

# BTO Nightingale Survey 2012

## Information for volunteers in Sussex



**Introduction** Within Britain, the distribution of nightingales has always been restricted to the southeast. Atlas data since the 1960s, however, have shown a clear contraction of breeding range away from the western and northern limits. Census data also show that numbers have declined strongly in recent decades. The BBS indicates that, between 1995 and 2009, the British nightingale population decreased by 57%. One possible explanation for the decline is that habitat suitable for nightingales to breed in is becoming scarcer. Nightingales are long-distance migrants, wintering in West Africa, and the BTO is also investigating the problems the birds might be experiencing there and on migration.

**What is the aim of this survey?** During the 2012 breeding season, BTO volunteers will be conducting a full survey of breeding nightingales across Britain. The main aim of the survey is to map all singing males and compare their numbers and distribution with results from the previous national survey in 1999. Knowing where nightingales are breeding in 2012, and which habitats they are using, will greatly aid their conservation in future years. For example, there may be opportunities to create woodland habitats suitable for nesting in areas where the availability of habitat appears to be limiting population growth, or to give greater protection to nightingales in key areas.

A completely new element of the 2012 survey will investigate how many males are singing at night later in the spring. Recent research suggests that only unpaired males continue to sing during the darkest hours of the night, whereas all territorial males sing in the daytime (especially at dawn and dusk). We hope to discover whether the proportion of birds singing at night varies systematically, for example with nightingale density, with habitat, or with distance from the edge of the range.

**How will the survey be organised?** Visits to tetrads known to have been recently occupied by singing nightingales will form the main part of the survey. A list of such tetrads has been compiled using mainly the 1999 survey results and subsequent records from the Bird Atlas 2007-11 project. Some additional tetrads have been added to test the likelihood that the initial list was incomplete; these are potentially suitable sites within the range but where the species has not recently been recorded. BTO regional representatives will allocate the selected tetrads in their regions to volunteers. To reduce the chances of singing birds being missed by the tetrad surveys, there will be wide publicity given to the survey and casual records of singing nightingales will be encouraged.

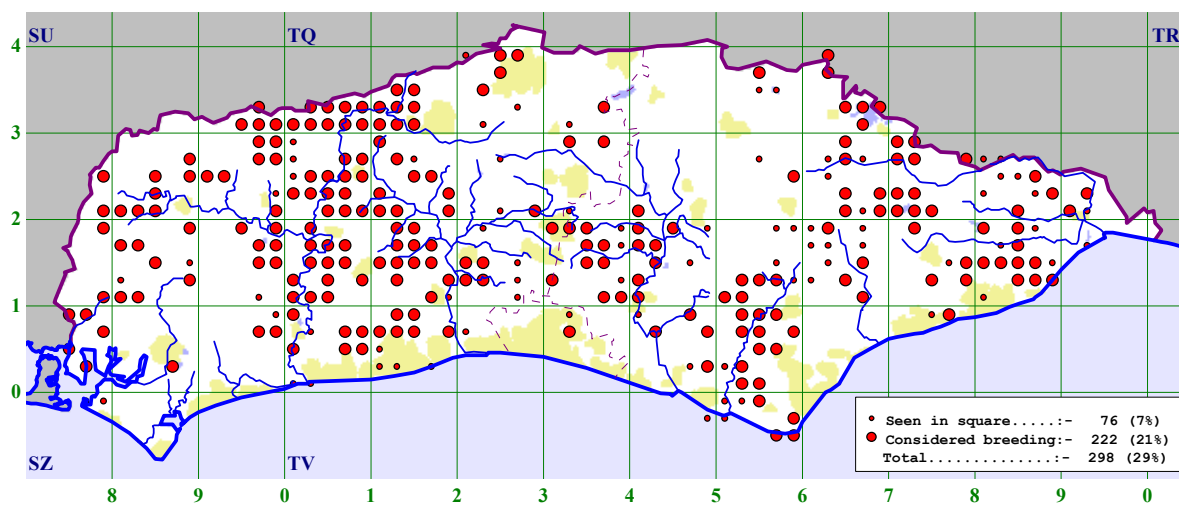
**What will be the survey method?** Volunteers should visit each of their allocated tetrads at least twice during the early spring (27 April to 14 May). Each visit should cover all suitable nightingale habitat within the tetrad and should be made in the early morning (before 8.30 a.m.). Volunteers should map any singing nightingales onto a pre-printed survey form. Basic habitat information will also be requested.

There will also be optional nocturnal visits to occupied tetrads (ideally at least two during the period 18 May to 4 June). The main aim of these visits will be to discover whether singing birds already detected by the daytime surveys are in song during the hours between midnight

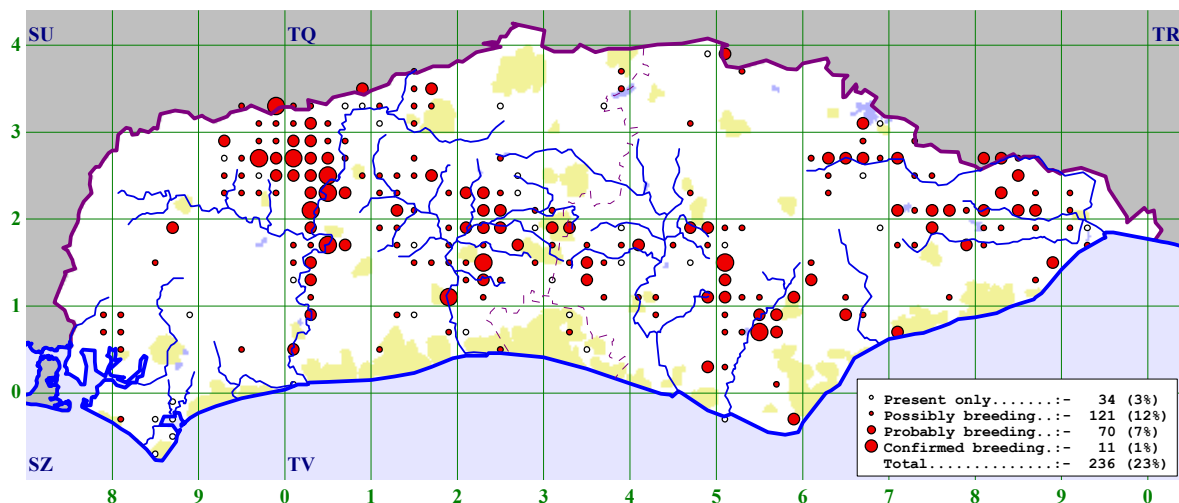
and 3 a.m., indicating that these are unpaired individuals. A sample of tetrads will be priorities for nocturnal visits but these visits will be useful in any occupied tetrad. Nocturnal visits **will not** be required in tetrads found to be unoccupied from daytime surveys.

All casual observations of singing nightingales in 2012 should be reported using BirdTrack. Each record should include the time of day, a six-figure grid reference and, where possible, an indication of habitat type.

**What will be happening in Sussex?** Despite a large recent decline in the Sussex population of nightingales (see maps below), the county still has a significant proportion of the national nightingale population and will make an important contribution to this national survey. There are 350 tetrads selected for surveys, with 200 of these being priorities for the nocturnal surveys. The Sussex Ornithological Society plans to use all of the data collected through this survey to obtain an up-to-date population estimate for nightingales within Sussex, as well as to inform conservation measures for this species within the county.



Nightingale distribution in Sussex during 1988-92



Provisional nightingale distribution in Sussex during 2008-11

**Interested?** Please contact Helen Crabtree ([hcrabtree@gmail.com](mailto:hcrabtree@gmail.com) or 01444 441687) for further information or to be allocated a tetrad in Sussex to survey for nightingales in 2012. Please also consider joining the Sussex BTO email group to correspond with other survey participants in Sussex: visit <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/SussexBTO>.