

Use of Online Recording: LRC Case Studies

1 - Local site monitoring

A key service provided by LRCs is to give local recording groups and county recorders an opportunity to safely input and store their records. Not all local groups take up this opportunity though, preferring instead to run their own databases which may or may not be shared with the wider conservation community. However, the trend is for more and more groups to share records with an LRC, even if this is only a gradual process. In some places this process has been coupled by the use of an online recording system. One such example of this is with the volunteer wardens of a SSSI in northwest England.

The wardens for this site are all experienced ornithologists who participate in annual BTO surveys such as the Wetland Bird Survey and the Common Bird Census. Each year they produce a comprehensive annual report on the site, which not only covers birds, but also mentions the other species that they are able to identify (such as butterflies and dragonflies). For many years, the wardens collected their data, stored it in spreadsheets and then submitted these to one of their number who collated and formatted the data (for example by putting it in the "Voos" order). Much of the process of submission and formatting was made efficient by the use of template spreadsheets and documents, so that when it came to compiling the reports, the information could simply be dropped into the relevant sections. However, operating in this way did present a few problems. For example, data would need to be backed up on several individual computers, or hard copies stored. There is also the issue of volunteer time. The compilation of the final report relied on one volunteer having the time and expertise to do it all. When the volunteer was no longer able to commit this time, the group needed to find another solution.

Having seen the RECORD Online Data Input System (RODIS) demonstrated at events around the northwest region, one member of the wardens' group suggested that RODIS may be able to provide answers to their data and reporting problems. The rationale was that all the members of the group could input data straight into RODIS, where it would be stored securely and backed-up (including an offsite back-up). When it was time to produce the annual report (in the spring) the LRC would have the data to hand to format and send back to the group. There was a further advantage to this though in that it allowed the data to be shared with a wider community, and also for the wardens to gain any records submitted to the LRC by other people visiting the site.

A RODIS training session was provided to the wardens, with telephone and online support available. As some of the wardens had previous experience of RODIS, there was a degree of peer to peer support from within the group.

The wardens naturally recognised the conservation value of their records, and were pleased with the notion that they would be used, through the LRC, to inform local authority work, planning applications and be placed on the NBN Gateway. The wardens still pass their data on to the BTO through the annual surveys, but

this is not shared on the NBN Gateway routinely. However, the LRC data does appear on the Gateway, and so the wardens' data is shared through the LRC.

In this example, it can be shown how an online recording system primarily meets the data needs of a recording group, but also allows data to be shared easily with the wider community that otherwise wouldn't be shared.

2 - Bioblitzes

LRCs are often involved in bioblitzes, not just to receive and digitise the data after the event, but also to be proactively engaged in the data collection and collation. Several LRCs have been successful in using several online recording systems to input data live at the events, which can then be used to instantly produce statistics to analyse the taxonomic spread of the data as well as the numbers of designated species etc. The national Garden Bioblitz also follows a similar theme, but on a larger scale.

Most LRCs are now attending one or more bioblitzes a year, lending special expertise on how data from the event can be inputted, stored and analysed. Whilst the recorders themselves will have vast knowledge of the species they are identifying and recording, the LRC staff are able to provide the expertise in digitising, storing and analysing the records. Often a bioblitz may be set up to include an indoor area for refreshments and where there is an internet connection allowing records to be entered into an online data input system. Recorders will bring their records on paper, perhaps on prepared forms, where the LRC staff and volunteers are on hand to input the records into an OR system.

In the future, the most efficient way of submitting data at events like this will be to use a smart phone application where records reach an online database as soon as they are taken. However, this requires good geographical coverage of the high speed mobile broadband network, and many sites that are of interest for biodiversity recorders are outside of this coverage. In the meantime, inputting data from bioblitzes via a core of data inputters has the following advantages:

- The data is submitted quickly and correctly.
- There are no issues with internet connections.
- Fast submission of the data means it can be used to produce live statistics.
- These statistics can be used to provide a very large incentive to collect and submit more data.
- Interest is raised in online recording amongst recorders who may use it after the bioblitz.
- Records can be verified online either during the event or afterwards.
- Recorders are introduced to the concept of online recording, and may continue to share their data through an online recording system.

There are disadvantages to this system however:

- It is likely that records will build up in the system quickly and need a lot of work to get them all verified at a later date.

- Online verification may not work with the local verification systems.
- Hold-ups in verification may mean that data is not available for local use.
- A lack of internet connection has prevented the use of online recording at some bioblitz events.

3 - Conclusions

The two cases described above show how use of an online recording system can promote the collection of biodiversity data at a local level, and how this can be to the benefit of local groups and events. Things to think about for future implementations of online recording are:

- How can the necessary training be provided?
- How important is promotion of online recording by LRCs, or is peer to peer influence within a group more significant?
- How many people need to be trained in an area before they can become self supporting?
- Can offline versions of online recording systems be created to allow data input at sites where there is no internet connection?

Answering these questions will go some way to helping to understand how online recording can fit in with the many local groups and local events that generate a large proportion of the national biodiversity dataset. It will mean that data managers will be able to promote systems that are of benefit to those groups and use scarce resources effectively to increase data access and sharing.