WeBS Newsletter

British Trust for Ornithology | WWT | RSPB | JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

Number 9 Winter 1998-99

Volunteer Help

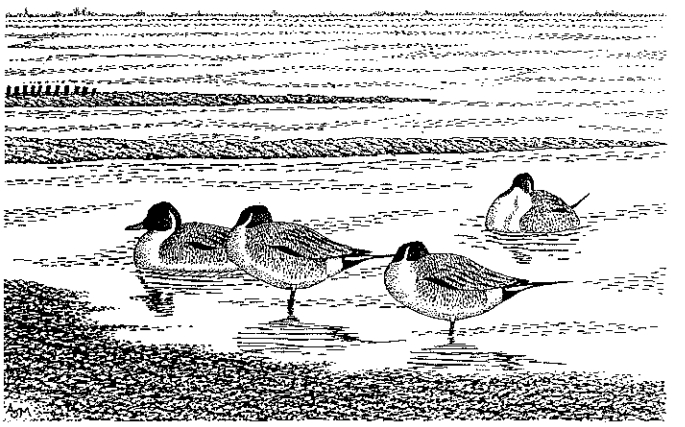
Since the reorganization of WeBS last April, things have been rather hectic for the Secretariat. The dust has settled in most areas, and we thank those counters who have had to bear with us during this time.

Whilst saving money was one of the key benefits of the reshuffle, we hope that the more efficient structure, particularly having all staff concerned with Core Counts in one location, will mean that a second major benefit will be realised: providing better support to the counter network. The skill, dedication and sheer numbers of WeBS counters are envied worldwide. To ensure that your efforts are put to greatest effect, we plan to provide better direction and co-ordination, improved feedback and to offer new services, e.g. training. We also aim to make life as simple as possible, particularly with respect to paper work. Please, therefore, contact any of the Secretariat staff when you have any queries or suggestions for changes or improvements to any aspect of WeBS that relate to Core Counts or Andy Musgrove at the BTO if they relate to Low Tide Counts.

We will continue to rely on your efforts and the counts themselves will remain central to WeBS. From time to time, however, we may require additional information to ensure that the count data are used to greatest effect. A current example is the WeBS atlas and the work to match WeBS data to the statutory conservation sites, particularly Ramsar sites and Special Protection Areas. This work really is at the cutting edge of the conservation of waterfowl and the wetland sites they use; in a sense, the raison d'être for WeBS. The information that you provide is vital for the statutory conservation agencies in being able to identify, monitor and protect these areas. If a request for further information drops on your doorstep, please take the time to complete the map and form and return these as soon as possible to the Secretariat. It is worth stressing that this exercise needs only to be performed once for each site: once the count boundary is logged, there is no need to collect the information again unless there is a change to the boundary.

Nevertheless, we appreciate that no-one likes paperwork. As ever, we try to keep this aspect as simple and as painless as possible. We consult counters before introducing new work and before making any changes to the scheme. Unfortunately, we cannot consult everyone directly about all the details. However, we do contact a wide number of people (normally around 30) for comments, whilst potential changes are announced in advance in the newsletter with an invitation for anyone to contribute suggestions. We hope that this means that the service we provide will suit as many counters as possible. If, however, instructions are lacking or unclear, please contact the WeBS Secretariat, if possible by phone and we will answer any queries. If you have a tone phone, you can leave a message on our answer phones at WWT at any time of day and we will return the call as soon as possible.

Thank you again for all your efforts.



WeBS is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterfowl 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 waterfowl populations, assess trends in numbers dn distribution, and identify and monitor important sites for waterfowl. 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).

CUDI – mapping the way forward for SPA and Ramsar site monitoring

Most counters will be aware that over the past couple of years WeBS has undertaken a major exercise, the Count Unit Definition Inventory (CUDI), to obtain good quality maps of the boundaries of all the count areas covered by WeBS each year. Far from being a step into further bureaucracy, the maps are already providing valuable information to all those who use the data you provide. We now have maps for around two-thirds of recently counted WeBS sites in England and Wales, a figure which we aim to improve on this year. Final maps should be distributed to counters next summer.

This winter, we are also carrying out a pilot survey looking at how the WeBS count areas relate to Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites, areas of international importance which are afforded special legal protection. In many cases, the WeBS boundaries and SPA/Ramsar boundaries differ and thus, when we record counts, for example, at the Wash or the Ribble Estuary, we are unsure how many of the birds are using the designated sites and how many frequent adjacent areas which may have little or no protection. Working in consultation with counters and local staff from the government conservation agencies (English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Council for Wales and Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland), we will be exploring ways in which WeBS count units might be reconfigured to enable better monitoring of designated sites. Hopefully, this will highlight important waterfowl areas outside any SPA/Ramsar site that might merit increased protection. The matching of boundaries will also enable the routine reporting of totals of waterbirds on the network of statutory protected sites (see article on WeBS report). The pilot project covers approximately 10 WeBS sites, and will be progressively extended to all designated sites over the following year.

Whilst this will involve a small amount of paperwork on your part, we hope that by undertaking a pilot study at a small number of sites we can fine-tune the process to make it as simple and painless as possible. Since the ultimate aim is to ensure that international laws and conventions effectively protect our most important sites, we hope you will take the time to help.

Updated WeBS recording forms and cards

Following last year's evaluation of the non-count data collected on the WeBS recording forms (WeBS Newsletter No. 8) and the increasing need to ensure the information you send us is computerised quickly and accurately, this summer we will be making a number of amendments to the WeBS recording forms and cards. The majority of the information on the form will remain the same, though key changes will be made to the way in which we collect name and address information and to how counts at complex sites (ie large sites, such as estuaries, which are counted in a number of smaller sectors) are recorded on forms. We hope these changes will save time and paperwork for counters, Local Organisers (LOs) and ourselves at the WeBS Secretariat.

We intend to issue each WeBS counter with a unique five digit number; where we already have your address details, you need only supply this and your surname instead of having to write a full address on every form. Full address details will only be required if you move address. This will also mean that we are able to attribute every single count to individual counters, ensuring we know exactly who to contact should we ever have any queries and assuring the best possible service when we need to mail WeBS literature direct to counters.

We are also looking to reduce the paperwork for LOs, particularly those co-ordinating large complex sites. One possibility is that the standard WeBS recording form will relate only to one individual count area (covering several visits), but will not facilitate counts for different areas for the same date as at present. Most single sector sites currently use this system. At complex sites with a large number of smaller count units (e.g. most of the major estuaries) counters most often submit their records on recording cards, a miniature version of the standard form, or phone counts through to their LO who in turn transcribes these to WeBS forms. The design of these cards will be modified to include all the necessary information required by WeBS (including room for the new counter codes) enabling them to be passed straight on to the WeBS Secretariat by the LO without the need to transcribe to standard forms. A separate, simplified Summary form will be available for LOs who wish to feedback monthly site totals to counters.

We will also provide adhesive labels containing each sector name (and the unique code used by the WeBS database) to LOs which can be stuck to forms or cards prior their to distribution to counters. This should ensure that counts are attributed to the correct count areas and minimise the risk of errors.

We intend to mail out draft forms to a number of Local Organisers and counters in the New Year for feedback on the proposed changes so that by next summer we have removed any problems and meet with the wishes and needs of all involved. If you have any comments on these ideas, or wish to be included in the consultation, please contact Mark Pollitt at Slimbridge.

Little Egret Roost Sites – Pilot Survey

Andy Musgrove

The Little Egret is, as readers will know, a species which is rapidly colonising the UK: the first breeding was recorded recently and during the 1990s it has become a relatively common sight along the south coast in late summer and autumn. Although the species is distinctive, it can disappear surprisingly easily into creeks and ditches and thus many counters feel that the best way to estimate numbers on estuaries is to count them as they fly to their communal roosts at dusk. The Little Egret roost survey in 1997-98 was an attempt to investigate how well WeBS Core Counts currently monitor non-breeding numbers on estuaries. This should enable the size of the non-breeding population in the UK to be determined and provide a baseline for setting national importance levels.

Counts were received for 22 roosts (totalling 579 birds) in September 1997 and 17 roosts (totalling 239 birds) in January 1998. A comparison with WeBS Core Count data for sites counted for both surveys found that during September, 73% more Little Egrets were recorded on roost counts than on core counts. However, in January, 17% fewer Little Egrets were recorded at roosts than on core counts. This phenomenon appears to be driven by counts on the three main sites (Langstone/Chichester Harbours, Poole Harbour and the Tamar Complex), and with these three sites removed, the pattern of considerably higher counts at roost than core counts is also seen in January. The reason why these three sites held relatively low roost numbers in January is not clear. One possibility could be that, with shorter days in January, more birds flew in after dark and were thus missed from roost counts. Another possibility is that these large roosts are favoured by birds in the autumn shortly after their arrival from France, but that birds remaining into the winter disperse to smaller roosts, perhaps closer to their feeding areas. Both of these suggestions are only hypotheses, however, and require further investigation.

The peak UK count of Little Egret currently occurs in late summer/early autumn. In September 1997, WeBS Core counts recorded a total of 416 Little Egrets (excluding the Channel Islands). However, substituting roost counts (where higher than respective core counts), including estimated totals for sites where no roost count was carried out (Cleddau, Taw/Torridge, Helford) and adding in estimates for sites where no core count took place (Looe, Christchurch) produces a figure of about 750 birds; approximately 80% higher than for Core Counts alone. The current 1% threshold would thus be eight birds, although the population seems likely to increase further over the coming years. (Note that for statutory site protection purposes, however, a minimum level of 50 birds of a given species is usually used.)

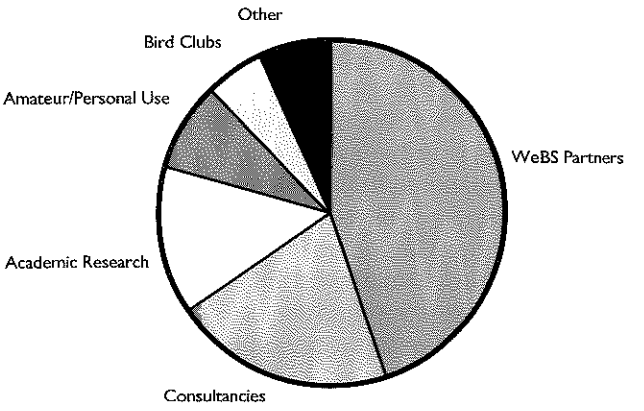
To get a better fix on the size and distribution of the non-breeding population of Little Egrets in the UK, a full survey of roosts is planned for 1999-2000, with the aim of counting all the important roosts each month. More details will be provided nearer the time. If you would like to help out with these counts then please get in touch with Andy Musgrove at the BTO.

WeBS data requests

An important function of WeBS is to ensure that count data are used as widely as possible for conservation. To this end, waterfowl data are provided for use in projects such as management plans, environmental assessments and the designation of statutory sites. In 1996-97, WeBS handled over 200 data requests for Core Count data, with the most frequent users being WeBS partners and consultancies (figure 5).

The WeBS partners would like to make sure that they are kept informed of all uses of WeBS data. This is largely to ensure that we are made aware of any threats posed to particular sites which may necessitate some action on our part but also to minimise the possibility of data being misinterpreted or misused. With this in mind, if you should be approached directly by anyone interested in using WeBS data, we would ask that you refer them to Becky Hughes (for Core Count data) or to Andy Musgrove at BTO (for Low Tide Count data). We are not seeking to restrict counters use of their data; however, we operate a data request service which ensures all users receive explanatory information about the counts, and receive data in a consistent format. This also removes the need for any administration on your part.

We are planning to report on cases where WeBS data have been used successfully to defend sites or support important conservation issues in future newsletters.



Users of WeBS data in 1996-97

Long-term population trends in wintering Pintail in Great Britain

Melanie Kershaw (WWT)

The Pintail is one of only two wildfowl species for which the international 1% level for northwest Europe has been reduced in the latest review following a downward revision of the winter population estimate from 70,000 to 60,000 birds. Pintail has also been designated as a species which has an Unfavourable Conservation Status in Europe (although the species' global populations are not concentrated in Europe), due to large declines on the breeding grounds in many countries and in wintering areas, particularly in the east and west. It was in response to these declines that an analysis of wintering Pintail trends in Great Britain was undertaken.

The current British population estimate of Pintail is approximately 27,800 birds representing almost half the northwest European wintering population, the highest proportion recorded for any duck species As with their distribution across sites in northwest Europe, Pintail wintering in Britain are highly concentrated on a few sites, mostly estuaries, with two thirds of birds recorded on just six sites (the Dee, Ribble, Morecambe Bay, Mersey, Solway and Burry Inlet). Since estuaries, which are well covered by WeBS, hold the majority of birds, it seems likely that WeBS counts (e.g. a peak count of 24,500 in 1997-98) represent close to 100% of the total wintering population in Great Britain.

Analysis of WeBS data from 1966 to 1995 revealed that numbers of Pintail wintering in Britain have increased by an average of 3.26% per anum. 'Segment analysis' identified four periods of relatively consistent population behaviour:

1) a period of rapid increase from 1966 to 1973 when numbers rose by 18.7% per anum
2) a decline during the mid 1970s
3) a further sharp increase in the late 1970s, and
4) a period of slow, but non-significant decline from 1980 to the present day.

The overall pattern therefore appears to be one of an increase up to the early 1980s with numbers reaching a plateau and possibly declining slightly thereafter. There is a weak correlation between British and northwest European population indices, and, as with the British population trend, there appears to be no evidence of any unusual declines or increases in the northwest European Pintail population.

Within Great Britain, there have been significantly different trends between regions, habitats and sites. Northwest England/north Wales is by far the most important region, holding three times the number of birds recorded in the second most important region, east/central England. Southeast England, southwest England/south Wales and Cumbria/southwest Scotland are also important regions for wintering Pintail. During the period 1966-95, numbers have increased most in east/central England, southeast England and southwest England/south Wales. The rate of increase

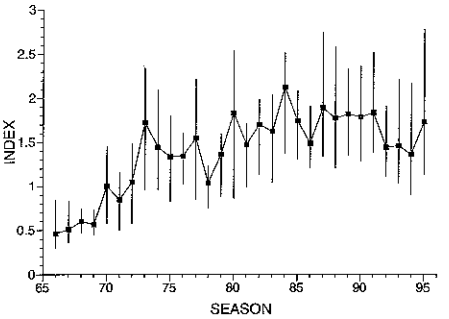


Figure 1. Annual indices for Pintail wintering in Great Britain 1966–95

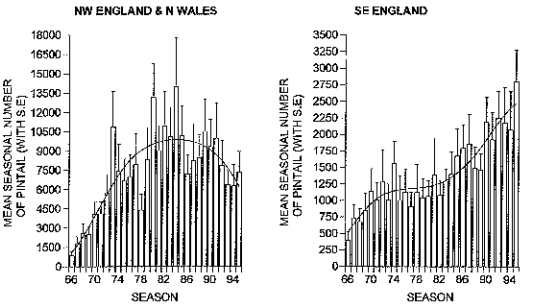


Figure 2. Mean seasonal (Sep-Mar) numbers in different regions of Great Britain

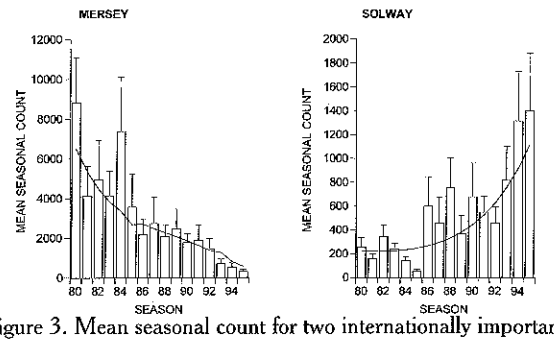


Figure 3. Mean seasonal count for two internationally important sites for the period 1980 to 1995

has been slower in the north and west of Britain. In terms of the current trend, numbers appear to have reached a plateau and are declining in northwest England and north Wales, southwest England/south Wales and east/central England, whilst numbers in southeast England and in Cumbria/southwest Scotland are still increasing.

Wintering Pintail are also highly aggregated according to habitat type. Pintail in northwest Europe tend to winter in coastal areas, particularly floodlands, estuaries and wetlands near to the coast. In Great Britain, numbers on estuaries and coastal habitats in the last five years are more than seven times greater than those on the second most important habitat, rivers/freshwater marshes. This is in contrast to the situation in North America and the southern Palaearctic, where inland feeding is common. In Britain, reservoirs and mineral workings do not hold significant numbers of Pintail, although the annual rate of increase since 1966 has been greatest on these habitats, and in particular on mineral workings (12.7% per anum),

suggesting that these habitats are increasingly being used by wintering Pintail. Numbers appear to have reached a plateau and have declined slightly in recent years on estuaries and coastal habitats and on natural waters, indicating a possible shift from coastal areas to inland freshwater sites.

Pintail are extremely mobile, enabling them to use temporary flooding. However, this mobility also causes major local changes in distribution and means that numbers tend to fluctuate considerably between years on individual sites. Individual site trends in Great Britain over the last thirty years were characterised by large fluctuations in numbers from year to year and also between months within each season. Monthly counting of sites under WeBS will not necessarily be sufficient to pick up these variations and to describe accurately population trends for such mobile species. At sites where counts are made more frequently than once a month (e.g. Caerlaverock and the Ouse Washes), massive fluctuations in numbers have been recorded over a period of days. Similarly, in areas where Pintail sometimes move off estuary sites to feed on stubble fields, monthly counts will not always accurately reflect the number of birds in the area. For example, many of the Pintail that winter on the Ouse Washes feed on nearby farmland, generally making two flights off the Washes each day to feed - one at dawn, returning just after sunrise and the second in mid-afternoon, returning at dusk. On the Solway, Pintail often feed on adjacent farmland during the day which means that they are not visible to counters on the shore.

The majority of Pintail were concentrated on just a few sites, and often extremely localised within them. The most important site is the Dee Estuary (Eng/Wal), where the five year peak mean for 1991-95 of 6,498 Pintail represents almost a quarter of the British total. Numbers were much higher during the 1980s when annual maxima in excess of 8,000 birds were common. Other significant sites are mostly estuaries concentrated around the northwest of Great Britain, notably the Ribble, Morecambe Bay, the Mersey and the Solway. Together with the Burry Inlet, in south Wales, these western estuaries accounted for an average of 57% (and as much as 70%) of Pintail in Great Britain in December, 1991-95.

One site, the Mersey Estuary, has shown a sustained decline in numbers over the period 1980-95, falling from an annual mean in excess of 8,000 birds in 1980 to less than 1,000 birds in 1994 and 1995. It has been suggested that this decline has been caused by improved sewage treatment, resulting in less nutrient enrichment of the water and therefore a decreased food supply. A number of other internationally important sites have experienced declines since the mid to late 1980s, namely the Dee Estuary, Burry Inlet, the Wash, and the Medway. In contrast, numbers are still increasing on the Solway, Swale, Somerset Levels, Severn, Ribble, Nene Washes and Pagham Harbour. The reasons for these site trends are not clear.

At present, there appears to be no significant decline in the number of Pintail wintering in Great Britain. There have, however, been large declines on some of the traditionally most important estuaries, notably the Dee and Mersey Estuaries. Whilst the species appears to be highly mobile and able to adapt to changing conditions, given their highly concentrated nature at sites within Europe and the more serious declines in breeding numbers in Russia and Finland and in wintering numbers in the east Mediterranean, it is important that numbers in Britain are monitored closely.

Reference

Kershaw, M. 1998. *Long term population trends in wintering Pintail (*Anas acuta*) in Great Britain 1966-95.* WWT report to JNCC, Slimbridge.

Data Protection Act

This Act serves to protect the rights of individuals whose personal information is held in databases or filing systems. It prevents us, for example, from using your name and address for anything but bona fide causes. Due to forthcoming changes in the Act, we will need to inform you of various things about the database and the uses made of the information, e.g. who is responsible for the database (the 'controller'), what the information is used for and what happens to it. As soon as legislation accompanying the Act has been finalised, we will let you know. Almost certainly, it will mean a few extra sentences somewhere on the WeBS recording forms outlining the relevant information.

For the record, in case this all sounds rather sinister, we keep your name and address on file so that, if necessary, we can 1. mail the annual report to you; 2. mail the recording form directly to you (e.g. if there is no Local Organiser for your region); and 3. identify who counted which site should we need to get in touch with the counter about a particular issue, e.g. to discuss unusual counts at the site. The database of counters for a particular region may be passed to the new LO when the previous one retires, and a list of Local Organisers' names and addresses is sent each year for publication in the Birdwatchers Yearbook (unless the LO has specifically requested us not to do so).

We operate a policy of not disclosing names or addresses to anyone outside the WeBS partnership. Where, for example, another NGO or a consultant wishes to discuss an issue with a counter or enlist their help with a survey, we first obtain details of the issue, then write to the counter with this information. We suggest that, if the counter wishes to become involved, they contact the NGO or consultant direct. Thus, the decision is entirely up to the counter, and, as far as possible, your anonymity is retained. We hope this is the most sensible solution in these cases, but would welcome thoughts and comments on this issue.

Regional trends in wader populations in relation to environmental change

Graham Austin (BTO)

Wader populations in Wales and South-west England fare badly . . .

The overwintering populations of waders on all the major estuaries have now been monitored since the winter of 1969-70. During this period, numbers of all major species have either remained stable or shown long term increases. However, when population trends are considered on a regional basis (based on Environmental Agency administrative regions), it is apparent that, for many species, trends differ from one part of Britain to another. When a species has shown long term stability at a national level (e.g. Ringed Plover, Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Turnstone), most regional populations have also remained more or less stable apart from those in Wales, and in some cases Southwest England, which have declined. For species which have shown long term increases nationally (e.g. Grey Plover, Black-tailed Godwit and Curlew) this pattern is repeated again throughout most other regions except in Wales, and in some cases Southwest England, where they have at best remained stable. Additionally, species that have increased their range like Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit have not spread into Wales to any marked degree.

During the same period there have been a number of long term changes in the environment which may help to explain at least some of the changes in the distribution of overwintering waders.

. . . while estuarine waters get cleaner . . .

The Bathing Water and Urban Waste Directives have resulted in improved cleanliness of coastal and estuarine waters. The reduction in the input of organic waste would be expected to affect the productivity of the invertebrates on which the waders feed, and in turn the birds themselves. There are indeed regional differences in both the degree of water quality improvement achieved and the current levels of organic input. Analyses showed that improvements in water quality over the past two decades were sufficient to depress the increase in total waders and of Curlew in particular by 14% and 17% respectively in the Anglian region. Conversely, improved water quality may partially account for the increase in Redshank recorded in Anglian region and may have mediated their decline in Wales. However, regional changes in water quality did not match the regional changes in wader numbers closely, which indicates that a much stronger force may be at work which outweighs the effects of water quality change.

. . . and winters get warmer

There has also been a gradual trend for wetter, warmer winters during recent decades. On a winter by winter basis, the geographical distributions of Avocet, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Curlew, Dunlin and Ringed Plover were found to be more easterly in warmer winters, particularly when measured in terms of snow or sleet days or days with ground frost. The downward trend in snow or sleet days during the past three decades and the associated easterly shift in the populations might partially explain the trends in the Welsh and Southwest populations of some of these species.

Sediments on east and south coast estuaries are especially muddy whilst those on the west coast are especially sandy. Generally speaking, muddier sediments provide much more attractive feeding to most species of waders. However there is a price to be paid by birds choosing to stay on the muddier east coast estuaries because the east coast is colder than the west coast. Waders have high energy requirements and so have to work hard to find sufficient food in the harshest winter conditions. Previously, there may have been an advantage to individual waders in moving further west to warmer estuaries even if these provided poorer pickings. However, with warmer winters in the east in recent years the richer pickings to be had there may now carry less of a penalty.

International wader population estimates

The thresholds used to identify sites of international importance for waders, a key tool for the conservation of their populations, are based on the estimates of East Atlantic Flyway (EAF) populations. These were last revised comprehensively in 1989 by Smit & Piersma, using data from the early to mid 1980s. Although some of these estimates have been revised more recently in Waterfowl Population Estimates first and second editions (published by Wetlands International), a nine-year timetable was recently agreed by the Ramsar Convention in 1996 for the revision of all waterfowl estimates.

Consequently, a complete review is being undertaken by the Wader Study Group, and workshops were held in Belgium in 1996 and more recently at Hungary in October 1998 to pool information and identify potential problems. Preliminary analyses suggest that there have been substantial increases in the EAF populations of a number of species, particularly Black-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover, Sanderling and NW European Redshank. The UK data which contribute to this review are derived almost solely from WeBS, both from Core Counts and special surveys such as the Non-estuarine Waterfowl Survey. Given that the UK supports a substantial proportion of wintering wader populations, including over 30% of the total numbers of 10 species, the high quality and accuracy of the UK dataset is vital in ensuring the quality of the international estimates.

The revised estimates will be presented to the next Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention in May 1999, with publication of these and the 1% thresholds used for international site identification expected in early 2000.

Bulletin Board

Wanted! New Local Organisers. Can you help . . . ??

The following areas currently have no Local Organiser co-ordinating coverage of WeBS sites. If you can help, or know of someone else who may be willing to give of their time to co-ordinate WeBS counts in these areas, please contact Mark Pollitt, WeBS Core Count National Organiser at WWT Slimbridge.

Co. Armagh (excl. Loughs Neagh & Beg)
Co. Down (inland sites)
South Down coast
Co. Londonderry (other sites)
Co. Tyrone (excl. Loughs Neagh & Beg)
Christchurch Harbour
Lavan Sands
Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin)
West Inverness/Lochalsh/Wester Ross
East Lancashire

Print of Wildfowl and Wader Counts Cover Painting

The high quality of paintings used for the cover of Wildfowl and Wader Counts in recent years prompted the suggestion of producing a limited number of prints for sale. We have produced 50 prints of Terence Lambert's painting which adorns the 1996-97 report, matching the size and position, but with the text removed. The prints are on a matt paper and each has been numbered and signed by the artist. The prints can be obtained from the Secretariat at a cost of £20 each plus £1.50 for postage and packing. All profits will go to waterfowl research. Should this prove popular, we hope to continue this practice in the future.

WeBS Atlas

Thanks to all those in Scotland who have returned their CUDI forms; and a plea to all those who have received forms but not yet returned them (wherever you live!) to do so as soon as possible. We are currently experiencing some problems producing the final maps, but hope to distribute these some time in the spring.

Seabird 2000

Seabird 2000 is a major new initiative to census all breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland. The project is a partnership between the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), the statutory nature conservation agencies, RSPB, the Seabird Group, Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group, the National Parks & Wildlife Service (Ireland) and BirdWatch Ireland. The aim of Seabird 2000 is to census all 24 species of seabird which regularly breed in Britain and Ireland. Both countries hold internationally important numbers of seabirds, but the very nature of densely packed seabird colonies, makes these populations extremely vulnerable, even to very localised threats. Hence, if these populations are to be effectively conserved, it is extremely important to regularly and accurately update our knowledge of their size and distribution, so that temporal changes and causes can be identified.

Seabird 2000 follows on from two previous national surveys conducted in 1969-70 ('Operation Seafarer') and in 1985-87. Subsequent to the last survey, the JNCC has been co-ordinating the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) and Seabird Colony Register (SCR), to which many amateur ornithologists have contributed. The SMP and SCR combined have been used to identify significant trends within regional populations since the 1985-87 census. However, there is considerable variation in the trends seen, both within and between species. It is therefore necessary to re-establish new baseline figures for all species across the whole of their range within Britain and Ireland.

The accurate census of all seabirds breeding not only around the coasts of Britain and Ireland, but inland as well, represents a huge undertaking. Therefore, Seabird 2000 would not be possible without the efforts of dedicated volunteers and would benefit greatly from the input of WeBS counters. The census work will take place between April and June during 1999 to 2001. We aim to count all targeted colonies once during the three year period: the largest coastal colonies will be given priority in 1999, while in 2000, the survey aims to count all tern colonies. Your contribution to Seabird 2000 need not be confined to your existing WeBS count area; the organisers would value your help at any seabird colonies in your local area, including inland colonies of gulls and terns, and also urban roof-top gull colonies.

If you wish to take part in Seabird 2000, please contact:
Dr Ian Mitchell at Seabirds and Cetaceans, JNCC, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen AB10 1UZ
fax: 01224 621 488
e-mail: mitche_i@jncc.gov.uk

WeBS Low Tide Counts

During the winter of 1998-99, WeBS Low Tide Counts are being carried out at the following sites: Adur Estuary, Alt Estuary, Belfast Lough, Breydon Water, Carmarthen Bay, Chichester Harbour, Deben Estuary, Dee Estuary (North Wirral Shore), Hayle Estuary, Humber Estuary, Irvine Estuary, Langstone Harbour, Mersey Estuary, Moray Firth, Orwell Estuary, Pagham Harbour, Severn Estuary, Solway Firth, Southampton Water, Strangford Lough, Tamar Complex, Thames Estuary and Tyne Estuary. Many thanks to all who are taking part; I will be sending feedback to all counters in the coming months once their data have been analysed.

The results of the previous winter's WeBS Low Tide Counts have now been written up and will be reported on in the WeBS annual report for 1997-98. Individual counters should by now have received feedback on the counts at their estuaries. The reporting now incorporates new dot-density maps which will hopefully make interpretation of the low tide distribution of estuarine waterfowl much clearer. Having completed seven winters of WeBS Low Tide Counts, a review is now being undertaken to ascertain the future direction of the scheme and to look for any modifications which can be made to strengthen the value of the counts with regard to effective understanding and conservation of estuarine waterfowl.

Colour-ringed Redshanks:
Niall Burton

During 1999, Cardiff Bay is to be flooded with freshwater to form a water park, following the completion of a barrage. As part of a study of the impact of this development on waterfowl, the BTO, with the help of local ringing groups, has been colour-ringing Redshank to determine their site-fidelity to the bay prior to its loss and to follow their movements afterwards. We would be grateful for any sightings of these birds from WeBS counters from now until April 2001. The majority of Redshank have been ringed with unique combinations of five colour-rings, one above the metal ring on the upper left leg, two on the upper right leg and two on either the lower left or lower right leg. In addition, some have been ringed with just a yellow ring over a white ring on the upper right leg. Information on the proportions of Redshank colour-ringed in flocks on the Severn estuary would also be gratefully received. Please record both the number colour-ringed and the total number surveyed for rings (not necessarily the total flock size) and send data even for those flocks which had no ringed birds. Records, including the site, date and time, should be sent to Niall Burton at the BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU (e-mail niall.burton@bto.org). Forms are available if required. Details of previous sightings will be sent to observers.

Old Annual Reports Available

Back copies of previous WeBS reports are available free to all WeBS counters. The A4-sized reports with full-colour covers have been produced since 1990-91 and we have spare stocks for most years. Please contact Becky Hughes at WWT and enclose a cheque or postal order (payable to 'WWT') for £1.50 to cover packing and postage. Copies of some pre-1990 reports are also available (further details on request).

Non-Estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey: *Steve Holloway (BTO)*

The two months of fieldwork for NEWS finished at the end of January 1998 and the last of the count forms were received by the end of May. In total, 3,700 sections of UK coastline were counted. These covered some 7,400km of coastline, approximately 70% of the area surveyed during the 1984/85 Winter Shorebird Count. In regions with very few counters, we endeavoured to ensure that the NEWS counts that were undertaken provided a representative sample of the different habitats within the area.

All data have now been input and added to the WeBS database. Having completed all of the usual checks, we are about to commence with analyses. Watch this space for further news on the results of NEWS . . .

WeBS Annual Report

Unfortunately, announcements about the annual report in recent years have been in the form of apologies for the lateness of the report. Again, sincere apologies are due for the 1996-97 report due largely to reorganisation at WWT. You should, however, have received the report with this Newsletter.

As a result of the new WeBS Agreement, we are planning changes to the contents of the report. The key elements will be retained every year: namely, total numbers, annual trends and comprehensive listings of internationally and nationally important sites based on Core Counts; and comprehensive site accounts using Low Tide Count data. Very shortly, the results of the 'alerts system' (to identify declining trends in species levels that are of sufficient magnitude to merit concern and consideration of conservation action) will be included, as will an overview of waterbird totals held on the statutory site network (SSSIs, Ramsar sites and Special Protection Areas) as measured by WeBS (see also the article on CUDI).

There is now a timetable to produce a bigger report every three years and a 'bumper' report every nine years. The contents of these larger reports are currently provisional, but plans are to provide more detail on the ecology of each species, e.g. summaries of major recent analyses and papers, results of the triennial population reviews and the inclusion of more graphics, such as distribution maps. The nine-year report, in theory, might provide sufficient detail to act as an update of Wildfowl in Great Britain or Estuary Birds.

We will probably take this opportunity to modify the format of the report slightly to fit in with these longer-term plans; as ever, we would welcome your thoughts and suggestions for possible improvements to the report.

Lastly, it is worth saying that our aim remains to meet a publication date of no more than a year after the last count data were collected. Whilst you would have every right to remain sceptical following our achievements in recent years, we can report that the 1997-98 report is on schedule for publication in April 1999.

1999 WeBS Counters Conference

Following previous meetings in Hull, Perth, Llanelli and at Oxford Island, the 1999 WeBS Counters' Conference will be held "down south" this year. The conference, which will be run in collaboration with the Solent Shorebird Study Group, will be held at the Southampton Oceanographic Centre on Saturday 13th March 1999, so put this date in your diaries now! The day will give WeBS counters a chance to meet each other, the national WeBS organisers and representatives of local groups. This will be a great opportunity to discuss local waterfowl matters, with a particular emphasis on the birds of the Solent. Entrance to the conference is free for all WeBS counters. If you are interested in attending, please contact Andy Musgrove at the BTO.

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 waterfowl and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

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