

The Local Patch Initiative

A standardised methodology and case study for recording a specific area of interest

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Introduction

Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) has always accepted records from members of the public who are often non-specialists, but have a particular interest in wildlife. Many of our records come from such people who are often dedicated wildlife recorders, whose efforts are much appreciated by BRERC.

In an effort to stimulate wildlife recording, some years ago BRERC set up several 'recording groups' with the aim of encouraging the recording and study of several specific groups of species. These groups still run today, and include the Avon Butterfly Project (ABP) and the Avon Reptile and Amphibian Group (ARAG).

These groups and their members have made a positive contribution to wildlife recording in the Bristol Region in the time since they were set up. However, recently there has been more emphasis on recording wildlife in the wider sense, not just the specific groups of species that are covered by the BRERC recording groups. BRERC has always encouraged submission of any wildlife records, from Daisies to Jackdaws and Oak trees to Otters. It doesn't matter if it is common or rare, if BRERC doesn't have the data then we cannot tell what is present or absent in any given area, and hence cannot advise local government, consultants, Avon Wildlife Trust or local recorders, amongst others.

However, members of the BRERC groups, whilst very interested in specific species, do not always have the time or the motivation to record species outside of the groups remit. So the challenge BRERC faces is who to target and what approach to take to encourage the submission of wildlife records for ALL species in a particular area.

Method

This challenge was met by firstly considering which people would be interested in recording everything they saw, and why this would be the case. The conclusion was that people interested in wildlife would always be interested in the areas in the immediate vicinity of where they lived. They would have an intimate knowledge of these places, and a good idea of the wildlife they had seen in the past. They would know many if not all the legal rights of way, footpaths and bridleways, and would also hopefully be friendly with the local landowners and hence able to gain permission to access their land if required. Because of their association with the local area, they would also have the motivation to record all the species they saw.

These assumptions come from personal experience. Firstly, I have always marvelled at the wildlife to be seen in our local fields and on the local public rights of way. I have lived around this particular part of North Somerset and casually studied it every day for the past 24 years! As such, the area holds many memories for me and I am acutely aware of the area's diversity of wildlife. As such I am motivated to record anything I see, from the birds using the feeder in my garden to the plants growing alongside a local footpath.

I am also fortunate enough to have been friendly with some of the local landowners since my childhood. With permission, I know I am able to wander (responsibly) around the fields and to study the hedgerows and other features.

In my time at the records centre I have had many conversations with people whose closest relation to wildlife is in the areas where they live. This can be their gardens, or slightly further afield. Whatever the case, these are the places these individuals are most likely to record wildlife with the minimum of prompting.

The proposed method is therefore to ask interested people to send in the wildlife records for their local area. The following document should act as a guide and instruct people as to the best way to go about this.

There are four basic steps to take:

1. Identifying a survey area
2. Gaining access permission where necessary
3. What and how to record
4. Submitting your records

These are covered in more detail below.

Identifying a Survey Area

This can be as vague or sharp a definition as you like. For the purposes of the case study I chose an area centred on some woodland, with fields around it mostly consisting of arable land or improved grassland. These woods are visible from my bedroom window and I have seen deer grazing on their edge in the past, so the question 'What else is in there?' frequently crosses my mind – hopefully an example of the kind of motivation mentioned earlier!

However it may be that you decide that you just wish to survey your garden or the verge of a local lane that you have always walked along. This is both perfectly acceptable and very valuable. At the other end of the scale, if you tend to walk long distances, there may be two or three routes you regularly take a Sunday afternoon stroll around. Anything you see on these walks would be valuable to us.

Once you have identified a survey area, BRERC can help you with a few aspects of recording there. If you commit to sending us your records, we can provide a species list for the area to show you what has been seen there before, and also a map with 100-meter grid squares on to enable you to easily find the grid reference for all your records.

Please do note that we cannot do this for HUGE areas! Producing one or two maps and a species list for an individual is a simple task that doesn't take more than about 45 minutes, but we cannot commit to producing these maps for areas of many square kilometres! As a rough guide I would suggest your survey area covers no more than about two square kilometres if you require the maps and information from BRERC.

Having said that, if you have special reasons (for example a plan that might get the local community involved in the recording) then please feel free to discuss the need for data for larger areas with us.

Gaining Access Permission Where Necessary

PLEASE READ!!!

We are aiming this report at members of the public who are interested in wildlife in their local areas and wish to record it. Many of you may well know some of the local landowners and assume that you would be more than welcome to walk around their land.

However, please do not access private land - whether you know the landowner or not – without first asking permission to do so, and clearly stating the reasons you wish to access the land. You may wonder why this is necessary, and here are some very good reasons:

- If the landowner finds you on their land without permission, they may not allow future survey teams onto their land. This can mean bodies such as Avon Wildlife Trust or us at BRERC do not survey important areas, which is ultimately to the detriment of wildlife and our knowledge of it.
- You can stimulate interest and awareness by informing the landowner what you wish to do.
- You can hopefully set their mind at ease with regards to what the data will be used for.
- The landowner may well request that you stay out of certain fields, or they may inform you that there will be a bull in a particular field at that time! They will usually request or expect that you do not take dogs with you.
- It is polite to ask for permission and the right and proper thing to do!

From years of experience, staff at BRERC are familiar with the types of questions landowners often ask when you ask for permission. It is of course important to only give honest answers to their questions. The points below should help allay any of their fears and answer any queries.

- Records submitted to BRERC are kept in a safe and secure environment and only ever released to responsible users of data. Such users may include local councils, Avon Wildlife Trust and environmental consultants.
- It is extremely unlikely that anything you (the recorder) find will have any effect on the way the landowner manages their land. They will still be able to do exactly the same things as they did before.
- You (the recorder) and/or BRERC are not seeking to change the way the land is managed or to prevent any future changes to it. All we wish to do is record the wildlife that is there at the present time.
- As stated above, landowners will usually expect that you do NOT take dogs with you onto their land.

What and How To Record

How much or how little you record is up to you. I know some of my colleagues here at BRERC would run after every interesting insect and look closely at every single plant, but if you just want to record the things that stand out and concentrate on enjoying the sunny weather then that's fine.

What IS important is to try and be representative – try not to exclude all the birds whilst looking at the plants, or look at the birds and plants and ignore the insects. If you can include a little bit of everything, it will enable us to start to build up a more comprehensive picture of wildlife in the Bristol region. Remember, even if you are recording a common species, it may never have actually been recorded in that specific place before!

Also, if you are not sure what the specific species is it may still be a useful record to us. For example, we have relatively few mammal records, so if you hear a shrew squeaking through the undergrowth, then you can note it down as Shrew sp. – whilst it may have been a common shrew, pygmy shrew or even a water shrew, just knowing that there are shrews of some kind present is useful to us.

Ideally we are looking for six figure grid references. We can accept four figure grid references but their value is more limited. As stated earlier, BRERC can provide you with maps with the six figure grid references shown on them to make the process a little easier.

You may question the need to note down records of bluebells (for example) for every six figure grid reference – everybody knows bluebells are really common and can be found in virtually every woodland and hedgerow in springtime.

However, bluebells are protected in the UK under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. They are also listed as a Species of Conservation Concern in the UK, and these two facts also make them a BRERC notable species.

This is important! Every notable species record on BRERC's database is exported to our GIS mapping system. For six figure records, this means that every notable species will be marked with a red star, and when BRERC does data enquiries for consultants, developers, local councils, Avon Wildlife Trust and many others, these records will be selected and the enquirer informed of their presence, and because (in this example) Bluebells are a legally protected species, consideration has to be given to them in any kind of disturbance or development.

If no one submits the bluebell record, then BRERC won't know this notable, protected species is present and enquirers cannot be informed of it's presence. That's why it is important for recorders to provide as many records at six-figure grid reference resolution as possible.

Submitting Your Records

Many of you will scribble notes down whilst out wandering around and will write them up once you get home ready to send to BRERC. This is of course a perfectly acceptable way to do things.

However, this is the age of computers, and if you feel comfortable with using them, BRERC has produced a spreadsheet where you can simply type your records in and then e-mail the spreadsheet back to BRERC once you have built up a good amount. I have used this spreadsheet myself and it is very simple and convenient – just a case of typing in a few bits of information for each record.

Because we have designed the spreadsheet to be compatible with our own systems, we can easily import the data onto our main database, so the records you record will be made available in a much shorter time if you use this method.

You can download the spreadsheet template from the BRERC website at www.brerc.org.uk, where it is available in several different formats to suit all major spreadsheet programs such as Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Works and Lotus 1-2-3.

The Case Study

1. Planning the survey and 2. Gaining Access Permission

The study area is mapped in **Figure 1**. It is centred on an area of woodland and surrounded by grassland or arable land. For this area of almost 0.75 square kilometres, BRERC holds 126 records on computer, 21 of which are notable (See the map in **Figure 1**).

BRERC also holds two formal survey reports of the woodland, carried out in 1977 and 1983. These reports describe the woodland in favourable ecological terms, with the 1977 report describing the woodland as 'very high quality'.

Having known this area well I know I could add many species to the lists held both on the BRERC database and in these reports, but all my sightings are anecdotal – for example, I cannot remember how many deer I saw on the edge of the woodland one day, I cannot remember what day or even year it was and at the time I didn't make any efforts to try and determine what species of deer they were. However, I know these deer were there and this encourages me to go and look for them and the myriad of other species I know I have seen in this area in the past.

My sightings of species need to be backed up with their abundance, their location and grid reference, and other details that make the record both usable and more useful. For this purpose I have produced a map of the area showing the six figure grid references for any one place (**Figure 2**) to aid my recording. These are the same sorts of maps we can provide to potential recorders.

The next step was to ask for permission from the local landowners. This was more complicated than expected! A total of three landowners needed to be consulted and asked for permission, although they all happily agreed to allow us onto their land to perform the survey. I agreed to provide them with a copy of what we found, and this is a good thing to do in general, as it promotes interest in the species present by the people who own the land.

3. Surveying

My survey of this area was mainly carried out over two days, Tuesday 11th May 2004 and Thursday 20th May 2004. The resulting species list is one that I have recorded by myself, using my own knowledge and not that of other specialists at BRERC.

Whilst I have a good rounded knowledge of natural history and have learnt to identify most of the commoner flora and fauna that one is likely to come across, I am not a specialist. Therefore my records of this area should have been obtainable by anyone with a general interest in wildlife recording and the wildlife around themselves.

It is worth noting here that BRERC surveyors always go out in pairs, for safety reasons amongst others. As a member of the public you carry out these surveys at your own risk, but we would recommend you survey in pairs, or at least take a mobile phone along in case you encounter some unforeseen situation!

I tested two different methods of survey over the two days. On the 11th May I simply noted a heading down for each place I lingered at, for example 'Top end of Woodland' and then wrote a list of species under that until I moved on into a new area. When I came to assign six figure grid references to the 72 records I had noted down, it was a fairly simple process to remember the exact location of every record, because the headings pinned them down pretty well. However, I did have to do this whilst the memory of the survey was fresh in my mind.

For the 20th May I took a different approach, printing a map of all the grid references in the area and then referring to the printed map when I wanted to note a species down. This is a more cumbersome approach out in the field, but is the most accurate and reliable, and because you are assigning grid references as you go along, you don't have to write your notes up right away. It also leads to a better recording coverage of the area to be surveyed; for this day despite covering a smaller area I recorded 77 records.

Other than these few points, there is not a lot to be said about the actual surveying – it's just a case of having a nice wander round at your own leisure and noting down what you see, which is actually a very pleasant experience!

4. Submitting the Records

I entered all my records into the BRERC Spreadsheet template, an example of which is seen in **figure 3** below.

I highlighted all the Grid references and included a note to indicate they have all been checked off against a BRERC map showing grid references. This makes the validation of the records a lot easier – if we can be confident the grid references are correct, one of the most time consuming aspects of validation is removed.

Once completed, it was then just a case of e-mailing the spreadsheet back to BRERC, and that's your role as a surveyor completed! Depending on the number of electronic records we receive, this data should be available on our main database within a month, and available to be used in data enquiries and all the other functions of BRERC.

Conclusions

A map of the species available on the BRERC database after the survey is shown in **Figure 4**. Comparing this to the 'before' map in **Figure 1**, the first obvious point is that whilst the coverage has increased, there are still lots of gaps! This is inevitable, but as time goes by it becomes easier to target the areas where there are gaps.

Less obvious, but a much more dramatic change, is the number of records for the area. I recorded a total of 171 records during the survey. Whereas before there were 126 records, there are now 297, a 115% increase! 21 of the original records were notable, whereas now 52 of the 297 records are notable.

In other words, by spending a couple days wandering around and noting what I saw, I have been able to more than double both the number of species records and the number of notable species records held for this area.

The project has been exciting for me from a personal point of view, co-operating and sharing my interests with the local landowners, carrying out the survey itself and recording species that in many cases had not ever been formally noted in that particular place before.

The increase in records for this area allows BRERC to be more informed as to the specific species and general character of the area. But as an interested individual, I have become more familiar and interested in the different habitats and species existing in my trial area, and on a personal level and in my own time I am encouraged to return to the places I have visited, and the gaps I have missed to record more species for submission for BRERC.

Records Before Survey **Figure 1**

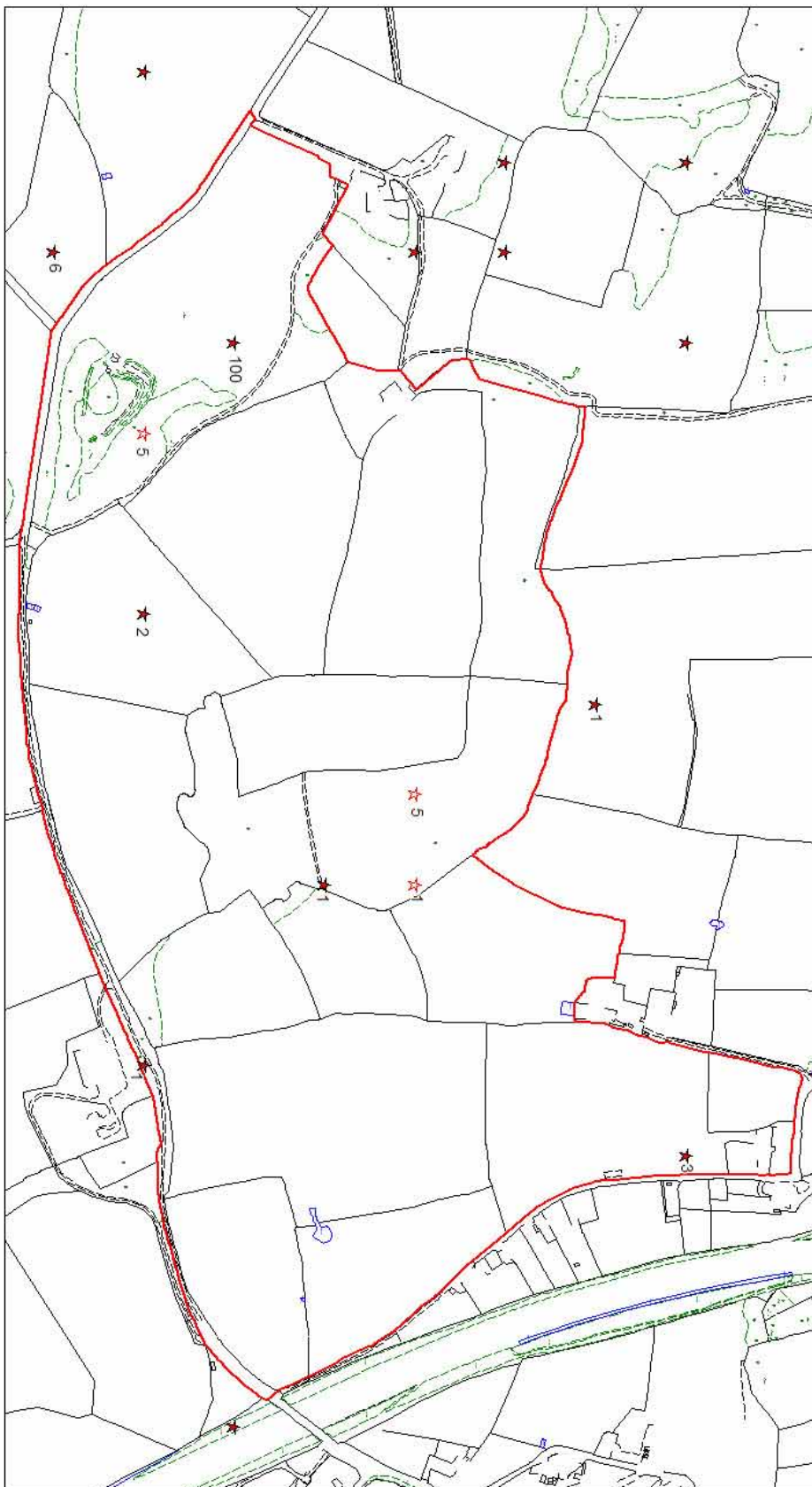
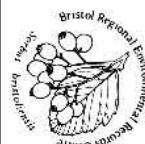
Numbers indicate records at one location

Compiled by BRERC on 4 June 2004



Scale 1:6330

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Six Figure Grid Refs for Survey Area Figure 2

As printed and used on Survey

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Scale 1:6787



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	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
	Latin Name	Common Name	Grid Reference	Location	Specific Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Vague Date	Recorder	Other Recorders	Abundance	Sex/Stage	Record Type
1											
2		Green Woodpecker	ST9999999	Fields at High Lane	10/05/2004		Mr. D. T. Marshall		1	Adult	field
3		Red Campion	ST9999999	Fields at High Lane	10/05/2004		Mr. D. T. Marshall		present	present	field
4											
5											
6											
7											

Figure 3

Total Records After Survey **Figure 4**

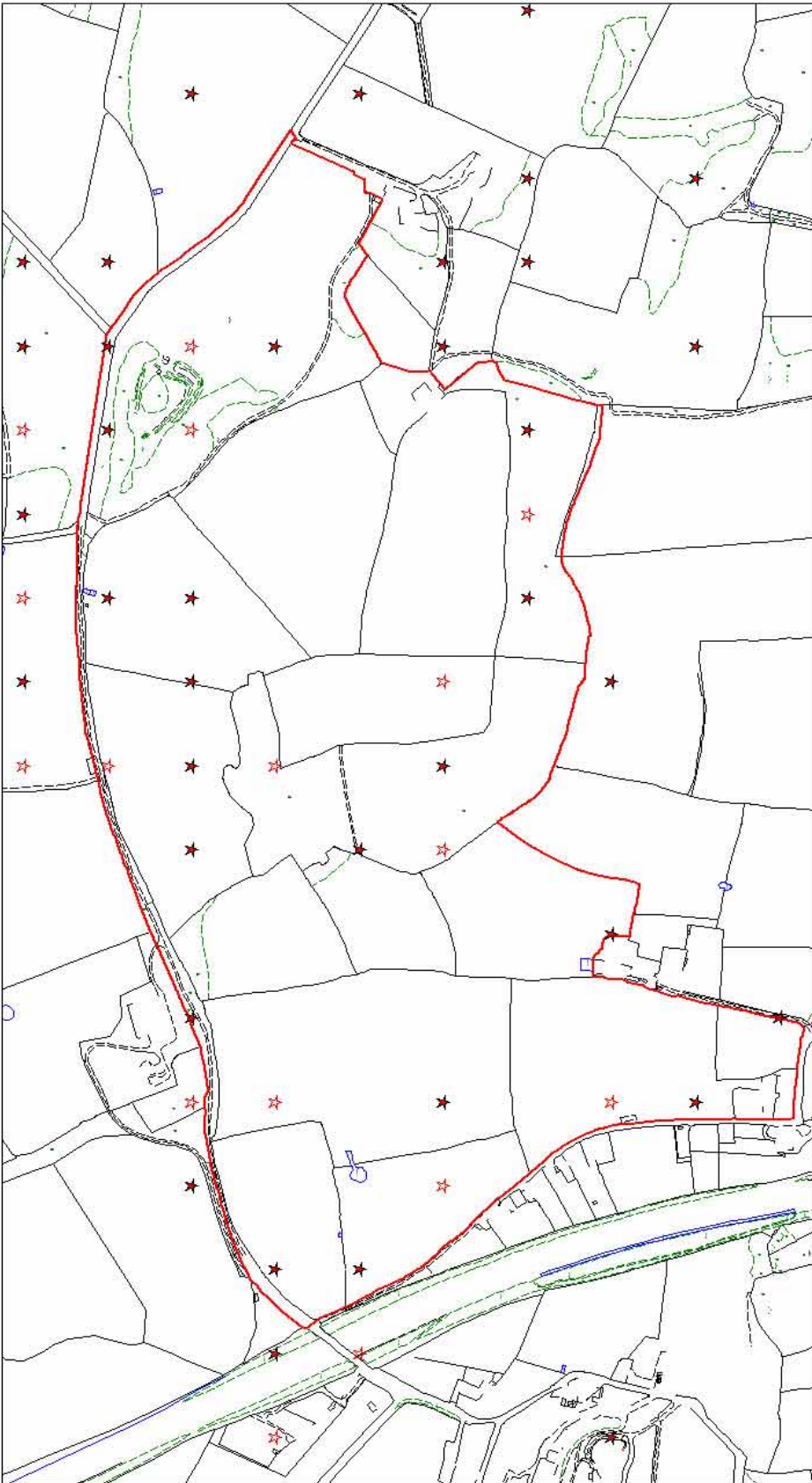
Records Before Survey + Records After Survey

Compiled by BRERC on 4 June 2004



Scale 1:6787

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