



Plate 23. View north from Carn Aosda, Glenshee, Perth & Kinross, February 2007. © David Palmar/photoscot.co.uk

Experiences of an improving birder

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Over the years, my wife and I have been to lots of wildlife meetings and excursions, including the Glasgow Natural History Society, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Clyde branch of the SOC and RSPB, all of which meet in Glasgow, and all of which run excursions. This, together with attendance at Argyll Bird Club meetings and excursions, and excursions run at SOC conferences, enabled us to build up our experience, while enjoying the company of some excellent bird and other wildlife experts.

We have also participated in several surveys for the BTO. Most of you will already know that the BTO is an independent, charitable research organisation, combining professional and citizen science to inform the public and environmental policy and benefit bird populations. BTO organises a broad range of surveys in which you can participate, requiring different levels of expertise. Even beginners can participate in some of them, so don't be put off by lack of experience!

Amongst these surveys are:

BirdTrack - enabling you to upload either a complete bird list for a location, or simply roving records, from places where you were going and probably making a list anyway. app.bto.org/birdtrack/main/data-home.jsp

Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) - more of this later. www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs

Other surveys record garden birds, nests, heronries, water birds and wetland birds. www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/core-surveys

One of the first we did was the Ptarmigan survey in 2006, where we climbed seven mountains (easy ones!) before we saw our first Ptarmigan, which promptly flew off! Our persistence was rewarded on the eighth mountain, where we were able to see not only white Ptarmigan in winter plumage, but on returning to the same spot in August, to see a Ptarmigan mother with several chicks.

Next, we participated in recording for the *Bird Atlas 2007–11*, taking on four tetrads, each requiring two visits, over the four years, so spreading out the effort. The non-estuarine bird survey in 2015/16 involved simply one walk along a short stretch of coast, recording the environment and the birds. We have also entered records into BirdTrack for several locations over the years, including last session's Clyde branch excursion to Ardmore.

I have also attended several one-day training courses run by BTO staff. The first was a BBS course on east Loch Lomondside run by James Bray a number of years ago now. I was immediately impressed by how he could identify simply by sound, birds which I could not see and of which in many cases I was not even aware at the time. Up till then I had been mainly a 'visual birder' but I realised how identifying birds by sound could help me to improve my bird detection skills, and enhance my enjoyment of bird watching. I also discovered how short 25 m is and what length 100 m is in the field! (The reason for learning this will become evident later, if you don't already know!)

A couple of years passed, during which my wife and I gained a bit more experience in bird sounds

by going out with various groups of experts mentioned above. Then at a meeting of the Argyll Bird Club it was announced that there would be another training day in 2016 in Kilmartin, this time run by BTO Scotland's Ben Darvill. We had previously attended a couple of talks by Ben and found them to be informative, amusing and memorable, so we had rapidly become fully paid up members of the Ben Darvill Fan Club!

The BBS survey

I said to my wife 'We'll just go to the BBS course (which only cost £5) - we don't need to take on a square' - but of course we ended up taking one on, and I'm glad we did! We had a choice of randomly allocated squares, and ours turned out to be in the forest near Inveraray, which was part of the national forest estate managed by Forest Enterprise Scotland. I contacted the local forest district office and was granted permission to take a vehicle into the forest on specific dates when no forest operations were due to take place, with backup dates arranged in case of inclement weather. (The good news is that if you were to do a bird survey in poor weather, you would under-record the birds as they go into hiding, so you should only go out surveying when it's not raining!)



Plate 24. Loch Fyne from above Auchnabreac, Inveraray, Argyll, May 2017. © David Palmar/photoscot.co.uk

To ensure that as far as possible comparable results are obtained from different observers, there is a standard method of carrying out the BBS coverage. Each survey is done in a 1-km OS grid square, and consists of two roughly parallel transect routes across the square, each 1 km long, and separated by at least 200 m from each other. The transects obviously must be walkable and may have to deviate a bit to avoid obstacles, but once you have initially designed them, they stay the same every year.

Each year you take a note of the main habitat types along the transect route of the survey, checking that they haven't changed between the first and the second visit. The idea is to survey one transect in five 200-m sections, then stop surveying during the walk to the second transect, then start surveying again.

Once our square had been approved by the BTO's regional organiser, I drew some lines on an aerial photo on the BBS website to represent the ten 200-m-long sections of the two separate 1-km-long transects through the square which we needed to cover (Plate 25), and printed it out, together with some guidance and recording sheets which are provided, on which to note the various birds we would record, and a list of two-letter codes for each species, e.g. WR for Wren.

I also downloaded a useful (free) app called Offline Maps, which uses your GPS position to show on your phone, where you are on either 1:50,000 or 1:25,000 OS maps.

On entering the forest, we confirmed what I had suspected from Google satellite view, and from

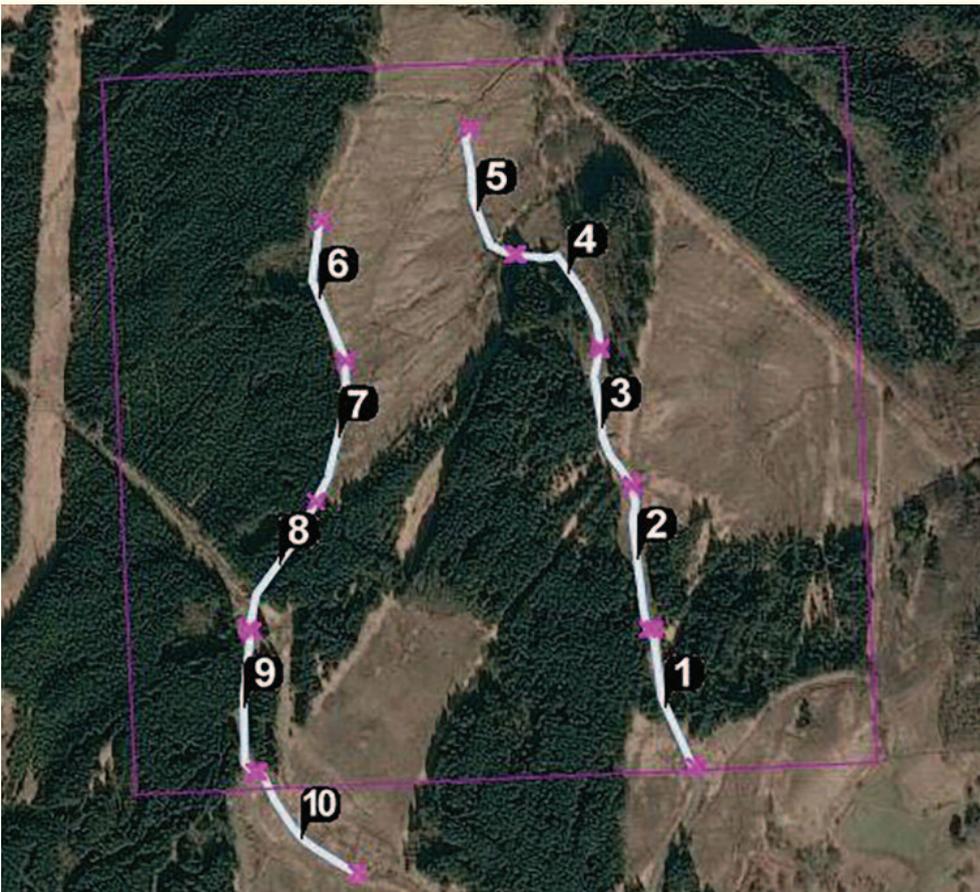


Plate 25. Satellite view of BBS square transects Image © 2018 BTO, Bing Maps



the forestry road information provided by Forest Enterprise Scotland, that we could drive exactly to the first transect. This made it easy to survey without getting up too early!

It's better to do the BBS in the early morning, as early as you can get to the square. We started between 07:00 and 08:00 hrs, with the aim of finishing by 10:00 hrs. The important thing is to be consistent from year to year, so that trends can be deduced.

On the first survey in 2017, we recorded birds and how we first noticed them (e.g. by sight, call or song). We did an early visit in May and a late visit in June, mainly listening out for bird song, and trying to work out whether the birds were within the nearest 25 m, between 25 and 100 m away, or beyond 100 m on either side of us - somewhat challenging when in a forest, so the distance was a 'best guess' scenario.

The reason for the distance being recorded is that BTO have a detectability algorithm, which allows them to extrapolate from your data what the total population of each species is likely to be. In 2017 the forest was full of Chaffinches, Wrens, Robins, Coal Tits and Willow Warblers, and with Meadow Pipits in the scrubby clearings, but nothing unusual was noticed.

Back home, I typed the results into the BTO's BBS website, using the two-letter codes for each bird in every 200 m section.

The second year, 2018, was a bit more varied, with in addition Crossbills, a Siskin, and a Cuckoo. On the first visit, I wondered at the beginning of the first transect whether I had heard a Tree Pipit, so I put it down with a question mark and tried to remember what the mystery bird had sounded like.



Plates 26–27. Tree Pipit in parachuting flight (left) and singing (right) near Inveraray, Argyll, May 2018. © David Palmar/photoscot.co.uk

At the end of the 10th section, I confirmed the Tree Pipit diagnosis, as we saw and heard it in full display song flight, taking off from a tree and landing in the same tree or a neighbouring one, and making a typical song like a Meadow Pipit, but with "pew, pew pew" at the end. On previous excursions with the RSPB and SWT, an expert birder had said "That's a Tree Pipit!", but this was the first I had diagnosed and been sure of myself, which was quite exciting! Having finished the survey, I even managed a few snapshots of it (Plates 26–27). Later, I listened to the Tree Pipit song on xeno-canto.org (a website which has thousands of bird songs and calls, and is free to use).

In summary, doing a bird survey doesn't need to be too onerous. There are surveys at different levels. It is an enjoyable and fulfilling way of making good use of a bird watching experience, and contributing to society in these days of political and environmental uncertainty. If you haven't tried one before, why not start now? It's a great way to focus your bird watching, have fun and help you learn while adding to the sum of human knowledge!

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