

# Bird Atlas 2007-2011

## Mapping Britain and Ireland's birds

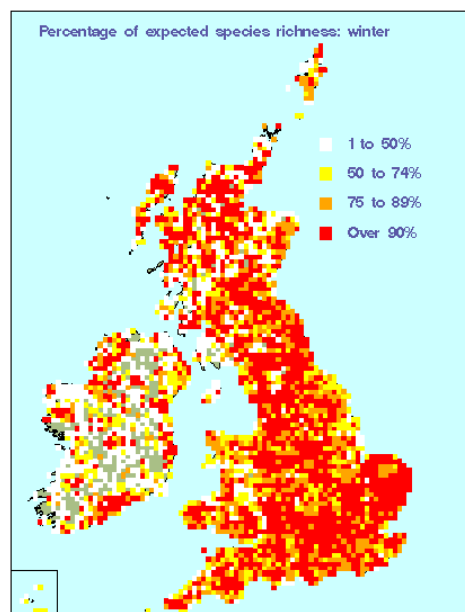


### Ireland Update March 2008



Thanks to your enormous support, the Bird Atlas 2007-11 is off to a flying start following the first winter of survey work. The number of dedicated volunteers helping to map Ireland's birds has just reached the **1,000** mark for the first time and an incredible **95,000** bird records have been submitted to the Atlas website, [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net) in Ireland to date – that's fantastic progress!

Following a month's rest from survey work in March, it's almost time to get Atlasing again with the upcoming breeding season starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> April. Before this, it is really important that you get the winter season's data in to us by the 15<sup>th</sup> April - please submit your Roving Records and Timed Tetrad Visits (TTV's) counts online or pop them in the post by this date. The Species Richness Map (opposite) shows where survey effort has been concentrated so far. We have taken on a big challenge and *your help is crucial* to ensure its success. Your efforts this winter have been invaluable in achieving this level of coverage, but with only 14% of the country covered for TTV's this winter we will need to maintain this level of effort and continue to recruit new volunteers. I will be continuing to travel throughout the country giving talks to update you on the progress and running workshops to demonstrate the methods involved on the ground - I hope to see you at one of the events. I also look forward to assigning you some new tetrads as you finish your quota and answering any new queries you may come up with.



The distribution of Wren in 10km squares based on online submissions by mid-January. The gaps suggest lack of coverage rather than absence of Wrens. Photo: Wren by David Kjaer ([rspb-images.com](http://rspb-images.com))

The website has proved an amazing resource, allowing Timed Tetrad Visit counts and Roving Records to be entered online and enabling you to view the list of species recorded by yourself and others in the tetrads and 10km squares in which you are working. Since Christmas there have been major upgrades to the website, providing much easier and quicker access. Sample species maps for 12 species that are good indicators of coverage in a range of habitats show us how the big picture is building. The regional species richness maps (by county) are particularly useful for highlighting 10km squares that need more survey effort.

The distribution map for Wren looks impressive already, but it will take a lot of time and great effort to fill in the gaps over the next few years.

The results of this Atlas will play a major part in setting the priorities for bird conservation in Ireland for the next two decades. With so many changes taking place across the country, such as our changing climate, increased development pressure and evolving agricultural sector, it is essential that we monitor how our birds are faring amidst an ever-changing Ireland. This is why the Atlas is so important and why we need your help to put the dots on the maps to answer these questions. So, let's do our bit on the 1<sup>st</sup> April - and why not forward this newsletter to your family and friend to get them involved too.

### Breeding Season Fieldwork Starts 1<sup>st</sup> April - Are You Ready?

After a month's rest from Atlasing in March, I'm sure you will be raring to get started on the breeding season fieldwork which starts on the 1<sup>st</sup> April and runs to the end of July. For those of you doing Timed Tetrad Visits there are two counting periods: April-May for the first visit and June-July for the second visit. This should mean that at least one visit should be undertaken once the bulk of summer visitors have arrived. For those of you submitting Roving Records, your bird records can be gathered at any time in the breeding season and we are keen to build up breeding evidence from any birdwatching trips or observations around the garden. Remember, for Roving Records we are looking for a **species list** for each 10 km square, so there is no need to keep recording the same species on different dates for the same 10km square.

### Recording Breeding Evidence

The Timed Tetrad Visits and Roving Records forms for both winter and breeding season have a column for breeding evidence. **You can also use this column on the Roving Records form to record any birds flying over (F).**

During April - July, one of the primary aims of the Atlas fieldwork, particularly Roving Records, will be to gather evidence of breeding for species in each 10km square. The standard codes we use are printed on the Roving Records form, Timed Tetrad Visit instructions and are available online at [http://www.bto.org.birdatlas/taking\\_part/bevidence.htm](http://www.bto.org.birdatlas/taking_part/bevidence.htm). In addition we have handy cards with the codes printed on them- to get one, simply contact the Atlas Coordinator.

There are three levels of breeding evidence: **Possible**, **Probable** and **Confirmed**. Each level has a number of categories that are indicators of breeding evidence; many are easy to record during day-to-day birdwatching and observation. A few codes warrant further exploration:

**T** (Permanent Territory) should be used for territorial behaviour, such as song, observed on at least two days, a week or more apart, at the same site.

**D** (Courtship and Display) is to be used for those species that display during the breeding season; for example, Great Crested Grebes, seabirds, some species of wader, Woodpigeons. Song flights should be recorded as **S** (singing male present)

Special care should be taken with the code **DD** (Distraction Display/ feigning injury), this is most likely to be seen from waders pretending to have a broken wing to distract your attention from their eggs or chicks, e.g. Ringed Plover.

The code **FL** (Fledged Young) refers to young (nidicolous species, e.g. Blackbird, Robin) or downy young (nidifugous species, e.g. Lapwing, Mallard). Records of independent juveniles should not be used because young birds often move a long way from their natal area, so sightings of juveniles that are not dependent on their parents do not necessarily prove breeding in that tetrad.

There are three non-breeding codes that have been introduced for this Atlas project:

**F** (Flying Over) is to be used on Roving Records forms during winter and the breeding season to indicate birds simply flying over a tetrad or 10km square and not using the habitat. A hovering Kestrel or a party of Swifts screaming around buildings should not be given the F code, as they are not just passing through.

**M** is for a species seen in the breeding season but suspected to be still on migration. A good example would be a Ring Ouzel on the coast in April; it is not suitable breeding habitat and is clearly a migrant.

**U** is for a species that is suspected to be a summering non-breeder; waterfowl are most likely to fall into this category. An example might be a Wigeon summering on a lake.



**Possible breeding**  
Code **S**: Singing male present in the breeding season in suitable breeding habitat.



**Probable breeding**  
Code **V**: Visiting probable nest site.



**Confirmed breeding**  
Code **FL**: Recently Fledged or downy young. Evidence of dependency on adults is important.

John Harding

## Making Every Record Count

We are in the fortunate position for the Atlas in being able to utilise records from other BirdWatch Ireland-led projects, which will help with the distribution maps. Records from the Countryside Bird Survey, Garden Bird Survey and BWI/BTO/RSPB Bird Track will all be treated as 'top up' Roving Records. In addition, we can add in records from the BTO Ringing Scheme and the Nest Records Scheme; these two schemes have the added bonus of providing information on breeding success. It's also important to enter breeding evidence on BirdTrack, so that any extra information added here can feed through to the Atlas. It's important for Bird Track that you take a few minutes to define your sites, so that we can be sure that your records relate to a specific 1-km, tetrad or 10km square. We also hope to be able to use records from the Irish Wetland Bird Survey. Your support for all these surveys throughout the Atlas period will be very valuable and is much appreciated.

## Nocturnal Visits

During the breeding season we encourage you to make at least one evening visit to your 10km square or tetrad to listen out for owls, roding Woodcock or drumming Snipe. Evenings can also be a good time to listen for Water Rail, Corncrake, Grasshopper Warbler and Nightjar, if suitable habitat exists in your area. These species could be missed during the daytime when Timed Tetrad Visits or Roving visits are made. This extra visit will help make the distribution maps as complete as possible.



*Long-eared Owl by Peter Cairns (rspbimages.com)*

## Frequency of Timed Tetrad Visits

Each tetrad you have chosen for a TTV requires a pair of visits in the winter season and a pair of visits in the breeding season. It is desirable that pairs of visits are completed in the same season; however, if this is not possible, TTV visits which are split across seasons will be accepted. It is also important to note that tetrads should not be counted in all four years. You can also add extra information for your tetrad, to increase your species list, by submitting Roving Records.

## Completed Your Tetrads or Roving?

With the improving weather and longer days approaching it may well be the case that you find yourself getting through your TTV's more quickly than you expected. Why not take on a few more tetrads for survey work this breeding season? If you feel you have covered a 10km square well for the Roving Records and are unlikely to turn up new species, take a look at the regional results on the online system and choose another 10km square where there has been little coverage (there is no shortage of these). You may well find yourself discovering new areas, sights, and species in places you would never have imagined.

## Talks & Workshops

In the past year I have greatly enjoyed travelling around the country meeting with many of you on the way. From Donegal to Cork and Belfast to Wexford the stories I am hearing back are all very similar - "once I got out there I realised the methods involved are really simple and it has been really enjoyable to make my birdwatching count". I look forward to meeting many of you again this summer and hearing how you got on this breeding season. The next big event is the All Ireland Conference on Bird Conservation Friday 4<sup>th</sup> - Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April in Newtownmountkennedy Co. Wicklow (contact Katie Jennings for more information or a booking form [kjennings@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:kjennings@birdwatchireland.ie) or phone: 01 2819878). I will have an Atlas stall at the conference for the duration of the weekend and will be running a workshop on the Sunday, so make sure you pop by with your Atlas questions or sign up to the Atlas workshop. Dates and venues for all my other talks and workshops throughout the year will be posted on the BirdWatch Ireland website [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie) - just go to the 'Events Section' or the back pages of *Wings* magazine.

## Tetrad Population Estimates

As part of the Bird Atlas we would like to develop population estimates for breeding and wintering species, as these are extremely important for conservation agencies.

Following your TTV we have asked you to (optionally) enter a population estimate for the tetrad for each species you encountered. You can do this for just a few of the species you recorded or for all if you wish. Based on your two visits, and the habitats covered, it is possible to come up with a broad estimate of the individuals for the whole tetrad. This is not an exact science and will be easier for some species than others. Just enter those species that you are happy to provide an estimate for. For some tetrads you may have extra local knowledge, and will know that a species is present in a tetrad even though you missed it on your two visits. You can enter a Tetrad Population Estimate (TPE) for a species that you did not encounter on your two TTV's providing:-

- 1) The knowledge is based on observations of the species during the Atlas fieldwork period, i.e., 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007 - 31 July 2011.
- 2) The observations were made in the relevant season (winter period is Nov-Feb and breeding season period is Apr-Jul inclusive) with the exception of point 3.
- 3) For a handful of early/late nesting species breeding season TPE's can be based on observations outside the period of Apr-Jul. These species include Crossbill and Long-eared Owl.



Exciting Early Findings

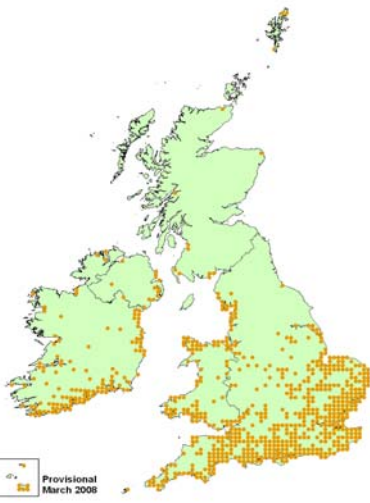
The submission of records online allows us very quickly to build a picture of the distribution of birds. However, these maps do not show the complete picture - it will take four years to do that! The orange dots on the maps below are based entirely on records submitted to the website as Roving Records and Timed Tetrad Counts and show presence in a 10km square. Records are not yet validated and we still need thousands of TTV's to get more counts of these species.

Little Egret

In the last Winter Atlas (1981-84) just one Little Egret was recorded in the whole of Britain and Ireland. Over 25 years later and the winter distribution is very different with the species spreading across the south of England, Wales and Ireland. In Ireland the main concentrations have been recorded along the south and east coast, but birds have also been recorded in the midlands and even as far north as Donegal, so if you encounter this white heron on your travels make sure you record it for the Atlas.



Little Egret by Jamie Durrant



Provisional data based on online submissions by mid March.

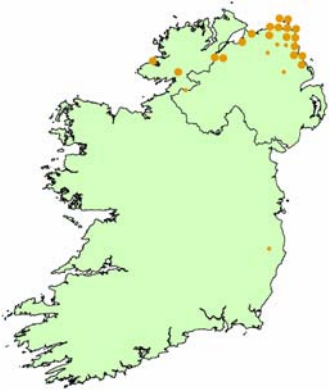
Buzzard

The maps below clearly track the expansion of the Buzzard. During the '70's and '80's the species started to re-colonise Northern Ireland from the remaining fragile population which was confined to the North Antrim coastline. In the past 20 years this expansion has continued down the east coast particularly into Louth, Meath, Dublin and Wicklow and as far as Waterford and Cork. The spread has also started into the midland counties and across to the west with Buzzard recorded in Offaly, Laois and Galway. The Atlas is essential in mapping species like the Buzzard to monitor their changing distribution and range, and your help is essential if we are to get the country covered - so please keep taking notes and getting those valuable records in to us.

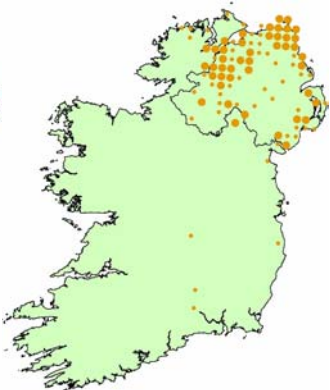


Buzzard by Danny Green (rspb-images.com)

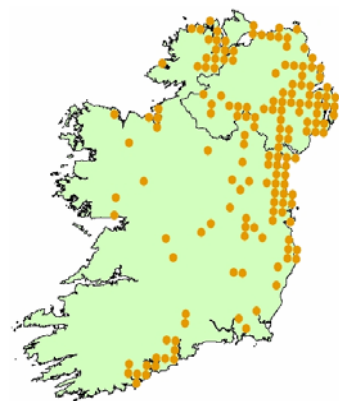
Breeding 1968 - 1972



Breeding 1988-1991



Winter 2007-2011



Provisional data based on online submissions by mid March.

Need More Forms

If you need additional Roving Records forms, TTV Breeding forms or Breeding Evidence Cards, please just get in touch and I will post them out to you. However, in attempt to cut down on postage costs Roving forms, Instructions and Health and Safety Guidelines can be downloaded from [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net), and evidence codes can also be viewed on the website.

***Keen Atlaser Pat Smiddy shares some of his experiences from the first winter of Atlas survey work:***



The present *Bird Atlas* (2007-11) is different to all its predecessors in that winter and breeding distribution (and density) will be plotted all at once. I looked forward to the first winter season (2007/08) with trepidation and excitement. Over the last 20 years it has become increasingly obvious that certain bird species are becoming commoner, while others are becoming scarcer. What would the Atlas reveal about such species? Would new species be found? Would it reveal even more subtle changes brought about by habitat change, milder winters, warmer and wetter summers, changes in agriculture and woodland planting than was obvious during casual day-to-day observations?

Photo: Sinead Cummins

My survey areas in 2007/08 involved part of east Cork and west Waterford including the wetlands and woods around the River Blackwater, and yes, there was change. The Little Egret is now widespread and the Buzzard can be found in most areas where there is woodland. Both of these species would have been extraordinary rarities to fieldworkers in this area working on the *Breeding Atlas* in 1968-72. The Brent Goose is found all along the coast, another change that has come about over the last 20 years, but the Bewick's Swan is gone. The surprising influx of Cattle Egrets was reflected in the area also. Will this be the next colonist? Sadly, the Barn Owl appears to have gone, but the Long-eared Owl may be benefiting from increased woodland planting.

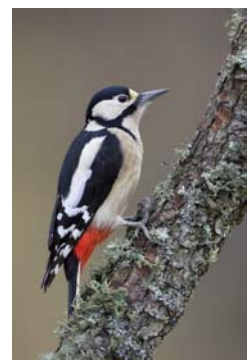
What has been happening to the small passerine species? Stonechats, which suffer badly in cold winters, were just about everywhere. Blackcaps were found mainly in urban gardens, but that other wintering warbler, the Chiffchaff, was very scarce, almost rare. Finches appeared to be doing well, but there was a great dearth of Greenfinches, apart from the very occasional flock. Redpolls were also scarce, but Siskins were very common in early winter and much scarcer later. The weather never got cold enough to bring many Bramblings, and I found them in only one square. Yellowhammers could still be found in mixed farmland (a changing habitat), and Skylarks could be relied upon to be present where stubbles were left untouched over winter. Meadow Pipits were usually present in intensive grassland.

I have no doubt that other observers will have stories of change as well. It is only when all these small jig saw pieces are put together over the next few years (winter and summer) that a composite picture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century status and distribution of our bird populations will emerge. The results may well shape the direction of conservation efforts for the next 25 years. This is why it is so important for as many people as possible to become involved in the project. Records can be submitted by anyone, even by those who never leave their gardens, just as well as by active fieldworkers who go into remote places. For my own part, as I write this article I can hear Chaffinch, House Sparrow, Great Tit, Wren, Robin and Dunnock in song outside. I look forward to 1<sup>st</sup> April so that I can get out and continue where I left off after the winter season. I recommend the survey to everyone with even a passing interest in Irish birds.

***You never know what you would encounter while out Atlasing! Declan Murphy reports on his interesting encounter with a Wicklow woodpecker.***



Although Atlas work can often appear quite taxing to those starting off, it can often have surprising results for your local 'patch'. Many of us birdwatchers travel to locations rich in birdlife to do our birdwatching. Places such as estuaries, lakes and coastlines can all provide for an exciting day out. With the exception of my garden I have a tendency to neglect my immediate neighbourhood for those more exciting areas mentioned.



Mark Hamblin (rspb-images)

However the Atlas changed all that! This year I had to spend two mornings exploring my neighbourhood counting every Robin, House Sparrow and Starling and also estimating their population – exciting stuff! Nevertheless I diligently went out and started counting, one sparrow, two, a Starling...Blackbird.....oh! Sparrowhawk – that's new for here and displaying as well, didn't think they bred here! A large flock of Fieldfares fly over and land nearby, the best views I've had this winter. Before I know it I'm actually getting through a nice list of species for my 'boring' area and quite pleased with myself I notice I'm near the end of my TTV. Thinking that I've got most species I come across a group of Jays in a dense oakwood and while counting them I suddenly hear a loud 'PIK' It takes a second to register the call when it calls again 'PIC...PIC..' My mind goes into overdrive – Great Spotted Woodpecker!!!! (Accurate count of Jays now reduced to an estimate – 'more than one!') I begin to panic as I fail to locate the bird despite its incessant calling and then I see it, a male making its way up a large oak. What a bird, what a find and on my doorstep, if it wasn't for the Atlas I wouldn't even have been there – I'd have been scanning an estuary looking for rarities. No matter how well you think you know your own back yard the Atlas makes you really get to grips with it, and it certainly paid dividends for me! *Declan Murphy.*

*Three dedicated BirdWatch Ireland Field Staff, Robert Wheeldon, Alison Phillip and Jamie Durrant have been working through all weather on the Atlas across the remotest parts of the North West this winter. Their hard work is evident from the coverage map on page 1. The Atlas trio will be resurveying the North West for the breeding season. Here are some of their highlights from the first winter's fieldwork:*



From left Robert Wheeldon, Alison Phillip & Jamie Durrant

Looking back at the tetrads I've visited, it's hard to pick out the best one as there's so many to choose from. I think one would have to be on the north Sligo coast in December, when a male Hen Harrier flew past me while hunting. It's also where I saw my first Long-tailed Duck of the project. I was on top of the world for the rest of the day. A more calming experience was on Lough Arrow in Leitrim. It was a misty day, walking through some beautiful beech woodland on the shoreline when a raft of 18 Goldeneye appeared from the mist, displaying. It was very atmospheric. *Rob Wheeldon*

Any sighting of a bird of prey is special for me. Whilst it impossible not be awed by these powerful and striking birds, many people find them frustrating. Identification can be a challenge when chances to practice are few and far between and the encounters typically so brief and fleeting, but for me this is part of the magic. An encounter with something as commonplace as a Sparrowhawk is memorable just because you never know when you'll see one again! *Jamie Durrant*

Driving along, on the way to do some tetrads, I was staring out the back window daydreaming. Little birds with lots of white flashes suddenly catch my eye as we drive past at 80kmph. "Did anyone else see those birds?" Reverse and 2 minutes later there are 11 Snow Buntings lined up along the top of somebody's house like House Sparrows would be normally! Great way to start the day with a new bird for our roving record list! *Alison Phillip*

## Which Method?

There are two methods involved in the Bird Atlas, **Roving Records** and **Timed Tetrad Visits (TTV's)**. It is important to note that both methods are **equally** valuable to the work we are undertaking. Below is a brief outline of the methods so you can decide which would be best for you. If you decide to take on some tetrads for a TTV it is hoped that you would also submit Roving Records.

**Roving Records** aim to build up as complete as possible species list for every 10km square in the country. You can submit bird records from 'Your Area' which can be anything from your back garden to your local birdwatching patch or where you walk the dog. You are only asked to record the species that you are confident of identifying. This method also allows you to record unusual or rare species you see whilst travelling around. You can submit records from any tetrad in any 10km square. Submitting records this way means you have time to ensure correct identification, or you can even return another day armed with telescope and field guide! By undertaking this method you are helping us to build up a complete species list for every 10km square in the country. Though less involved than TTV's, Roving Records are no less important as they often pick up species that may otherwise be missed by TTV's. You do not need to be assigned a tetrad for this method.

**TTV's** are aimed at experienced birdwatchers as these are the more scientifically rigorous surveys, requiring good identification skills (including bird songs & calls). The time limitation on the duration of your visit means that you must be able to identify quickly and accurately all the species in that tetrad. Questions to ask yourself here would be could I identify the difference between a Chiffchaff and a Willow Warbler or a Song Thrush and a Mistle Thrush. If the answers to these questions are "No" then Roving would be a better method to follow.

## How to Sign Up

For the **Roving Records** you simply need to contact the Atlas Coordinator (contact details on page 7) to have a Roving Pack sent out to you in the post, or alternatively you can view the instructions online and download the forms from [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net). You do not need to be assigned a tetrad or 10km square for Roving Records.

For the **TTV's** you need to request the tetrads you want to take on for survey work. The simplest way to do this is through the online system by logging on to the [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net). Once you have registered and logged in you will come to the "Data Home Page" from here go to "Request TTV" which will bring up a map of Ireland and Britain. Simply follow the steps and I will then assign these tetrads to you. Please remember we are aiming to cover 8 tetrads in each 10km square and it is much more valuable to cover two 10km squares with the minimum coverage of 8 tetrads than covering 16 tetrads in one 10km square. Alternatively, you can simply give me a call or write to me with the details of the squares you would like to cover.

## Funding

In Ireland, funding for the organisation and undertaking Atlas fieldwork is being provided by The National Parks & Wildlife Service, The Environmental Protection Agency, The Heritage Council and The Environment & Heritage Service - Northern Ireland.



## Species Sponsorship

Additional funds are still required to for the operation of the Atlas in Ireland and one of the ways in which we are raising the required funds is through the Species Sponsorship Scheme. Our aim is to encourage a wide base of support from companies, organisations and individuals, in line with our desire to involve the whole of the birding and conservation community in this powerful project.

If you know of an organisation or company that might be interested in sponsoring a species please contact Katie Jennings on 01 2819878 or e-mail [kjennings@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:kjennings@birdwatchireland.ie) for additional information.

Our thanks go to CJ Wildbird Foods who has sponsored the Coal Tit and an individual donor who has sponsored the Corncrake.

Support of Bird Atlas 2007-11 at this level will secure sole sponsorship of the chosen species and ensure acknowledgment of the sponsors' association with the project on the bird's pages in the published Atlas.



*Coal Tit by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)*

Frequently Asked Questions	
<b>Q. Does the same tetrad need to be covered for a Timed Tetrad Visits in all four years?</b>	<b>A.</b> No, a single tetrad requires just two visits in the winter and two visits in the breeding season. Additional Roving Records can be made at any time in the four years of Atlas work.
<b>Q. Do the pairs of visits need to be in the same season?</b>	<b>A.</b> It is highly desirable that the two winter visits are in the same winter, and the two breeding visits are in the same breeding season. It doesn't matter if the breeding visits come before the winter visits or vice versa. We will accept visits in different winters/ breeding seasons. If you have missed a late winter visit just do it next winter.
<b>Q. For Roving Records do I need to record a species in a 10km square every time I see it?</b>	<b>A.</b> No, you only need to record a species once during the winter season and once during the breeding season for each 10km square.
<b>Q. What route should I take through a tetrad?</b>	<b>A.</b> Your route should take you through all the major habitat types in the square. Don't be tempted to ignore open farmland or urban areas - all are equally interesting when it comes to putting the distribution maps together. You can vary your route between visits if you wish
<b>Q. Can I record counts for Roving Records</b>	<b>A.</b> From the 1 <sup>st</sup> January 2008 you can enter counts for Roving Records on the website. The downloadable PDF has been revised to accommodate this. Unfortunately, there are no spaces for counts on paper Roving Records forms which were distributed in 2007. Counts are most useful for flocking species such as Lapwing, Golden Plover, Twite and Fieldfare.

Contact the Irish Atlas Coordinator & post forms to:  
Brian Caffrey, BirdWatch Ireland, Midlands Office, Crank House, Banagher, Co. Offaly  
Tel: 05791 51676  
E-Mail: [bcaffrey@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:bcaffrey@birdwatchireland.ie)