

Nightjar Survey Instructions 2025



Firstly, please register and select your survey square(s) from the Heathland Birds Survey webpage (www.bto.org/heathland-birds-survey), using the Request Square map. You can then download and print the square map in a variety of formats as well as display the areas with known suitable/unsuitable habitat. A survey Visit and Habitat Recording Form should be downloaded and printed for each square covered. A Letter of Introduction and other useful information can be found on the Resources section of the website.

The aim of the survey is to record all occupied Nightjar territories on the square by recording territorial males and other individuals located during **two visits at dusk or dawn**. Nightjars occupy a variety of habitats, but lowland heath and conifer plantations up to 20 years old are most important. Please see examples below of how to record your survey observations on the map and recording forms.

Important: make sure that you are familiar with Nightjar churring song and calls before commencing the survey and also the similar song of Grasshopper Warbler and calls of Woodcock. See the Resources page for further information on Nightjar and other species

Safety and access

Take sensible precautions when walking on rough ground at night. Use footwear appropriate to the conditions and make sure that you can find your way back to your car. Take a torch, compass and whistle. Inform someone where you are going and at what time you expect to return. If possible, work in pairs or arrange to survey large sites as part of a co-ordinated group.

Use available public rights of way and open access areas but stay on established tracks and paths. Ensure that you have permission to enter private property and notify all necessary persons when you intend to look for Nightjars on such land. Your local organiser may be able to help with this.

Field methods:

The survey runs from the end of May to 31st July. The square should be visited during dusk or dawn, at least two times (additional visits are welcome), each visit falling within one of the following periods and not less than 10 days apart:

Visit A: 25 May – 30 June

Visit B: 1 July – 31 July

The peak period for churring typically falls between the last week of May and mid-July. Birds recorded earlier in May could be migrants and churring decreases substantially in August. Cold and wet weather can delay occupation of territories and vocal activity. Nightjars churr most predictably and consistently just after sunset and just before dawn. As a rough guide, males begin churring about twenty minutes after sunset; for dawn counts you will need to be on site at least one hour before sunrise. Calm, warm and dry evenings/mornings are best. Do not attempt to count when the wind speed exceeds force 4 (moderate breeze raises dust & loose paper, small branches move) or when it is cold (less than 10°C) or raining, as these conditions depress activity and make the detection of birds more difficult. In consistently poor weather you may need to make more than two visits to establish presence or absence.

It is recommended that you make a preliminary visit in daylight to familiarise yourself with the site and access. Don't try to cover too much ground on any one visit – you should aim to check no more than 80 hectares of suitable habitat on any one night. As a rough guide this is slightly less than the 1-km squares marked on the map. Try to work out the most efficient route to ensure full coverage.

Survey the site by walking at a steady pace along rides and paths, being sure to pass within 200m of all likely areas. Stop and listen for birds every few minutes. On hearing a Nightjar, mark its position as accurately as possible on the map.

Bird Recording:

Each bird observation should be marked on the survey map - **see Example on back page**: For the first visit mark the locations of the first recorded singing male as A1, the second as A2, etc.; for the second visit as B1, B2, etc.; for the third visit as C1, C2, etc. Where the same male is known to have moved location, join the sequential locations with a solid line (e.g. A1 — A1). Where different males are detected on a single visit, join their locations with a dashed line (e.g. A1 - - - A2). If unsure mark as A1 — ? — A3. Indicate any observed flights by an arrowed line (e.g. — A3 →). Mark the records of other individuals on the survey map by using standard BTO (CBC) symbols - **see Example on back page**. Also, mark the locations of any other individuals recorded outside the survey square on the edge of the map.

Only males churr, but the 'coo-ick' call, given by both sexes, can be used as evidence of an occupied territory. Sound lures or call playback should **NOT** be used for this survey.

After the final visit please record the estimated total number of minimum/maximum territories in the appropriate box. This total should be the number of territories that you consider the square contains, based upon the number recorded across all visits.

Habitat details (within 50m of each male/pair):

For each male/pair (coded A1, A2, B1, etc), where first observed, please indicate the main habitat by putting a "1" in only one of the grey boxes (categories 1-4) to describe the main habitat. However, if the predominant land use is equally split between two categories, please tick each of the appropriate grey boxes (categories 1-4). Then enter 'Y' for all types that apply from the white subcategories and any from section 5). For the grass/heather/bracken-dominated heath categories, dominance is defined as greater than 50% coverage. A plantation or woodland can be defined as mixed if the area contains more than 10% of both broadleaf trees and conifers. Use a single row per male/pair on each visit— see example over the page.

Other Heathland Assemblage Species

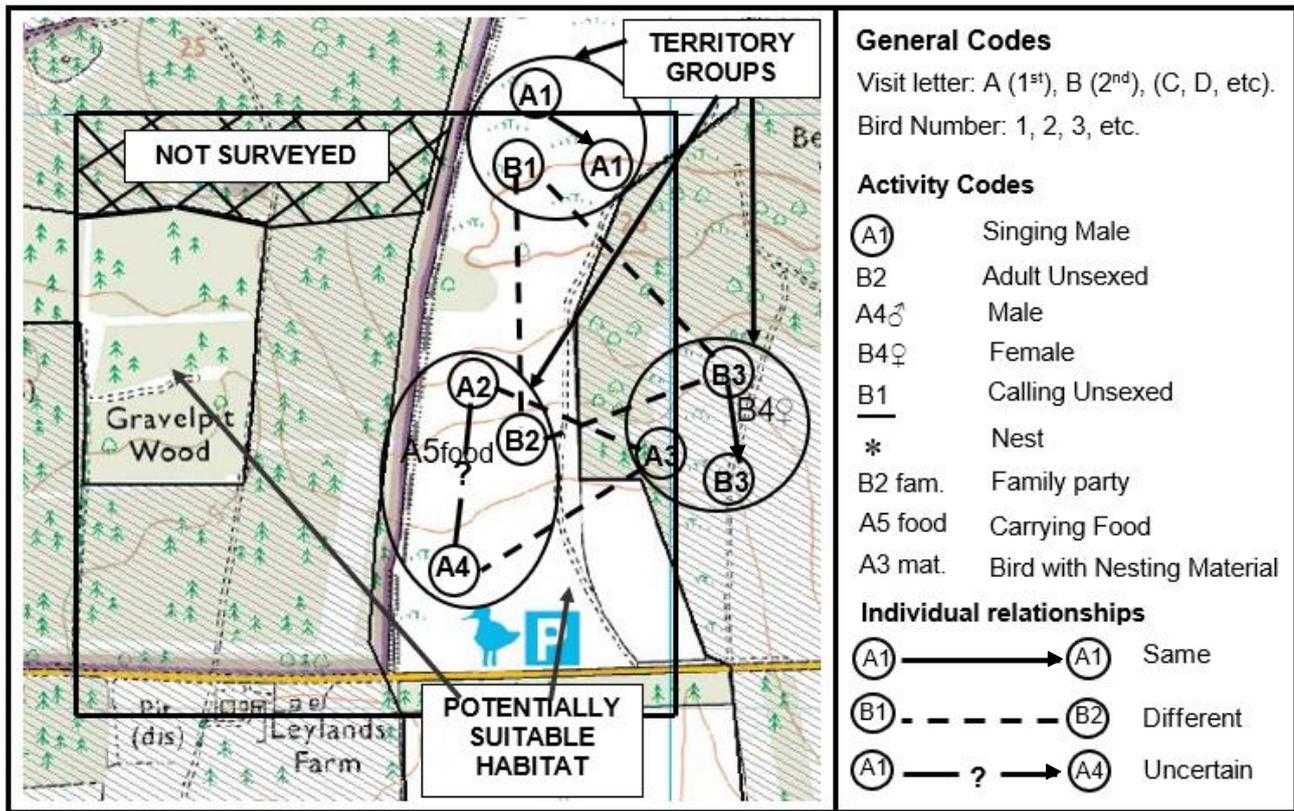
Records of the following species are also requested: Cuckoo, Curlew, Grasshopper Warbler, Hobby, Linnet, Long-eared Owl, Redstart, Redshank, Snipe, Stone Curlew, Stonechat, Tree Pipit, Wheatear, Whinchat and Woodcock. Please record the number of males/territories detected on each visit. If you make any additional or casual visits e.g. for Woodcock or Long-eared Owl, etc, please enter these records into BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net) for the 1-km square or actual location (use the Pinpoint option).

Confidentiality:

Breeding Nightjars and their nest sites **should not be disturbed**. It is NOT necessary to find a nest to confirm breeding. Under no circumstances should a nest be approached unless it is part of an established monitoring scheme.

Examples of bird and habitat recording

Map of plotted registrations and codes



Example of Habitat details recorded for each territorial/singing male or pair.

Habitat Recording Form (males/pairs only). Species : Woodlark / Dartford Warbler / Nightjar (delete as required) Square: |

For the 50m radius around each territorial male/pair, select one main Habitat Category (1-4) and as many items that apply in each subcategory, plus any items from 5)

Bird	1) Farmland	2) Heathland	3) Woodland/Forestry	4) Other Habitats	5) General	Grazed (Y/N)	Bare ground present - natural	Bare ground present - burnt	
A1			1				N	Y	N
A2		1					N	Y	Y
B1	1						N	Y	N

Submitting your data and survey help

Please submit your survey data using the dedicated online survey application: www.bto.org/heathland-bird-survey
 If you don't have access to a computer then please send your completed maps and survey forms to your local organiser by 31st July, who will enter them on your behalf, or to David Norfolk, British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.
 Email: heathlandbirds@bto.org