

The Devon Bird Atlas 2007-2013

Edited by Stella Beavan and Mike Lock, with a Foreword written by HRH Prince Charles and a Preface by Humphrey Sitters. The book is in hardback form and is approximately A4 size. 508 pages with colour photos, illustrations and maps.

Devon's first bird atlas was the Tetrad Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Devon 1977-1985, published in 1988 ("Tetrad Atlas"). The new Devon Bird Atlas 2007-2013 ('New Atlas'), published on 29th January 2016, is based on more than one million bird sightings contributed by more than 1,000 observers. It is the first atlas to show both breeding and wintering birds in the County. The superb cover artwork is by Mike Langman, who also illustrated the covers of the Somerset Bird Atlas.

After the introductory Foreword and Preface, there are Sections on acknowledgements, the Devon environment, a brief history of bird recording in Devon, the achievements of the New Atlas, its methodology and the species accounts. There are also seven appendices (details of which are given below).

I particularly liked the section on the Devon Environment. It covers geology, weather, natural areas and habitat types and includes excellent photos and six habitat maps; everything you need to know about natural Devon. There is much to learn from it. The section on New Atlas methodology has 10 pages, explaining breeding criteria and codes, record validation, data analysis and mapping, sources of records and coverage and effort. Like Somerset, Devon were able to carry out their work in conjunction with the BTO, which provided use of its database and other support. In this section there are tables showing a breakdown of species according to the degree of change in tetrad occupation since the Tetrad Atlas.

The accounts for 480 species and subspecies inevitably constitute the bulk of the book, taking up 388 pages. Several authors contributed to the species accounts. Each breeding bird has a table summarizing the comparison between the number of tetrads occupied in the Tetrad Atlas and New Atlas survey periods and showing the statistical significance of any change. The accompanying text discusses the reasons for any significant change.

In general, breeding species are allocated two pages and non-breeders one or less. Most species have at least one photo, where possible taken in Devon, and varying in size according to the amount of text. The 2007-2013 breeding distribution maps are large (roughly 5" square) and show the county divided into 10km squares on a light green background. Breeding status is shown by three different sized red dots (confirmed, probable and possible) and a small pale pink dot where no breeding status was determined. These small pink dots can be difficult to pick out against a pale green background, but this is just a minor quibble. Sensitive breeding species are mapped at the 10km square level rather than at tetrad level.

The three maps for breeding distribution in 1977-1985 and breeding and winter abundance 2007-2013 are smaller (just over 3" square). This makes the red dots on the first named much smaller but they are still readable. The abundance maps have different coloured squares according to numbers of birds per tetrad rather than dots. As many counties have discovered, it is difficult to squeeze a lot of large maps and text into a book like this without doubling its size and cost. Devon have, I think, tackled it well.

Some wintering birds, such as Water Pipit and Brambling, have maps showing winter and breeding abundance (the latter mainly accounting for birds in passage periods, because the New Atlas defines the breeding period as March to September). Other species recorded only in the period from October to February have just one winter-period abundance map, e.g. Snow Bunting.

At the end of the species accounts are details of rare species for Devon recorded during the New Atlas period. So the book shows just about every species recorded in the county during the period 2007 to 2013.

In the appendices are a bibliography, names of observers, a gazetteer, climate data during the New Atlas period (temperatures and rainfall), the Devon bird list, scientific names of plants and animals other than birds and charts of altitudinal distribution of tetrads and species. I was interested to see the reasoning behind the inclusion of the latter charts. Most of Devon is below 200 metres, with only 11%, mainly Dartmoor and Exmoor, being above that height. The editors take the view that most birds choose breeding sites by their habitat and vegetation type rather than just altitude, but there are some species which have significant altitudinal preferences. They are listed in a separate table.

So what do the species accounts tell us about the state of Devon's birds? Unfortunately, species that were common thirty years ago, such as Cuckoo, Skylark, Yellowhammer and Starling, are no longer to be found in large parts of Devon. Another declining group is made up of woodland species, including Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Wood Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher. Tetrads with Grey Partridge and Lapwing have reduced by 90% in number. As to be expected, there have been gains as well as losses. Eleven species have been gained, including Little Egret. Many of the findings mirror those in Somerset (and, in many cases, nationally). There are a number of fascinating discussions about species losses. For example, in the case of Marsh Tit, recent research suggest that declines may be caused, or aggravated, by competition from increasing populations of Blue and Great Tits.

Is the book worth buying? The answer is an unqualified..... Yes! From my experiences with production of the Somerset Bird Atlas, I can appreciate the challenges Devon have faced in their work and production of the New Atlas. I think they have done a superb job. The book is expensive at £40 plus £6.99 postage but you get a lot of book for your money and you can spend many hours browsing its content. Its format makes it very accessible to the casual reader as well as the atlas devotee. It's an excellent investment for anyone interested in Devon's birds.

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