

# Newsletter

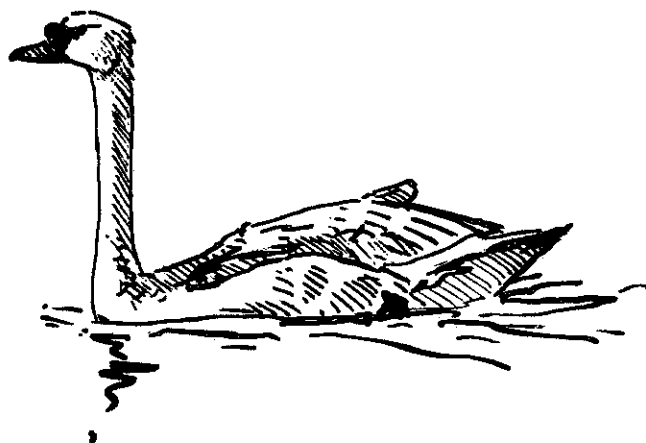
Number 13 Winter 2000-01

## Waterbird counts in 1999-2000

*Keeping our volunteers supplied with up-to-date results from their counts, either for WeBS or special surveys, is one of our priorities. In this newsletter we have pulled together the highlights from the provisional results of last winters WeBS counts. We also have results from the ongoing national grey goose census, updates on the status and progress on each of the special surveys which have been carried out in recent years and our plans for future surveys. By keeping you updated on these and other related developments, we hope we can keep you convinced of the importance of your efforts towards waterbird conservation at local, national and international levels.*

**M**any species in Britain fared well in 1999-2000. Both common grebe species recorded increases from the previous winter, whilst Cormorant numbers reached record levels, surpassing 16,000 for the first time. Both Grey Heron and Little Egret counts were the highest recorded by WeBS to date, the latter peaking in September at over 1,000 birds. The long-term increase in the numbers of Mute Swans was sustained, with three counts in excess of 19,000 birds, a figure previously unsurpassed. European White-fronted Geese numbers have been steadily dwindling during the 1990s and low counts once again continued this trend. Naturalised Canada Geese are in contrast, faring much better, with a peak totals of almost 50,000 birds a considerable jump up from recent years. Dark-bellied Brent Geese, whose numbers have been affected by a continued run of poor breeding success, peaked around 90,000 birds following a successful breeding season (23.5% young). This is the first time since 1993 that productivity has exceeded mortality (estimated at 15%) since 1993.

Peak Shelduck counts in Great Britain fell for the third consecutive winter, with only just over 57,000 birds recorded in January and February, the



lowest since the 1970s. Wigeon numbers were lower than in recent winters, though this was one of the few wildfowl species that increased in Northern Ireland. Gadwall numbers in Britain once again exceeded all previous counts, whilst Pintail numbers worryingly plummeted, with only 17,000 birds present during the midwinter months (compared to a typical figure of around 25,000). Mallard numbers fell once again, the tenth fall in eleven winters.

Lapwing and Golden Plover numbers in Britain were both high, peaking in November following cold weather mid month. Avocets rose to record levels, with more than 4,000 present in January. Curlew

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 Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environment & Heritage Service in Northern Ireland).



Sandpiper autumn passage coincided well with the September counts, numbers almost matching the record counts of the previous year. Dunlin counts on both sides of the Irish Sea were in the lower range of usual fluctuations, whilst peak counts of Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit in Northern Ireland were also well down on the previous year, the latter being less than one third of the previous winter's peak.

Perhaps most notable overall was a geographical split along the Irish Sea, with numbers

of many waterbird species in Great Britain faring much better than those in Northern Ireland. Several wildfowl species registered record counts in Britain, whilst few totals in Northern Ireland were exceptional. Waders, in particular, fared poorly in Northern Ireland. It will be interesting to put the Northern Ireland counts into perspective when the results of the I-WeBS counts for the same period are published.

*Mark Pollitt*

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## **WeBS Counters' Conference**

The next WeBS Counters' Conference will be held in the Caledonian Thistle Football Stadium at Inverness on Saturday 24 March 2001. The stadium has very good conference facilities, with superb views over the Firth, so make sure that you bring binoculars!

As always, we are endeavouring to provide an interesting and varied program of talks from local counters and groups as well as from the WeBS partners. There will be the opportunity to learn more about the aims and work of the Moray Firth Partnership (MFP), a forum encompassing all those with an interest in the Firth spanning both commercial and conservation pursuits, and the locally very active Highland Ringing Group (HRG). The MFP has kindly agreed to provide a grant towards the cost of the conference, whilst the HRG has assisted immeasurably with the organisation of the conference. Many thanks to them both.

The talks will cover varied topics including local Greylag Geese studies, monitoring seaducks, inter-firth movements of waders, a new way of determining the natal origin of Scotland's wintering Redshanks, Cormorants and much more.

All WeBS counters and organisers are welcome to attend the conference, but we have only included booking forms with copies of this Newsletter for distribution within Scotland. However, if you would like to attend the conference, but have no booking form, then please contact Heidi Mellan at the BTO. Places at the conference are limited and will be allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis.

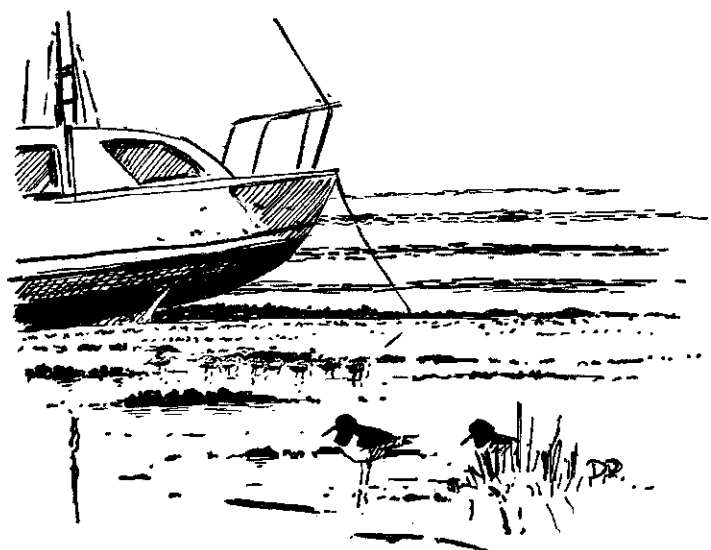
*Steve Holloway*

## **WeBS Low Tide Counts**

During the winter of 2000-01, WeBS Low Tide Counts will be undertaken on 13 of the UK's estuaries, these being Southampton Water, Pagham Harbour, Stour Estuary, Orwell Estuary, Solway Firth, Mersey Estuary, Belfast Lough, Strangford Lough, Breydon Water, Lindisfarne/Budle Bay, Dornoch Sands/Loch Fleet, Bridgewater Bay and parts of Morecambe Bay. All of these estuaries are designated as either SPAs and/or Ramsar sites. The perceived value of WeBS Low Tide Count data is increasing all the time, and is regularly used during SPA (and Ramsar) site designations as well as to inform estuarine development issues (such as current proposals for a port extension in Southampton Water). This is reflected in the increasing number of data requests processed annually.

Finally, a big thank you to all of you counting at low tide, especially those giving it a try for the first time.

*Andy Musgrove*



# Differing fortunes for Icelandic-breeding geese

The 40th consecutive winter census of Pink-footed Geese and Icelandic Greylag Geese took place in Britain and Ireland during autumn 1999. Two discrete counts were undertaken and maxima of 212,493 Pink-footed Geese and 75,866 Greylag Geese were recorded in November. Both counts are lower than those in 1998, representing a decrease of 7% for Pinkfeet and 9% for Greylags. While the estimate for Pink-footed Goose is believed to be low due to an apparent late arrival into Britain, the Greylag Goose estimate is believed to be accurate and, with the exception of an under-count in 1984, represents the lowest count since 1978. This continues the decline that began in the early to mid 1990s (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that from similarly sized populations of c.85,000 in 1980, both species continued to increase during the following eight years, with Pinkfeet doubling their numbers in this time and Greylags increasing to around 100,000. However, since then, while Pinkfeet continued to increase to around 230,000 by the mid 1990s, Greylags have steadily declined.

Monitoring of reproductive success during this time, by counting the proportion of first year birds in

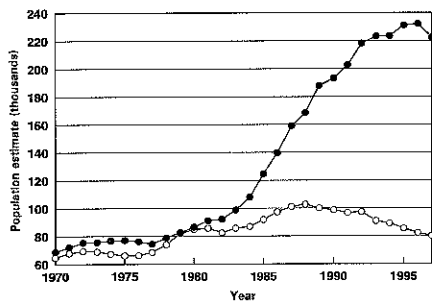


Figure 1. Population trends of Pink-footed Goose (●) and Icelandic Greylag Goose (○) since 1970, based on five year running means (i.e. figure for 1997 is the mean of estimates for 1995-1999).

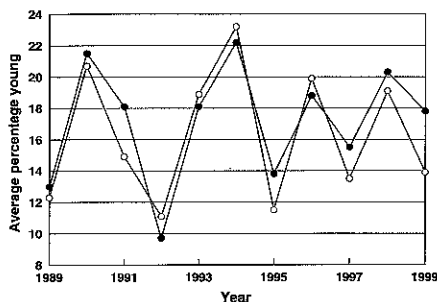


Figure 2. The average percentage of young Pink-footed Geese (●) and Icelandic Greylag Geese (○) in flocks in Britain, 1989-1999.

winter flocks, showed that productivity in both species was very similar (Figure 2) and therefore suggested that some other factor must be affecting the survival of full-grown Greylag Geese.

Since 1995, the number of geese shot in Iceland each year has been monitored. This has shown that the decline of the Greylag population is probably almost entirely due to over-exploitation of the species in Iceland. Each autumn, between 30,000 and 40,000 Greylags are shot prior to their departure for Scotland. This amounts to almost one third of the post-breeding population, a proportion that does not appear to be sustainable in the long-term. Pinkfeet, on the other hand, are shot in much lower numbers, around 10,000-15,000 each year, or 5% of the population (Figure 3).

Greylag Geese are particularly vulnerable to hunting in Iceland for two reasons. Firstly, they nest in lowland areas, making them more accessible to hunters than Pinkfeet which nest in the uplands. Secondly, Greylags remain in Iceland each autumn for around four weeks longer than Pinkfeet, providing hunters with a longer hunting period.

Efforts by the Icelandic Government in the past two years to discourage the shooting of Greylags have met with some success. However, stricter measures enforced by law may be necessary if this does not prove sufficient to reverse the decline.

Once in the UK, these geese continue to be shot. However, estimates of the number killed are not available in this country, so it is not possible to identify if this source of mortality is also a cause of concern for the Greylag population. As part of its goose monitoring programme, WWT will be keeping a close watch on the trends of these geese and, through its connections in Iceland, encourage hunters there to reduce the number of Greylags they shoot.

*Richard Hearn*

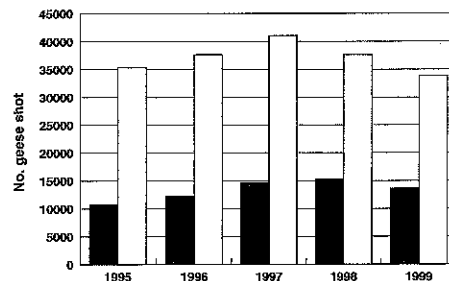


Figure 3. The number of Pink-footed Geese (■) and Greylag Geese (□) shot in Iceland each year, 1995-1999.

## A local focus . . .

*As well as playing a vital role in national and international waterbird conservation, WeBS counts also contribute greatly to conservation at a local level. David Bingham of the RSPB explains more of how counts on one of the UK's premier waterbird sites, the Wash, feed into local issues as well as national and international ones . . .*

**T**he Wash is the largest estuarine system in the country with 12% of the area of England draining into it through its four main rivers. The WeBS counts on the Wash are organised by the RSPB, Lewis James (The Wash and North Norfolk Area Manager) and James Cadbury (Reserves Ecology) co-ordinating a team of dedicated and skilled volunteers, some of whom have been carrying out surveys on the Wash since the late 1960s when the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry began. The Wash supports thirteen species at internationally important levels and usually comes top of the table of principal sites published in the WeBS annual report, peak mean counts exceeding 300,000 waterbirds. These counts have resulted in the Wash being protected by a full set of national and international conservation designations. In addition to this recognition, WeBS data also have important uses on a local scale. To understand how this works it is necessary to explain a little of how we count and record birds on the Wash.

Covering a large area from Gibraltar Point to Hunstanton, the Wash is divided into 22 count sectors. These sectors have remained unchanged over time and we now have collected a significant amount of data for many years which we can draw upon. In addition, counts for the last three years have sub-divided these areas into sub-sectors based predominantly on habitat type, providing more detail about the counts which is particularly useful at the local scale. All this information has been computerised locally, and we currently hold in the region of 150,000 count records on our database together with all of the additional count and disturbance details.

Whilst it is difficult to predict when or how the data will be used in the future, a few examples of previous uses give some idea of the possibilities and potential importance of this information.

Local bird monitoring is an important record of the county avifauna, and each year annual summaries of the Wash counts are sent to county recorders for inclusion in their bird reports. The Wash is divided by two counties, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, so information is provided to the recorders of both. The task is made a lot easier by

the foresight of the original organisers who put a sector boundary on the Norfolk/Lincolnshire border!

Data has also been used to respond to local concerns about changes through construction work or new developments. Information was obtained on Brent Goose distribution around the managed realignment<sup>1</sup> site at Freiston following concerns that goose distribution may be affected during construction work. Detailed data from sub-sector records enabled us to show how the geese used the area and allay these concerns. A very specific use of the detailed sub-sector data was information obtained on the birds using a particular field that had a planning application for a wind farm. This data would not have been available from sector counts alone, barring anecdotal evidence of the counter. A data search has recently been carried out to assess the possible impact of fuel spill from a ship that has run aground at Sutton Bridge. This was done by analysing December count details from two sectors at the mouth of the river, the results of which may be used for media release.

Local management issues also benefit from the availability of WeBS data. The same Freiston managed realignment site straddles two sector boundaries, though matches with sub-sectors within these areas. The sub-sector data will therefore be used to examine changes in numbers that will inevitably occur with future coastal realignment and provide much better information than sector data alone. Several examples also relate to the Snettisham RSPB reserve and adjoining sites of high conservation value. The reserve has been expanded to include areas of beach that are counted as sub-sectors. This will enable data from monthly WeBS counts to be used for the reserve annual report and the new areas to be monitored in the future. An area of grazing marsh close to the Snettisham reserve is divided into two sub-sectors. One of these is currently under a stewardship agreement to improve

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> a strategy to encourage the movement of the shoreline landward of its present position in a managed or controlled manner, sometimes referred to as "managed retreat"

the management of the area, and the water levels and grazing regime are kept at optimal levels to encourage wintering and breeding waterbirds. The future success of this project can therefore be monitored, at least partially, by using data obtained through WeBS counts.

The dedicated recording of additional information by the Wash counters has provided added benefits. Skylarks have always been recorded in WeBS counts around the Wash, and many of our counters have recorded other passerine species, including Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings. When these counts were first made in the 1970s it was probably never anticipated that the populations of these once common birds would crash so severely, though they now provide key information on these changes over the past three decades. Even the non-bird information on activities and disturbance has been utilised, in support of the Wash Human Interaction Strategy.

Local Wash-based research projects have profited from the availability of WeBS data. These have included numerous PhD student studies, including most recently research into Turnstones and their new feeding grounds on quays around the Wash. Others have examined changes in the ecology of the Wash, such as work being carried out on the declining shellfish populations in the Wash and its effect on bird populations, particularly Oystercatchers. This work also involved giving up-to-the-minute counts of Oystercatchers for presentation on a local television news feature.

And finally, even validating our counts is helped by recording counts at a fine level of detail. Sub-sector data were used in an unexpected way when a large count of Avocets on the Wash was found to come from sizeable flocks on two adjoining sectors. Whilst it might have been expected that there was a degree of double-counting, the data were interrogated and it was found that the counts were made on saltmarsh sub-sectors that were in fact five miles apart. The likelihood of duplication was therefore slim and both counts were accepted as genuine records of separate flocks of birds.

The future uses of our data may be unpredictable — who knows what the next local, regional or national call upon the data may be. Through WeBS, however, we intend to keep recording the birds every month to meet whatever needs may arise.

*David Bingham is The Wash & North Norfolk  
Administrator for the RSPB*

# Conservation Update

## Reporting sightings of colour-marked wildfowl

WWT co-ordinates the colour-marking of wildfowl in the UK, on behalf of the BTO. Part of this responsibility is to channel sightings of marked birds from members of the public to those responsible for the ringing projects. To do this, a certain amount of information about the sighting is required and without this it is not always possible to trace the sighting to the correct ringer or inform the observer of the origins and movements of the bird they have seen.



The key information required for each sighting is as follows: species, date, location (with grid reference) and the colour and code on the ring or neck collar. With this information, WWT staff can identify the ringer and forward the details.

Many sightings are reported by counters on the back of WeBS count forms. It would be helpful if they could instead either be sent separately to 'Colour-marked Wildfowl' at the usual Slimbridge address, though simply enclosed with your count forms on a separate piece of paper will suffice, or e-mailed to [colourmarkedwildfowl@wwt.org.uk](mailto:colourmarkedwildfowl@wwt.org.uk).

One final point is to encourage observers to report all sightings, even if the individual bird concerned has already been reported from that site. Whilst such sightings do not advance the understanding of movements, they are extremely valuable for other ringing-based studies, such as the estimation of survival rates.

I look forward to receiving your valuable sightings.

*Richard Hearn*

## New Irish Light-bellied Brent Goose Research Programme

The population of Light-bellied Brent Geese that breed in eastern Canada undertakes a hazardous journey across the Greenland ice-cap and the North Sea to spend the winter in Ireland. The WWT research team, in collaboration with staff from WWT Castle Espie and the Irish Brent Goose Research Group, have initiated a programme of research on this population of the Light-bellied Brent Goose that will serve to underpin an international Flyway Management Plan. This plan will highlight actions required to ensure the conservation of this threatened population for the future. The research programme will focus on identifying important sites along the flyway and building a population model to predict the effects of various threats to this population.

To determine survival rates and to investigate movements, Light-bellied Brent Geese are being colour-marked in Ireland and Iceland. Birds are being marked with yellow leg rings. Counters in Northern Ireland and the west coast of Britain are urged to look out for these birds and to report any sightings to Richard Hearn at WWT Slimbridge (see Reporting Sightings of Colour-marked Wildfowl).

*James Robinson*

# Before the counts began

*WeBS counts are the principle mechanism for monitoring our national populations of non-breeding waterbirds. But what happened before the counts began? How clear is the picture of our wintering waterbirds before wildfowl counts were first introduced in 1947? The following article summarises evidence collated by the late Colin Tubbs, a noted naturalist with over thirty years' experience of ecological study of the Solent, about former wildfowl and wader populations in the Solent estuaries . . .*

**B**efore the modern era of systematic counting there are relatively few direct indications of the size of estuary bird populations. Much historical information, embedded in literature and unpublished manuscripts and diaries, is generalised and qualitative. It seems that our interest in absolute numbers is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the possible exception of hunters who often recorded the numbers of birds which they shot. It is these records that may help to plug the gap in our knowledge of waterbird numbers and at least help to place recent changes in a more historical context. Although the problems inherent in interpreting such records are large (continuity and timescale, recording of shooting effort, grouping of records etc.), the meticulous diaries of a Solent punt-gunner, William Mudge (1881-1964), proved to be both comprehensive and detailed and spanned the majority of years in the first half of this century. Whilst, in comparison to the data we collect today, the information in the Mudge diaries would not stand up to rigorous scientific analyses, they do, when combined with other evidence, help to enlighten us on how some of the species populations fluctuated, at least locally, before the counts began.

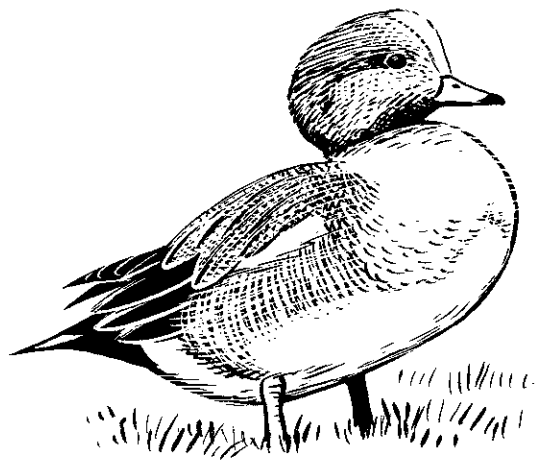
William Mudge shot wildfowl and waders on Southampton Water, the Beaulieu Estuary and the adjacent areas of the Solent. His diaries noted not only the number of birds of each species which he shot, but his narrative provided a record of shooting efforts and extensive comments on the numbers of birds he and fellow wildfowlers saw. His records between 1920-21 and 1952-53 showed that, despite an increase in his hunting effort, the numbers of waterbirds shot declined. Distinctive patterns could be discernible for certain species. Dunlin, Lapwing and Curlew showed long-term declines with a revival during the early 1940s. Numbers of Shelduck, Oystercatcher, Knot, Black-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover and Turnstone were shot only in small numbers prior to the early 1940s, after which the bag increased markedly. A third group of species, including Mallard, Wigeon, Teal and Brent Goose, showed a peak in the 1920s and early 1930s, a trough prior to the onset of the Second World War and a further peak thereafter. Coot, a major quarry species earlier in the century, had all but gone by 1920.

Comments on the 'large' flocks of many species were routinely recorded. Many flocks of species such as Redshank, Curlew, Lapwing and Dunlin which Mudge regarded as significant would today be thought unremarkable. Species such as Shelduck, Oystercatcher, Black-tailed Godwit and Turnstone now occur in hundreds where evidence suggests they previously occurred only in tens. Grey Plover, a now common species at many estuarine sites, was comparatively scarce prior to the 1950s.

## **Dark-bellied Brents**

The punt-gunner's ultimate prize was Brent Geese. Mudge recorded much detail about the Brent Geese he saw, and during the 50 year period spanned by his diaries the largest gathering he noted was of only 80 birds on the Beaulieu Estuary, a site which today may hold in excess of 2,000 birds. The total population numbered around 15-16,500 in 1955, and supporting manuscripts dating as far back as 1860 suggest that at no time during the intervening period was the population any more than two or three times this size. In comparison, today's British population numbers around 100,000 birds.

Brent Geese were previously thought to have a highly specialised winter habitat and food requirements, with eelgrasses *Zostera* spp. forming a key part of their diet. However, population increases since the 1950s, following successive legal protection in European countries, also co-incided with increased exploitation of grasslands, autumn-sown cereals and saltmarsh habitat, showing a



previously undiscovered ecological flexibility. But why had Brent Geese failed to exploit these resources previously?

### **Pre-war wildfowling — a population suppressant?**

Perhaps the answer to the Brent question lies in closer examination of the above patterns and some compelling circumstantial evidence from other manuscripts. Whilst incomplete, the Mudge diaries also suggest increases in some populations after the First World War and, as described earlier, many species showed a peak in numbers during and immediately after the Second World War. During the latter there were restrictions on wildfowling activities, and in both wars many wildfowling were pre-occupied elsewhere. William Mudge's diaries confirm that during the latter period he had many of his regular haunts to himself. Whilst his own bag increased, the overall drop in wildfowling activity brought some release of populations from the dampening effect of hunting mortality. Earlier accounts, including those from the wildfowling press, suggest that the level of wildfowling at that time was a significant influence on the numbers and distribution of wildfowl and that these same issues were present on many other estuaries away from the Solent. The Mudge diaries note that many wildfowl, including Brents, remained out of the reach of punt-gunners in the estuaries by remaining on the main Solent waterway by day. Other manuscripts also suggest that Brents were confined to intertidal areas and prevented from exploiting saltmarsh habitat by continued shooting and disturbance from wildfowling.

Since that time, a combination of factors including establishment of an agreed quarry list, the establishment of safe refuges and increased regulation of wildfowling through the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and local wildfowling clubs has seen many waterbird populations increase. It seems that at least some of these changes can credibly be attributed to a moderation of hunting mortality and disturbance, though other, in many cases unknown, factors may have been responsible for the growth of other populations such as Grey Plover which may never have been limited by hunting pressure. We may also speculate that other factors, such as habitat loss and sea-level rise, may be more significant pressures in years to come.

*The full article summarising Colin's research was published in British Wildlife magazine in April 1996. British Wildlife is an independent bi-monthly magazine covering all aspects of British natural history and conservation.*

# **Conservation Update**

### **Seaduck surveys**

Whilst many WeBS sites support important concentrations of seaducks, large counts of these species during WeBS counts are a relatively rare event. A number of dedicated surveys employing specific methodologies are ongoing within the UK, including a programme of aerial surveys by JNCC's Seabirds at Sea Team during 2000-01. The plan is to cover the top half dozen sites for seaducks — weather and other factors permitting! One important consequence of this will be the most complete coverage yet of Welsh coasts, particularly for Common Scoter. Aerial and land-based counts are being carried out in Carmarthen Bay following the *Sea Empress* oil spill, a CCW/local oil company survey of Liverpool Bay is being undertaken by a local consultancy in association with WWT, RSPB and local bird clubs, whilst the JNCC survey will cover Cardigan Bay. It is significant that these counts will be made within the space of a week, the first synchronised coverage of these three sites. Recent counts suggest that the Welsh coasts alone could support more Common Scoter than the entire British estimate of the early 1990s; these surveys should provide the first accurate assessment.

WWT is currently developing a UK seaduck monitoring strategy. As ever, volunteer counters will be a key part of any successful scheme, particularly those individuals who already undertake regular counts of some of the more accessible key sites. The strategy will review the extent of existing data for the UK and identify potential gaps in our knowledge. Key to any national programme will be to assess the best means of counting birds at individual sites, since precise methods or conditions are often needed, and these will undoubtedly vary considerably between different sites.

Thus, I would be very keen to hear from anyone who currently counts seaducks, particularly if not as part of the regular WeBS counts. We're keen to assess how your site might be included in the strategy and to ensure that the count methods used are recorded to enable consistent data in the future. This will ensure that these data can be used fully in the conservation of UK seaducks the protection of the habitats that they use. Please contact me at WWT Slimbridge (see back cover for details). Many thanks in advance.

*Peter Cranswick*

### **Lead shot & wetlands**

Legislation which came into force in 1999 to restrict the use of lead gunshot over some wetlands in England is currently under review by stakeholder organisations including EN, WWT, RSPB and BASC. The list of wetland SSSIs subject to restrictions is being re-assessed, and WeBS data is playing a valuable role in aiding this process. Any recommended changes to the legislation will have to be agreed by the Environment Minister before passing into law, with the whole process likely to be conclude later this year.

**W**eBS Core Counts are designed to provide population estimates, trends over time and identify important sites for wintering waterbirds in the UK. The once monthly counts fulfil these objectives to a greater or lesser extent for a large proportion of the UK's waterbird species. Nevertheless, additional methods are required to provide the

necessary data for others. Thus, for example, dawn or dusk roost counts are made to monitor numbers of many grey geese effectively, such as the autumn Pinkfoot and Greylag census.

Several of these surveys are conducted under the auspices of WeBS, designed specifically to plug the gaps, whilst others, even though organised under other partnerships, may involve the same counter

network to a large degree. Because they are either labour-intensive, or because the demands upon the same counter network, on top of continuing Core Counts, are too great for counts to be made every month, most of these 'special surveys' are only conducted periodically, perhaps once every three or nine years (an agreed international timetable for waterbird monitoring).

## Little Egret Roost Survey

**Why:** Little Egrets are generally dispersed widely during the day, particularly at estuarine sites where, hidden in river channels, they may often not be visible. However, many congregate in communal roosts at dusk, enabling accurate counts to be readily obtained. This survey will provide a baseline against which to measure future population growth in this country following their recent colonisation of the UK.

**When:** a national survey (focusing on southern estuaries between Pembrokeshire and the Thames) was carried out over the period April 1999 - March 2000.

**How:** for most of the major estuaries, the dusk counts were made of birds arriving at the 'traditional' roost sites established in the last decade.

**Next:** results of the survey will be compared with those from the WeBS Core and Low Tide counts made during the census period. Recent Core Count results suggest that the population continues to increase, with over 1,000 birds recorded in September 2000. Summary results of the census will be published in the Summer 2001 Newsletter.

**Contact:** Andy Musgrove, BTO.

## Whooper and Bewick's Swan Census

**Why:** to determine the population sizes of migratory swans in Europe. These species often feed in non-wetland areas, e.g. agricultural land, during the day and many are not counted by WeBS. Counts in the UK were conducted as part of the international programme which undertakes a complete census of both swans every five years.

**When:** January 2000.

**How:** for many counters, this involved simply providing the counts from their local WeBS sites during the January Core Count. Roost counts were made at many of the key sites, notably WWT Centres, and for Whooper Swans in particular, many observers in northern Britain and Northern Ireland visited additional sites, not normally covered by WeBS. In addition, observers were asked to provide information on brood sizes and habitat use where possible.

**Next:** a paper on the Icelandic population of Whooper Swans (which winter in Ireland, Britain and Iceland) is being prepared for presentation at the International Swan Symposium, to be held in Airlie, Virginia in February 2001. Data for Bewick's Swans will be provided to the data manager compiling European-wide totals. A summary of the results will be provided in the Summer 2001 Newsletter.

**Contact:** Peter Cranswick, WWT.

## Pilot Riverine Survey

**Why:** to identify how many wintering waterbirds occur on rivers in the UK; rivers are relatively poorly represented in WeBS and this survey will identify the best methods for tackling a national survey of this habitat.

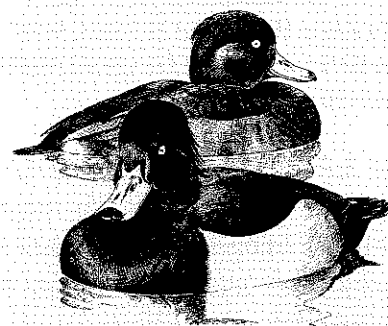
**When:** counts were made in January and February 2000. Four further rivers (the Wye, Spey, Findhorn and Waveney) will be surveyed in January 2001.

**How:** the main channel of around 30 rivers were surveyed for all waterbirds, plus Grey Wagtail and Dipper. Count sections of 500 m in length were used to help us identify the ideal length for the full survey.

**Next:** all river count sections have been digitised and will enable us to compare the pilot count data with other datasets, in particular river water quality data held by the Environment Agency. This will enable us to identify how to undertake the national riverine survey.

Provisional results from the pilot survey will be published in the Summer 2001 Newsletter.

**Contact:** James Robinson, WWT.





# Special Surveys . . . Special Surveys . . . Special Surveys

We are currently in the middle of a particularly intensive period for special surveys. Here we provide a brief guide to work currently underway, including a potted summary of what each survey involves, progress to date and plans for the future.

We hope that many if not all WeBS counters will be willing to participate in these special surveys. Some are relatively simple, involving

a slightly different focus during the standard WeBS count at your site, whilst others involve visiting completely different areas or using new methods. Where necessary, we also advertise the survey more widely to elicit additional help from birdwatchers who do not normally take part in WeBS.

All LOs are approached in advance of special surveys, since, knowing the area and the local

counter network, they are best placed to organise wintering waterbird surveys. Many are willing to organise the new survey, but we appreciate this may not always be possible for a wide variety of reasons. We hope to establish the counter network several months in advance of fieldwork and then provide instructions and other information so that there is ample time to plan and arrange coverage in

*continued overleaf...*

## Naturalised Goose Survey

**Why:** to determine the size of naturalised (introduced or escaped) geese in Britain and Ireland. There are concerns that the WeBS counts may not accurately reflect the continued growth of Canada Geese in particular if numbers have reached carrying capacity on existing sites and birds are expanding onto smaller sites. This provides an update of the last national survey in 1991. The survey also provides valuable information on the summer distribution of these species.

**When:** counts were made in spring and summer 2000.

**How:** for many counters, this simply involved counting the number of birds on their WeBS site in August, but counters were also asked to visit additional sites which potentially held birds, including urban parks which may not be regularly covered for WeBS. Observers were asked to provide counts of adults and young separately where possible. In addition, coverage using randomly selected tetrads (4 x 1-km squares) was undertaken to enable confidence limits to be placed on the population estimate.

**Next:** data are being validated and will be analysed later in spring 2001. Comparison of the site-based and tetrad based approaches will prove particularly challenging!

**Contact:** Colette Hall, WWT (site-based) and Steve Holloway, BTO (quadrat-based).

## Pilot Dispersed Species Survey

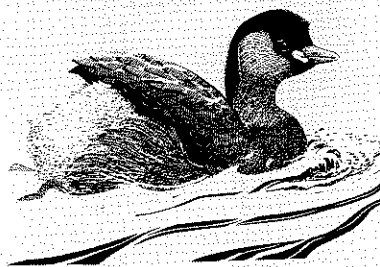
**Why:** smaller wetlands, such as small pools, ditches, flooded fields and wet meadows are not usually covered by WeBS counts yet are likely to hold considerable numbers of species such as Little Grebe, Grey Heron, Moorhen and Coot, grassland plovers, and both species of snipe. This pilot will help identify the methods for a national census that will identify the component of waterbird populations usually missed by WeBS counts.

**When:** December 2000 and January 2001.

**How:** counters are asked to count all waterbirds within selected tetrads (4 x 1-km squares). Some 200 tetrads were selected at random, but stratified so as to provide a representative geographical scatter of locations and habitats.

**Next:** data will be analysed later in 2001 and enable us to evaluate the methods before undertaking a full survey.

**Contact:** Steve Holloway, BTO.



## Mute Swan Census

**Why:** to determine the size of the British Mute Swan population. Birds are widely dispersed throughout Britain and, with some remaining territorial throughout the year, many occur away from sites regularly covered by WeBS. The survey also identifies the breeding and non-breeding components of the population. This will provide an update since the last national census in 1990 and will assess the increase since the ban on the sale of lead fishing weights, the effect of mild winters and cleaner waterways.

**When:** counts will be made during April and May 2001 (all non-breeding flocks must be counted in April).

**How:** observers are asked to check all suitable habitat in randomly selected 10-km squares and simply count all birds present (except cygnets born in 2001). The selection will focus on those squares with most swans, although a number potentially less promising squares are included to check the extent of any expansion into new areas. We are approaching organisations such as the Environment Agency who may be able to help with coverage of the river networks.

**Next:** forms and instructions will be with LOs from the end of Jan. Please let us know asap of any anticipated coverage problems and we will assist in whatever way we can.

**Contact:** Peter Cranswick, WWT (England and Wales) or Allan & Lyndesay Brown, SOC (Scotland).

your area. Through Newsletter articles, we hope that counters will be fully aware of what is in store and can also plan to assist where possible. For pilot surveys, we often ask LOs and counters for their thoughts on how best to design the survey, fieldwork, recording forms

## National River Survey

**Why:** to identify how many wintering waterbirds occur on UK rivers, a habitat relatively poorly covered by WeBS Core Counts. This will enable us to determine accurate population estimates for species such as Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Goosander, Mallard and several other species, as well as identify important river sections for waterbirds and describe those features (river type, water quality etc.) which are important for waterbirds.

**When:** provisionally December 2002 and January 2003

**How:** precise methods will be determined by the analysis of the Pilot survey data, but are likely to involve two visits to 'randomly' selected river sections throughout the country (ideally, targeted at those areas likely to hold most birds); complete coverage of the lower stretches of all major rivers will probably also be attempted. Since few rivers are counted regularly, this will mean a fair deal of additional fieldwork. We will provide more details nearer the time and hope that many counters will be willing to participate (nearly all counters found the pilot an enjoyable experience!). We will also approach other organisations (e.g. Environment Agency) who may be able to assist with fieldwork.

**Next:** Detailed methods for the national survey will be finalised during 2001. Once the required level of coverage has been determined, we will approach LOs to start to put together the counter network for this pioneering survey. More details will be provided in future Newsletters.

**Contact:** James Robinson, WWT.

etc. This is invaluable in ensuring a successful survey.

However, we greatly value all counters' opinions and advice, whether praise or moans, so please contact us at any stage about any aspect. Many thanks in advance.

*Peter Cranswick*

## National Dispersed Species Survey

**Why:** to identify how many of the more widely dispersed waterbird species occur on 'small' wetland sites not normally covered by WeBS Core Counts. This will enable us to revise our population estimates for species such as Mallard, Moorhen, snipes, Lapwings and Golden Plovers.

**When:** provisionally winter 2003-04

**How:** precise methods will be determined following analysis of the Pilot survey data, but are likely to involve a quadrat (square) approach in which all waterbirds are counted. As with the river survey, this represents an notable increase in the level of fieldwork to be undertaken, combined with the use of rather different methods to normal for WeBS.

**Next:** detailed methods will be finalised in 2002. More details will be provided in future Newsletters of progress with this novel survey.

**Contact:** Steve Holloway, BTO.

## Too much?

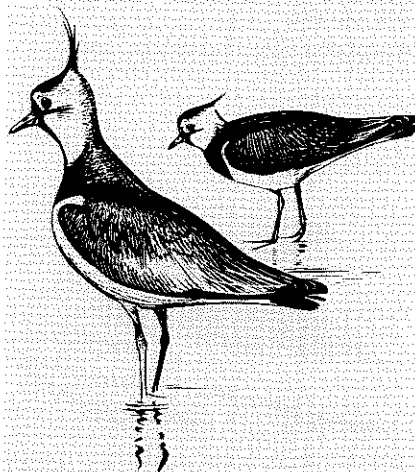
As mentioned above, we are currently in the middle of a particularly intensive period of special surveys. This is partly a combination of predetermined international timetables, of attempting two novel surveys (which require pilot surveys in the first instance) and also because few special surveys had been conducted in the preceding period, necessitating a period of 'catch up'.

However, we are conscious that we may be reaching the point of overload for counters. Consequently, we are considering rescheduling the national river survey for winter 2002-03, rather than the initially planned 2001-02. We hope that a 'normal' winter of just (!) WeBS Core Counts and Low Tide Counts will provide a chance for counters to recharge their batteries. Similarly, the National Dispersed Species Survey may be postponed for one year. The exact timings of these surveys will be dependent on the outcome of the respective pilot schemes. As ever, we would be grateful for your views.

It is planned that the larger national surveys, such as NEWS, Rivers, Mute Swans etc. will be undertaken as part of a rolling programme, probably once every nine years. Once the implications of the new pilot and national surveys are clear, we will be in a position to plan this 'master' timetable.

A huge thank you to everyone who has participated in these special surveys. They provide much valuable information to complement WeBS counts for the monitoring and conservation of the UK's waterbirds and wetlands.

*Peter Cranswick*





## Bulletin Board

### International Waterbird Census

The January counts from WeBS, along with that from equivalent schemes throughout Europe, the Middle East and SW Asia, are supplied each year to Wetlands International as part of the International Waterbird Census (IWC). This massive dataset is essential for producing international population estimates and trends for waterbirds, enabling changes in numbers in Britain to be put in context, and assessing the relative importance of this country for waterbirds.

As with WeBS, a Steering Committee advises on the focus and direction of the IWC. David Stroud of JNCC, a member of the WeBS Steering Group since its inception, has also been a long term member of the IWC SC and Peter Cranswick was also invited to join in 2000 as the representative of national co-ordinators in NW Europe.

As with WeBS, the IWC is constantly looking to improve and develop, to meet the demands of the many users of its data, particularly the Ramsar Convention and the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement. The 'gap-filling' census was at the forefront of discussions at the annual meeting last November, an ambitious project to cover as many of the major wetlands throughout the region as possible. As mentioned in a previous Newsletter, it is hoped that counters from countries in NW Europe in particular will be able to assist with coverage in the less densely populated countries and those with relatively few resources to survey their waterbirds (please contact the WeBS Secretariat if you are interested in participating; thanks to all those who have already done so).

It is particularly satisfying to see that the wealth of data and experience gained through the 50 years of the WeBS scheme, the most comprehensive of any country, has considerable influence on the development of the IWC. The UK scheme, as a result of its sheer size and longevity, has often been the

first to address many waterbird monitoring issues, and this experience was regularly drawn upon by the Steering Committee — a tribute to the considerable efforts of the WeBS network.

### Hello – Goodbye!!

During the last year, a number of Local Organisers have retired from WeBS to be replaced by new co-ordinators. A sincere thank you from all the WeBS staff to outgoing and incoming organisers alike. An updated list of Local Organisers and their contact details will be included with the summer newsletter.

Several Local Organisers are stepping down in spring at the end of the current WeBS season. These are:

Euan Cameron – Perthshire  
Maurice Arnold – West Midland counties (covering Warwickshire, Worcestershire, West Midlands & Staffordshire)

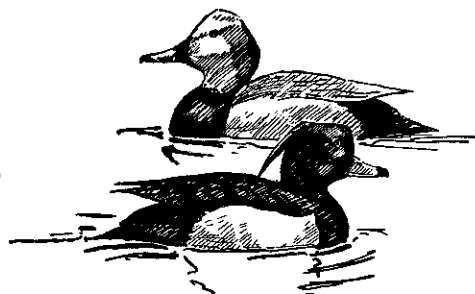
If you feel you may be able to help co-ordinate counts in these areas, or know someone else who might wish to help, please contact the WeBS Secretariat or the Local Organiser directly. The WeBS Secretariat can supply an information sheet on the role of a WeBS Local Organiser on request.

### Marine Strandings

Our active counter network in coastal areas is well placed to inform relevant organisations on stranded seals, cetaceans or turtles. Listed below are contact details should you encounter any, live or dead, during your fieldwork.

#### *Live strandings*

The British Divers Marine Life Rescue are active in rescues throughout the country. Their Rescue Hotline can be contacted on 01634 281680.



Alternatively, live strandings can be reported to the RSPCA on 0990 555999 (or SSPCA in Scotland, regional numbers available through directory enquiries).

#### *Dead strandings*

Fresh carcasses can yield valuable post mortem information.  
Dead cetaceans: Natural History Museum 020 7942 5155.  
Dead seals: Institute of Zoology 020 7449 6691, or your local Wildlife Trust. In Scotland, Bob Reid (Scottish Agricultural College) 01463 243030. In Wales, Rod Penrose (Marine Environmental Monitoring) 01348 875000

Codes of conduct for Turtle Strandings are available from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Wildlife Trusts.

### The WeBS Year

A reminder to all counters that the 'WeBS year' runs from April to March rather than from January to December. If the information you collect is to be used fully and the importance of the sites you count recognised to their full potential it is important to get all your counts (including the January to March counts) to your Local Organiser as soon as possible after the March count.

### Priority count dates for 2002

A flier listing the priority count dates for 2001 and 2002 should be enclosed with this newsletter. If you have not received one please contact your Local Organiser or the WeBS Secretariat.

### It's quicker by e-mail . . .

For Local Organisers who are on-line, please drop us an e-mail ([WeBS@wwt.org.uk](mailto:WeBS@wwt.org.uk) and [lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org)) so that we have your current e-mail address (if you haven't done so already). We try to acknowledge receipt of any significant batches of counts you send in and replying by e-mail is quicker and saves on postage. It also means we can consult quickly

*continued on page 12*



## Bulletin Board

with LOs, for example over special surveys and proposed changes to any aspects of WeBS, and hopefully means we can provide answers to your queries with maximum efficiency.

### Mapping the way forward

Our ongoing mapping project (the Count Unit Definition Inventory or CUDI) has progressed significantly. We now have the boundaries of about 70% of currently counted sites marked on 1:25000 scale maps, vital information in helping us and other users to interpret your counts. If you

still have a CUDI questionnaire outstanding, please complete it and return it the WeBS Secretariat.

### Statutory Sites Waterbird Monitoring Appraisal

As outlined in the summer newsletter, we are currently embarking on a project to examine how well WeBS sites monitor designated sites such as SPAs, Ramsar sites and SSSIs. We will be sending out questionnaires to Local Organisers or counters of these sites requesting further information about bird numbers and distribution in relationship with the designated area.

We hope that you, our local experts, will be able to assist with this project which aims to ensure our monitoring provides adequate information for the continued protection of these areas.

### Welcome to the WeBS team

Welcome to Paul Marshall, who joins the WeBS team at WWT to assist with the CUDI mapping project and in particular the project described above relating WeBS counts to designated areas.



## Many thanks for all your help

The great strength of WeBS, arguably the biggest count scheme of its kind in the world and the envy of many other countries, lies in the tremendous volunteer input from you, the counters. We hope that you will continue to support WeBS, and through it, the conservation of waterbirds and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

## Contact Details

		Automated system	Direct dial	e-mail
Head of Secretariat	Peter Cranswick	01453 891900	01453	Peter.Cranswick@wwt.org.uk
Core Count Organiser	Mark Pollitt	ext 265	891931	Mark.Pollitt@wwt.org.uk
Assistant Organiser	Colette Hall	ext 255	891926	Colette.Hall@wwt.org.uk
	James Robinson	ext 261		James.Robinson@wwt.org.uk
		ext 263		
(If you experience problems, dial 01453 890333 to speak to the WWT Receptionist)				
Low Tide Count Organiser	Andy Musgrove	01842 750050		Andy.Musgrove@bto.org
Assistant Low Tide Count Organiser	Steve Holloway	01842 750050		Steve.Holloway@bto.org
	Mark Rehfisch	01842 750050		Mark.Rehfisch@bto.org
Mute Swan Survey Organiser (Scotland)	Allan Brown	01334 656804		swans@allanwbrown.co.uk

WWT  
Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT  
Fax 01453 891901

BTO  
The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU  
Fax 01842 750030

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