



## ISLES OF SCILLY BAT GROUP

*Affiliated to: Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust and Bat Conservation Trust*

### **Improving Biological Record Keeping**

Report of a joint meeting of the Isles of Scilly Bat and Bird Groups, Tuesday 14 July 2015, The Garden Pavilion, Church Road, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly

#### **Introduction**

The meeting was organized by a small committee of the IOS Bat and Bird Groups in response to a realization that records of bat or bird sightings that were submitted to the Groups often provided insufficient information to be useful for conservation purposes. As planning progressed, it soon became apparent that the inclusion of other species would significantly enhance the value of the meeting. Major aims were to review different methods of record collecting and reporting, to assess what level of information would be appropriate for different conditions and to determine how best to improve the quality of records.

#### **The Programme**

- 10.00 Refreshments & Welcome:  
Marian Bennett, Chairman, IOS Bat Group
- 10.30 Introductory Talk 1: Bat Recording in Scilly: current practice and problems:  
Mike Gurr, Secretary, IOS Bat Group
- 10.45 Introductory talk 2: Bird Recording in Scilly: current practice and  
problems: John Headon, IOS Bird & Bat Groups
- 11.00 Making the most of your data: How BCT uses distribution records to  
inform bat conservation. Katherine Boughey, Bat Conservation Trust,  
Planning Project Officer
- 11.30 Recording Butterflies & Moths: John Headon
- 12.00 Coordinating records of birds and other taxa: John Headon
- 12.30 Lunch
- 13.30 IOS Bat Group AGM

- 14.00 The work of the Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS): Gary Lewis, Manager of ERCCIS  
***NB, Gary was unable to be present, owing to transport problems, and Rosemary incorporated a brief description of the work of ERCCIS in her talk (see below)***
- 14.30 Plant recording in Scilly and the work of the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Federation of Biological Recorders: Rosemary Parslow, BSBI Recorder for the IOS
- 15.00 General Discussion: How can we achieve better biological recording and co-ordination in Scilly?
- 16.00 Close and depart.

**Bat recording in Scilly: current practice and problems: Mike Gurr**

The IOS Bat Group had been founded in 2006 and Mike, who is the Group Secretary, summarized those aims of the Group that were relevant to this meeting as:

- To promote bat conservation
- To provide source of information and education
- To accumulate information about bats and initiate research to procure that information

This requires good record keeping. We need to know:

- What species?
- Where do bats roost?
- Where do they forage?
- How are numbers and behaviour changing over time?

The Group has adopted four main types of record keeping:

- Participation in the Bat Conservation Trust's (BCT) National Bat Monitoring Programme(NBMP). This involves roost counts & field surveys (see Katherine's talk later). Until now this has been consistent on St Mary's but spasmodic on other islands.
- Regular roost counts by members for Group records. One roost on St Mary's has been followed in detail; a roost on Bryher has been studied spasmodically. An important roost on Tresco has been studied spasmodic until recently but now is recorded more consistently.
- Occasional collaborative projects A good example a project in 2011 with Exeter University in which 10 bats were radio tracked over 4 weeks. In most of these collaborative projects, automatic detector/recorders (Anabat/Songmeter) have been employed.
- Casual observations sent in by members and visitors.

This last is where we have had most problems, which provided the stimulus for arranging this meeting.

We receive many casual notifications from members and visitors, some of whom are principally interested in birds. The principal problems have been:

- Name of observer is often not provided
- No indication of observer's experience
- Incomplete details of the observation:
  - No date or time of day on which sighting was made
  - No precise indication of where bat seen
  - No indication of weather conditions

Without this sort of detail, the records are worthless from a scientific point of view. The formal, detailed records are lodged annually with BCT and ERCCIS and it would be good to be able to archive the more casual records if they contained an acceptable level of detail

Further information about the Bat Group, past and present, can be obtained from the section of the IOS Wildlife Trust's web-site devoted to bats: [www.ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk). Select *Scilly wildlife* and then *Isles of Scilly Bat Group*.

### ***Bird Recording in Scilly: current practice and problems: John Headon***

John, who is Assistant Recorder for the IOS Bird Group, reviewed the history of bird recording in Scilly, which dates back to Augustus Smith in the mid-nineteenth century and features many well-known names in the study of ornithology. Early publications came in 1880 and 1906 and the Cornwall Bird Watching and Preservation Society (CBWPS) began annual recording of birds on Scilly in 1931. The independent Isles of Scilly Bird Group (ISBG) was inaugurated in 2000 and is now responsible for bird recording on the islands.

The Group obtains records from a number of sources, of variable quality:

- Online birding sites such as Birdguides and Rare Bird Alert (including pager alerts)
- Notice boards placed at strategic points around the islands
- The logs held every night in October at the Scillonian Club and on St Agnes
- The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Birdtrack online recording system
- Reports received by the Recorder from individuals – on paper, on electronic documents or spreadsheets, by word of mouth and even Facebook.

A high number of records on Scilly are of rare birds, either at a national or local level. National rarities are assessed by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) whose secretary, Nigel Hudson, was present at the meeting. Local rarities are assessed by the Isles of Scilly Rarities Committee (SRC) of which John is secretary. John described the similarities and differences between the processes of these two organizations.

John went on to explain some of the difficulties involved in assessing records of the rarer species, in particular:

- The varying diligence of observers in supplying full details of their observations and the difficulty of persuading some people to provide a description, including outright refusal in some cases
- The difficulty of finding out who actually provided the records in some cases – especially from the large number of birders who do not live on Scilly.

### **Making the most of your data: how BCT uses distribution records to inform bat conservation: Katherine Boughey**

Katherine, currently Project Planning Officer at BCT, will shortly be moving to the role of Monitoring and Science Manager, overseeing the Trust's National Bat Monitoring Programme (NBMP). She will use these data to devise more effective conservation measures.

She first briefly described two main components of the NBMP: roost counts and field surveys. In the first, bats are counted as they emerge from a known roost. In a field survey, the observer walks around a designated 2-3km circuit, divided into 12 stopping places, at each of which the observer records pipistrelle passes for 2 minutes with the detector tuned to 45kHz. Between stops the detector is tuned to 23kHz for recording noctules or serotines. Hitherto, paper records have been returned to BCT but the Trust is now in the process of digitizing information and exchanging information on-line. The NBMP provides information on the distribution of bats and trends in population numbers all over the UK.

#### **What does BCT do with such bat distribution data?**

1. Firstly they can be used to target conservation efforts where most needed
2. To support practitioners.
3. For research

Digitization is particularly useful for field surveys, as it can be used in combination with digital habitat maps and Google Earth, providing layered maps to illustrate different features. For example a colour-coded map can be produced, illustrating 'species richness' in different geographical locations. Such approaches have allowed BCT to assist DEFRA and Natural England in their

agri-environment schemes and indicating the distribution of rare species such as grey long-eared, greater and lesser horseshoe, and barbastelle bats.

### The future: how can bat workers help?

BCT aims to develop on-line systems as quickly as possible and to work with other organizations to harmonize systems so that they can be used easily by local volunteers. The main requirements from recorders are:

1. *Location of the observation.* Recorders are recommended to use hand-held GPS monitors or to make use of the GPS features of current smart phones to provide at least 6 digit and preferably 10-digit grid references. A helpful web-site for finding the grid reference for a location is: [www.gridreferencefinder.com](http://www.gridreferencefinder.com)
2. *Method of identification of bats.* Ideally this should be given as one of the 16 'method of ID' categories developed by the Bat Conservation Trust. This information is critical to enable the reliability of the record to be established. This may be with a hand-held or a fixed-location detector, the type of which should be specified. Increasingly DNA profiling is used. Identification from droppings alone may well not distinguish between species (for example common and soprano pipistrelles).
3. The type of record, for example a maternity roost; swarming site, hibernacula, bat in flight etc. Ideally this should be given as one of the 13 'record type' categories developed by the Bat Conservation Trust. Without this information is it very difficult to make use of the record to inform bat conservation, as different types of records are used in different ways.

The following two presentations were slight changes to the programme.

### **The BTO Birdtrack recording system: John Headon**

It had not proven possible for a speaker from the BTO to attend the meeting, so John presented a BTO slide show describing:

- Why Birdtrack is needed
- how the Birdtrack system operates
- how observers can enter their data
- how observers can view and manage their data
- how scientists use the huge mass of data in the system

Birdtrack is financed and supported by the BTO, RSPB and similar organizations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Of particular interest for today's meeting was the system for advising observers if the record they are entering is a national or local rarity, or if it involves a larger number than usual or is out of season. Observers are prompted to complete a rarity description and send it to BBRC or the local recorder.

This slide show provided an interesting contrast with the NBMP system described by Katherine, with each having their particular plus points.

### **Recording of Other Orders of the Animal Kingdom: John Headon**

John spoke for a few minutes about the recording of other orders of animals undertaken by ISBG.

Records of bats received by ISBG in the past have been sketchy to say the least, and attempts would be made in future to ask observers to be more rigorous in describing what they have seen.

John then described the results of a meeting between him and Mick Scott (the local moth expert) regarding recording Lepidoptera on Scilly. The main conclusion had been that Lepidoptera recording should continue under the aegis of the Cornwall branch of Butterfly Conservation, but that John would investigate the possibility of operating as a sub-group of that Branch. John had agreed with Mick that John would take over the recording of butterflies on Scilly.

The results of these discussions would be subject to ratification after discussions with residents on Scilly with a particular interest in Lepidoptera and also with the Cornwall branch of Butterfly Conservation.

The other main group of animals for which a lot of records are received by ISBG is the Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises). John is in the process of trying to establish contact with the relevant people to whom collated records could be sent and who could provide validation of these records.

### **Plant recording in Scilly and the work of the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Federation of Biological Recorders: Rosemary Parslow**

Rosemary is the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) botanical recorder for the Isles of Scilly and has years of experience in recording plants in the archipelago. Since taking over as recorder in 1983 Rosemary has maintained a database of plant records from the Isles of Scilly which now amounts to some 71,000 records. Unlike many mainland counties there is no team to meet and record but records are contributed by visitors to the islands, botanical groups, interested islanders and Rosemary. She thanked those people in the audience

who had been key not only to recording plants but following up unusual records that an absentee recorder could not.

Among the functions of the work expected of a recorder is the production of check-lists and other publications, (examples of which were demonstrated), help with identification and validation of records. This could be a sensitive area as no one likes to have records rejected, especially as it was important to encourage recording. Although, as the sole recorder for Scilly, Rosemary is expected to verify records where possible and can call upon help from BSBI referees for difficult plant groups. Also she and the other two Cornwall BSBI recorders work closely together.

One major aim as recorder is the production of a Flora. This is now well underway and examples of different species dot maps with colour-coding for date classes were demonstrated. Interpretation of the maps being a fascinating aspect of the process.

CISFBR. Rosemary also plays a large part in the work of the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Federation of Biological Recorders (CISFBR). Established in 1997, this is a group of independent naturalists interested in all aspects of biological recording, promoting the collection, verification, validation and digitizing of records and encouraging the dissemination of records through County and National Recorders, and Records Centres. It aims 'to give recorders a voice'. The Federation's Handbook for Biological Recorders indicates the wide range of species covered by members' interests and offers practical advice on recording methods and improving the quality of recording. Recent publications with which it has been associated include: *Ferns, Clubmosses, Quillworts and Horsetails of Cornwall & the IOS*, *The Mammals of Cornwall & the IOS* and the *Red Data Book for Cornwall & the IOS*.

ERCCIS. CISFBR works closely with the Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS), which is one of many County Environmental Records Centres. ERCCIS is hosted by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust at Allet, near Truro. It provides a resource for naturalists, acting as a central database that collects, manages and disseminates information about the biological and geological state of Cornwall and Scilly. The information services it provides include a comprehensive library of reference works and details of how to record wildlife and submit records. ERCCIS encourages the recording of both *habitats* and *species*.

### **Discussion**

The presentations were followed by extensive discussion. Among the many important points made were:

- The commonest problem, as outlined in the introductory talks, is insufficient information to be useful for a particular purpose.
- Most reputable organizations already have a workable pro-forma for recording observations. The main requirement is in encouraging people to use them.
- Different levels of information on a record form may be appropriate for different circumstances. It may not always be necessary to have extremely detailed information.
- Many people are reluctant to provide data. They need to be encouraged in a way that does not put them off.
- There are now many different ways of recording including the use of electronic detectors, digitization of information, use of GPS systems. Those that are comfortable in their use will use them. Others, not technically inclined, will probably not be persuaded to use them but should be encouraged to use 'traditional methods' provided that they are instructed as to what the minimum level of information should be.
- Some recording requirements are for long-term projects that are concerned with discerning trends in wildlife populations. In such cases, the 'clean-ness' of the data becomes less important. The project team then needs to specify clearly the level of detail required.
- It is a sad fact that some observers are 'protective' about their information and will deliberately not declare it. This has long been a problem in Scilly, where we have many individual, or even teams of naturalists, who visit the Isles, collect information and then take it away without making it available to local wildlife organizations. More education and persuasion may be the solution but the problem may always be present to some extent.
- It is recognized that many aspects of wildlife in Scilly differ from those on the mainland. This is partly owing to climatic differences, the nature of various habitats (for example the clarity of the water, influencing marine biology) and the isolated nature of the archipelago. This sometime results in quite reputable mainland ecologists visiting and coming to erroneous conclusions (for example claiming to find a noctule roost, identified by droppings, when the latter were from a Scilly shrew; claiming that a particular plant was not rare, when it was in fact rare in Scilly but not on the mainland). These observations underline the need to disseminate the proceedings of this meeting widely.

### **Conclusions**

As the discussion drew to a close, it became apparent that most, if not all, participants thought that the main problem was not the recording systems



available but persuading more people to use them and to submit data. It is important not to discourage people, who might otherwise be able to offer valuable help. It was suggested, with almost unanimous agreement that the first step might be to set up, on the Islands, an informal group of people interested in, and with good knowledge of, biological recording to exchange ideas and then to disseminate information, targeted to the many 'casual observers who live in or visit the Islands. This might have some similarity with CISFBR but less comprehensive in the first instance (learn to walk before you can run!). It was thought to be important that this informal group should have no leader as such, so that a large administrative burden was not placed on one individual. The local organizing committee for this meeting will contact all local recorders to initiate this project.

The formal meeting ended at about 15.30 but informal discussions went on well after that!

The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust displayed a selection of their work and aspects of the work of the IOS Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the meeting room and members of staff were present

There was a **Bat Walk** in the evening. We met on Holgate's Green at 9.30pm. The evening was misty with occasional slight drizzle and a moderate breeze. Seven participants in the meeting and four visitors took part. The pipistrelles of Scilly were out in force that night and gave us a splendid display.