

BBOWT's Reserves Surveying Programme

This summary will give you an outline of the Trust's annual surveying programme and help you decide if you would like to volunteer. Please also refer to the Wildlife Surveyor profile document.



BBOWT launched the Reserve Surveying Programme (RSP) in 2002. Prior to the RSP, many surveys were carried out on BBOWT nature reserves by both amateurs and professionals, however much of this data was collected in an ad hoc manner. The RSP has standardised BBOWT's approach to surveying and now ensures quantitative data is collected using repeatable methodologies.

It is essential that data is collected using standard methodologies to ensure records can be accurately compared between years. It is for this reason that specific methodologies for each survey type have been designed, many of which follow set transect routes.

The RSP aims to:

1) Collect data to direct the management of reserves

Survey data will be used to establish species presence/absence on reserves and species population trends. This is essential to determine the management strategy for reserves. Long-term monitoring will establish if habitat management work has been a success.

2) Collect data to direct future surveying and monitoring programmes

3) Assess the impact of climate change

4) Inspire, train and involve volunteers

5) Contribute to national recording schemes

RSP Timetable

Late January – registration form sent to existing and new volunteers to complete and sign-up for forthcoming spring/summer (March-September incl) survey season.

February/March – survey packs (instructions, maps, forms etc) sent to allocated volunteer surveyors.

March to September – survey season. Survey data returned to BBOWT Ecology Team for processing.

October to December – survey data analysed and sent to national recording schemes as well as feedback to volunteer surveyors.

October to February – winter survey season (much reduced – mostly bird surveys).

January – previous year's survey data fed back to BBOWT land management staff to inform habitat management work.

Throughout the year, BBOWT's Senior Ecologist supports all allocated surveyors and provides information about courses and other events which may be of interest.

Surveys undertaken as part of RSP

BBOWT only undertakes surveys which will inform management work on its reserves and surveys which contribute to national recording schemes. These priority surveys are outlined in the management plan for each reserve.

Each year the Ecology Team undertake over 300 planned priority surveys with the fantastic help of more than 120 experienced volunteer surveyors. 75% of the RSP is undertaken by volunteers. By the end of 2025, 95 volunteers have been surveying for 10 years or more. The remaining surveys are undertaken by the BBOWT Ecology Team and other Trust staff.

2025 surveys included:

- 1/ 39 Butterfly Transects (assisted by 55 volunteers). Weekly surveys from April-Sept inclusive. Each transect is covered by a maximum of 4 volunteers, surveying once a month
- 2/ 27 Bird Transects (assisted by 29 volunteers). Usually just 4 surveys in spring, however some transects are surveyed monthly throughout the year.
- 3/ 9 Dragonfly Transect (assisted by 12 volunteers) Weekly surveys from May-Sept inclusive. Each transect is covered by a maximum of 4 volunteers, surveying once a month
- 4/ 60 Habitat Condition Assessments (assisted by 8 volunteers). Mostly undertaken by the Ecology Team as specialist knowledge of grasses, sedges and rushes is needed.

Other surveys included – dipwell monitoring of water-levels, reptile tin monitoring, territory mapping of priority bird species, simple transects for birds, butterflies & dragonflies (less survey effort than full transects) etc.

Survey Allocation Process

Once all survey registration forms have been completed and returned, the Senior Ecologist allocates the surveys planned for the forthcoming survey season. The registration forms will help allocate the most appropriate survey/s for each volunteer. This will depend on the information provided in the registration form – eg previous survey experience, identification skills, home address and how far prepared to travel, time able to commit (weekly, monthly etc), species group interested in etc. Travel expenses are unfortunately not provided.

Most surveys are undertaken by the same surveyor every year. This helps with administration and with consistency of data collection and survey effort. However, every year new surveyors are needed to fill gaps when previous surveyors have retired, or new surveys (eg on new reserves) have been planned.

Inexperienced Volunteers

Volunteers often express an interest in helping with the RSP but lack the necessary surveying experience or wildlife identification knowledge. In this instance, the Senior Ecologist recommends courses and local organised group survey events to improve knowledge and skills.

Survey Work

Volunteer surveyors are asked to undertake their allocated survey work in their own time within the date and time constraints laid out in the survey methodology. This often requires a survey to be undertaken in a specific week on a monthly basis or more frequently. Surveyors must read and understand the risk assessments included in their survey pack.

Colin Williams
BBOWT Senior Ecologist
colinwilliams@bbowt.org.uk
07789632117