

Inland Observation Points

Title

Inland Observation Points 1962-1965

Description and Summary of Results

By the early 1960s there were increasing moves by birdwatchers and others to try to monitor the numbers of birds occurring rather than just noting which species. Some breeding season monitoring schemes were starting up, eg the BTO's Common Birds Census (funded by the government's Nature Conservancy) started properly in 1962 following some trials in 1961, but these only covered some species and only the breeding season once the birds were established on their territories. There was also a considerable interest in bird migration and how it progressed through the country but, with the exception of regular (mostly daily) counts and ringing activities at the Bird Observatories around the coast, there was no systematic scheme to record how many birds were occurring, where, and exactly when, both through the various migration periods within a year and between years. The Bird Observatories conference of January 1962 therefore suggested that a scheme be set up to try to record migration through inland areas and not just at the coast where they were themselves already operating.

Thus the Inland Observation Points scheme was set up to record the spring migration into the country, and to establish when changes in numbers of the different species occurred and where. The idea was that if enough people recorded the birds they saw on a regular basis then some general patterns could be detected.

Trials started in March 1962 covering Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire and were extended further after August 1962 to try to monitor other periods than spring migration, in particular such as autumn arrivals of thrushes, and after November 1962 to the whole of England and Wales. As was often the case no money was available for staff to analyse the data and indeed observers were asked to contribute to the cost of printing the forms. Very quickly it was realised though that even with 30-40 forms received each month (which is what happened) it was going to be possible to look only at those species which seemed most likely to produce "interesting" results. Some of these were summarised in the published reports in *Bird Migration* and *BTO News* noted below, including some notes during and shortly after the very cold spell of January-February 1963.

Humphrey Dobinson left the employment of the BTO in 1963 (although returned for two brief periods later on specifically for this project) and reports did not continue on a regular basis. The scheme rather stagnated as a result, although it was not formally stopped. After 3 years the scheme was revived and adopted formally as the Daily Bird Count Scheme in January 1965 and extended to accommodate anyone who wished to contribute, and run by various BTO staff members in their own time. Four 15-20 page newsletters were produced between July 1965 and September 1966 each covering a two-month period from March to October 1965 and which summarised the results for that period. However no more were produced and, although the intention was to continue, no more newsletters were written and the survey fizzled out completely after the end of 1965. However there is a legacy of 6 large boxes of forms and in 2009 these were input to the computer by volunteers with a

view to comparing results with the current Bird Track survey which, it will be clear, has very similar objectives and field methods – see Notes on Survey Design below.

It has been noted that there are some obvious differences with what is being recorded today with such as House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Tree Sparrow *P. montanus* being common in many areas, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* and Corn Crake *Crex crex* were recorded regularly in England, and although Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* was rarely recorded, Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* was quite common.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were initially asked to record counts of birds in a defined observation area as often as they wished, preferably daily but at least four times per week, and to note any passing over. The observation area was chosen by the observer – their garden, a defined bit of local farmland, a whole village or whatever. Records were then submitted on a form supplied for the purpose.

Such records were intended to give indications of movements of birds but also information on distribution and numbers of the commoner species, something that county bird reports were not good at.

Purpose of Data Capture

An attempt to track the numbers and movements of commoner birds occurring all over the country especially at migration periods.

Geographic Coverage

All of England and Wales.

Temporal Coverage

The first experimental period (as Inland Observation Points) was 1 March 1962 to the end of August 1962 which covered only Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. From September to November 1962 the second experimental period covered these three counties and 10-15 other areas scattered over the rest of England. After November 1962 records were accepted from any part of England and Wales. This carried on at a low level until January 1965 when it was revived as the Daily Bird Count Scheme, but this too fizzled out after a year or so, evidently partly at least because of the burden of large volumes of data.

Other Interested parties

The enquiry was organised and run by the BTO.

Organiser(s)

Humphrey Dobinson started the Inland Observation Point Scheme. When it was revived in January 1965 a combination of staff members Steve Boddy, Peter Davis, Henry Mayer-Gross and Chris Mead in their own time and with help from Humphrey Dobinson and Brian Dickinson kept it going for a few months.

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

A comparison of migrant arrival dates comparing the IOP period (early 1960s) to the present (2010s) is:

Newson, S.E., Moran, N.J., Musgrove, A.J., Pearce-Higgins, J.W., Gillings, S., Atkinson, P.W., Miller, R., Grantham, M.J. & Baillie, S.R. 2016. Long-term changes in the migration phenology of UK breeding birds detected by large-scale citizen science recording schemes. *Ibis* 158: 481-495.

Contemporary reports covering different periods are:

Dobinson, H.M. 1962. Inland Observation Points. *Bird Migration* 2: 182-186;

Dobinson, H.M. 1962. The Inland Observation Points. Records for summer and autumn 1962. *Bird Migration* 2: 272-276;

Dobinson H.M. 1963. Inland observation points February - May 1963. *Bird Migration* 2: 325-328.

The enquiry was noted in *Bird Study* vol. 9 issue for December 1962, and vol. 10 issue for March 1963; and in *BTO News* number 8.

Four newsletters of the Daily Bird Count scheme were produced as 15-20 page typescripts and sent to observers if they paid at least £1: July 1965 covering March-April 1965; October 1965 covering May-June 1965; January 1966 covering July-August 1965; and September 1966 covering September-October 1965.

The computer inputting and notes on what is planned are in *BTO News* number 285.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

BTO Windows network central area.

Computer data -- outline contents

Excel spreadsheet containing the observations.

Computer data -- description of contents

Columns are:

Present - always 1; year - 1963-1966; start - time of day as a decimal; end – ditto; duration - End-Start; obs - Observer Name; spcode - 2-letter species code; spno - Species number; dayno - Days since January 1st; site – number; spname - Species name; Number_species - Number of species in the record site/time; site_name - Name of place; gridref - National 1-km square; Lat - as decimal; Long - as decimal

Information held in BTO Archives

Six archive boxes containing data forms. All have been scanned.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

The objectives and field methods of this survey were very similar to what is now known as Bird Track, and whose predecessor was Migration Watch set up for the spring migration. That Bird Track has been able to work and continue, and why the IOP scheme failed, is due to the technology which can now be used. In the early 1960s everything was done on paper and by hand and the resources were simply not available to cope with the amount of information which was sent in. Observers contributing to Bird Track type their observations directly into a database accessible over the Internet, and the computer holding this database is then used to interpret, analyse and produce results without any necessary intervention from the organiser. So although there is an organiser of Bird Track they are relieved of all the more mundane aspects of such a survey and can concentrate on all the biological aspects it.

Specific Issues for Analysis