

NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR BIOLOGICAL RECORDING

NFBR NEWSLETTER 11: April 1991

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MEMBER NEWSLETTER 11: April 1991

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I am sorry that this newsletter is both late and thin! This is the last issue that I shall edit, due to other commitments, but I will pass on any contributions for the next issue.

Meg Game, c/o London Ecology Unit, Bedford House, 125 Camden High Street, London NW1 7JR, tel 01-485-2722

The Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording

Bill Ely, NFBR Chairman and representative on the Commission, writes:

Public awareness of the existence and value of biological records has been raised recently by the initiatives of the Linnean Society, in producing the study "Biological Recording - Need & Network", and of the National Federation for Biological Recording, in organising annual conferences and liaising with other user groups. As a result of this increased concern a meeting was called by the National Environmental Research Council in London last year at which a steering group was launched to consider the best way to set up a co-ordinating commission for biological recording, from the workers who collect records through to the decision-makers who need to use them. In order to keep the commission to a workable size it was recommended that each interest be represented by a small number of relevant organisations, each of whom would send a member to the commission but who would also liaise with a "constituency" of other organisations to ensure that their views and interests were included in the commission's deliberations. The organisations which are involved in the collection and collation of information are represented by the National Federation for Biological Recording and the Biological Recording in Scotland Campaign.

During its first year the Co-ordinating Commission has met several times under the chairmanship of Sir John Burnett, prepared a "Statement of Intent" and submitted a "Programme for the Establishment of a National System for the Co-ordination of Biological Recording" to the Department of the Environment, together with a request for initial funding to commence work on this programme.

The initiatives developed by the CCBR raise a number of questions for the NFBR and some of these were aired at our Council meeting in November last year. Clearly, there is a danger that we could be left behind as the CCBR initiates and develops national policies. Members of Council are working on responses to these developments in order to keep NFBR in touch with them.

Bill Ely

The following is reprinted from a Note from Sir John Burnett, Chairman of the Co-ordinating Commission

The object of this note and the enclosed Statement of Intent is to bring you up to date on what has transpired since the meeting organized by NERC in February 1989 when a number of resolutions were agreed.

The members of the Co-ordinating Commission were chosen at that meeting and earlier this year I was asked if I would be its Chairman. I was both honoured and delighted to accept, especially since I have been concerned for many years about the poor records of all kinds, not only biological, in this country and, indeed, elsewhere. So, although I can claim no especial expertise, I hope that I can bring enthusiasm and drive to our common task.

The Commission first met on 16th May 1990 and rapidly agreed that it should prepare a concise yet comprehensive statement, explicable to all potential users, of what needed to be done. The final draft is enclosed. You will, I hope, be pleased to know that it has been seen by both the Secretary of State, and the Minister of State for the Environment as well as by the (ex - ed.) Prime Minister, since she happened to say how important recording was in one of her speeches! I have been given a written assurance of her interest and an unambiguous promise of interest and financial support from the Department of the Environment.

An application for funds to carry out a detailed, expert feasibility study of the Commission's objectives has been agreed and will shortly be submitted to the Department of the Environment. It will deal with a wide range of technical issues as well as including, not least, the costs of establishing the proposed network and sources of funding for recording agencies of all kinds.

Through my colleagues who are, amongst their other activities, doing their best to keep you all in the picture, we will bring you up to date as we progress. We are also all agreed that there should be a meeting in the foreseeable future, to which I hope all interested parties will send representatives, when we can have a discussion with you on all relevant matters. Meanwhile, if any body has views they would like the Commission to take up, please either get in touch with my colleague who is liaising with you, or, if you prefer, with me direct. We are determined to maintain our momentum and get an agreed, effective national scheme going along the lines of our statement as soon as possible. We shall also do our best to involve as many potential users - some of whom may not yet realise the value either of biological records, or of access to them - as we can.

I hope that you agree with me that although the Commission does not yet know all the answers (how could it!), we are getting things moving and intend to continue in that way.

Sir John Burnett, Chairman CCBR
October 1990

The Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording: Statement of Intent

The Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording (CCBR) was established as the result of widespread discussions, over several years, involving all the principal existing agencies, organizations, and societies engaged in biological recording. It became clear that there was a widespread and increased interest in biological records. This was especially the case for a variety of biogeographical purposes, not least their use, in conjunction with other physical and climatic data, for monitoring natural and man-made changes in the environment, as well as for their application to a variety of other purposes. For example, demand for biological records is likely to grow with the increasing introduction of environmental assessments of all kinds whether for planning, development or land use. The Linnean Society played a leading role in these discussions and its report - *Biological Recording: Need and Network* (1988) - was presented to a fully representative meeting, organized by NERC in February 1989, of a range of agencies, scientific, voluntary, commercial, local authorities and government. This meeting recommended the establishment of the CCBR both to create, in the first instance, a nationally agreed, computerized system for biological recording and to propose an organization to ensure its continued, effective maintenance. It was agreed that a Steering Committee representing the views of the various groups would prepare an initial plan. This committee has met and made recommendations to its constituents.

This paper sets out concisely the agreed intentions of the CCBR.

Uses of biological records

Biological recording is defined as the collection, collation, storage, dissemination and interpretation of records, both in space and time, of kinds and numbers of wildlife, assemblages of organisms, and their habitats, especially when the records are related to specific,

localized sites. They are of use, or of potential use, for a variety of purposes. These include:

1. Biological research and environmental assessment.

Biological records, especially when considered with other environmental data, are the raw material of ecological and biogeographical studies of all kinds. Because many plants and animals are sensitive to small changes in the environment, changes in their abundance or distribution can be used to detect or monitor both intrinsic and extrinsic environmental changes such as climatic change, or changes in land management such as the effects of high nitrogen, pollutants, falling water tables, amongst many others. Biological records linked with remote sensing could provide a particularly valuable tool for survey and monitoring work, over large or small areas of the globe.

2. Planning. It is becoming of increasing importance to take statutory planning decisions with a clear knowledge of their likely or potential effects on all aspects of the environment, direct and indirect, including the effects on wildlife. These decisions require prior knowledge of which organisms are present, their abundance, ecological requirements, distribution and vulnerability. Such information is required at all stages of the planning process in order to ensure enlightened decisions by local or central government, private industry, developers, citizens or voluntary bodies.

3. Land management. Land owners and land managers in both the private and public sectors, whether concerned with commercial gain, amenity, habitat re-instatement, or conservation, need to know what habitats and species are present at a given site. The presence, absence and abundance of particular organisms frequently provide clear indications of soil conditions and hence of the likely outcome on the land of the management proposed. Alternatively, the effects of a particular management regime on the organisms present needs to be known, or predictable, e.g. on SSSI sites. This may require knowledge of historical records of the presence and abundance of the contemporary flora and fauna, or of how they compare with those of an adjacent region, or even in a national, or international context.

The co-ordination and promotion of biological recording

A new approach is needed since, at present, no effective organization exists to co-ordinate records. Biological records are, at present, kept by a diversity of agencies and individuals to different standards and with differing degrees of accuracy. Moreover, these

records are frequently not co-ordinated with those of other agencies concerned with collecting physical, chemical, climatic or social data, with which the biological data could most usefully be correlated. Indeed, they are only rarely made available to such agencies. No complete Index exists of UK record holders, nor of their standards, nor the availability of their records.

A single, adequately funded, national organization for the maintenance of biological records is needed urgently to establish, promote, co-ordinate, maintain and monitor standards of accuracy, format, accessibility and compatibility of records. It should also promote the development and creation of databases which would comply with satisfactory standards, to be established, and such record holders would be registered and accredited by the national organization. Users could then be assured of the value of any records they obtained either directly from the accredited databases, or, indirectly, through the national organization. There is no intention, at this time, to establish a single national Biological Data Archive but rather to promote and facilitate a diversity of specialist sources brought to a common, high standard. This will require the establishment of an effective network of recognized databases. Whether the proposed new national organization can be developed from any existing centre or centres, or whether it will need a *de novo* approach, is not yet clear.

The proposed national organization should play a leading role in Europe, and indeed, globally, both in the promotion and the establishment of networks of other biological record centres and in conjunction with those of other environmental agencies. In this way the value of biological records for detecting environmental change, for instance, would be immensely enhanced.

Procedure

The proposed national system should form a computerized network of local/regional recording agencies, perhaps on a county basis, together with a small number of national/thematic centres possessing major holdings of biological records, e.g. Biological Records Centre, British Trust for Ornithology, the Nature Conservancy Councils, certain learned societies.

In order to promote the establishment of the proposed national organization for the maintenance of biological records as soon as possible, the CCBR will:

1. Instigate the compilation and publication of a complete Index of Biological Records Agencies currently holding records in the United Kingdom.

2. Make detailed recommendations for the establishment of an agreed computerized network of databases, including an assessment of the potential of existing centres for development, and ensure, after adequate and appropriate consultation:

- i. minimum standards for verifying the accuracy of biological records;

- ii. a common recording format;

- iii. standard procedures and common protocols to ensure the compatibility of all records;

- iv. registration procedures for accredited recording agencies;

- v. arrangements for access to the databases through prescribed procedures (N.B. the vast majority of records should, in principle, be generally available, but some records, e.g. of threatened species, may need to be restricted);

- vi. the maintenance and publication of a register of accredited databases together with details of how, where and under what conditions records may be obtained.

3. Seek funding from appropriate sponsors and establish the embryonic national organization. Since it will be essential to establish the organization on a permanent basis there will be a need for ongoing discussion about how best it can be maintained and by whom.

Funding

The proposed network will build, to a greater or lesser extent, on existing local and national resources. It will, in any event, have to be built up in stages. Assured finance will be needed eventually to sustain the network but some front-loaded funds will be necessary to carry out an appropriate feasibility study and to establish it in the first instance.

Initially, funding will be needed to co-ordinate and plan with other record holders the details of the proposals, to develop protocols and existing software, and to establish a basic network of databases to an approved standard. Some databases will require to be set up from scratch, although in other cases appreciable progress will have been made towards the approved basic standard. Progress is likely to be uneven. Funds will also be needed to compile the index of agencies holding biological records.

Since the proposed organization will be in the domain of "public good", funding will be sought, in the first

instance, from both central government and local authorities. Future funding will be determined in the light of discussions within the CCBR and with a range of potential sponsoring agencies, public and private. Although not entirely predictable, it seems most likely that diverse sources of funding will need to be involved, together with income generation in connection with continuity of operation both to maintain up-to-date records and to determine time trends.

A short discussion on the user needs of a biological recording system

Below I have presented a discussion paper on the user needs of a biological recording system. The needs have been ascertained from my consecutive posts with the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council and the Wildlife Trust of Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Other planning departments, other wildlife organisations and other bodies may have different needs.

The purpose of this paper is to initiate a forum for discussion and, I hope, to encourage responses so that a more comprehensive report on user needs can be compiled. If you disagree or have views to add please send your response clearly marked "Biological Recording - User Needs" and address to me as follows:

**Marie Moreau, The Wildlife Trust, Priory
Country Park, Barkers Lane, Bedford, Bedfordshire MK41 9SH**

The main purposes of a biological record centre are as follows:

1. To provide a comprehensive, expert and authoritative source of data. The data will include historical information but must also be up to date.
2. To provide those data to conservation bodies, statutory authorities, consultants and developers to assist in decisions regarding site and species protection, planning, land acquisition, management plans and conservation of nature, in order that wildlife and its habitats may be protected.
3. To form part of the National Recording Schemes.
4. To provide information for scientific research, countryside monitoring, education and interpretative uses in order to enhance the understanding and preservation of wildlife.

A Wildlife Trust needs a record of all sites of wildlife interest with their locations, natural history, management and other relevant information. The Trust needs to prepare species and habitat distribution maps and to be able to locate rare species and rare habitats precise-

ly and rapidly. The Trust may use the data supplied by Record Centres to:

1. Make land acquisition decisions and assess priorities.
2. Make decisions regarding the protection of sites and species via the planning process, assessing priorities for action, and commenting on development proposals.
3. Make comparisons of land management regimes, assessing the effects of different regimes and following detailed species requirements.
4. Write management plans and draw up management agreements and programmes.
5. Monitor sites, habitats and species (countryside monitoring).
6. Educate and inform decision makers, children and the general public.

The County and Local Authority Planning Departments also require a Record Centre for a variety of uses. These may include:

1. Preparing reports on the wildlife value of sites subject to development proposals, for example road schemes, mineral workings, restoration schemes.
2. Commenting on the wildlife implications of planning applications and schemes forwarded for consultation by other statutory authorities, for example District Councils, Department of Transport, Internal Drainage Boards, Water Authorities.
3. Preparing reports in order to contribute towards the preparation of structure and subject plans and strategy documents.
4. Preparing reports on water catchment areas and river management works.
5. Providing information for inclusion in farm (or other land) management plans, especially where grant aid is provided.
6. Assessing the implication of tree planting and woodland management schemes.
7. Commenting on the wildlife implications of leisure and recreation proposals.
8. Providing reports for site acquisition by the authority and subsequent site management.

Rapid and easy input and retrieval of data and complex manipulations of the data held greatly increase the usefulness of the information that has been collected. For this, a computer system such as RECORDER is needed.

Great care must be taken over access, retrieval and interpretation of the data. Record Centres should always allow complete information access to bona fide wildlife protection bodies or agencies.

Marie Moreau, November 1990

Publications

Two booklets on badgers from the Mammal Society

Badgers are the subject of numbers 9 and 10 of the Mammal Society's series of Occasional Publication booklets. The charming line drawings by Eunice Overend and Guy Troughton should alone be sufficient to encourage casual reading, but casual and serious readers alike will find these two excellent publications interesting and useful.

"Surveying Badgers" is written by the organisers of the recently published (Nature Conservancy Council, 1989) second national badger survey. It emphasizes the importance of consistent recording methods, so that, unlike the first survey in 1963, the data will provide a baseline against which future changes in badger populations and ecology can be monitored. The emphasis on standardised recording and a carefully thought-out rationale behind the recording should serve as a goal for biological recorders in general - the booklet should be read for this alone!

Various reasons for and types of badger survey are discussed and a description is given of the data, mostly sett details, which should be recorded. An example of a recording sheet is presented but this might have been more useful in a format which could be photocopied, with space for some "customising". The two appendices giving habitat categories (40 basis types) and soil textures look to be eminently usable by the experienced and newcomers alike, and could well be useful for other recording applications.

It would seem to the reviewer, a non-specialist, that, with minimal guidance, this booklet could be used by the relatively inexperienced field naturalist, and is to be commended for this. This in turn should fulfil the

hope of the authors that the booklet will provide both guidelines and stimulus for local recorders to help monitor the country's badger population.

The surveys can perhaps be most tangibly useful in indicating (and then, it is hoped, preventing) badger persecution. The second booklet, "Badger Persecution and the Law", outlines the offences covered by badger protection legislation and then guides the reader through a comprehensive list of actions which are *not* an offence. Thus it is (generally) against the law to treat cruelly or to dig for any badger, but it is not (generally) an offence to disturb a badger occupying a sett. The authors are placing great emphasis on the importance to successful persecution of gathering incontrovertible evidence of a particular crime having been committed.

The apparent anomalies in what is and what is not a crime result from the legislation assuming that "badger persecution...is primarily an animal welfare issue". (One wonders how long before future badger protection laws will be based upon *Meles meles* as a threatened species?)

In a thoroughness matching that of its twin booklet, the authors clearly and simply provide advice on making charges (which will stand up in court), being a witness to the event, correct police action, providing expert witnesses, and court attendance. Most of the guidelines should also be valuable for court cases involving other protected species.

Whilst one may be left wondering how any successful prosecution could be brought, quite clearly they have been, and I feel convinced badger baiters and diggers will have a tougher time as a consequence of this booklet.

These publications are available from the Mammal Society's headquarters at Baltic Exchange Buildings, 21 Bury Street, London EC3A 5AU. I would recommend both, and particularly the latter, for police forces, nature conservation organisations, countryside rangers and others who are keen to protect the declining badger.

Marie Moreau

"Surveying Badgers", S. Harris, P. Cresswell and D. Jeffries, 1989, Mammal Society (London).

"Badger Prosecution and the Law", P. Skinner, D. Jeffries and S. Harris, 1989, Mammal Society (London).

£1.50 each inc. p & p.

NCC Phase 1 Handbooks

The Nature Conservancy Council has finally succeeded in producing two booklets on Phase 1 survey methodology.

The first book, in A4 format, is entitled "Handbook for Phase 1 habitat survey". Part 1 includes sections on planning a survey, field and office procedures, and how to record and store the data. Part 2 is entitled "Field manual" and includes habitat definitions, species codes and recording forms.

The second book is in fact Part 2 of the main book produced in a smaller, more portable A5 format.

The booklets will be reviewed in the next edition of the NFBR newsletter.

"Handbook for Phase 1 habitat survey", 78pp, £10
"Field manual", 62pp, £2.50
Handbook plus 2 field manuals £14.00
from the NCC, Northminster House, Peterborough
PE1 1UA

A Review of Butterfly Introductions in Britain and Ireland

A report by M R Oates and M S Warren, for the Joint Committee for the Conservation of British Insects, 1990

A4, 96pp, £8.50 from WWF, Panda House, Wey-side Park, Catteshall Lane, Goldalming, Surrey, GU7 1XR

birdBASE, The Information Centre of Western Palearctic Birds.

birdBASE is one of a number of software packages to come on the market recently aimed at the ornithologist (or more specifically, one suspects, at the twitcher) who has access to a PC. The database contains information on all 867 bird species recorded in the Western Palearctic up to the end of 1989, accessible in alphabetical order of English or scientific name or in order of "World List" numbers, taken from Howard & Moore's *A Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*.

For each species, data are presented in three windows. The first two of these contain a wealth of information, while the third allows the user to record personal

observations. The Core Data window gives for each species its scientific and English names, world number, BTO two-letter code, Euring number, category on the British & Irish list, whether the species is on the lists of birds considered by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel or the *British Birds* Rarities Committee or the ICBP's Endangered Species list, its status in Britain (resident, summer or winter visitor, passage migrant or vagrant) and population indices derived from winter counts of wildfowl and waders and *Population Trends in British Breeding Birds*. Unfortunately the English names used are the ill-fated alternative names proposed by the BOU Records Committee (*Ibis* 130 (Supplement) and *British Birds* 81:355-77) and later abandoned, rather than currently accepted names.

The Super Index window provides a ready index of references to each species in a number of publications, including BWP, most of the most popular field guides, several specialist identification guides, the summer and winter Atlases and two journals, *British Birds* and *Birding World*. The choice of journals, perhaps more than anything else, indicates that the package is aimed at the twitching end of the ornithological market; it would be nice in future editions to see *Bird Study*, *Ringing and Migration* and other journals included.

The Personal Data window allows the user to record his or her personal garden, ringing, county, national, Western Palearctic and world life lists, annual lists from 1980 to 1996; dates of first ever, earliest and latest records; eight further simple lists and an additional two lists where up to four characters can be used. It allows more than enough data to be stored to satisfy the average twitcher, at whom it is aimed, but is not really suitable for use by a biological records centre.

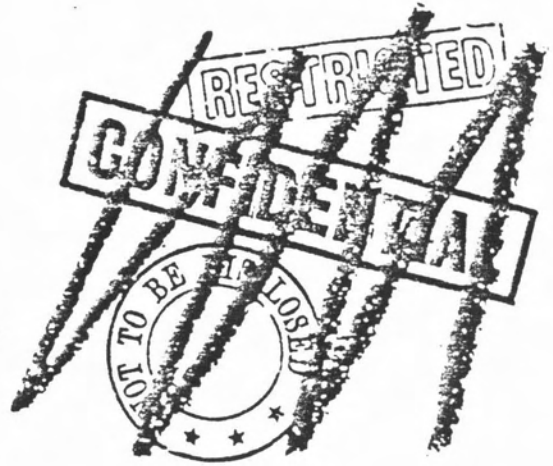
However, the Core Data and Super Index provide an enormous amount of information which is probably available nowhere else in such a readily accessible form. This alone makes *birdBASE* worthy of consideration by records centres. The system is very easy to use, even for someone like myself who is only barely computer literate, and seems to be very accurate. The manufacturers offer an annually updated database for a small additional charge, which prevents the indices from dating and also solves my only quibble as a twitcher entering my own data, that I have already seen three species which were new to the Western Palearctic in 1990 and therefore not included!

John Archer, London Ecology Unit

One 3.5" or two 5.25" floppy disks with reference manual and user guide, all in plastic case. £49.95 from natureBASE, 105 Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4HT.

The Campaign for Freedom of Information

3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD
Telephone 01-278 9686 Fax: 01-383 5062



9 April 1990

Dear Friend,

The Campaign for Freedom of Information is undertaking research on access to environmental information and I am writing to Wildlife Link groups to ask if you can provide us with any examples of when it has been, or is, denied to you.

The Campaign has pressed for greater disclosure of environmental information since its launch in 1984. We promoted the Environment and Safety Information Act 1988 which was introduced as a Private Members Bill by Chris Smith MP. The Act requires relevant authorities to set up public registers of enforcement notices served on premises which breach legal safety standards or cause serious public harm.

We are currently collating cases where environmental data and research has been withheld from interested parties by government departments, regulatory authorities or companies. If you know of any instances where attempts to get hold of reports, safety studies, development plans, results of analyses or surveys have been frustrated, please let us know.

We would also be interested to hear about the practices of regulatory bodies - whether, for instance, they decide policy behind closed doors.

We hope to be publishing a report in the early summer but are always interested to hear of new cases where access to environmental information has been withheld. Please keep us in touch so that we can regularly update our information.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Emily Russell
Campaign Researcher