

# WeBSnews

The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey



CALCULATING  
CORE COUNT  
DATES  
See page 16



CHANGING FORTUNES FOR GEESE AND SWANS 8



AN IRISH HAVEN 4



INTERNATIONAL WATERBIRD CENSUS 17

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## ALSO INSIDE

- 01 BE ALERT TO CHANGES WITH THE WEBS REPORT
- 02 FROM THE EDITOR
- 04 WEBS SITE IN THE SPOTLIGHT
- 06 RECOLLECTIONS
- 07 LOAC UPDATE
- 08 GSMP UPDATE
- 10 AEW MEETING OUTCOMES
- 12 LOW TIDE UPDATE
- 13 WEBS ONLINE HELP
- 14 STARTING TO COUNT
- 16 RECLAIMING THE LAND
- 16 CALCULATING COUNT DATES
- 17 INTERNATIONAL WATERBIRD CENSUS
- 18 LOCAL ORGANISER UPDATE
- 20 BACKCHAT

**PLUS** WeBS WHO'S WHO, CORE COUNT DATES & NEWS



## Be 'Alert' to changes with the WeBS report

As introduced in the last edition of *WeBS News*, 2013 sees changes to how WeBS is reporting its results. We will continue to produce an annual paper report *Waterbirds in the UK*, packed with the latest results from monitoring of waterbirds in the UK and the wider flyway.

The WeBS Report has been a much anticipated annual feature, but now an online WeBS report will also be available, accessible through a new WeBS Online reporting interface. Work on this is progressing well, and the new *WeBS Alerts* report is already available via the new interface. If you've not already done so, check out [www.bto.org/webs/alerts](http://www.bto.org/webs/alerts)

The WeBS Alerts provide a periodic assessment of changes in the over-winter numbers of 40 widespread waterbird species in the UK, over a range of spatial and temporal scales. This assessment is based on an "Alerts System", providing a standardised technique with which to monitor these changes and triggering Alerts where declines exceed pre-defined levels. There is currently a three-year ▶

## FROM THE EDITOR

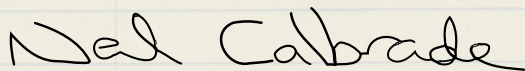
## Welcome...

...to the latest issue of *WeBS News*.

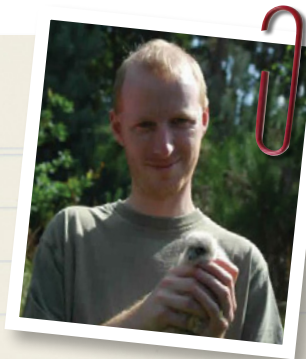
Following what was generally a mild winter, spring has begun with more winter-like conditions with snow still lying on the ground as I write this. I recently saw my first Stone-curlew of the year in a blizzard, it must have been wondering why it had returned!

In this issue we hear the experiences of two WeBS counters who have contributed to the survey for contrasting periods of time, with one detailing his first WeBS count and another his memories of 10 years of counts.

This year we launch the new eagerly awaited online WeBS reporting, which will allow us to produce results for individual countries and even at a county level. Following this, the new look WeBS report will be out in the autumn which we hope you will enjoy as much as its predecessor.



**Neil Calbrade** Editor & WeBS National Organiser



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## NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION

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The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK, which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data collected are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution and identify and monitor important sites for waterbirds. A programme of research underpins these objectives. Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. WeBS is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the latter on behalf of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, Natural Resources Wales, Natural England and Scottish Natural Heritage) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.



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## CONTINUED FROM COVER

timetable for Alerts reporting; this latest release incorporates data up to 2009/10. The Alerts are an advisory tool. Subject to interpretation, they can be used as a consistent basis on which to direct hypothesis-based research and subsequent conservation efforts if required. The Alerts system has been developed to assist and direct monitoring on designated sites, as well as providing contextual information for interpreting changes in site numbers. Thus, Alerts assessments are undertaken and reported at

1. a national level (using all sites monitored by WeBS in Great Britain, each of the constituent countries of the UK, and for the SPA suite for each species), and
2. at the site level (for individual SPAs, SSSIs and ASSIs where

waterbirds are designated features and for which there are suitable WeBS data).

## How are Alerts calculated?

The first task is to calculate proportional changes in the smoothed index value over short- (five-year), medium- (10-year) and long- (25-year) term, and, for SPAs, since-designation time-frames are categorised according to their magnitude and direction. Population declines of between 25% and 50% trigger Medium Alerts and declines of greater than 50% trigger High Alerts. Although they do not trigger Alerts as such, increases of 33% and 100% (values chosen to be those necessary to return numbers to their former size following declines of 25% and 50% respectively) are also ►

identified.

### Importance for evaluating protected sites

In the report, we provide an overview across the SPA suite for each species. For each of these, there is a summary of all Alerts that have been triggered followed by a species by species breakdown that includes a short description of trends with plots showing indices and smoothed trends for that species. Analysis using the three time-frames is very useful in examining broad patterns of change at a national level. The map below shows the WeBS Alerts assessment on all SPAs over the short term. Each pie chart represents an SPA with the size being proportional to the number of waterbird species for which that SPA is designated. The charts are divided according to the number of species which fall within the different Alerts categories: red, orange, white and green. In general, it appears that sites in the east of the UK are faring slightly

better than those in the west. Although this could be associated with subtle changes taking place in distributions of wildfowl and waders, in response to climate change, it is important that the results are examined on a site by site basis and that local issues are therefore not overlooked; the very ethos of the WeBS Alerts system.

### Alerts and 'the SPA review'

The SPA review is a comprehensive review of the UK's SPAs undertaken every few years by JNCC. The most recent review was by Stroud *et al.* (2001), and is currently in the process of being updated. The SPA review is distinct from the *WeBS Alerts*, but the two are clearly complementary. The Alerts provide vital information for the overall assessment of how protected sites in the UK are faring.

Although the primary focus of WeBS is to monitor the UK's waterbirds in winter, WeBS counters should be aware that, for some species, sites are often designated as being of

particular conservation importance as a result of the numbers of birds using them at other times of year. For example, numbers of some waders often reach their peaks on favoured estuaries during passage periods rather than the core winter period; notable spring peaks include northbound Dunlins on the Mersey, and, in particular, the aggregations of Sanderling and Ringed Plover on the Ribble.

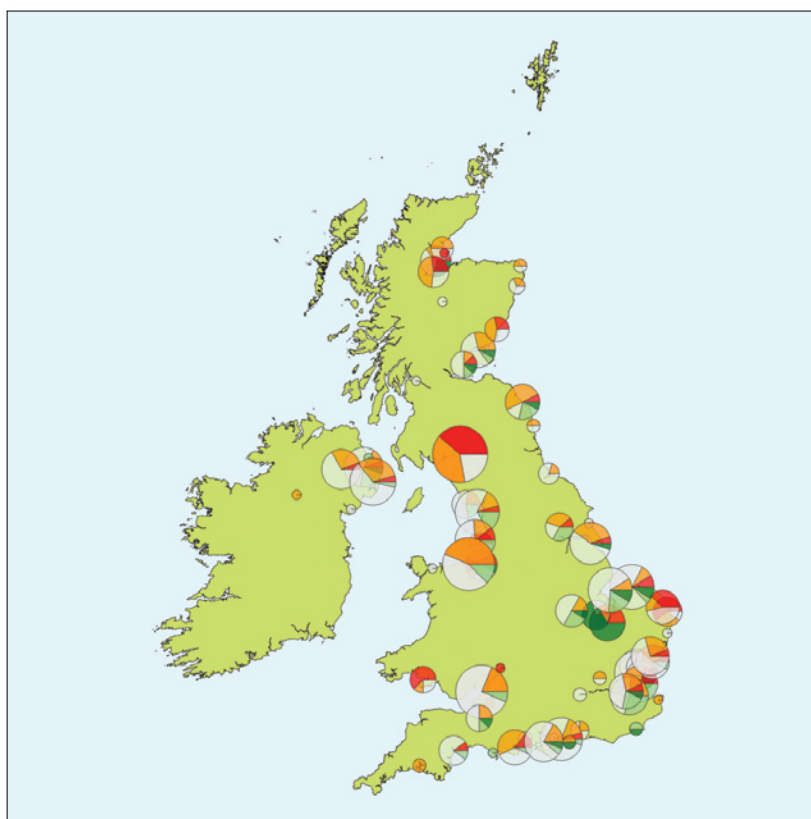
It is important that, wherever possible, WeBS counts are undertaken during the appropriate months in order to gather data representative of these important periods, as well as during the core winter months. Similarly, there are some sites where, although parts of the site have thorough WeBS coverage, the designated area, as defined by an SPA boundary, is in fact relatively poorly monitored by the survey. In these situations, it would clearly be beneficial if any additional WeBS coverage at the site can be directed towards the presently uncounted areas.

As part of the development work which we are carrying out within WeBS and in association with the on-going JNCC-led SPA review, we will be looking to identify sites where these are particularly pertinent issues. When opportunities arise, we can then try to optimise WeBS coverage accordingly, both spatially and temporally.

### References

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**Stroud, D.A., Chambers, D., Cook, S., Buxton, N., Fraser, B., Clement, P., Lewis, P., McLean, I., Baker, H. & Whitehead, S.** 2001. *The UK SPA network: its scope and content*. JNCC, Peterborough.



▲ Short-term pie charts showing the Alert status of waterbird species for which the SPA is designated. Red = High Alert (>50% decline), Orange = Medium Alert (25-50% decline), White = no change, Light Green = increase of over 33% and Dark Green = increase of over 100%.



## WEBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT



# Strangford Lough

Nestled in the southeast corner of County Down, Strangford Lough is Northern Ireland's premier waterbird site; the past 50 years have seen many changes.

Kerry Mackie WWT

Strangford Lough lies on the eastern seaboard of County Down, Northern Ireland, and is a mere 30 minutes drive from downtown Belfast. It is the largest inlet in Britain and Ireland, stretching 17 miles north to south, and four miles at its widest point, covering an area of 150 square kilometres, half of which is intertidal. With every tide, 350 million cubic meters of seawater flows through a five-mile channel known as the 'Narrows', the lough's only link to the Irish Sea. The tide race here boasts an eight-knot current with every ebb and flow, testing even the most experienced yachtsmen, including the Vikings who gave the lough its Old Norse name of "Strang fjord" (strong fjord).

The Old Irish name "Loch Cuan", meaning "quiet lough" or "lough of harbours", better describes the lough's interior with its scattered drumlin islands, sheltered bays and mudflats. The largest mudflats extend to cover the northwestern corner, while the eastern shore, weather-beaten and characterised by a rocky shoreline, is fringed by a myriad of reefs - remnant islands - known locally as "pladdies". There are two estuaries on the western side of the lough - the Comber Estuary where the River Enler meanders through salt marsh before crossing a mile of mudflat to the tide edge, and the larger Quoile Estuary, into which the River Quoile flows into the southwestern corner of the lough at

Downpatrick. The latter, a town once navigable by boat, is protected these days from flooding by a tidal barrage, behind which an expanse of freshwater now covers the former estuary.

Other more extensive sea walls were built along the northern mudflats in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, turning large areas of slobland into farmland and providing flood control to one of Strangford's largest towns, Newtownards. Smaller towns, such as Killyleagh, Kircubbin and Comber, have grown either as market towns or minor ports, whereas villages such as Ardmillan owe their origins to fishing, and Greyabbey to an ecclesiastic order. Farming is the main land use around the lough, taking advantage of the Gulf Stream to produce early season produce. Other past industries included not only herring and clam fishing, but also professional wildfowling, with the use of punt guns to bring quarry such as Brent geese and Wigeon to the Belfast market. Light-bellied Brent Geese were abundant until the early 1930's, at which point they started to decline when the eelgrass they fed on became affected by disease. Without any bird counts from this period, we do not know their exact numbers. However, some anecdotal information such as an observation of 10,000 Light-bellied Brent geese by Sir Peter Scott, in November 1934, is likely a conservative benchmark as early shooting records suggest seasonal peaks occurred much later in winter. It was not until 1950, when the first series of bird counts began, under the National Wildfowl Enquiry, coordinated in Northern Ireland by the prominent wildfowler/ornithologist Lancelot Turtle, that the extent of this

### The importance of Strangford Lough

Peak counts of internationally and nationally important species between 2006/07 and 2010/11

SPECIES	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Mute Swan	(59)	252	111	221	186
Whooper Swan	199	432	251	183	319
Light-b Brent Goose	24,658	30,457	20,702	21,375	33,750
Shelduck	3,413	6,084	5,583	3,069	3,101
Wigeon	3,476	1,582	1,540	1,559	2,178
Pintail	496	395	449	487	301
Eider	728	551	784	613	463
Goldeneye	83	237	181	139	471
Oystercatcher	6,842	8,689	9,575	8,513	7,910
Ringed Plover	278	227	277	288	(86)
Golden Plover	8,513	8,817	11,328	7,435	2,522
Grey Plover	141	118	84	204	44
Lapwing	5,154	3,906	5,198	5,110	4,869
Knot	5,380	7,360	6,376	7,452	2,807
Dunlin	3,151	4,115	4,455	2,514	4,384
Black-tailed Godwit	535	645	707	193	455
Bar-tailed Godwit	529	(1,305)	969	1,158	436
Curlew	1,918	1,552	1,571	2,040	1,504
Redshank	3,632	4,028	4,969	4,488	3,286



**The expansive saltmarsh and mudflats are a magnet for thousands of wintering waterbirds**



ALL PHOTOS BY WWT

decline could be realised. Strangford's total that year being a mere 500, with protection following shortly thereafter. Wildfowl counts continued sporadically during the late 1950's and early 60's thanks to individuals such as the wildlife artist Bob Milliken, who was still counting his local area around Greyabbey until a few years ago, when in his late eighties.

The pioneering initiative of the National Trust, local wildfowling clubs under Wildfowling Association of Great Britain and Ireland and concerned conservationists led to the launch, in 1966, of the Strangford Lough Wildlife Scheme by the Duke of Edinburgh. This scheme incorporated refuge designation, active wardening, shooting regulation and the first monthly winter counts to include both wildfowl and waders.

It is coordinated by a founding member, Paddy Mackie, to this day. The lough's 70 count zones have changed little since this time, unless accommodating for new refuge boundaries. The number of dedicated counters has remained between 25 and 30, and has included volunteer naturalists, wildfowling wardens (NT, NIEA, WWT, RSPB, UWT). Core counts are coordinated to start three hours before high water, on a Sunday, mid month, and preferably in the morning when disturbance tends to be low. Most count zones can be covered from the many roadside lay-bys around the lough or from the vantage point of drumlin tops, with a few blind promontories on the eastern side walked by the sure-footed. Many islands and rocks can be scanned with telescopes from the periphery,

however, the cluster of islands along the western edge requires a National Trust boat. Data, in the form of species summaries, historical context and commentary on observed trends, provides feedback to counters prior to the start of the next counting season. Some counters are also involved in the Strangford low water count coordinated by the National Trust from 1992. This additional count has helped to investigate how different species use the intertidal zone, and the importance of the lough to species like Golden Plover and Lapwing, that have largely dispersed landwards long before core counts are completed.

What have we learned from nearly 50 years of continuous bird counts? Strangford Lough is certainly the most important wintering area for waterfowl on the island of Ireland. It is currently ranked twelfth in the UK with up to 80,000 waterfowl overwintering annually. It is also internationally important for Light-bellied Brent Geese, Knot, Redshank, Whooper Swan, Mute Swan and Shelduck, and is nationally important for a further 19 species. Change, both regionally and at a flyway level, has led to changes in species abundance over time. Wigeon, once in their tens of thousands, have dwindled to a trickle - a trend also seen to some extent with Knot, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwit. In contrast, there have been dramatic increases in Eider, Shelduck, Black-tailed Godwit and the gradual recovery of Brent Geese, now in numbers similar to those last seen by the punt gunners of the 1920's.

To keep the show on the road, gentle recruitment of counters is ongoing, helped along by the volunteer networks of the National Trust and Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, and recent support from the BTO with Shane Wolsey's bird monitoring workshops. Conservation of Strangford, although underpinned by multiple designations from Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and Marine Nature Reserves to mention a few, is closely linked to the ecology of its diverse assemblage of birds, the monitoring of which, through WeBS, is, quite simply, fundamental.



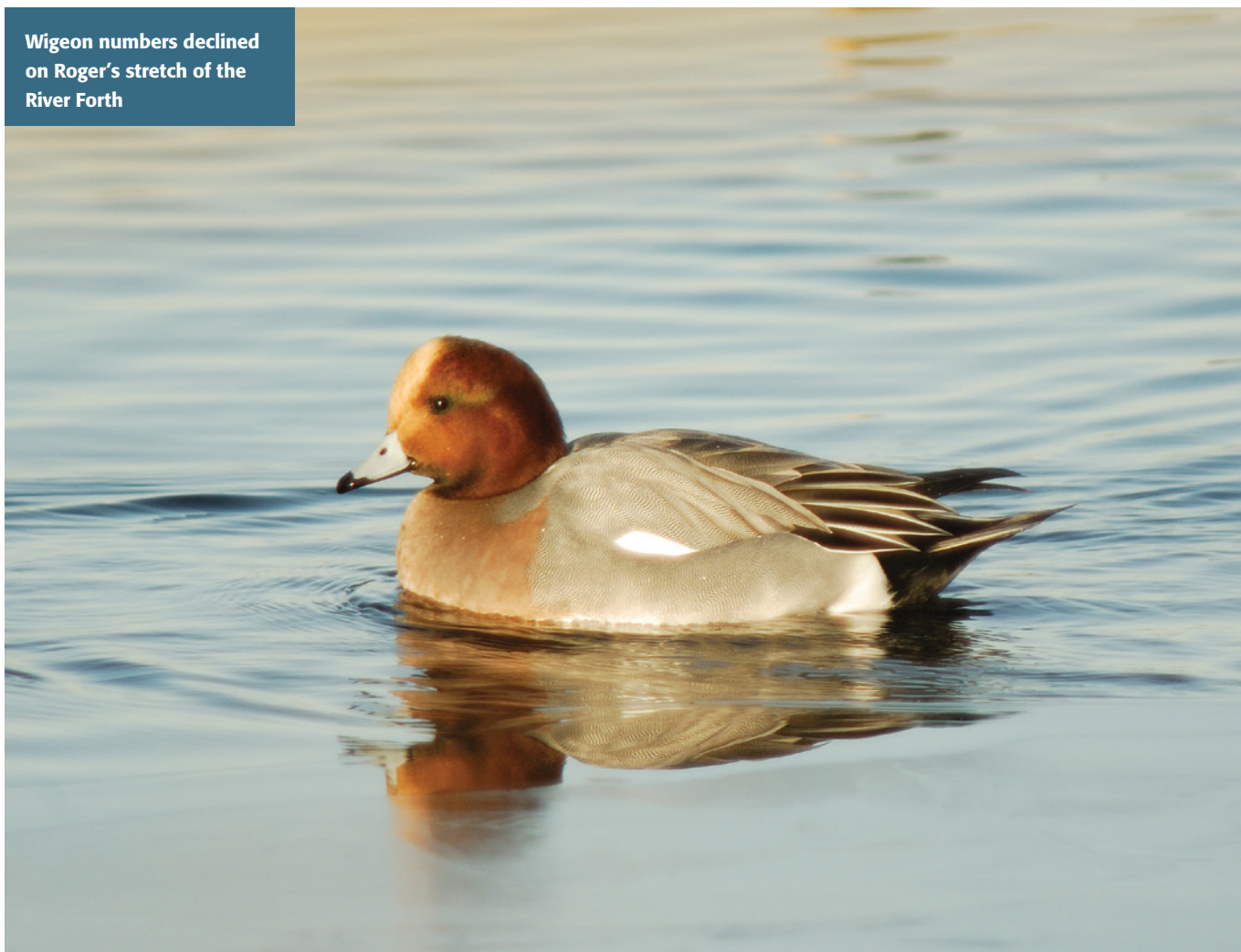


## Recollections of a WeBS counter

When Roger Chapman was asked to count a stretch of river near Stirling, he had no idea how much enjoyment could be had from carrying out WeBS Counts...

**Roger Chapman** Retired WeBS Counter

Wigeon numbers declined on Roger's stretch of the River Forth



NEIL CALGRADE

Until I moved north to Stirling in 1994, after my retirement, I had never carried out any bird census activity. I got my chance in 1995 when I became involved in setting up a new RSPB Local Group in the Forth Valley and met Neil Bielby, the WeBS LO for Central Scotland. He was on a recruiting drive to improve the region's WeBS coverage and he buttonholed me

as a prospective new counter. I was not very confident of my bird identification skills but I thought I could cope with wildfowl and other wetland birds much better than small birds flitting about in bushes and treetops so I agreed to have a go at core counting, starting in September of that year. The site he assigned to me was perhaps untypical for WeBS, being a linear count along part of the upper

reaches of the River Forth, where the river meanders through the flat Carse of Stirling and is never more than 40 metres in width. The total distance, as the counter walks, is about 8 km, finishing at the confluence with the River Teith just above Stirling – where the tidal part of the river begins. My first activity was to survey the site and seek permission from each of the farmers along the south (right) bank

of the river - chosen so as generally to have the sun at my back. The landowners were all very supportive and some of them told me about the birds they had seen themselves. From the start I realised that the survey route would present some problems, particularly when the river and its tributaries were high. Much of the route is good open walking but where the side streams come in and farm boundaries occur it can become more like an assault course. There are deep ditches, thorny hedges and barbed wire fences to contend with and the state of the banks varies from month to month. Sometimes big diversions back to the road or the intervening line of an old railway embankment were called for and the whole count could scarcely be completed in less than four hours. Luckily, I was able to call on my wife to drive me to the start point and pick me up at the finish - often in a weary and dishevelled state.

But what about the birds? My abiding memory is of the geese - great skeins of them criss-crossing the Carse - often against a backdrop of the snowy Trossachs and Menteith Hills to the north. They were mostly Pink-

feet but there were a good number of Greylags too. Sometimes I found them on the ground on my patch and then they figured in my counts but, of course, such casual WeBS sightings are not the primary method of goose census.

Looking back, I can see that the most significant counts were of the wintering ducks on the river - primarily Wigeon and Teal. They usually began arriving in October and built up until February. I could generally hear them around the next bend - Teal whistling and Wigeon giving their characteristic two-note whoop. In the peak year (2001/2) there were more than 500 Teal and 400 Wigeon but it was more usually up to two hundred of each. After about 2003/4 numbers began to decline significantly until I was lucky to see 50 of each by the time I relinquished the count in 2010/11. I've no idea of the cause or significance of this decline. The other highlight of the season was the arrival of small groups of Whooper Swans. There were usually no more than two dozen but I regarded them as the climax sighting of the year. Of course, these numbers of

winter visitors were dwarfed by counts on the big lochs and estuaries but they were surely significant in their own right.

Walking the course of the river produced sightings of many other birds, such as Snipe - counted - and winter thrushes - just admired. Brown Hares were quite common and there were occasional Roe Deer in the thickets along the old railway track and river bank. There was plenty of farmers' stock to bypass carefully and once I had the privilege of freeing a sheep that had become badly entangled in bramble.

To anybody who is contemplating doing a WeBS count I would say "Jump at the chance" - though you will be lucky to secure a patch as good as the one I counted for 16 years.

## LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff providing ideas, feedback and advice.

One issue raised during the last meeting is that there are still several hundred forms being processed by the WeBS office each year. A large proportion of Local Organisers already input the data from forms for their region. However, there are some Local Organisers who are unable to input the data themselves and who would welcome a volunteer to input the data for them. Having regional inputters would reduce the processing costs but would also mean that the data are more readily available for County Bird Recorders who need the data from forms a lot sooner than we can currently provide them.

If you would like to volunteer to

input the data from the forms for your region please contact your Local Organiser.

The next meeting of the WeBS LOAC is scheduled to be held at the Nunnery on 16th July 2013. The minutes from previous meetings are available via the website at [www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/about-webs/webs-local-advisory-committee-loac](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/about-webs/webs-local-advisory-committee-loac)

As always we are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future. If you would like to know more about what is involved please contact Heidi.

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS which you would like to be brought to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your Local Organiser or LOAC Regional Representative listed here.

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# GSMP Update

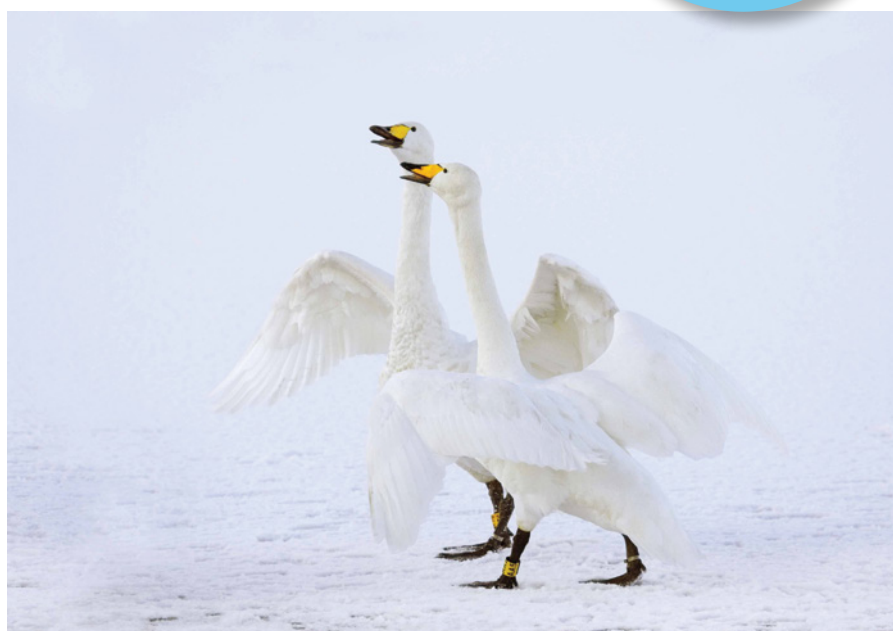
Monitoring of wintering geese and swans in 2011/12, through the WWT/JNCC/SNH Goose & Swan Monitoring Partnership (GSMP) network revealed mixed fortunes for populations coming from the east and west.

## Kane Brides WWT

Assessments of the numbers and annual breeding success of nine wintering goose populations and two species of swan revealed that, on average, Russian breeding populations experienced favourable conditions and good breeding success, whereas Icelandic breeding populations generally had low breeding success, though there were exceptions in both regions. Reports coming from monitoring stations in the breeding grounds in arctic Russia indicated that rodent and predator numbers were generally low in 2011, thus it seems likely that the low predator abundance allowed **European White-fronted Geese** and **Dark-bellied Brent Geese** to raise good numbers of young. However, interestingly this was not the case for **Bewick's Swan** which breeds in the same area, though we do not understand why this is. Poor weather in Iceland also affected the breeding performance of **Pink-footed Goose** and **Whooper Swan**, though migrant **Greylag Geese** seemed not to have been impacted.

The 2011 Icelandic-breeding Goose Census revealed an 8.1% increase in the number of **Iceland Greylag Geese** compared to 2010. This is the highest estimate since the decline in the 1990s, and brings this population back to the numbers found in the late 1980s. Age ratio assessments made during early November at various localities on Orkney and in southern Iceland revealed that breeding success was slightly lower than the recent average but still relatively good, with flocks containing 19.6% young.

In Scotland, these Icelandic birds join the resident **British Greylags**, which are monitored annually at key



EDMUND FELLOWES

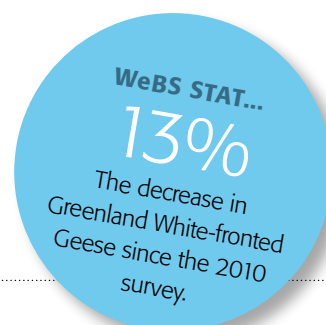
**Whooper Swans suffered poor breeding performance due to poor weather**

areas within north and west Scotland, namely the Uists (Outer Hebrides) and on Tiree (Inner Hebrides). Between the 1980s and the mid 2000s, numbers of birds at these two locations steadily increased, but on the Uists they now show signs of levelling and, on Tiree, numbers are steadily decreasing, due to active management measures to reduce conflict with agriculture.

The last weeks of September 2011 brought exceptionally warm conditions to northern Britain and an estimated 20,000 **Pink-footed Geese** remained in Iceland in early October. Given that most of the geese remain in the remote interior of Iceland; this figure must be treated as an underestimate. Therefore, it is likely that the autumn census was an underestimate of total numbers as the population figure was 17% lower than in 2010, and a third lower

than the 2009 population estimate. However, coverage of roosts was good and also breeding success in 2011 was extremely poor and in fact the lowest recorded since 1977, with autumn flocks containing just 8.5% young, and a mean brood size of 1.77 goslings per successful pair. As reported later for Whooper Swan, the poor breeding performance is likely to be due to poor weather conditions during June, when there was a late and widespread snowfall. Therefore, it is likely that there has been a significant reduction in the number of Pinkfeet. However, given the delayed migration in 2011, it also seems probable it is not as great as the counts suggest. The results from the 2012 census are therefore awaited with anticipation.

Both populations of **Barnacle Goose** seem to be faring better. The first 16 **Svalbard Barnacle Geese**





were observed on the Solway Firth on the 24<sup>th</sup> September, with numbers gradually increasing through October to a maximum count of 35,727 in March 2012. Breeding success among flocks on the Inner Solway ranged from 6.1% to 23.5%, with a mean of 13.9% young; with the ten year mean at 9% this is above average. The maximum count of **Greenland Barnacle Geese** wintering on Islay, the key area in Scotland, was 46,412 birds, which is 3.5% higher than the peak in the previous winter and the second successive increase following a period of decline during 2006-2010. Elsewhere, counts from other strong holds saw the highest ever winter peak on Tiree with 4,295 birds. On the Uists 3,719 geese were counted, with 1,932 at South Walls, Orkney, 532 birds being the peak count on Danna and 740 birds counted from Colonsay/Oronsay. This population experienced another reasonably good breeding season in 2011, with around 11% young, and this probably accounts for the slight increase in numbers at key sites in Scotland.

Internationally coordinated surveys indicate that the population of **East Atlantic Light-bellied Brent Geese** has fallen below 6,000 birds in recent years. Britain supports around one half of the total population (all at Lindisfarne, though numbers fluctuate between years), with Denmark supporting the remainder. Coordinated age ratios at Lindisfarne and sites in Denmark revealed an overall estimate of 4.4% young. Low breeding success in this population is increasingly common and a cause for concern, but the reasons are not well understood.

Counts carried out by the **Greenland White-fronted Goose** Study entered their 30<sup>th</sup> year – congratulations GWGS! The census in spring 2012 carried out across wintering sites in Britain and Ireland gave an overall population estimate of 22,403, a decrease of 13% compared to surveys carried out in 2010, this population estimate being the lowest since the late eighties. The overall percentage of young was 8.8%, this being over 12% lower than the previous year (which was the most successful year recorded) but



GRAHAM CATELEY (HTTP://GCATELEY.FOLIO.COM)

**Pink-footed Geese were late arriving in the UK due to warm weather in Iceland.**

importantly also below the 10-year average. Low breeding success is driving the decline in this population and it is crucial that ongoing research gains an understanding of what has caused the poor breeding success in this population over the past 15 years.

The breeding success of **European White-fronted Geese**, wintering at three localities in England, was high, with 35% young in these flocks, an increase of 9.2% on 2010/11. However, data collected in Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium, where most of this population winters, show that 20.7% of flocks were young birds. Within these countries, the percentage of young birds differed, being lowest in Germany (19.2%) and the Netherlands (19.5%) and higher in Belgium (31.7%). Thus the proportion of young recorded in Britain (35%) fits the pattern showing that birds wintering on the south western edge of the range are more successful. This is due to the carry-over effect of birds wintering in the UK returning to their breeding grounds in better condition than from elsewhere. Data collected in Britain during 2011/12 indicated that the breeding success of **Dark-bellied Brent Geese**, at 16.2%, was also above the recent average (9.5%) and 3.5% higher than the previous year.

**Bewick's Swan** age counts were conducted at three major wintering sites for the species in Britain during winter 2011/12. Overall, flocks contained 11.9% cygnets and the

mean brood size of pairs with young was 1.9 cygnets, indicating that breeding success was again relatively poor in 2011. Although annual breeding success has improved since the exceptionally poor breeding season in 2007 (4.7%), the percentage of young in British wintering flocks remains at less than 15% on average.

Age counts for the Icelandic population of **Whooper Swan** covered a much broader area, with counts being received from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. A total of 14,435 birds were aged, with an overall total of 12.5% young and a mean brood size for pairs with young being 2.0 cygnets. This relatively poor breeding success was most probably influenced by cold conditions encountered across much of Iceland in June, with snow affecting many areas.

Full species accounts and reports, along with more information about the GSMP, can be found on the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust's website at [www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring](http://www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring) where it is also possible to download the annual GSMP newsletter, *GooseNews*, and other more detailed reports. Many thanks, as always, go to the network of volunteers who contribute to GSMP.

# Poor progress to conserve migratory waterbirds

Parties to the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) gathered in La Rochelle last May for the fifth Meeting of Parties (MoP), but reported little progress.

**David Stroud** JNCC and **Richard Hearn** & **Ruth Cromie** WWT

**DETAILED DATA...**  
Further information on MoP 5 outcomes:  
[http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop5\\_docs/mop5.htm](http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop5_docs/mop5.htm)

**A**EWAs are a key legal instrument for waterbird conservation in Europe and Africa, and the UK has been a Party since AEWA was established in 1999. Among many other things, the Agreement recognises “the need to take immediate action to stop the decline of migratory waterbird species and their habitats...”, and its Parties have undertaken to “...take coordinated measures to maintain migratory waterbird species in a favourable conservation status or to restore them to such a status”.

Previous MoPs have defined and prioritised the necessary actions to achieve these objectives, both through the development of a Strategic Plan and reporting systems that allow assessment of waterbird status and progress. MoP 5 saw the first comprehensive assessment of progress against AEWA’s Strategic Plan – a total of 26 targets were assessed using 35 quantifiable indicators. The formal assessment of progress stated that “With 2/3 of the indicators either not achieved or with limited progress, the overall progress towards achieving the Strategic Plan goal has been assessed as very insufficient. Only one indicator [was] achieved.” The 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the ‘Review of Status of African-Eurasian Waterbirds’ shows that a further 20 populations are now in unfavourable conservation status, with those in west Asia and the Afrotropical region having particularly poor status, at least to the extent this is known because knowledge of status in these regions is especially poor. This indicates that despite much good work undertaken by Contracting Parties to AEWA, the scale of responses is still far too little to address the major pressures and threats

**Pathologist Martin Brown finds lead shot in the gizzard contents of a lead poisoned Whooper Swan**



WWT

to migratory waterbird populations.

Among the key issues for consideration by Parties at MoP 5, some of which resulted in formal Resolutions, included:

- following discussions at MoP3 and MoP4, review again the need for sustainable long-term funding mechanisms for monitoring of waterbird status at international scales;
- the slow progress in phasing out the use of lead gunshot in

wetlands;

- to review existing, and adopt further, single-species action plans (notably for UK, including Bewick’s Swan and Greenland White-fronted Goose);
- the inclusion of European seaducks as conservation priorities for the next triennium (2013-15); and
- negative effects of power-lines on migratory waterbirds.

Unfortunately, despite the wide

recognition of the importance of adequate assessment of the status of waterbird populations (including for AEWA's own Conservation Status Report, produced every three years), the proposal by Switzerland for a 2% increase in national contributions to be ring-fenced for the International Waterbird Census (IWC) was not approved. A weak Resolution resulted, that urges Parties to make voluntary contributions, and for the issue to be revisited at MoP6 in 2015. Fortunately, Wetlands International recently secured short-term funding from the MAVA Foundation for the next few years, and consequently excellent progress with IWC development is now being made. The issue of ensuring sustainable long-term funding for IWC remains.

The issue of the phasing out of toxic lead shot in wetlands was addressed throughout the Meeting with well attended discussions that highlighted the continuing issue of lead poisoning of waterbirds, a case study of poor compliance with English regulations, and the barriers to transition to the non-toxic alternatives to lead from the hunting perspective. The presentation on the chronology of both the science of understanding of lead poisoning and the policy responses represented a rather depressing picture of desperately slow progress in many countries in addressing this problem. Within Resolution 5.23 on AEWA's contribution to delivering the Aichi 2020 biodiversity targets, a new deadline of 2017 (long after the original 2000 target date) was agreed for Contracting Parties to phase out use of lead shot for hunting in wetlands and phase in non-toxic alternatives. Contracting Parties were also asked to assess and report on the effectiveness of the measures they take, with a critical need to engage with the hunting community to better understand national barriers to implementation.

International actions plans for Bewick's Swan and Greenland White-fronted Goose have recently been completed and will be available soon from AEWA's website. Both outline a range of actions needed to reverse the current negative trends for these waterbirds. For Greenland

**'despite much good work undertaken by Contracting Parties to AEWA, the scale of responses is still far too little to address the major pressures and threats to migratory waterbird populations.'**

Whitefronts, it is good to see the Welsh government already consulting on a proposal to fully protect White-fronted Geese from the start of the 2013 shooting season – one of the actions for the UK highlighted in the plan.

In the past few years several European seaducks have become high priorities for conservation, particularly the Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter (as reported on in the last WeBS newsletter). The international profile of this issue is relatively low because awareness of the scale of the declines has been quite recent. Nevertheless it was possible at the MoP to ensure delegates debated this issue which was formally included as a priority work area for the AEWA Technical Committee over the next three years. The desirability of developing an international action plan for Long-tailed Ducks, to focus conservation efforts for this species and, hopefully, other seaducks, was also discussed.

Waterbirds are one of the species groups with the most comprehensive assessment of status at international scales. Time-series monitoring for some populations extends back over half a century. In 2010, the Biodiversity Convention established a range of targets linked to its Strategic Plan, including that "*By 2020 the extinction of known threatened species has been prevented and their conservation status, particularly of those most in decline, has been improved and sustained.*" The continued decline in conservation status of so many African-Eurasian waterbirds suggests that achievement of this target for these species will be extremely unlikely, despite current efforts.

**Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2013-2014 season...**

**2013...**

14 April

12 May

23 June

21 July

25 August

22 September

13 October

10 November

15 December

**2014...**

19 January

16 February

16 March

20 April

18 May

15 June

13 July

10 August

7 September

12 October

9 November

7 December

Keep up-to-date with counts and dates at [www.bto.org/webs/coredates](http://www.bto.org/webs/coredates)



# Low Tide Update

Low Tide Counts highlight important feeding areas within an estuary which thousands of waders and wildfowl rely on each winter.

**Neil Calbrade** WeBS Low Tide Organiser

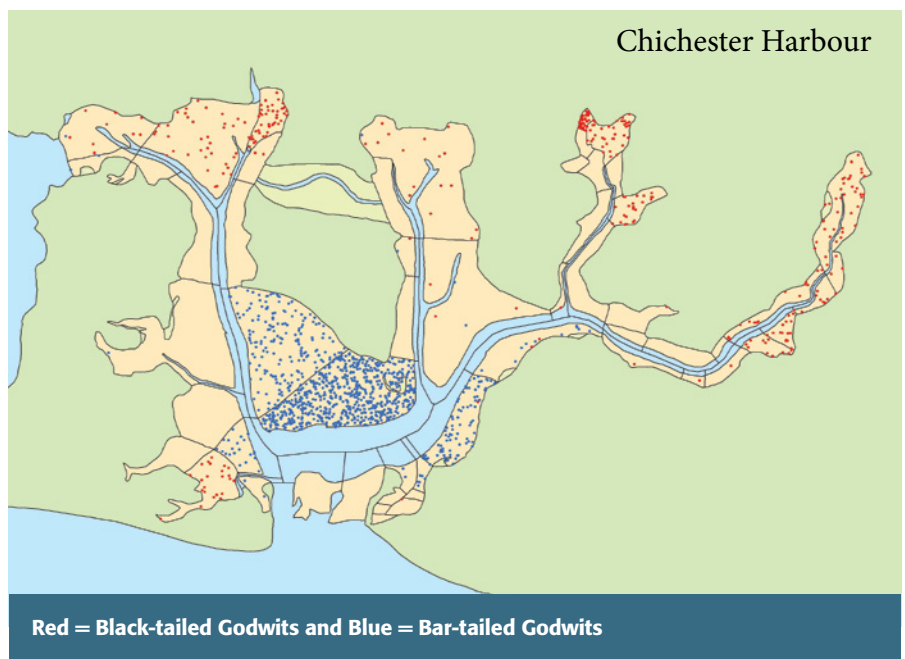
Each winter, approximately twenty estuaries around the UK are counted at Low Tide on a six-yearly cycle to allow us to gain a snapshot of changes in distributions of birds. Data from Low Tide Counts are widely used in environmental impact assessments relating to developments and other operations which may cause disturbance to feeding birds, such as dock developments, recreational activities, tidal power barrages, marinas and housing schemes. By plotting the feeding distributions of each species, we can help to ensure that important feeding grounds are protected. Different species will occupy different areas of a site, for instance Bar-tailed Godwits favour the larger expanses of mudflat on the outer reaches of an estuary with Black-tailed Godwits being found more on the inner sections as in the distribution map of Chichester Harbour from 2010/11 opposite.

The winter of 2012/13 saw both the Ribble and the Mersey being counted, both of which are very important sites which had not been counted for a long time, and so it was good to get an update on the waterbird usage at these sites. We will soon begin the process of organising counts for 2013/14 at sites such as the Firth of Clyde and the Deben Estuary. We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme, so please contact the WeBS office (email: [lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org)) if you have time to count one or more sectors once a month between November and February and would like to take part.



NICK MORAN

Both species of godwit may sometimes flock together for roosting but prefer different areas for feeding



# Editing records in WeBS Online

No matter how carefully you enter your counts online, it is still possible to make a mistake, but thankfully this is easy to rectify...



**Heidi Mellan** WeBS Counter Network Organiser

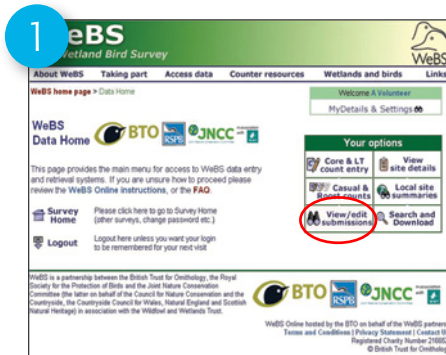
Even after you have submitted your records online, until the end of the WeBS year when we lock the records, you still have the ability to edit any records you may have made a mistake with. Be it the time or date of the count, a species identification, a count

inputting error or you want to add additional comments to a record, this can easily be done following these six simple steps.

We now receive over 80% of all WeBS records through WeBS Online which has greatly speeded up

our validation of the data and with the new interactive online WeBS Reporting, more up to date records are able to be made available.

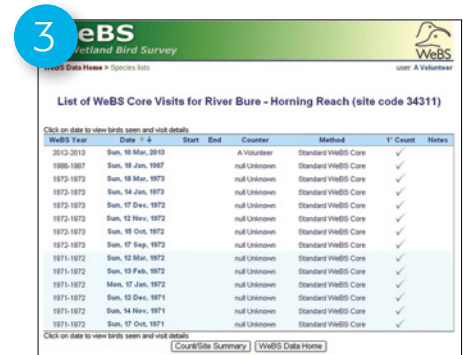
## Your step-by-step guide:



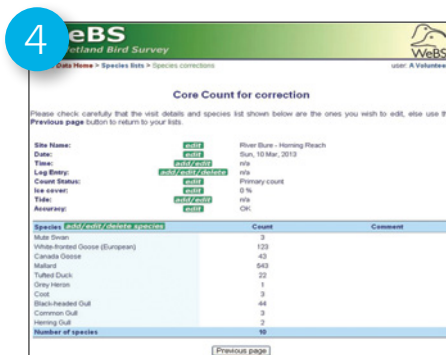
▲ On your data home page, click on "View/edit submissions".



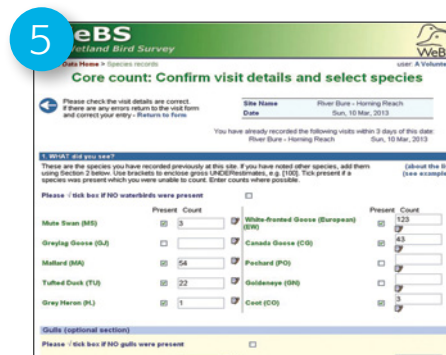
▲ Now, from the list, select the site for the records you wish to edit.



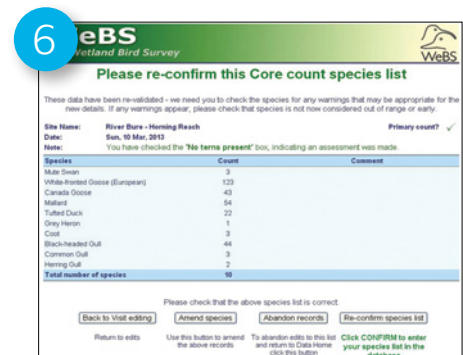
▲ Select the visit you wish to edit the records for and on the next page click "edit these counts".



▲ Use the green buttons to select the information you want to edit. To alter the species count, you will be asked to confirm you want to make changes so to continue, click "continue with editing your species".



▲ Edit the record you wish to amend, for this example we are amending a species count.



▲ Now, double check your edited records and reconfirm.





# Starting to count

A stretch of the Cromford Canal may not be home to thousands of waterbirds, but that doesn't matter for one WeBS counter on his first experiences of doing counts.

**John Matkin** WeBS Counter

On Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup> of November last year, I undertook my first WeBS count. This date probably won't go down in conservation history but I found a nice way to spend a couple of hours. The date had been circled in my diary for some time such was my excitement to get involved, but my best laid plans had unravelled slightly as the universe (true to form) conspired against me.

A couple of days prior to the count I had returned from Ethiopia with a respectable bird list and damaged binoculars. This meant I was forced to use the 'spare pair' that had long been gathering dust. They had seized up and you have to squint to see anything through them. They are only marginally better than just using my eyes and for a pedant like me the very fact I was having to use them was

frustrating.

I arrived at the car park adjacent to the Cromford Canal, the start point of my survey, at around half past seven. On a chilly November morning like this you would expect to find three or four cars belonging to the very keenest joggers or dog walkers, but not today. Instead there were hundreds of cars, hundreds of people, tents, staging and U2's 'Beautiful Day' blaring out from a sound system and across the normally silent meadows – I wondered if the BTO would be laying this on for me every core count date, it all seemed a bit over the top. It later transpired that this was in fact the starting point for an enormous charity walk and, despite the noise and commotion of the assembled crowds, it soon faded to the background as I began to walk.

My stretch of the Cromford Canal runs for 3.5 miles from Cromford

Wharf with its well-fed Mallards to Whatstandwell. The Derwent Valley Mills, the canal once supplied, form part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and along its course the flow of the canal is punctuated by restored pumping stations, bridges, tunnels, and engine houses. The stretch I have chosen to study forms part of a SSSI owing to the range of plant communities that abound both beneath the still waters and throughout the surrounding wooded valley.

The route of the canal can be explored by following the old tow-path that runs adjacent to it and is a popular spot for people to enjoy a walk and empty their dog. For most visitors it's a scenic and tranquil place to be but for those in the know it's also a surprisingly good place to see species such as Water Voles, Grass Snakes, Pied Flycatchers and occasionally Hawfinches – the sort of species you are unlikely to stumble across elsewhere. The River Derwent which runs alongside the canal is good for birds such as Goosander, Grey Wagtail and Dippers that prefer a more fast-paced and racy waterway. For me it's a place for life's more simple pleasures, watching birds such as the Little Grebe, the Moorhen and the mighty Coot all of which can be recorded here in decent numbers.

As survey sites go it couldn't be much more straightforward; the path adjacent to the water means the birds are rarely more than ten feet away and the linear nature of the site makes counting them very easy. The added bonus is being able to recount the birds on the return journey making the 'spare pair' of binoculars largely redundant.



JOHN MATKIN





NEIL CALBRADE

**Canals are home to under-recorded WeBS species such as Little Grebe and Moorhen.**



JOHN MATKIN



NEIL CALBRADE

On this particular morning the surface of the water steamed as the warmth of the sun cut through the fog. The still sunlit water provided a perfect reflection of the golden Alders, a mirror disturbed briefly here and there by falling leaves – rarely are mornings more perfect. The poetic beauty of the whole experience was sullied only by the distant hum of the A6, the scent from the sewage works, the out-of-control dogs, those infernal binoculars and by Bono reminding me that it was indeed a beautiful day.

In birding terms my first ever WeBS count didn't allow me to observe a great variety of wildfowl species. I didn't get to watch impressive swirling flocks of waders. I didn't even find a rarity among the flocks. I didn't even find 'flocks'. As expected I did find

quite a few Little Grebes, Moorhens and a few Coots, not enough to make the staff at BTO HQ choke on their morning coffee, but enough to make me want to get out there on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December and do it all again.

You can read about John's experiences on his WeBS counts at <http://thecoot.blogspot.co.uk>. If you blog about your WeBS Counts, please let us know, whether you count a large estuary or a small pond, we could feature your posts [here](#).

## WeBS snippets



### WeBS at the Birdfair

Due to the promotion and forthcoming launch of the Bird Atlas 2007-2011 on the BTO stand, WeBS won't be at the Rutland Birdfair this year. However, this is still a good opportunity to check out a proof and place your order for a copy of the most important bird book for years.

### Keeping it local

Local Organisers (LOs) play a pivotal role in the running of WeBS, and should be the first point of call for WeBS Counters, both current and new, with any queries about their site or region. These details can be found on the WeBS website at [www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/contact-your-local-organiser](http://www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/contact-your-local-organiser).

### Identification help

If you have difficulty separating Green and Wood Sandpipers, Curlew and Whimbrel or are baffled by terns, white-winged gulls or 'grey' geese, help is at hand. Check out the Bird ID videos on our website at [www.bto.org/webs/bird-id](http://www.bto.org/webs/bird-id) which give in depth help at separating these potentially tricky species

# Reclaiming the land

Assessing the effectiveness of habitat creation as compensation for impacts to protected birds

**Benedict Gove** RSPB

Significant resources are applied to habitat creation/restoration schemes to offset the impacts of development, particularly in estuaries. European and domestic guidance requires that compensatory habitat should provide the same ecological functions as that being lost, be located as close as possible to the site of damage, be ecologically functioning prior to loss of (or damage to) the protected habitat, and be of sufficient scale to allow for uncertainty. There has been a large increase in such schemes in the UK as a consequence of port expansion, industrial development and improvements to transport infrastructure. Compensation measures may take the form of habitat creation or restoration and enhancement of existing degraded habitat, and these practices are also applied more widely with conservation objectives in mind. However, it is unclear how well these measures achieve the desired goals (i.e. the full replacement of what is lost). A new RSPB project reviews the evidence



TONI CROSS

▲ **Paul Holme Strays Managed Realignment site on the Humber Estuary.**

from intertidal coastal habitats in the UK. The two key objectives are:

- To compare created compensation habitats with those lost to development; and
- To compare created habitats with natural equivalents.

We focus on birds as an easily measurable indicator of habitat state for which data are reasonably readily available for a number of sites. Data

on birds using development sites, compensation sites and natural equivalents have been obtained from environmental statements, monitoring reports, consultancy reports, RSPB archives and WeBS records. The consistent methodology and long-term nature of WeBS counts make them particularly valuable. For example, we use WeBS counts from Cardiff Bay (pre construction of the barrage) to provide a reliable baseline against which the compensation habitat created at Newport Wetlands can be measured, also using WeBS counts. Similarly, WeBS data from managed realignments such as Allfleet's Marsh and Freiston Shore can be directly compared to nearby areas of natural habitat also monitored by the WeBS scheme. The resulting outputs will build knowledge and understanding to underpin policy, advocacy and casework support, as well as helping to improve site and wildlife protection.

## CORE COUNTS

### Time and tide wait for no man

**Every year we have the task of calculating the dates for the WeBS Core Counts which is not as straightforward as it seems....**

For the majority of WeBS Counters, the date on which the Core Count falls each month is not critical. For those who count estuaries or other coastal sites however, they are dependent on the tide and this can make a huge difference between how many birds are present, and indeed close enough to count accurately.

#### How are the Core Count dates calculated?

The ultimate aim is to select a date each month when the tide is at its highest and in daylight at the majority of coastal sites around the country. However, due to the nature of the tides and differences around the country, it is not always possible and what would be an ideal date for The Wash for example may be unsuitable on the Ribble. In order to come up with these dates, five main estuaries are selected, The Wash, Ribble, Severn, Forth and Portsmouth and using a tide

prediction program, the height and times of the tides for each Sunday of the month are calculated. Next, for each month, each date is then rated, 4 for the best date where the tide is highest and at a suitable time of day to 1 where it is either a very low high tide or the tide is in the middle of the night. This is done for each site and then the ratings added up to come up with the most suitable count date for the majority of sites.

Where tidal conditions are unfavourable for a site on the selected date, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates to carry out their counts. Some sites which are not themselves tidal may also be affected by the tide as birds get pushed off estuaries and may roost inland and so these sites too would need to co-ordinate with the nearest estuary.

# African-Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership

Every January, counters across Europe are out in force to monitor the fortunes of waterbirds using the East Atlantic Flyway, and WeBS counts contribute...

**Richard Hearn** WWT & **Chas Holt** BTO

Many WeBS counters will no doubt be aware of recent efforts to reinvigorate the International Waterbird Census within the African-Eurasian region. The Partnership, established to steer and support this development, met earlier in 2013 at the headquarters of Wetlands International in Ede, Netherlands. This group comprises representatives of Wetlands International, the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), national scheme organisers (including the BTO and SOVON), Specialist Groups, and other relevant organisations (including Tour du Valat).

Two major projects are now well underway to develop waterbird counting in the Mediterranean Basin and the East Atlantic flyway. Training courses and workshops have taken place alongside surveys of poorly known sites, and some of these have found thousands of wintering waterbirds. Database and online data capture developments are also well underway; the IWC is already making use of the existing **www.observado.org** system, and a bespoke system is being developed.

Last year a workshop for National Coordinators (NCs) was held at the Pan-African Ornithological Congress, which allowed for excellent dialogue on development and other issues between NCs and Wetlands International. A similar workshop will be held later this year at the European Bird Census Council conference in Romania. WeBS counters can feed in views on the IWC and flyway scale monitoring through the WeBS Local Organisers Advisory Committee



NEIL CALBRADE

▲ Improved waterbird monitoring throughout the East Atlantic flyway will improve both population estimates and conservation issues faced by species such as Bar-tailed Godwit

(LOAC) [www.bto.org/webs/loac](http://www.bto.org/webs/loac) which will next be meeting in July. Long-term funding remains a concern, following the failure of AEWA Contracting Parties to agree a sustainable funding mechanism for IWC (see page 10), but for the next few years at least, thanks largely to funding from the MAVA Foundation, development of the IWC will continue.

This year, data and information will be collated for the next Conservation Status Report for AEWA, and the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of Waterbird Population Estimates, which is now an online database<sup>1</sup>. For those who have not seen it, much of this information is available online using the Critical Sites Network tool<sup>2</sup>. These are crucially important products of the IWC that

assimilate vast amounts of information collected by volunteer counters, to help determine waterbird conservation priorities, particularly for AEWA but also other conservation organisations working on waterbirds.

Much more information about IWC can be found on the Wetlands International website at <http://www.wetlands.org/Whatwedo/Savingwaterbirds/Monitoringwaterbirdpopulations/tabid/773/Default.aspx> including summaries of data, newsletters, and online forums.

1 <http://wpe.wetlands.org/>

2 <http://wow.wetlands.org/informationflyway/criticalsitenetworktool/tabid/1349/language/en-US/Default.aspx>



# Counter Network News

By Heidi Mellan WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Graham Thomason (Mersey Estuary), Adrian Dancy (Greater Manchester), Ian Hainsworth (Carmarthenshire), Chris Jones (Gwent (excl. Severn Estuary)), Niall Burton (Severn Estuary (Wales)), Shirley Pashby (East Yorkshire and Scarborough (excl. Humber)) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme within the last year. We were greatly saddened to hear that Stan Laybourne, the Local Organiser for Caithness, passed away in June, our condolences go out to his family, he will be greatly missed.

We would also like to thank Dermot Smith who has taken over as LO for Mersey Estuary, Peter Gibbon for taking on Deryshire, Jamie Dunning, the new LO for Greater Manchester, Geoff Orton who is the new LO for North Kent Marshes, Heather Hilton the new LO for East Lancashire and Fylde, Terry Wells who has taken over as LO for Carmarthenshire, Al Venables who has joined us as the new LO for both Gwent and the Severn Estuary (Wales), Yvonne Benting for taking on Harris and Lewis, Steve Morgan who is taking over as the LO for East Yorkshire and Scarborough (excl. Humber) Rupert Higgins who has joined

us as LO for Avon (other sites), Eve Tigwell who has taken on Somerset (other sites) and Sinclair Manson for taking on Caithness. Welcome to you all.

Our special thanks go out to Mr & Mrs Shakeshaft, who retired in August after counting on the Ribble Estuary for 40 years, Bill Curtis, who has also retired after more than 50 years of counting on the Humber Estuary and at Hornsea Mere and to Angus Murray who, for over 25 years, covered the Old Slade Reserve in Buckinghamshire and will be retiring this year. They were all nominated by their Local Organisers to receive a special mention as a thank you for their support over the years!

## Desperately seeking Organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Cheshire North; Clwyd; Durham; Essex; West Kent; the Mersey inland area; several areas in Yorkshire; several areas in the Scottish Highlands and several regions in Northern Ireland. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org).

## WeBS OBITUARIES

### Stan Laybourne 1941-2012

Stan Laybourne died on the 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012 on his 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. He had endured poor health for many years, something he bore with his usual stoicism. Despite very obvious pain and discomfort, he rarely complained.

Stan was born in Dumfriesshire, where he spent his formative birding years. He would relate how he thought he knew all the local birds, but on joining his first SOC outing quickly realised there was still plenty to learn. He had fond memories of those early days, of the friendly welcome from the Dumfries branch members who taught him so much, and Bobby Smith especially, whom he held in high regard.

Stan had been one of the 190 passengers on board the MS Devonian in July 1966 for the SOC Scottish Bird Islands Cruise, a unique experience in the company of some of the world's leading ornithologists.

After completing teaching training, Stan and his wife Eileen moved north to Caithness, where they took up teaching posts in Thurso High School. He instantly fell in love with the county, especially the peatlands which he likened to tundra without permafrost. That's when I first met Stan and so began a friendship spanning more than forty years. Together with the late Pam Collett we had many happy days mapping out the birds of the flows. Stan felt so strongly about the uniqueness of the peatlands that for the BTO habitat register he entered the whole vast area as one entry. When this was queried,

he replied that it could not be compartmentalised. How right he was. The fragmentation of the peatlands following afforestation and the resultant negative effect on its unique breeding birds has been well documented.

Through his involvement in SOC, Stan held the position of branch secretary for many years until very recently, when continuing poor health forced him to retire. He had also been local recorder for Caithness as well as local organiser for WeBS.

His love of wildfowl and particularly geese ensured his involvement in organising local goose counts over the winter and of course surveying his beloved Greenland Whitefronts. His unique knowledge of the bird and of the local wintering flocks was recognised far beyond Caithness. His patience in attempting to read darvic rings on distant geese in poor light knew no bounds.

Stan's contribution to Caithness ornithology was recognised by a recent presentation from local birders. The gift of a clock was much appreciated, all the more as it was engraved with two flying Greenland Whitefronts, a fitting gift to a true professional. Among the gathering were some former pupils whose lasting enthusiasm for birding owes a lot to the school bird club set up and run by Stan for many years.

Stan was a gentleman and a gentle man. The large gathering of friends at his funeral service bore testimony to his standing in the local and wider community. He will be sorely missed.

**Sinclair Manson**

*originally published by the Scottish Ornithologist's Club*

## IN THE NEWS...

### RESEARCH

# Twite – the Honorary WeBS species

By Nick Adams, RSPB

For the last four years the RSPB, with support from Natural England and Pennine Prospects through their Heritage Lottery Fund project Watershed Landscape, have been working in the South Pennines with farmers to increase the amount of seed available to Twite *Carduelis flavirostris* on their breeding grounds. This is the stronghold for English Twite with in excess of 100 pairs breeding in the area.

These birds then spend their winter on the coastal salt marshes, mostly in the south and east of England, with birds from further north moving to more northerly coasts to winter. This split was shown through colour-ringing of birds on their winter grounds and as chicks at the nest.

In recent winters though, the Twite have not been seen as frequently at their regular wintering sites around the southeast coast of England, so we would like to ask for your assistance.

A number of you already record Twite as an additional species on your WeBS counts, for which we are very grateful. So this is a request to you to please carry on and for anyone else who sees Twite during the normal course of their WeBS counts in the 2013/14 winter to please record them; if you can get a count that would be fantastic.

TOM MARSHALL (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



Twite are often found on saltmarshes in the winter months

### Background...

In addition to counting Twite, there are ongoing studies using colour-ringing to provide a link between breeding and wintering sites. If you see any colour-ringed Twite (or any other colour-ringed bird for that matter), please submit your records to [www.ring.ac](http://www.ring.ac)

### TRAINING

## Wash Spectacular

By Neil Calbrade, BTO

Last November we held a WeBS Training Course at the RSPB Reserve at Snettisham. This course was aimed at providing both beginner and existing WeBS counters with some hands-on experience at identifying and counting large numbers of predominantly waders. We were lucky enough to have the help of RSPB warden Jim Scott who was able to share his knowledge of the site and what it takes to count the large numbers of birds that occur there. The day was made up of a morning on the reserve, watching and counting the birds, followed by an afternoon of talks giving more detail on the background of WeBS and how to go about counting large flocks.

In addition to the thousands of waterbirds seen, we were also treated to views of a flock of Snow Buntings and even had a flock of Waxwings appear in front of us. Unfortunately, due to it having to be held on a weekday to coincide with favourable tide conditions, this course was poorly attended. We plan to run further wader identification courses at Snettisham this year though dates have not yet been confirmed.

Keep an eye on the website at [www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/taking-part/training](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/taking-part/training) on our Facebook page where we will announce further dates.

### Did you know?

Since WeBS counts began back in the 1960s, counters have counted an incredible number of birds, but even we didn't realise just how many. A recent summation of all the Core Count and Low Tide records in the database came to a staggering 751,881,113 birds, which is three quarters of a billion birds counted!

**Wildfowl are long-lived** species. A drake Eider ringed on the Ythan Estuary was found dead at the same site 35 years and 6 months later, while the oldest Wigeon on record was a drake recovered in Russia 34 years and 7 months after being ringed at Abberton Reservoir, Essex.

## BACKCHAT

### Word of mouth...

### Priority vacant sites

Some sites are listed as priority sites due to their importance for the total numbers of waterbirds which winter there or because they support internationally important numbers of one or more waterbird species. However, some of these sites or sections within larger complex sites are not counted. To highlight which sites or sections are currently available, check out the website at [www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/vacant-priority-sites-home](http://www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/vacant-priority-sites-home) for more information.

### Arise Sir Bob

Okay, so not quite a knighthood, but we would like to congratulate Bob Howells (former Local Organiser for Burry Inlet) who received an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in recognition of his work for BTO and as a long-standing WeBS Counter.

### WeBS Tutorials

In order to make WeBS Online even easier to use, we have recently produced a series of online tutorial videos. In these we cover all aspects from registering to use the system, inputting counts to downloading your data for your own use. Check out the videos at [www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/online-tutorials](http://www.bto.org/webs/taking-part/online-tutorials)

### Snap shot



### Red-headed Tufted Duck?

**John Inglis** noticed this unusual looking Tufted Duck on the River Thames at Hampton. The red eye and orange crown suggest it is a Tufted Duck/Pochard hybrid, but whatever its parents, it certainly stands out!

### Calling all photographers and artists

We are always in need of good quality photographs and artwork of WeBS species for use in WeBS productions such as the annual report and newsletter. Full credits will be given of course. If you have images you would be happy for us to use, please get in touch.

### The WeBS team & contacts

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help.

#### Graham Austin

*WeBS Alerts, WeBS database management, Statistical analyses*  
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