

SOS Survey Strategy

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Background

The SOS continues to have an excellent track record in supporting national bird surveys and following its own programme of surveys. Recently completed ones are in Table 1 below. The SOS organises the annual Sussex Winter Bird Survey, which is co-ordinated by Christine George (sussex.wbs@gmail.com) and supports ongoing annual surveys such the Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Surveys (WHBBS) and South Downs Farmland Bird Surveys. The information below does not cover these or the regular BTO surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) and the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) – see the SOS and BTO websites for further details or contact the Sussex BTO representative Dr Helen Crabtree (hcrabtree@gmail.com) on BBS and WeBS inland sites and Dave Boddington (davebodds@yahoo.co.uk) for coastal and estuary sites. Helen is also the contact for the South Downs Farmland Bird Survey and other BTO surveys including Woodcock and heronries. Alan Perry (aledgehill@outlook.com) leads on the WHBBS.

Table 1. Recent surveys completed by SOS/BTO volunteers. Note all species are colour coded in the tables according to their national red list status – red, amber and green.

Year	Species/group	Narrative
2020	Honey-buzzard	SOS survey completed in 2021
	Marsh Tit	As above
2021	Chiddingfold Forest	Joint with Surrey Bird Club. Started 2021, completed 2022. Turtle Dove & Nightingale
	Turtle Dove	RSPB survey
	National seabird census	Urban gull survey completed in 2022
	Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows	National BTO/RSPB survey of LWG waders – Lapwing, Redshank and Snipe. Completed 2022.
2022	Nightingale	SOS survey completed
2023	Nightjar	SOS survey completed
2023	Woodcock	National BTO survey completed

Survey Strategy

In October 2023 a subgroup of the SOS Scientific Committee met to update the SOS surveys strategy. This group consisted of Pete Hughes (Surveys & Projects Officer), Ken Smith and Mark Mallalieu. We present here a proposed programme of surveys up to 2027, the presumed start of the next BTO Atlas survey period (Table 2). This list forms a framework but it will be brought to the Scientific Committee annually for consideration and to ensure it fits in with national surveys. We will also consider whether any species should be added or removed from the list, for example a species that had declined to the extent that it dropped off the BTO BBS trends would be a strong candidate for addition. The species proposed in Table 2 are those which we believe are suitable for surveys using SOS volunteers. Some

additional notes on the proposed groups and species are included below the table. It is suggested that species surveys are repeated on a roughly ten-year cycle.

Table 2. *Proposed SOS surveys up to the next BTO atlas period, plus BTO single species or species group surveys.*

Year	Species	Narrative
2023/24 & 2024/25	Wintering gulls	BTO national survey (WinGS). The primary aim is to obtain new population estimates for the principal gull species that winter in the UK and assess how populations have changed since the last survey in 2003/04–2005/06.
2024	Corn Bunting	SOS surveys 93/94, 2014. Will use a sampling survey methodology based on the 2014 survey.
2025	Tree Pipit	Partly covered in 2017. Clear declines at heathland sites, but some work based on records needed to devise sampling strategy for non-heathland sites.
2025	House Martin	Last BTO survey 2015. Late season. Will use a sampling survey methodology based on the 2015 survey. Will also consider expanding this into a popular survey of key species nesting on houses (e.g. House Sparrow, Starling, Swift).
2026	Rook	Some coverage by BBS, but separate survey to count rookeries should be attractive option for membership. An early season (March/early April) survey.
2027	Woodlark	Last survey SOS 2017. Mainly heathland sites but need try to pick-up breeding pairs in clearfells, farmlands and vineyards. Green-listed, but not well covered by BBS and repeat survey of value.
2027	Stonechat	Last survey SOS 2016. Mainly heathland sites but need to pick-up breeding pairs in downland gorse, river valleys and levels, vegetated beach shingle and golf links. Green-listed, but not well covered by BBS and repeat survey of value.
2027 (or 2026)	Dartford Warbler	Last full survey SOS 2017. Heathland sites. Could be moved to 2026 as later in season than Rook survey.

We assume that BTO will be organising the next national atlas from the 2028 breeding season. The national atlases are such a key part of the BTO survey programme and profile that it seems very likely that this will go ahead although the exact form and methods are likely to evolve from previous incarnations. We assume SOS will aim to do a repeat tetrad atlas survey of the whole county but this will need to be reviewed once the national BTO methods are clear. The SOS should pause most other single species survey work during the next Atlas, but should consider a task force of interested SOS members to increase the recording of certain species that are hard to detect and/or are most easily detected outside the main survey periods, such as Goshawk, Long-eared Owl and Hawfinch.

It remains SOS policy to support national surveys (principally those of the BTO). For example, the BTO will be running a Winter Gull Survey over the two winters (2023-24 and 2024-25). It is also intended that SOS continue to look at national surveys and consider whether anything is to be gained by increasing coverage in Sussex (especially when the national survey involves some sort of sampling). Given that BTO surveys are often launched with very short notice, the SOS survey programme needs to be flexible to be able to respond to national priorities and to avoid overloading the volunteer surveyors.

Alongside all the above survey plans, certain species are the focus of particular effort by small study groups and some or all of these groups are likely to continue their work, in particular on Stone-curlew, Honey-buzzard and Hawfinch. In addition, a group may be formed to survey breeding Long-eared Owls in 2024. Also, the SOS will consider a task force approach during the next BTO Atlas to improve detection of some species.

Issues and species meriting further investigation

With the increasing use of Sound Apps such as Merlin, it might be possible to survey species such as Spotted Flycatcher that hitherto we have considered impracticable for single species surveys.

It may be possible to use the SOS database to monitor trends and estimate population size for a few species thus reducing the priority they might otherwise merit for single species surveys.

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