

# The Birds of Berkshire

## Atlas and Avifauna

A fully revised new edition to be published in 2013  
based on fieldwork completed in 2011, price £35

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**Birds of Berkshire Atlas Group**

# The Birds of Berkshire

## Atlas and Avifauna

The culmination of the work of over 400 volunteer surveyors from 2007 to 2011 will be the publication of a new county atlas and avifauna: *The Birds of Berkshire*, a full revision of the 1996 edition, which was based on fieldwork twenty years earlier.

The new Atlas provides a synopsis of the current status of each of about 160 summer and/or winter resident bird species, describes the changes that have occurred over the last twenty years and discusses their causes. Species accounts are also given for a further 165 non-resident migrant or vagrant species that have occurred in Berkshire. There will be chapters on the history of ornithology in Berkshire, on geography, habitats and climate. To aid bird-watchers less familiar with the county, the Atlas gazetteer section will provide information on nature reserves and other sites of special ornithological interest.

The results show dramatic changes compared to the last Atlas surveys carried out in 1987-9, with some species becoming extinct in Berkshire and many new or expanding breeding species. Changes in land use, in agriculture, the growth of urban areas and gardens and the creation of new nature reserves have had both positive and negative effects on bird populations and we are beginning to see significant climate-related changes. We are thus creating a chronology of changes in bird diversity and distribution which will provide both intrinsic interest and a scientific basis for conservation in the county.

Each account illustrated with a contemporary line drawing

Composite maps allowing comparison of 1989 data with the results of the 2007-2011 fieldwork

Maps showing summer and winter abundance where applicable

**Stonechat**  
*Saxicola torquata*

Uncommon winter visitor and passage migrant and scarce resident or summer visitor.

The Stonechat is a scarce summer visitor to Berkshire and a passage migrant or winter visitor in larger numbers. It is typically found breeding on areas of heathland, but also occurs on commons and wasteland, particularly where Gorse *Ulex europaeus* is present, and in young coniferous plantations. On passage and in winter it also occurs at gravel pits, sewage farms and on farmland. Nationally the breeding population, which is sensitive to hard winter weather, fell through the latter half of the 20th century then grew 2-3 fold from 1994 to 2007, with a series of warm winters, falling sharply following snowy winters in 2009-10. During the breeding season tetrad survey, Stonechats were recorded in 47 Berkshire tetrads, with breeding confirmed in 16, an increase of 60% compared to the 1987/9 survey. The distribution shows a strong correlation with the heathland in the south of the county. Although it can hold territory in small areas of suitable habitat, Stonechats are conspicuous and it is unlikely that many breeding pairs were overlooked: in 2008, 26 territories were located on the East Berks heaths and 8 territories on Greenham Common. Subsequent cold winters may have reduced that number, though the numbers of tetrads in which breeding was confirmed or recorded as probable each year changed little from 2008 (10) to 2011 (6).

The abundance maps show that whereas the breeding population in 2008/11 was almost exclusively in the south of the county the winter population was threefold higher, more dispersed and predominantly on the downs in the north of Berkshire. In the winter of 2010/2011, following cold and snowy conditions in the winter of 2009/10, the numbers of tetrads in which wintering Stonechat were reported fell by 90%.

Monthly summary counts (figure 1) published in annual reports, inevitably biased towards sites favoured by bird-watchers, show a decline in numbers as the winter progresses, then an influx of birds in the early spring. Numbers are lowest at the end of the summer with post-breeding dispersal. A second influx occurs in autumn as wintering birds arrive. The extent to which the spring and autumn peaks represent passage birds is not clear, nor is it known whether part of the wintering population stays to breed.

Breeding numbers had increased through the 20th century, though erratically: between 1946 and 1966, breeding was confirmed in only four years, with never more than three pairs involved. By the time of the 1987/9 tetrad survey, breeding was confirmed in 10 tetrads, though the highest number of pairs recorded breeding in any one year had been 14 in 1976, 12 of which were on the east of the county. A survey of the east Berkshire heaths during the 1993 breeding season located 15-16 pairs of Stonechats, of which 13-14 pairs bred raising 35-38 young. A similar survey in 2007 located up to 26 pairs in the same area. Away from the heathlands, there were two pairs in small areas of scrub on the Gillette Way Industrial Estate in Reading in 1986, one of which was seen carrying food during May.

Stonechat Breeding Status: 2011 (1989): Confirmed: 16 (10) Probable: 2 (2) Possible: 10 (3)

In some years, winter influxes are quite marked. In 1976/7, there were at least 20 birds in west Berkshire, including eight at Brompton Gravel Pits, 20 in mid-Berkshire and seven at Wraybury Gravel Pits in the east. In September and early October 1989, there were at least 15 at seven sites, including six together at Smallmead Gravel Pit. There was then a second influx in November 1989 of a further six to eight birds and many of these autumn arrivals appeared to remain to winter, with some 13 birds being present in January and February. By 2006-8, the peak numbers of birds wintering shown in annual reports had risen to 90-100. Birds disperse from their winter quarters after February and an increasing number are then reported from traditional breeding areas.

Ringling evidence is so far limited to the recovery at Finchamstead in March 1992 of a bird ringed in Strathclyde in August 1991.

The *Historical Atlas* indicates that the Stonechat was uncommon in Berkshire in the 19th century; although Noble (1906) states that it was resident in many parts of the county. In contrast to the current pattern, it was then less common in winter than in summer. There were breeding or summering records in the 1930s and 1940s from Crookham Common, Bradfield, Burghfield, Twyford, Wellington College, Pinkneys Green, Eton and Slough Trading Estate.



Figure 1: Stonechat - monthly maxima average 2001-2008 from annual reports

Month	Maxima Average
J	40
F	45
M	55
A	60
M	65
J	35
J	40
A	50
S	75
O	65
N	60
D	55

290

Many species illustrated with colour photographs



Photo: Gordon Langsbury 291

Charts showing patterns of occurrence

*The Birds of Berkshire* will be a book of approximately 450 pages in a large colour format. As well as the maps, it will be illustrated with line drawings of each species and photographs of key species and the different habitats found across the county.



The Atlas project was supported by the Berkshire Ornithological Club (BOC) and the NDOC (Newbury District Ornithological Club).



**Birds of Berkshire Atlas Group**

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