

SOS Survey Strategy

Updated: January 2025

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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 coordinated 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 |
| 2024 | Corn Bunting | SOS 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. The strategy was further updated in January 2025 and below is an updated proposed programme of surveys up to 2027, the start of the next BTO Atlas survey period (Table 2). This list forms a framework but is brought to the Scientific Committee annually for consideration and to ensure it continues to fit 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 in 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. |
| 2025 | Heathland Birds Survey | BTO national survey focusing in Sussex on the West Sussex commons and the Ashdown Forest but there will be other sites to cover including farmland sites to survey for breeding woodlark and will include other heathland assemblage species. |
| 2025 | Tree Pipit | Partly covered in 2025 heathland survey and previously partly covered in a 2017 survey. Some work based on records might be needed to devise sampling strategy for non-heathland sites. |
| 2026 | 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). |
| 2027 | Rook | Some coverage by BBS, but separate survey to count rookeries should be attractive option for membership. An early season (March/early April) survey. |

The BTO will be organising the next national atlas from the 2028 breeding season. 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. 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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