



Back from the Brink -
Interim Evaluation of Species Monitoring
(Summary Version Only)

A report prepared for:
The BftB Partnership



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1 Executive summary

1. Back from the Brink (BftB) is a major, four-year, partnership programme that aims to save England's rarest and most threatened wildlife. At the core of the programme are 19 specific projects that focus on the needs of individual target species or particular habitats and geographical areas where many rare species are found.
2. Monitoring and evaluation is an important part of BftB and is being overseen by a Task and Finish Group (TFG). Just Ecology was appointed to encourage the adoption of a robust and effective scientific approach to monitoring in the BftB projects, as guided by the TFG.
3. In agreement with the TFG, Just Ecology's initial focus has been on the gathering of species status information in order to ascertain baseline status and how this might change in response to BftB activities. The aim is for some very basic information to be collected on species abundance and distribution, so that these simple population measures can be tracked within each of the BftB projects.
4. Work commenced in October 2017 and this interim evaluation report provides: a summary of the species monitoring methods that are being used for the BftB projects; an initial audit of supplied species monitoring plans; an overall evaluation of the supplied information; and, recommendations for future work. This report will feed into a wider interim evaluation of the whole BftB programme.
5. BftB monitoring is being focused on 111 primary species and BftB field methods have been documented with respect to the sites where monitoring will take place; the recording units; the frequency and timing of field visits; the methods; and the abundance and distribution metrics that can be generated from the data. This information has been audited with respect to whether there is reliable baseline information, fit-for-purpose methods, and whether reliable information on abundance and distribution can be generated.
6. Baseline surveys exist for nine of the 12 single-species projects and the supplied methods indicate that these will provide good baseline measures of relative abundance and/or distribution in the areas to be monitored by BftB. For the integrated projects, which are focusing on multiple species, complete baseline surveys are generally not available.
7. BftB survey methodologies for on-going monitoring within the single-species projects have been mostly well described. Only for the lesser butterfly orchid is further information required. For the single-species projects, the metrics agreed for abundance and distribution can be reliably calculated from the BftB monitoring method, and often from the baseline survey also that pre-dates BftB. Some are surrogates, however, that allow only an approximate measure of abundance and distribution to be reported.
8. None of the integrated projects have provided a full set of monitoring methods for all of the included species. There are gaps in the supplied information, summarised

in Table 2-7 below (Page 26). Further work is required for some species in some projects on the selected abundance and distribution metrics, for full compliance to be achieved.

9. For the overall evaluation of the BftB species monitoring programme, highlighted shortcomings relate to gaps in the supplied information (above) but also the difficulty in establishing pre-BftB baselines and the constraints on resources for this aspect of the BftB programme.
10. An overall weakness of the programme is that comprehensive baselines will only be available for a small number of the included species. A compilation of pre-existing records for each species will provide useful context but is not likely to be complete for these rare species. The remedy, and a potential important legacy, will be for BftB surveys and monitoring to provide the definitive baseline for each of the included species, at least for the included sites.
11. There remains some uncertainty, in some instances, about which sites are to be monitored for particular species. Ideally, this needs to be resolved with urgency so that these sites can be included and can receive repeat monitoring visits. It is important to have a definitive set of maps that show monitoring site boundaries and the recording units within sites for each project and species. These maps should be stored together with the BftB monitoring data and it is essential that the data are clearly attributable to sites and the recording units.
12. There is also some uncertainty over which species will be monitored in which years of BftB meaning that the overall survey effort for each species is unclear. This needs to be clarified for all species. Similarly, the number of visits per year per species is not always clear and is sometimes caveated. These aspects should be clarified with the project teams during the next phase of work.
13. Whilst there appears to be 'fit-for-purpose' methodology in place for the ongoing monitoring of most of the selected primary species, the amount of detail that has been provided by the project leads is variable. It would be ideal for protocols and recording forms to be available for all BftB primary species, with consistency in the amount of detail, and consistency for species 'shared' by projects, where appropriate. This information should be stored with the BftB data and maps and would be an important part of the legacy of the project.
14. The derived methods were intended to provide, where possible, reliable estimates of abundance and distribution for the included species over time. This would allow the 'fortunes' of the species to be tracked, both through BftB and subsequently. Great effort has been made to ensure that this is the case but there are a few areas where the derived and reported metrics can be improved.
15. Some project leads have indicated that the resources are not available to undertake an 'ideal' level of baseline survey and monitoring for all of the included species. This point has been noted and acknowledged. Understandably, the design of the monitoring has proceeded at a relatively slow pace given all the demands placed on the relatively few project staff. A reliance on volunteers, in many cases, has given

rise to uncertainties over the amount of species monitoring that can be achieved. The provision of additional resources to this aspect of the programme is the obvious remedy although it would be a challenge to ensure that this had the desired impact at this stage in the overall programme.

16. Several areas for future work have been detailed and these will need to be discussed by the TFG, prioritised and resourced.
17. In the absence of any form of annual monitoring report, it needs to be confirmed which of the primary species were actually monitored in 2018, the first year of BftB. The extent to which reliable baselines have been assembled for each species should also be clarified, and whether these provide robust information on both abundance and distribution. It is also important to know whether these baselines would allow a reliable back-calculation for the BftB abundance and distribution metrics, which would allow comparisons with the metrics from the BftB programme.
18. There are gaps in the monitoring information that need to be filled, as detailed above. Definitive information is required for the *lesser butterfly orchid project*; mapping is required from the integrated projects; and there is further work to do on the BftB metrics. Other gaps in species monitoring information have been highlighted, including, in some cases, decisions on monitoring sites, the frequency of monitoring and further provision of protocols and recording forms.
19. Annual audit of the species monitoring activity is recommended with the audit sheets updated accordingly. Continuation of the audits will require agreement on some annual reporting of species monitoring information to an appropriate timetable. It will require reporting of the agreed metrics and back-calculation of the metrics to baselines, where possible. The focus of these audits, and the mechanisms involved, will need to be discussed and agreed with the TFG.
20. The importance of maps that show areas of search and where data are collected has been stressed. A GIS-based application is recommended as an output from BftB. The application should allow for correct capture of new sites and potential changes to site boundaries and recording units into the future. Mapped units should relate to the data collected for each species for those units. Resource would need to be allocated accordingly.
21. There needs to be agreement on whether a central collation of BftB monitoring data is desirable or whether the data will be stored by the BftB partners. There needs to be agreement on the sharing of records, e.g. with partners, members of the public and data custodians such as Local Record Centres, National Recording Schemes, the National Biodiversity Network *etc.*. The audiences, mechanisms and timetable for data sharing need to be agreed. It is expected that there will be public interest in the monitoring results and so the reporting of results should feed effectively into BftB's communications strategy.
22. Whilst the single-species projects have indicated the Recovery Curve (RC) positions they are adopting for the BftB baseline, only two of the integrated project teams (*Dorset Heathlands* and *Gems in the Dunes*) have so far indicated that they are adopting the Taxon Group's national RC scores for their species, for the baseline. It

needs to be clarified whether the other projects are doing the same or whether they propose any adjustments. It is important to know what the baselines scores are before reporting any changes in status. Going forward, any changes proposed for RC positions that arise on account of the monitoring information need to be communicated, with justifications, so that they can be considered by the Taxon Groups and, where appropriate, approved.

23. A key purpose of BftB is to measurably improve the conservation prospects of the included species. It follows that monitoring data should assist with identifying where, and the extent to which, this has been achieved. It is suggested that the monitoring of abundance and distribution, and positioning on the RC, are separate processes. The first is important in order to demonstrate a species response, e.g. to habitat creation or management, where possible. The second is more about where we are with conservation actions for a particular species or species assemblage. BftB will provide part of the information for RC assessments. Data from other programmes in England will be equally important in many cases and will allow Taxon Groups to derive an overall picture of the species nationally.
24. During the BftB programme, valuable data will be gathered both on the distribution and abundance of rare species, which hopefully should see an improvement during the life of the project. If the programme lifetime is too short to see any changes, the information gathered will give us a better baseline from which to assess the legacy of the programme and will aid future data analysis and the conservation management of the included species.
25. Implementation of all of the above recommended work is a significant investment, although all of the above activities are worthwhile components within the scope of BftB. The value of implementation of these tasks needs discussion with the TFG, with prioritisation and the allocation of resources where necessary. Engagement from the BftB project leads will be important.