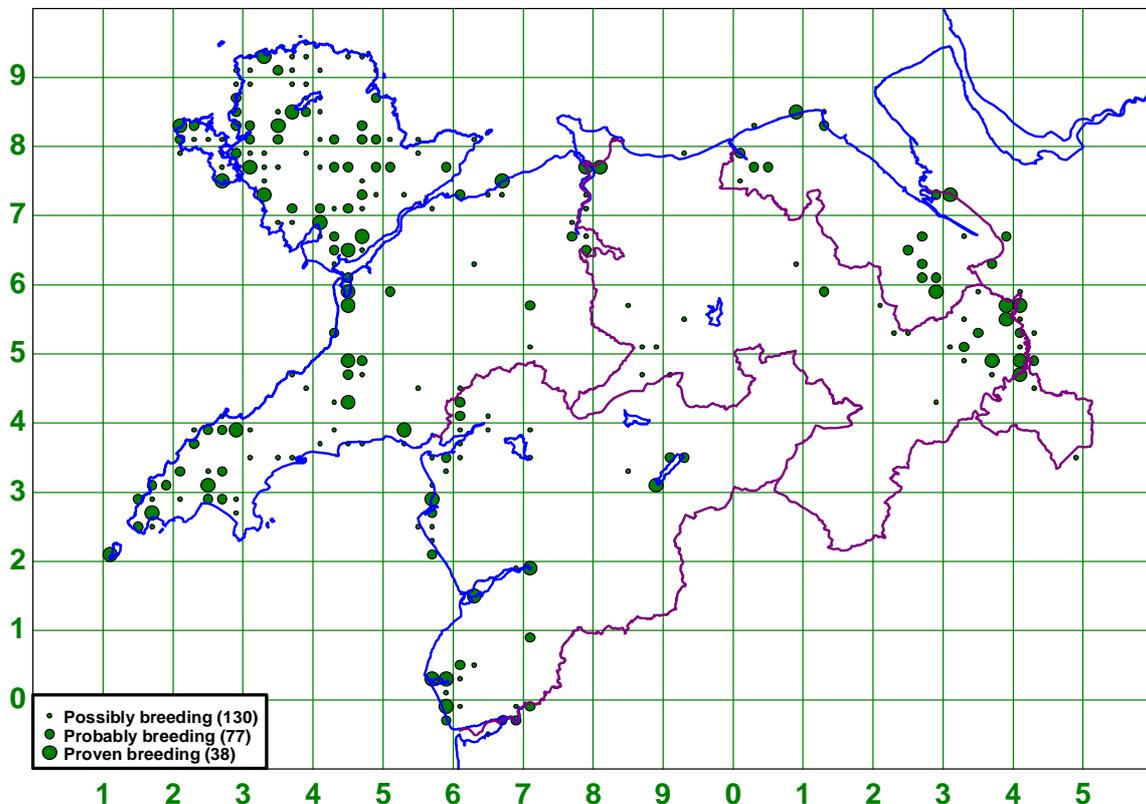
Photographs wanted!

We are slowly starting to build up a library of excellent photographs to be used in our publication but could do with lots more; obviously full acknowledgement will be given. We are contacting local camera clubs and keen bird photographers to offer them the opportunity to showcase their pictures within our Atlas. If you know anyone who might be interested then do ask them to get in touch. If you are the photographer then please take your camera out with you this spring and summer and submit your results as soon as possible. In particular, we need habitat shots that show broad types of habitat such as moorland, oak woodland, coastal cliffs, estuaries, farm buildings and wetland etc. We require high quality, high resolution (minimum 500KB) digital images and it is preferable if most of these shots show landscape features that are clearly recognisable as being in North Wales. Jane Hemming is gathering together images at present to see what gaps there are in our requirements so if you want any more information of what we require then please get in contact: jane.freeman1@btopenworld.com.

Guess the Species Competition? Prize to be won

A little bit of knowledge and detective work should enable you all to have a go at identifying the species whose distribution from 2008-2010 data is shown below. A £10 Amazon token will be awarded to the person who correctly identifies the mystery species, first drawn from the hat on the closing date. Entries must be submitted by post or email to Anne Brenchley. **Closing date - 10 April 2011.** Good luck.

Mystery species 2008-2010



Tracking Down Hawfinches



We all know where people go in N Wales to find winter Hawfinches – sites in the Conwy Valley, Llanelltyd churchyard near Dolgellau and maybe the Maentwrog area. But how do we find them in the breeding season? We have to learn a few tricks from Dave Smith, who studied them intensively around Dolgellau for five years from 1999, and even wrote up his findings (in *Welsh Birds* Vol 4(1) 2004). He found one wood with at least 19 pairs in 2002,

and elsewhere small clusters of up to 4 pairs plus sites with solitary pairs. Most were nesting in mixed deciduous/coniferous woods, plus 4 pairs in churchyard yews.

Here are a few pointers:

- Any stands of hornbeam should be checked for breeding Hawfinch, as this species is strongly favoured. However, beech is more likely to be encountered in Wales and small hawfinch flocks can often be found feeding in/under beech in early spring so mixed species woods with a strong beech component are a good starting point for a search.
- Many pairs in the main colony nested in conifers, particularly Douglas fir - Dave found 21 nests altogether, with seven each in beech and Douglas fir.
- It is worth spending time listening to a bird song CD prior to fieldwork as familiarisation with the calls and song of Hawfinch will make locating breeding birds much easier. If you are lucky enough to find birds, then spend some time quietly listening and observing, comparing calls and general behaviour with other more familiar species.
- Birds are easier to locate when in small breeding concentrations. In March and April, there is much territorial and courtship activity in the leafless canopy, with males often singing in their territories. During the nest-building and egg-laying periods (typically late April to early May) the females will call feverishly, begging to the male with high-pitched, reeling ticking calls. June again can be a good time to locate territories, when fledged young will beg loudly and repeatedly in the vicinity of the nest, with sharp, metallic ticking calls.

Geoff Gibbs

Atlas Organisers – contact details

North Wales Breeding Bird Atlas Working Group

Anne Brenchley - Chair and Coordinator for North East Wales

Geoff Gibbs – Coordinator for North West Wales

Peter Stuttard – (pstuttard@tiscali.co.uk) produces notes from the meetings and manages the Project Plan

Kelvin Jones – Website Manager

Andrew Dale – Partner Relationship Coordinator

Ian Spence – Data Manager

BTO Regional Representatives:

Tony White, Anglesey

wylfor@treg5360.freemove.co.uk

Geoff Gibbs, Caernarfon

geoffkate.gibbs@care4free.net

Mel ab Owain, Clwyd West

melabowain@btinternet.com

Anne Brenchley, Clwyd East

anne.brenchley@btinternet.com

Dave Anning, Meirionydd

anning.ecology@tiscali.co.uk

BTO Regional Representatives bordering North Wales:

Charles Hull, South Cheshire

edleston@yahoo.co.uk

Allan Dawes, Shropshire

allandawes@btinternet.com

Jane Kelsall, Montgomeryshire

janekelsall@phonecoop.coop

Moira Convery, Cardiganshire

moira.convery@dsl.pipex.com

Paul Miller, Wirral and Mid Cheshire

paulandhilarymiller@tiscali.co.uk

County Bird Recorders

Anglesey: Steve Culley, 22 Cae Dedwydd, Cemaes Bay, Anglesey LL67 0LP (01407 710542)

SteCul10@aol.com

Caernarfon: John Barnes, Fach Goch, Waunfawr, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 4YS

Email records to rhion678pritchard@btinternet.com

North-east Wales: Ian M Spence, 43 Blackbrook, Sychdyn, Mold, Flintshire CH7 6LT (01352

750118) ianspence.cr@btinternet.com

Meirionydd: Jim Dustow, Afallon, 7 Glan y Don, Rhiwbryfdir, Blaenau Ffestioniog, Gwynedd LL41 3LW (01766 830976)

Jim.Dustow@rspb.org.uk

The maps were produced using DMAP by Dr Alan J Morton

Thanks to the Countryside Council for Wales for printing this newsletter.

Anne Brenchley

43 Blackbrook, Sychdyn, Mold, Flintshire, CH7 6LT

REMEMBER:

- **Make every record count!**
- **Sponsor a species!**