

The *BB/BTO* Best Local Bird Atlas 2007–17

Abstract *British Birds* and the British Trust for Ornithology announce the winner of the award for Best Local Bird Atlas 2007–17. All local atlases and avifaunas based on fieldwork carried out within the past decade were eligible for consideration for this award.

In parallel with the judging of the Best Bird Book of the Year (see *Brit. Birds* 111: 96–99), a separate panel of judges met at the BTO annual conference in Swanwick to look at almost 40 recently produced county bird atlases and avifaunas. Our task was to decide on six candidates for a one-off award for the Best Local Bird Atlas based on fieldwork undertaken exclusively in the last decade (between November 2007 and November 2017), and then to identify a winner from that shortlist. This ten-year period began with the start of fieldwork for the BTO/SOC/BirdWatch Ireland *Bird Atlas 2007–11*. Many counties, regions and smaller recording units started atlas-type fieldwork in tandem with the national survey and since then have published their results, either as a book or in some electronic format.

Judging proved to be extremely difficult. All the projects behind the publications under review were organised by teams of amateurs, each with their own local agendas and ambitions. In addition, every area is different in terms of topography, accessibility of habitats, availability of surveyors and (not least) the availability of technical expertise to deal with maps and databases.

In terms of selection criteria, a key starting point was that the publication, whether a book or an online resource, must be based on atlas fieldwork that ran in parallel with *Bird Atlas 2007–11*. Some books were complete avifaunas while others were atlases, based on just the breeding season, or both the winter and the breeding season. The timescale meant that some commendable and indeed much-praised efforts had to be discounted from consideration, notably *The Norfolk Bird Atlas* (published in 2011, but which covered 1999–2007; *Brit. Birds* 104: 401) and *Breeding Birds of the Sheffield Area* published in 2013 (*Brit.*

Birds 107: 433–434), which covered 2003–08. Atlases published only online were initially treated equally but their largely different scope, and to some extent purpose, meant that it was not possible to judge them fairly alongside the books; in the end, we decided to treat them separately and to mention those which particularly impressed us. Unfortunately, at least three tetrad atlases or avifaunas based on the Atlas fieldwork period are still in preparation and so could not be included in the review. We had decided in advance, however, that ten years after the start of fieldwork (November 2007) was a suitable period over which to take stock.

We then debated other aspects of each publication that we felt should be considered in detail. Several elements of an atlas – its cover, the use of photographs, drawings and charts, the layout and style of text, the content and scope of any introductory chapters and appendices and, above all, the maps – all contribute to the initial feel. This was apparent in just a few minutes, but time was needed to explore the details before, individually, we were able to shortlist a book. All of the books under review had been seen by at least one of the team: 15 had been reviewed in *BB* by either John or Mark, while in her role as Atlas Coordinator for the BTO and lead author of *Bird Atlas 2007–11*, Dawn had looked at each of the books professionally. All of us needed to look over all of the books again, or explore them for the first time, and this part of the review took around two hours. In the process, we had discussions about some elements of the published works and the conditions under which they had been produced. We shared opinions about the design of maps and how we felt the information within them was conveyed to the reader. We were keen to see how the species

distributions were interpreted and compared with local geographical features – this being an aspect that greatly improves an atlas when done well. We discussed the merits of photographs, their quality, size of reproduction, relevance, captioning and from where/whom they were sourced. We talked about the texts and how well they described the maps or set the findings of the survey into a local and national context. We looked at how well the atlases had handled population changes: for many areas this was the second tetrad atlas (and for some, the third). For other areas this was the first local atlas and so the detailed findings were novel. Although all areas had done winter fieldwork as part of *Bird Atlas*

2007–11, not all atlases included results from this season in the final presentation. We also looked at how the issue of sensitive species had been managed.

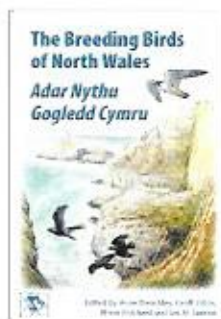
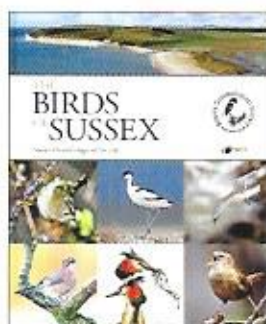
With all these options in mind, we each set about compiling an initial shortlist of ten books. There was little disagreement in those choices, with nine being chosen by all three reviewers. From this initial selection we retreated to separate corners of the room to choose our top six, placing them in order. This part of the process turned out to be relatively quick, with a large degree of agreement among us; and, following a relatively short discussion about the merits of each, this resulted in the final placings given below.

Winner

The Birds of Sussex

By Sussex Ornithological Society; BTO Books, 2014; reviewed in *BB* by John Clark (*Brit. Birds* 107: 300–301)

This is a county avifauna, which includes results from the tetrad atlas conducted in the county in 2007–11. A range of aspects of this book particularly impressed the judges, notably the clear maps, combined with concise interpretation of the findings evident from them in the text. Since the full set of maps was available on a CD issued before publication, only a selection is included in the book, allowing more space for the text to help interpret them. A wealth of other data, such as trends from BBS and WeBS counts, are included, making this a very complete work. The detailed text is broken up by clear headings, helping navigation and comparisons between species. An attempt is made to estimate the populations of each species breeding regularly in Sussex, with an explanation of how these estimates were derived. The introductory chapters were particularly well received: they are attractive, informative and cover a range of topics in detail. The book's large format allows for a good selection of impressive photographs, all of which were taken in the county. Last but not least, the whole work was available to buy only two and a half years after the conclusion of fieldwork.



2nd The Breeding Birds of North Wales

Edited by Anne Brenchley, Geoff Gibbs, Rhion Pritchard and Ian Spence; Liverpool University Press, 2013; reviewed in *BB* by Mark Holling (*Brit. Birds* 107: 235–236)

This atlas is the first of its kind for this challenging area. The low number of potential volunteers and the remote nature of some of the terrain meant that a decision was taken early on to limit the scope to the breeding season only. Yet even with one extra year of fieldwork beyond the national survey, the book was published within a year of this being completed, and most of the text is in Welsh as well as in English. The introductory chapters – describing the area, changes in land use, the winners and

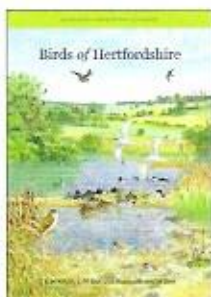
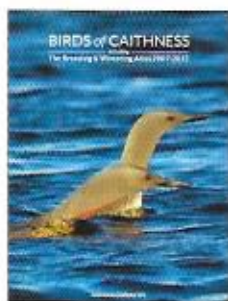
losers among the region's breeding birds, and an analysis of the distribution of species groups by habitat – gained particular praise. Within the species accounts, we found the pages to be well laid out and the relief maps showing tetrad-level distributions large. With no previous tetrad distributions with which to compare the results, the authors illustrated changes at a 10-km² level and provided

statistics to support the detail for North Wales. The technical information chapter at the end of the book gives all the details required by future atlas organisers in North Wales to repeat the work.

3rd Birds of Caithness

Edited by P. Davey, S. Manson, E. Maughan, D. Ormand and J. Smith; Caithness SOC; DVD reviewed in *BB* by Mark Holling (*Brit. Birds* 109: 689)

Originally produced as a limited-edition DVD, this avifauna proved to be so popular that the pages were printed out from the original format and a hardback book produced. Of all the areas covered by the atlases we reviewed, this one is among the most sparsely populated and many tetrads are remote from roads or tracks. We felt that this was an extremely attractive and informative book, giving a thorough account of the birds of the county. The analysis of how the local environment has changed and continues to change puts the species accounts into perspective and grabs the reader's attention. Captions to the photographs also provide additional information. We liked the simplicity but also the detail of the accounts, which are structured to give some historical context and a description of the mapped distribution and local counts where available, plus a look into the future based on recent trends.



4th Birds of Hertfordshire

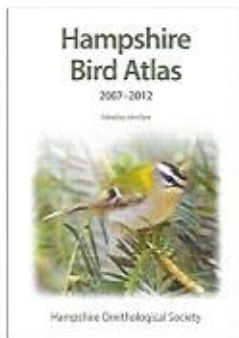
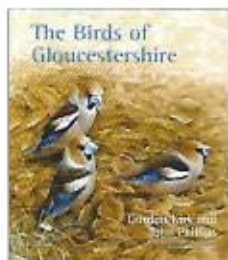
By Ken Smith, Chris Dee, Jack Fearnside and Mike Illett; Hertfordshire Natural History Society, 2015; reviewed in *BB* by Mark Holling (*Brit. Birds* 108: 433–434)

This is an avifauna that complements previous volumes, published in 1959 and 1986, and the texts of the breeding species benefit from data from no fewer than three tetrad atlas surveys. For those species which have undergone marked changes in distribution, all three maps are included, whereas others have just the most recent map combined with one showing changes. We were impressed with the succinct yet erudite accounts of each species, and the excellent design of the book, which incorporated fine artwork, mostly good-quality, locally sourced photographs, and clear charts and tables.

5th The Birds of Gloucestershire

By Gordon Kirk and John Phillips; Liverpool University Press, 2013; reviewed in *BB* by Mark Holling (*Brit. Birds* 107: 238–239)

This avifauna includes maps from a winter and breeding-season tetrad survey conducted in 2007–11, surprisingly the first time the area has been subject to an atlas. We liked the presentation and the authoritative feel of the book as well as the excellent use of additional tables and statistics. We felt that this is a very comprehensive review and found the mix of artwork and photographs particularly appealing.



6th Hampshire Bird Atlas 2007–2012

Edited by John Eyre; Hampshire Ornithological Society, 2015; reviewed in *BB* by Mark Holling (*Brit. Birds* 109: 417–418)

The breeding, winter and change maps are clearly presented in this book, which is another attractive volume. The breeding maps used a different approach from most atlases, mapping 'breeding considered likely' and 'present but not considered breeding' rather than the usual three-tier approach, and also incorporated abundance information. The texts are detailed and informative, with an interesting discussion around the change maps for each species. The photographs were virtually all taken within the county and included detailed captions.

As well as the six winners, we felt that the *Arran Bird Atlas 2007–2012* was worthy of an honourable mention. This volume could easily be dismissed as light in both weight and content, given the minimal comment on each species. But the fieldwork was very much a community effort and the writing up driven largely by one individual. The result is a brief but reliable overview of the birds of this island at an easily affordable price, and is a considerable achievement.

Results from tetrad atlas work in the Thames and Chilterns areas (including the online results from the counties of Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire) have been amalgamated into one accessible and interactive unit, providing an overview of species distributions across more than 9,000 km². This enables trends and habitat associations to be seen more clearly than is the case when information is presented separately for each county.

The tetrad atlas maps for East Glamorgan and for Hertfordshire are also available online as interactive maps (produced by the same person using the same software), and include impressive tools allowing users to interrogate the maps. We were also impressed with the online *Devon Bird Atlas*, which supports the published book. The website is simple to use and allows overlays of habitats and altitude and a range of alternative views of the data.

Advances in technology, enabling the rapid production of informative and interpretive maps online, will no doubt influence how the results of local atlases are produced in the future. However, we felt that these can never fully replace the informed, expert interpretations of the results, presented in a clear and attractive way, and combined with the maps in a really good local atlas. It is clear that more advanced design and printing technology and the emergence of



Adrian Thomas

110. Adrian Thomas, editor of *The Birds of Sussex* on behalf of Sussex Ornithological Society, with the award for the BB/BTO Best Local Bird Atlas 2007–17; January 2018.

digital photography has facilitated a move away from the avifaunas of the late twentieth century – with page after page of print, a few scattered line-drawings and a centrally bound block of photographs. Our winner has taken full advantage of these advances to produce a stunningly attractive and authoritative volume. Nonetheless, we also recognise that not all bird clubs have the resources to produce such lavish works and the content of books such as *Birds of Caithness* and the *Arran Bird Atlas 2007–2012* also deserves high praise.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Faye Vogely of the BTO for collating information on atlases and avifaunas produced in the last decade and for sourcing books from the Chris Mead Library at Thetford. We would also like to thank the BTO for making facilities available for judging at Swanwick.

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