

Cumbria Bird Club – Long-eared Owl Winter Survey 2007

Many thanks to everyone who took part in this survey. I feel that I owe it to all who managed to drag themselves away from cosy home comforts on dark cold wintry evenings to at least give some initial findings and feedback in this newsletter. I hope to do a more in depth and (possibly) more scientific report when time allows and all the results are in and analysed.

This survey was instigated by Mike Carrier who was inspired by the results of Durham Bird Club's survey of this species in 2005. Previously the Durham Breeding Atlas of 2000 had estimated that there were just 15 pairs in the county. The estimated population after the survey was an astonishing 51 pairs and an impressive twenty pairs monitored in 2005 successfully fledged 45 young. Encouragingly the owls were also found in a variety of primary habitats with farmland, woodland, wetland, heath/ moorland and industrial sites all holding pairs.

The Breeding Birds of Cumbria Atlas estimated a population here of 10-15 pairs mostly occurring in upland conifer plantations with adjacent expanses of unimproved grassland and moorland. It was also felt that numbers of this species may be restricted in Cumbria by the presence of Tawny Owl though the Durham survey found that 90% of Long-eared Owl sites held, or were adjacent to, Tawny Owl territories and all six successful woodland sites held Tawny Owl. Long-eared Owl is regarded as being in the top ten of British birds for which we have little information on numbers and to quote our own Atlas "*The Long-eared Owl is perhaps the most elusive and under-recorded of Cumbria's breeding birds.*"

Methodology

Historical records of Long-eared Owl from 1974 to 2005 were provided by the Archivist (Dave Shackleton). Volunteers were then allotted 10km squares to cover and given details of sites with historical records within their squares. Observers were asked to survey as many locations with suitable habitat as they could giving priority to historical sites. There were sufficient volunteers to cover most squares with historical records plus some extra 10km squares with no previous records. Additionally all bird club members were provided with forms and asked to cover any suitable area they wished.

The surveys were carried out from mid-January to March 2007 at around dusk. Sound recordings of owls were made available and surveyors were asked to record additional species heard or seen in particular other crepuscular and nocturnal species. They were also asked to record the distance between any Tawny/ Barn Owls and Long-eared Owls. The instructions were to arrive prior to dusk then simply wait look and listen!

Results

To date 30 volunteers have submitted surveys from around 100 locations. The results were not as spectacular as from Durham but there were a number of positive records which are all detailed below:

- A female was heard calling near a small rural village in the north of the county with surrounding woodland and farmland. She was heard on six dates from 21st January to 4th March. Tawny Owls were also recorded here around 150 metres distant from the Long-eared Owl.
- In a southern valley a male and a female were calling on 29th January with just the female heard on 4th February. The habitat comprised grazing land, copses, a small river, woodland and rough upland moorland. Tawny Owl and Buzzard were nearby.
- In central Lakeland a male was persistently calling on 7th March from upland coniferous woodland with adjacent rough moorland.
- In an eastern upland area a possible Long-eared Owl was seen heading for coniferous woodland within open moorland/rough grazing on 4th April. Another possible record nearby was of a male calling from coniferous woodland on 2nd March though the observer did have the honesty to admit that it could have been a dog!
- In a southern upland valley a male was heard calling on 31st January in coniferous woodland with unimproved pasture including isolated trees and marshland. Tawny Owls were heard nearby.
- In the south-east of the county a nesting pair were found on 31st March of which the latest news is that three young have hatched. The same observer also saw two birds wing clapping at a different location on 27th March. The habitat in both instances is of conifer plantation with rough grazing.
- At another location in the south-east again with conifers and moorland a bird was seen hunting a verge in broad daylight on 31st May. The owl put on a fantastic performance for the nearby observer and is a reminder that not all day hunting owls are necessarily short eared.
- There is also a site in north Lakeland that regularly holds two pairs in upland coniferous woodland but was unfortunately not possible to survey this year.

