

wildlife and habitats



Introduction

In 2003 a major report 'The State of Biodiversity in Hertfordshire 1992 - 2002' was produced to update the original State of the Environment Report.

This can be found online at

<http://enquire.hertscc.gov.uk/hbrc>.

Whilst much has happened to conserve the county's wildlife, it remains under immense and increasing pressure and continues to decline in different ways. To help address this, the HEF Biodiversity Officer now provides a driving force behind reporting, reviewing and progressing the 1998 Herts Biodiversity Action Plan. Monitoring Wildlife Trust Reserves and Wildlife Sites has continued with support from voluntary groups, while representation at East of England Biodiversity, Record Centre and Grazing Animal Forums has promoted Hertfordshire within the emerging regional agendas.

Herts BAP update

The Biodiversity Officer has undertaken and generated a co-ordinated programme of activities which have included:

- A detailed Review of the BAP to report on actions undertaken to date;
- Establishing a working Hertfordshire Biodiversity Partnership;
- Updating BAP priorities, including four new Species Action Plans & one new Habitat Action Plan;
- Progressing the programme of actions by developing lead partners and active working groups for the existing 7 habitat & 17 species action plans;
- Establishing a long term BAP monitoring programme following the nationally developed Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS), a web-based database for assessing the national and local BAP activities and targets.

In Hertfordshire, the wildlife and habitats indicators reflect current trends in the biodiversity resource where known, as follows:

Indicator WH1: Water Voles

Only three sites were surveyed during 2003 and unfortunately all proved negative. Mink continue to expand and are a known threat to water voles.

However the Species Action Plan is now formally progressing, and a key component of this will be a strengthened and focused surveying programme.

Indicator WH2: Birds

The British Trust for Ornithology's Breeding Birds Survey and other records of Herts Bird Club provide data on population changes; between 70-86 BBSs are undertaken every year. Long term trends are the most valuable indicators. All four species selected are on the Hertfordshire Red Data List for birds (53 species), to be published by the Bird Club early in 2004.

Grey heron (indicative of wetlands)

Grey herons breed in colonies and their nests are counted annually. In England their population increased by 8% (1994-2000) and by 17% (2000-2002), but numbers have declined in the eastern region by 8% (1994-2000). In Hertfordshire, a minimum of 91 nests was recorded from four sites in 2000.

Skylark (indicative of farmland quality)

A national Biodiversity Action Plan species, the Skylark is on the Red List of birds of conservation concern, in England numbers declined by 20% (1994-2000) and 1% (2000-2002); they also declined by 17% in the Eastern Region (1994-2000). In Hertfordshire numbers increased by 13% (1999-2000).

Song thrush (indicative of woodlands and mixed farmland)

This is a national and county Biodiversity Action Plan species. Although widespread, it remains on the national Red List. In England it has increased by 14% (1994-2000) and 8% (2000-2002).

However, in the Eastern Region, numbers have declined by 21% (1994-2000). In Hertfordshire numbers have increased by 18% (1999-2000).

House sparrow (indicative of the urban environment)

House sparrows are now a National Red List species. In England numbers have declined by 13% (1994-2000) and 1% (2000-2002). Regionally, the species has declined by 22% (1994-2000), and has declined by 8% in Hertfordshire (1999-2000).



Indicator WH3 - Number of Wildlife Sites in Hertfordshire

The most important ecological sites other than SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), they do receive some safeguard under planning policies throughout the county. By November 2003, a total of 1971 Wildlife Sites had been identified by the Wildlife Sites Project. This amounts to some 16,150 ha of land, or 10 % of the county. The reduction in area from 2002 is due to re-digitising of the site boundaries to exclude sites that previously extended into neighbouring counties. 30 new sites have been added to the list but two sites are known to have been severely damaged. Since 1997 a total of 1,352 sites have been recorded to their owners, some 70% of the total. Conservation advice continues to be provided when requested.

Indicator WH4 Pipistrelle bats

Although monitoring continues, no regional bat figures are currently readily available for this year's report.

Indicator WH5 Butterflies

Herts and Middx branch of Butterfly Conservation regularly records on nearly 40 sites in Herts. Populations can fluctuate markedly in the short term due to weather conditions and may not necessarily reflect longer-term trends.

Chalk grassland. Chalkhill blue

Following a dramatic increase in the mid 1990s, there has been a steady decline - 27% since 2000 (4 transect surveys). Some sites retain a very healthy population, however. One of Herts most threatened species - the **dingy skipper** - has increased 60% since 2000 (2 surveys).

Neutral grassland / damp meadows

Gatekeeper expanded its range slightly, but since 2000 also showed a decrease of 19% (50). The **meadow brown** is perhaps the most common species, but has shown a 53% decrease although this did reflect unfavourable management on one site (49). The **common blue** has shown a 17% decrease since 2000 (29), and a contraction in range.

Acid grassland / heath / bracken

The **small heath** - once universally common - continues to decline with a 17% decrease since 2000 (18), a trend reflected nationally, although there was a small recovery 2001-2002. The **small copper** also declined by 17% since 2000 (20), although this may be a cyclical pattern as numbers in 2002 rose 27% and there is every sign that 2003 was a good year.

Mature broad-leaved woodland

White admiral has also declined significantly - 82% since 2000 (2), although it continues to appear in both new and former sites, suggesting expansion or new colonisation. **Purple hairstreak** has shown an 18% decrease since 2000 (17).

Rides and glades

The **speckled wood** has shown a long term local and national increase, although since 2000 numbers are almost unchanged (30). The **ringlet** continues to expand its range and numbers - 100% since 2000 (20), and is currently considered to be one of the most successful species.

Scrub / hedgerows

The **brimstone** declined by 40% since 2000 (26), most of this drop occurring between 2000 and 2001. Usually stable, this may reflect climatic changes. The **orange tip** decreased by 19% since 2000 (34), although this is a spring species that suffers from cold, wet weather.

National BAP species are also considered

Grizzled skipper had a poor year in 2003 with no records again from Broxbourne Woods, very low numbers in Tring Park and Aldbury Nowers. Waterford Pit and Frogmore Pit were the best sites. As with 2001 there were just two records of the adult **small blue** in 2002 at Hertfordshire's only known colony but 2003 was the first year since the colony's discovery in 1998 when no adults were seen. The **purple emperor** has been found in three 10km squares in the south and west of the county, and is now subject of a Species Action Plan.

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