

Zeros matter

Changes to our recording system

Soon there will be small changes to the way we record for Garden BirdWatch online.

Kate Risely explains the need for these changes.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

The British Trust for Ornithology was founded over 80 years ago, and over that time the organisation has collected millions of records of birds and, in recent years, other kinds of wildlife too. However, information about the absence of birds is just as important as information about their presence. In mapping studies such as the BTO *Bird Atlases*, we need to be sure about where in the country the birds weren't present, as well as where they were. When we are looking at migration patterns, such as through BirdTrack records, we can only know when birds arrive in an area by knowing that they weren't there beforehand.

All of our BTO surveys are designed so that we can be sure when birds aren't there; Breeding Bird Survey volunteers are asked to record all birds encountered during their surveys, so we can reasonably assume that if they didn't record a Bullfinch, it was because they didn't see or hear one. BirdTrack recorders are asked to tick the 'complete list' box, so that we can tell the date that Swifts arrive (and leave) by looking at when they feature on complete lists. For single-species surveys we emphasise the importance of submitting results even when nothing was seen.



To investigate changes in butterfly numbers, we need to know when none were seen.

ORANGE TIP: JOHN FLOWERDAY

ZEROS IN GARDENS

Garden BirdWatch is designed to be easy and accessible, and as long as people are recording consistently, it doesn't matter how many birds they record. We assume that Garden BirdWatchers can identify a group of the most common garden bird species from Blackbird to Wren: this is a consistent list of birds shown on the paper forms and the online system (with some minor differences). This means that if a box for one of these common bird species isn't ticked, either paper or online, we assume that it was not recorded.

The important thing from our point of view is identifying the true zeros.

Unlike the bird counts, which are an intrinsic part of GBW, recording other wildlife is entirely optional. If you haven't submitted any records of butterflies (for example) from your garden in a given week, we currently have no way of knowing whether you saw no butterflies that week, or if there were butterflies and you couldn't identify them, or you didn't choose to record them, or if you didn't notice if there were any or not.

The important thing from our point of view is identifying the true zeros, so we are now introducing an option on the online system allowing people to make a positive statement: 'I am sure there were no butterflies'. It's important to remember that you should only use this option if you are sure there were zero; if you're not sure if you would have noticed them, then you should select the 'I didn't look' option. If you definitely never record all or particular groups of other wildlife, you can set the default to be 'I didn't look', so you don't have to select this every time.

ACCESSING THE ONLINE SYSTEM

The new online system is currently being rolled out to sections of online users at a time, so you may still see the old system for a while. All Garden BirdWatchers have a username for the online system, even if they have previously only submitted data on paper forms. To be reminded of your username and reset your password, go to www.bto.org/my-bto, click 'Login to My BTO' and select 'Request new password'. You then need to enter the same email address as we have on file for you to be sure the reset email is sent to the right place; if you're not sure that we have your correct email address, please get in touch with the BTO Supporter Team on gbw@bto.org or call 01842 750050.

► If you are sure there were no butterflies in your garden, select 'No' on this menu.

If you aren't sure if there were definitely zero, you can select 'I didn't look'.

If you *never* record these groups, you can set these to automatically default to 'I didn't look' under 'My Details'.

Garden BirdWatch



The new system

Summary of changes

A NEW LOOK

Entering data works in generally the same way as before; however, the style has been refreshed and underlying code has been updated, meaning that the data entry system should now work better on other devices such as tablets and phones.

GARDEN WILDLIFE HEALTH (GWH)

You can now enter records of sick or dead wildlife directly within your Garden BirdWatch weekly report (if you haven't already reported them directly via GWH). If you tick that you have seen any sick or dead wildlife, an option will open to submit a basic report to GWH. You can add more detail by going to www.gardenwildlifehealth.org and logging in with your normal username and password.

NO RECONFIRMATION

Please check your submission before you submit it, as under the new system you won't see a second reconfirmation screen. However, if you want to edit or view your completed submission, just click on 'view/edit this count'.

Were Butterflies present in your garden?	<input type="button" value="Yes"/>	<input type="button" value="No"/>	<input type="button" value="I didn't look"/>
Were Dragonflies present in your garden?	<input type="button" value="Yes"/>	<input type="button" value="No"/>	<input type="button" value="I didn't look"/>
Were Mammals present in your garden?	<input type="button" value="Yes"/>	<input type="button" value="No"/>	<input type="button" value="I didn't look"/>
Were Reptiles/Amphibians present in your garden?	<input type="button" value="Yes"/>	<input type="button" value="No"/>	<input type="button" value="I didn't look"/>
Were Other Insects present in your garden?	<input type="button" value="Yes"/>	<input type="button" value="No"/>	<input type="button" value="I didn't look"/>

www.bto.org/gbw (click 'Go to GBW Online')