

# WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey  
Issue no. 15 Spring 2002

## The Bigger Picture

Whilst WeBS paints a relatively comprehensive picture of waterbird numbers in the UK, the many birds that visit our shores have little respect for national boundaries. Simon Delany places our counts in an international context.

### The International Waterbird Census (IWC)

The January 2002 midwinter census will be the 36th conducted under the umbrella of IWC – the International Waterbird Census. This census was initiated in 1967 by IWRB (the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau, now Wetlands International), which was located at Slimbridge until 1996. The methodology of the IWC is based on that used by WeBS, and standardised, site-based counts similarly form the basis of the IWC database. The main difference between IWC and WeBS (and other national-level schemes) is that data are collected from the midwinter period only, so that the IWC database comprises counts from the month of January only (or July in the Southern Hemisphere).

National schemes such as WeBS contribute to IWC by submitting their January data to the IWC database held by Wetlands International. This allows Wetlands International to prepare international overviews, and adds value to counts at national level by putting them into an international context.

In 1995, IWRB combined with two other international wetland and waterbird conservation organisations – the Asian Wetland Bureau and Wetlands for the Americas – to form Wetlands International. Shortly afterwards, the headquarters of the new organisation was established in Wageningen, The Netherlands.

### Waterbird Population Estimates

Knowledge of the numbers of individuals in each waterbird population, and whether those numbers are increasing, stable or declining, are among the most important requirements of effective action to conserve waterbirds and their wetland habitats. A crucial aim of IWC is to provide data from which these waterbird population estimates can be derived. One of the best-known and most widely-applied criteria for identifying internationally important wetlands is the Ramsar 1% criterion by which any site which regularly holds 1% or more of a waterbird population qualifies as a wetland of international importance. The Wetlands

#### The aims of IWC

The International Waterbird Census uses information collected by four regional censuses over the long term:

- ▶ to estimate population sizes of waterbird species
- ▶ to describe changes in numbers and distribution of these populations

Important secondary aims include:

- ▶ to assess the importance of individual sites for waterbirds during the non-breeding season
- ▶ to contribute significantly to international efforts to conserve waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

International publication *Waterbird Population Estimates* (first edition, 1994; second edition 1997) is a compilation of estimates for every waterbird population in the world, and acts as the fundamental basis for the Ramsar 1% criterion and for other instruments of international waterbird and wetland conservation such as the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). A third edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* is in preparation and will be published in 2002.

### IWC goes global

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a great geographical expansion in waterbird monitoring using methods based on the 'midwinter census', which was by that time well established in about 50 countries in the Western Palearctic and the Middle East. The Asian Waterbird Census was initiated in 1987, The African Waterbird Census in 1989 and the Neotropical Waterbird Census in South America in 1990. In the 1990s, the Census operated at a global level, but as four separate surveys with more than 14,000 counters (mostly volunteers) involved in over 100 countries. In 2001, as part of the development

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The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data collected are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution, and identify and monitor important sites for waterbirds. A programme of research underpins these objectives. Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. WeBS is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, The 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).



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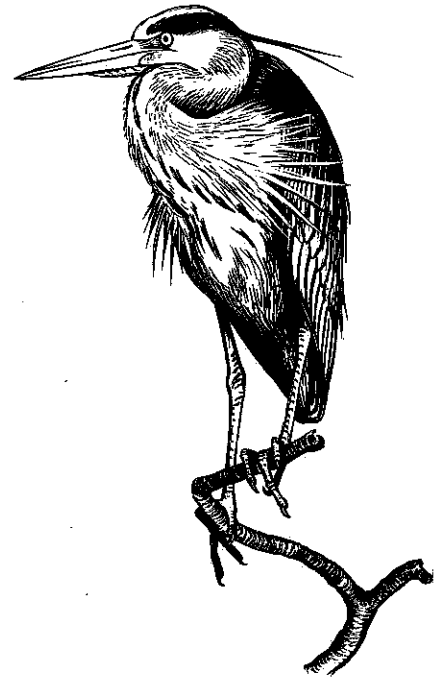
## Foot and Mouth Disease and the impact on bird monitoring

Sadly, the year 2001 will be remembered in ornithological terms not for the success or otherwise of our breeding birds, nor for the numbers of passage waders or wintering ducks. The striking memory for many will be of the Foot and Mouth outbreak, the tragic images of the ensuing agricultural crisis and the prolonged restrictions on access to many parts of the countryside. At a personal level, the latter may be viewed in the long term merely as a minor inconvenience, though summed nationally the restrictions may have considerable consequences for wildlife and conservation organisations whose understanding of the ecology of our fauna and flora is often founded on the information provided by amateur naturalists.

For professional ornithologists, the subsequent gaps in long-term datasets resulting from the cancellation of vital fieldwork will be evident in data analyses for many years. Whilst access restrictions were a necessary control (and indeed still remain in force in some areas as this article is written), the prolonged timescale of restrictions was not foreseen early in the outbreak. Very quickly, as the scale of the problem became evident, many local and national biological recording schemes fell foul of the access restrictions. The cancellation of almost all national and local breeding bird surveys, in which many of you no doubt participate, was a sad loss, perhaps particularly for rarer species whose populations are already faring poorly and where a regular and up to date supply of information may be crucial. WeBS Core Counts were suspended in March and the scheduled Mute Swan census in spring 2001 similarly fell victim to the outbreak (this is now planned for Spring 2002 — see article on p9). Only in September were WeBS counts finally re-instated where access restrictions permitted.

However, unlike many other surveys, the absence of WeBS Core counts for the majority of sites between March and August, whilst regrettable, is a relatively small loss to the bigger scheme. As a non-breeding survey, the prime period of interest rests between September and March, but particularly from November through February. The absence of late winter and passage counts of waterbirds will not seriously dent our understanding of these species, nor greatly impair the regular analyses of populations, trends and important sites. Nor, thankfully, have wide scale restrictions persisted into the current winter; it seems that, by November, almost all sites were once more accessible and near normal levels of coverage have now been resumed.

It is worth noting that, throughout the period of access restrictions and official suspension of counts, not a single complaint was received by staff at WeBS partner



organisations about counters accessing land without authorisation or ignoring restrictions on closed footpath networks. On behalf of all the partner organisations, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of our counters for their patience and responsible attitude throughout the previous months at a time when the potential for conflicts over access was considerable.

Mark Pollitt

## New look WeBS News

As you will no doubt have noticed by now, the WeBS newsletter, now with a snappy (if somewhat predictable!) title of 'WeBS News', has received a facelift. We hope the new look and structure will improve your enjoyment of the newsletter, and always welcome your thoughts, suggestions for improvements and, of course, your contributions. If you have an idea for an article, or have published something interesting in your local bird club report or newsletter and feel it would be of interest to a wider audience, then please don't hesitate to get in touch with myself or other WeBS staff to discuss your ideas. Your views and comments are important, so if you like the changes, or if you think we're missing the boat somewhere, then please do let us know. After all, it's your newsletter . . .

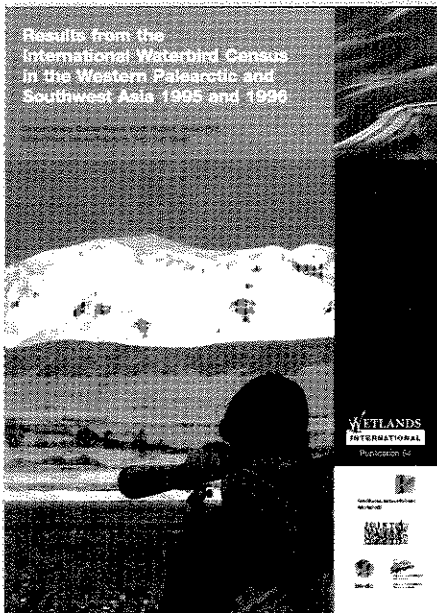
Mark Pollitt

## The Bigger Picture

...continued from page 1

of Wetlands International into a truly global organisation, a new global strategy for waterbird monitoring has been developed by Dr Gerard Boere.

IWC has always functioned against a background of fiscal frugality, and 2001 was a particularly difficult year for Wetlands International in this respect. Production of reports on IWC in the four regions, and the already overdue third edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* were all delayed by a major restructuring operation within the organisation. These short term setbacks will be compensated for by the long term advantages of having a strategically planned and resourced waterbird monitoring programme operating at global level, with a high global profile attracting global-level support.



### Some results of IWC in the Western Palearctic and southwest Asia 1995-1996

The most recent report on IWC in the region in which WeBS operates was published in 1999 and summarised results of the census in the years 1995 and 1996. We are currently working on the report on IWC in the Western Palearctic and southwest Asia in January 1997, 98 and 99, and we expect this to be published in 2002. The delay between each census occurring and results appearing in a report is because many national schemes publish results at national level before submitting them for international analysis. Then, the sheer scale of the task of compiling and analysing results from over 50 countries results in further delay. The 1995-96 report is available to download from the Wetlands International website at:

[www.wetlands.agro.nl/publications/waterbirds\\_pub.html#int\\_watbird\\_census9596](http://www.wetlands.agro.nl/publications/waterbirds_pub.html#int_watbird_census9596).



Waterbirds on Bonanza saltpans / Martin McGill

It's a huge file that not all computers will cope with. Anybody wanting a copy of the printed version of this report can order it via the Natural History Book Service in Taunton, accessible through the Wetlands International website.

Altogether, 23.6 million waterbirds were counted in January 1995 and 19.4 million in January 1996. Between two and three million Coots and Mallards were counted in each of these seasons, and between one and two million of the following species (in decreasing order of abundance) Wigeon, Dunlin, White-fronted Goose, Black-headed Gull, Tufted Duck and Lapwing.

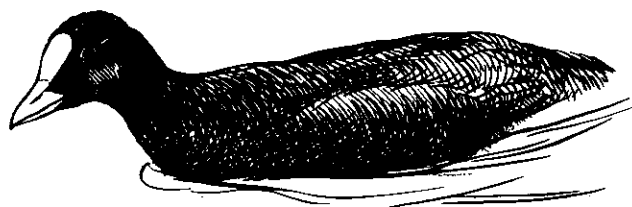
### Plans for a Gap-filling Census

It has long been the wish of waterbird count co-ordinators at Wetlands International to organise a special effort in one season when as many of the gaps in coverage which exist in the Western Palearctic and southwest Asia could be covered by a major counting effort. An approach has been explored whereby counters from countries where waterbird counting is well-developed (mostly in western, northern and central Europe) conduct intensive surveys in countries where coverage

for the midwinter census is normally lacking or incomplete (mostly in southern and eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia). A feasibility study for this Gap-filling Census was completed in 2001 and we are now in a strong position to prepare a funding proposal for the real thing in January 2004 or 2005.

### Keep up the vital work!

Most birdwatchers are aware that the dedicated efforts of waterbird counters make significant contributions to waterbird and wetland conservation at national level. Please keep up this crucially important work, and try to involve as many other birders as possible. The value of these efforts at international level is perhaps less well known, but the combined hard work of counters in over 100 countries produces enormously useful results which feed in a very real way into international nature conservation policy. On behalf of Wetlands International and the many organisations at national and international level that use these results, I would like to extend sincere and grateful thanks to all waterbird counters who contribute to the UK WeBS scheme.



# Updating the estimates of wader numbers wintering in Great Britain

Following the article on revisions to national wildfowl population estimates in the summer 2001 newsletter, Mark Rehfish, Graham Austin and Andy Musgrove provide similar updates on wintering wader populations . . .

Previous population estimates have shown that Great Britain is of considerable international importance for overwintering waterbirds. Obviously, thresholds used to identify sites that merit designation as being of particular national or international conservation importance can only be calculated if the size of the national and international (flyway) populations is known. These '1% thresholds' (i.e. 1% of the national or international population of each waterbird species or subspecies) are fundamental to waterbird conservation, and to ensure that sites are assessed using up-to-date data, national and international population estimates are revised periodically.

Based on a rolling timetable, estimates of the numbers of waterbirds in Great Britain have been revised in 2001 (hereafter referred to as population estimates, although in most cases the birds in GB represent only part of a discrete population). The previous population estimates had been published in 1981, 1987 and 1996. To update Great Britain's wintering wader populations, data from three sources were used: the Wetland Bird Survey (1994-95 to 1998-99), the 1997-98 Non-estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey (NEWS) and the 1986 BTO/IWC *The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Great Britain and Ireland*. The new estimates are more realistic than those presented in the past as for the first time the number of birds that are likely to have been present where counts were missed have been estimated. Even with the hugely dedicated team of WeBS counters, every year some counts are not carried out as a result of counters going on holiday, being ill or being unable to participate in WeBS Core Counts for other reasons! The new methodology imputes these missing counts. Imputing

generates a 'best-guess' for the number of birds that were likely to be present based on available counts of each species, with particular emphasis being placed on counts made during the month and year and on the site of the missing count. Les Underhill and Graham Austin have shown that these estimates are accurate as long as there are no more than 50% of missing counts in a dataset.

Resulting from the updating of the wader population estimates an interesting fact has emerged. For the first time since the start of monitoring in the early 1970s, the historical increase in the number of predominantly coastal waders wintering in Great Britain

appears to be coming to an end. Seven of 16 largely coastal species have shown declines of over 5% since 1987/88-1991/92 (Figure 1). Additionally there has been a decrease of some 5% in the numbers of waders overall (Figure 1). The population size of Ringed Plover has also almost certainly decreased, the apparent increase in its population being due to its previous population estimate having been extrapolated from unsuitable data.

The recent tendency towards declining wader populations may be due to a variety of factors. Recent WeBS research has demonstrated that the distribution of waders in Britain has shifted eastwards and northwards as winters have become

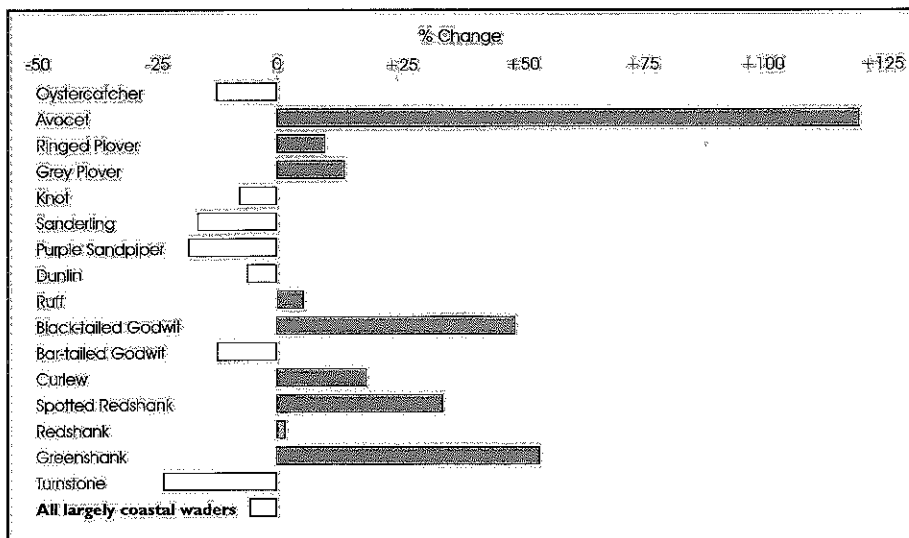
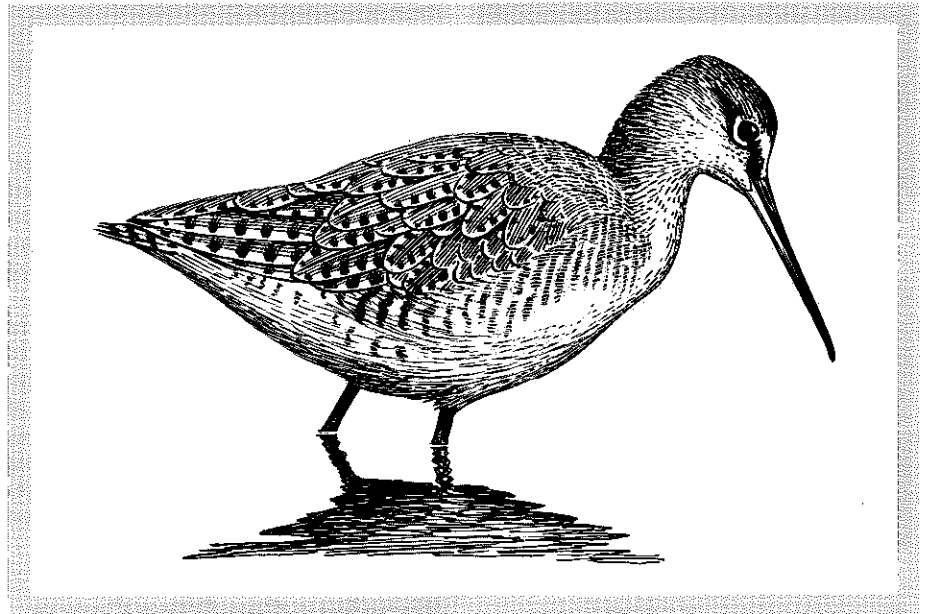


Figure 1. Changes in population estimates of predominantly coastal waders

increasingly milder over the last 20 years, and it is therefore possible that some of the waders that used to winter in Britain may now winter on the continent. It has also been suggested that the clean up of coastal waters resulting from the Bathing Water and Urban Wastewater Directives may be lessening the quantity of organic nutrients available to feed the invertebrate prey of waders and that this could result in a decrease in wader numbers. It is imperative that a better understanding of the factors influencing these changes is obtained, especially if these declines continue.

The full list of waterbird population estimates, wildfowl, waders and other waterbirds will be included in a forthcoming WeBS Newsletter, as soon as the two papers with the new estimates have been accepted for publication in the scientific press.

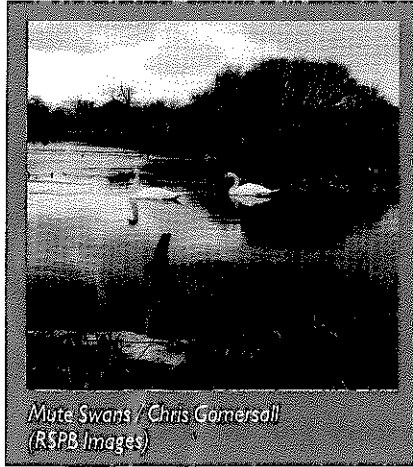
## Picture perfect

We hope that you like the new look of the WeBS newsletter, and as ever would welcome your thoughts, comments and contributions. To go with the new design, we are also keen to include more photographs of wetland sites to complement articles. Whilst our library of pictures includes many shots from the RSPB and WWT reserves, we have very few shots of the many other wetlands that form the majority of WeBS count sites. Purchasing pictures from professional photographers is also prohibitively expensive. However, this is, we hope, an area where many of our counters may be able to help.

Are you a keen amateur photographer? Do you have some photographs of your count site or other wetland that could grace the pages of this newsletter or other WeBS publications? We are asking our counters for photographs of their local wetland sites and would welcome any contributions — prints, negatives, slides or even digital images — that we can use to create an image library of the UK's wetlands. Whilst we cannot promise to use every image sent in, we will maintain and reference images in the library so that they act as a resource for future publications. We may also be able to include some images on a future WeBS web site. Although we cannot pay royalties for the use of images, we will of course give full credit to the photographer.

Should you wish to contribute a picture or pictures to the image library, please send them to Colette Hall, WWT, Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT, marking the envelope 'Wetland Images', and include the following information:

- ▶ your name and address (or WeBS Counter Code)



Mute Swans / Chris Gamersall  
(RSPB Images)

- ▶ for each picture, the name of the wetland, the county, and (where possible) a grid reference for the site
- ▶ the approximate date when each picture was taken (month and year would be fine)
- ▶ any additional information you may wish to provide about the picture(s)

Please be selective with the images you send — if everyone sends in a whole photograph album we simply will not have time to look through and catalogue them! Although we would like to keep the original images on file where possible, we now have the ability to scan the images and store them on computer, so if you wish to have the originals returned please include a sturdy self-addressed envelope for their safe return. If you plan to send digital images, please contact us first to discuss file sizes and formats. Sorry, but all images are sent at the owners risk.

Colette Hall

## Low Tide Counts

The curtailment of many bird surveys during the summer due to Foot and Mouth Disease obviously left counters champing at the bit. A record number of sites have agreed to carry out WeBS Low Tide Counts this winter between November 2001 and February 2002. Important new sites not previously covered by the scheme are the Dornoch Firth, Ailsa Complex, Dyfi Estuary and Carlingford Lough. Repeat counts are being made at many sites, including second-time only counts at the Dee Estuary, Dengie Flats, Eden Estuary, North Norfolk Coast, Swale Estuary and Wigtown Bay.

Major progress is being made now on the forthcoming Low Tide Count Atlas. Site accounts have been prepared for all 62 estuaries covered during the first seven winters of the scheme and

these have been distributed for comments to LTC Local Organisers. Additionally, most of the species accounts have now been prepared. Work is now concentrating on methodological and analytical aspects of the scheme. It is hoped that the Atlas, which will be provided to all counters who have taken part in the scheme, will be complete in summer 2002.

Once again, neither the Atlas nor the scheme as a whole would be possible without the hard work put in by everyone who takes part in the Low Tide Counts, which continue to be widely used for the conservation of the UK's estuaries and their birds. Thank you for all your time and efforts.

Andy Musgrove and Steve Holloway

## Conservation Update

### Birds of Conservation Concern

A revised list of Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) is being prepared for the UK, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. The criteria used to assess conservation priority are based on population and geographical range decline, historical population decline, rarity of breeding species, localised distribution, international importance, and global and European conservation concern. WeBS data have played an important role in assessing the status of many waterbirds. Species listed on the 'red' list are of the highest conservation priority, those on 'amber' of medium priority and those on 'green' low priority. These listings will be used by all those involved with conserving wild birds to target finite resources for national conservation priorities. Once consultation over current drafts is completed and the list finalised, a more detailed article will appear in *WeBS News*.

James Robinson

### Seaduck surveys in the Irish Sea

Information on divers and seaducks around our shores is perhaps one of the most obvious gaps in our understanding of waterbird numbers and distribution in the UK. Whilst the UK has been one of the leading lights in developing surveys of birds in offshore areas, nearshore areas have remained comparatively little studied. Counts of seaducks at more than 3-4 km from shore are impossible from land at most sites, and boats or, ideally, planes are required for surveys.

The *Sea Empress* oil spill, which killed many thousands of Common Scoter in Carmarthen Bay in 1996, prompted intensive surveys of that site, including aerial surveys. With Common Scoter a red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern, and also a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species, surveys were also initiated in Liverpool Bay last winter. This winter, funded largely by the Countryside Council for Wales, co-ordinated monthly surveys have been extended to include all key Welsh sites for Common Scoter (Carmarthen, Cardigan, Conway and Colwyn Bays), and the English coast of Liverpool Bay as far north as Fleetwood.

Coincidentally, consents have just been granted by the UK Government for companies to investigate the potential of the marine environment for wind farms; the production of 'green' energy in this way will contribute to the UK's commitment to the Kyoto Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In most cases, proposals are to place wind turbines in shallow water about 5-10 km from shore. Each proposal requires an environmental assessment, including survey of the numbers and distribution of birds in these areas. Consequently, the already ambitious programme of surveys has been expanded, and potentially most key

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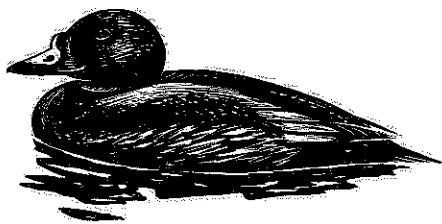
sites for Common Scoter in the Irish Sea, including the Solway Firth, Dundrum Bay and various sites of the Irish coast, will be covered this winter.

WWT will be undertaking the aerial surveys, employing new techniques recently developed in Denmark. All extensive shallow areas (to about 20-30 m deep) will be surveyed using transects spaced 2 km apart. The precise location of all birds seen (primarily seaducks, divers, auks and gulls) will be recorded. Analytical techniques to make the greatest use of these data are still being developed, but it is hoped that this survey, by far the most extensive and comprehensive of inshore waters in the UK to date, will provide valuable information on the numbers and distribution of waterbirds, and will help explain why these birds favour these sites. Last winter's work has already thrown up a few surprises, including the fact that scoter are regularly recorded over 10 km from shore at some sites, and that very large numbers of divers moved into the Irish Sea last February. JNCC's Seabirds at Sea Team are undertaking similar surveys in most of the east coast Scottish Firths.

Good weather conditions are essential for this survey and this, combined with the need to survey some sites during weekends (scoter seem to have a penchant for MoD firing ranges), means that some surveys may be made on the WeBS count date. So, if you see a low flying plane quartering your site, please wave or if you make alternative gestures because we've just flushed birds half way through your count, I'll understand, and offer my apologies in advance! We won't be there long : : : :

Peter Cranwick

If you want to see more about proposals for offshore windfarms in the UK, check out <http://britishwindenergy.co.uk/main.html> Ed.



### Cold weather

Cold weather causes additional stress for birds, when simply finding enough food to meet the increased energy demands of staying warm can be literally a matter of life or death. For waterbirds, the icing over of waterbodies can deny them access to food and safe roosting areas, and snow can prevent geese and swans grazing. The large-scale movement of birds from the near continent into Britain under these conditions is a well-known phenomenon, as is

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### New Gloucestershire wetland

A huge area of wetland habitat is to be created near Gloucester as part of a combined flood prevention and conservation strategy. It is hoped that within the next five years almost 1,500 acres of low-lying farmland will revert to water meadows and wet grassland through stewardship agreements with existing farmers. By allowing the land to flood more regularly, it will be returned to a type of husbandry last practised in the 19th century. (5/12/01)

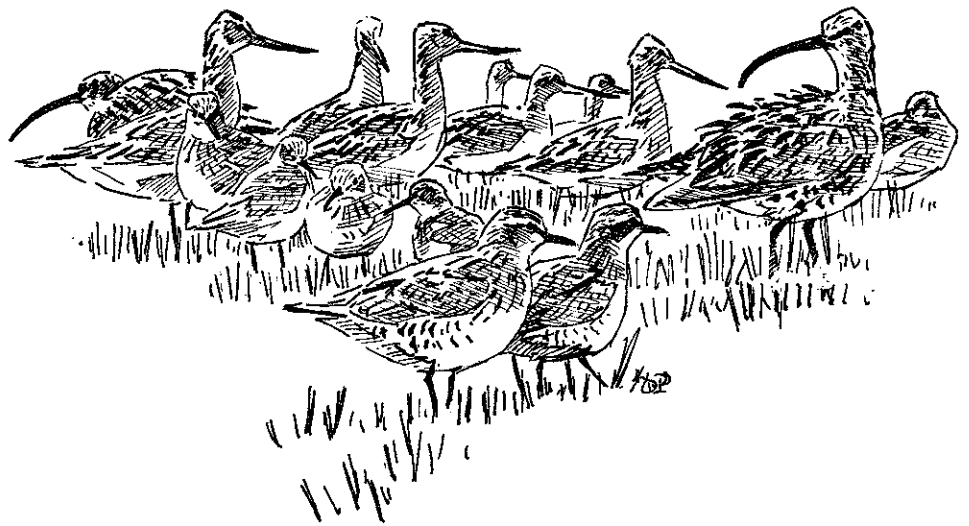
### Mystery gull deaths

Hundreds of dead gulls were washed up along the northeast coast of England in mid November, with fisherman reporting hundred of others floating out at sea. Although those onshore were covered in oil, this is not thought to be the cause of death. Further investigations are being carried out to identify the cause of the mortalities. (20/11/01)

Environment Programme and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre suggest that with a global increase in temperature of just 1.7 °C in the next 70 years (in the lower range of current predictions) could reduce the tundra breeding habitat of Dunlin by as much as 36%. Our own shores could similarly be affected, the biggest threat being to estuarine feeding habitats in eastern and southern Britain through habitat loss as a result of sea level rises. (04/11/01)

### New washlands project

October saw the launch of a new three-year project to capitalise on the ecology of two North Yorkshire rivers, the Ure and the Swale. The 'Washlands For The Future' project will focus on the sand and gravel extractions along the river corridors, aiming to encourage landowners, mineral extractors and planning authorities to create and enhance a range of wildlife habitats. (11/10/01)



### Tweed granted SSSI status

The River Tweed, one of Scotland's most well-known rivers, has been notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Scottish Natural Heritage have designated the whole river, from its source north of Moffat to the estuary on the Scottish border, totalling over 470 km, reflecting several ecological features such as Salmon, Otters, several rare plants and Goldeneye amongst others. (01/11/01)

### Global warming threatens waterbirds

WWF and RSPB issued warnings that climate change could threaten our winter waterbirds. Predictions carried out by scientists from the United Nations

### New plans for Trinity Broads

A new agreement between Essex & Suffolk Water, the Broads Authority, the Environment Agency and English Nature will help to protect Trinity Broads. The agreement, to be implemented through a five-year management plan should enhance the nature conservation value of the broads and will improve habitat management for Bitterns, waterbirds and other wildlife. (02/11/01)

### Fears for Filey Dams Nature Reserve

Local residents and conservation groups fear proposals for new housing may damage an important local nature. Filey

Darns is a locally important site for waterbirds, Water Voles and Great Crested Newts. The building company behind the proposals has dismissed claims that the development will adversely impact the wildlife interest of the site. (10/10/01)

### Lough Foyle runway extension opposed

Belfast High Court has granted permission for RSPB to challenge the decision to grant planning permission for a 'runway end safety area' on mudflats in Lough Foyle. The mudflats of Lough Foyle are designated for their international importance for waterbirds and are protected under Northern Irish and European law. Derry City Council and the Department of the Environment in Northern Ireland (DoENI) stand by their decisions to support the proposal. The ruling clears the way for a full judicial review hearing into DoENI's decision. (07/09/01)

### New SPAs

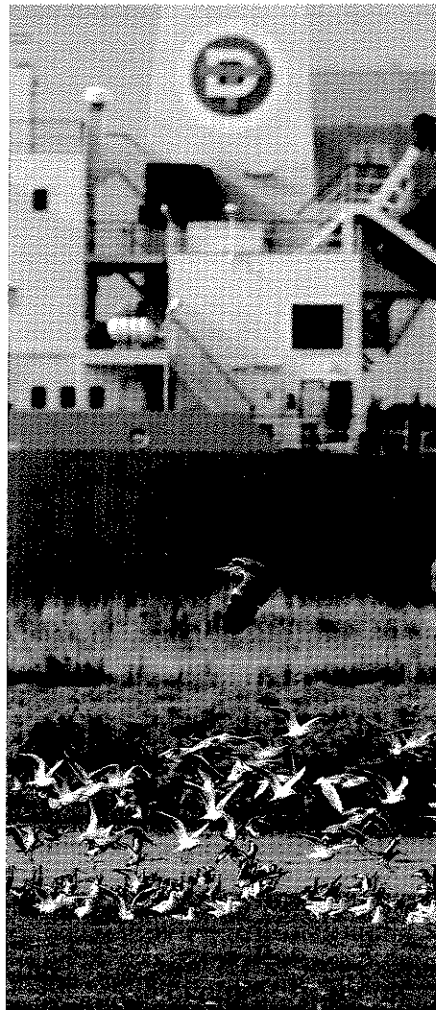
A number of wetland sites, including the Firth of Forth, Marazion Marsh and parts of the Isles of Scilly, were classified Special Protection Area (SPA) in the last six months. The Forth is recognised for its waterbird and seabird numbers, Marazion for its importance for Bittern and Aquatic Warbler, and the Isles of Scilly for wintering waders and seabirds. The total number of classified SPAs in the UK stands at 222, with a further 21 proposed (as at 19 September 2001).

### Pollution threat to estuaries

Raised nutrient levels and algal blooms are damaging the UK's estuaries, according to a report published by WWF and the Global Environment Network. Some UK tidal rivers and estuaries have up to 100 times more nutrients than the level the Government recognises as causing a problem. The biggest source of nutrients are agriculture and sewage, and WWF is calling for the government to define vulnerable sites and insist on nutrient reductions on nearby farmland and biological treatment of sewage waste. (23/08/01)

### 'Beach Nourishment'

Some 20,000 tonnes of sand are to be moved from the Eden Estuary to protect a fragile stretch of coastline at St Andrews which was severely eroded by storms last winter. The 300 m section lies alongside the famous golf links, and the trust carrying out the work have been working closely with Scottish Natural Heritage to ensure the works protect the special wildlife interest of the area which lies within the Firth of Tay and Eden Special Protection Area. (31/08/01)



Waders and Gulls on Belfast Lough / Chris Gomersall (RSPB Images)

### Rubble trouble

The dumping of rubble and building waste over the sea wall at Leith on the Forth Estuary is threatening the mudflats, says the RSPB. Unless the dumping is halted, the mudflats at eastern docks may all but disappear. Already some stretches of waste are over 40 yards wide and concerns are that continued dumping, often in the guise of sea defence repairs, will obscure vital feeding areas for waterbirds. Forth Ports say that no rubble has been dumped on land for which they have responsibility. Scottish Natural Heritage is working with other parties to resolve the problem. (11/09/2001)

Compiled by Mark Pollitt and Colette Hall

Information for the 'In Brief . . .' section is collated primarily from national and local newspapers, press releases and internet news sites (dates of publication follow articles where appropriate) and does not necessarily reflect the views of WeBS staff or partner organisations.

(though much rarer) the local die-off of large numbers of birds.

During prolonged cold spells and triggered by data collected by the Met Office, a monitoring system is rapidly implemented to assess the effect on waterbirds, with reports provided by NGOs, wildfowling clubs, and reserve wardens on their local situation and the behaviour of birds. Under these conditions, a ban may be imposed on wildfowling. The primary aim is to reduce the associated disturbance, enabling birds to conserve their energy.

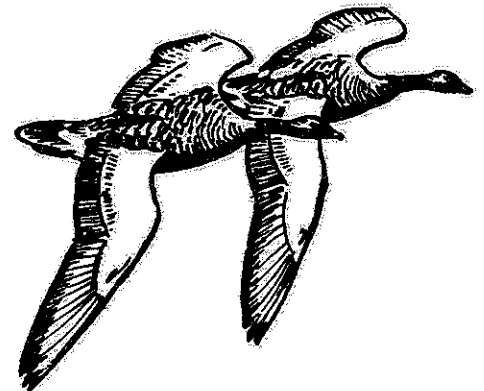
Whilst wildfowling bans are an obvious way to reduce disturbance during cold weather, it is perhaps worth remembering that disturbance may come from many sources, particularly at estuarine sites. Naturally, WeBS counters wish to avoid disturbing birds for obvious reasons, but it is perhaps worth being extra cautious during cold weather periods. Perhaps also, should you feel happy to do so, it is worth highlighting this issue to others you may meet out and about, such as walkers or other birdwatchers, during this critical period for waterbirds. Further information on the effects of severe winter weather on waterbirds and the statutory suspension of waterfowl shooting can be found at [www.jncc.gov.uk/species/wildfowling/default.htm](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/species/wildfowling/default.htm)

Peter Cranswick

### Latest census of Svalbard Pink-footed Geese

On 4-5 November 2001, the annual international count of Svalbard Pink-footed Geese was carried out by ornithologists from Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Belgium, led by Dr Jesper Madsen. The preliminary estimate was 29,556, of which the majority were in the Netherlands (83%) and Denmark (13%). These geese move further south during mid-winter, concentrating in the Netherlands and Belgium. The proportion of juveniles in the population was estimated at 6.1%, a little below the long-term average.

Richard Hearn



**Pilot Riverine Survey: coverage, numbers and distribution**

Rivers and their floodplain wetlands sustain many forms of life yet are among the most vulnerable and threatened ecosystems in the UK. The corridors they create support a range of habitats which are important to large numbers of birds which visit the UK during the winter, particularly during periods of harsh weather. There is a need to monitor changes in the fortunes of birds using rivers so that correct and effective conservation action can be triggered when numbers decline. In addition, information on the numbers of waterbirds wintering on riverine habitats are required to improve the accuracy of population estimates for many species.

At present, coverage of rivers by the WeBS is very poor compared to that of estuaries and still waters. Consequently, WeBS undoubtedly misses a significant proportion of the UK populations of several species which use river habitats, e.g. Goosander, Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Mallard and Goldeneye to name a few. Furthermore, there may be stretches of rivers that are nationally, or even internationally, important for waterbirds which have not yet been identified. To address these problems, WeBS is organising a national Riverine Survey, co-ordinated by WWT, during winter 2003-04. Following this survey, we hope to identify a number of river sections which might be included on an annual basis in WeBS so that we can start to monitor the numbers and distribution of waterbirds on rivers more intensively.

There are at least 85,000 km of river in the UK, far too much for WeBS counters to cover! Therefore, the survey will focus efforts on the most useful stretches for assessing trends in the populations of river birds. To ensure that the count sections selected are representative a pilot survey was conducted. In the late summer of 1999, a representative selection of rivers in the UK were identified based on physical characteristics, e.g. river width, altitude, etc. A selection of canals was also chosen. During the autumn we contacted many current, and some new, local organisers who live close to each of these rivers and canals and a large number agreed to co-ordinate teams of counters. In January and February of 2000 and 2001 these teams tirelessly counted birds on 30 rivers and canals throughout England, Scotland and Wales (Table 1). Consultation with counters indicated that the pilot was enjoyable and that a full survey would be welcomed (see Newsletter No. 12).

Over 27,400 birds were counted on 1135 km of rivers during the pilot (Table 1). Given the small proportion of the UK's riverine resource covered in the pilot, this result demonstrates the importance of this

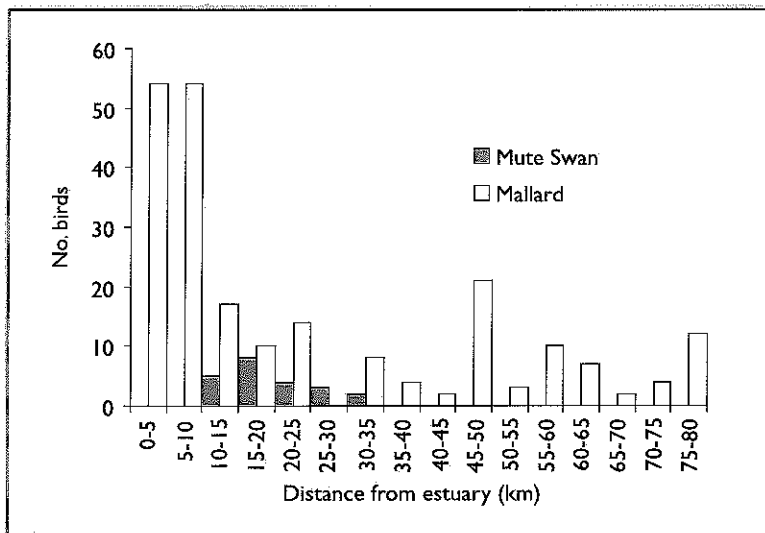


Figure 1. Numbers of Mallards and Mute Swans recorded on the river Tamar, Southwest England, winter 1999-2000

**Table 1. River coverage and bird numbers recorded during the WeBS Pilot Riverine Survey, 1999-2001**

River/canal	No. of stretches covered	% of river covered	Total no. of birds counted
Allan Water	16	28	78
Avon (Central Scotland)	49	80	60
Carron	27	51	391
Cherwell	98	59	334
Conwy	18	31	19
Dee (NW Scotland)	111	41	456
Derwent (Midlands)	145	57	2303
Derwent (NW England)	67	100	701
Devon	40	53	342
Exe	15	10	277
Findhorn	32	20	74
Forth	83	56	1358
Gloucester-Sharpness Canal	46	94	267
Hull	79	91	2307
Irwell	39	35	1638
Kennett-Avon Canal	23	11	141
Leeds-Liverpool Canal	56	18	439
Lossie	35	37	72
Mersey	18	23	354
Great Ouse	345	71	3921
Ribble	149	71	3179
Spey	16	5	119
Stour	54	47	594
Tame	15	9	160
Teith	6	14	63
Tamar	160	100	570
Tweed	258	84	3748
Wear	70	33	913
Witham	9	10	150
Wye	191	39	2403



## Pilot Riverine Survey *cont.*

habitat for birds during the winter months. There were some notably high counts of waterbirds on many of the stretches covered. For example, 510 Greylags, 71 Mute Swans and 279 Mallards were counted on just three 2 km stretches of the river Hull near Driffield and 255 Teal and 329 Wigeon were counted on a 3 km stretch of the Forth just west of Stirling. There were also over 100 Goldeneye recorded on a 3 km stretch of the Irwell at Salford and 41 Goosander on a 3.5 km stretch of the Tweed near Berwick. We hope to give fuller feedback directly to organisers and counters who took part in due course.

The pilot data also illustrate general patterns of bird distribution along rivers. For example, Figure 1 shows the abundance and distribution of Mallards and Mute Swans along the river Tamar in Southwest England. The highest concentrations of Mallard were recorded at the lowest reaches of the river but small numbers were also present into the upper reaches. In contrast, Mute Swans were concentrated on the middle sections of the river and were absent from the upper and lower reaches. Other species, such as Green Sandpiper and Dipper, were only recorded in the upper reaches. Similar patterns of bird distribution have been found across all the rivers covered by the pilot.

We are linking the pilot data to information on habitat characteristics and water quality held by the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency to try to explain these patterns of abundance and distribution of birds on rivers during the non-breeding season. These analyses are enabling us to identify an appropriate selection of river sections for the full survey so that we can monitor the UK's river birds with accuracy.

*James Robinson*

## Pilot Dispersed Species Survey

During the winter of 2000-01 a small number of WeBS counters were involved in the pilot survey for the Dispersed Waterbird Survey (DWS) which is planned for next winter (January 2003). We always knew this would be a difficult survey as it aims to plug the gaps left by the current suite of WeBS surveys. Although a combination of WeBS Core Counts, Non-estuarine Waterfowl Survey and the forthcoming Riverine Survey cover the majority of waterbirds in the UK, especially when supplemented with other non-WeBS surveys organised by WWT such as goose and swan counts, there are still significant numbers of waterbirds of particular species that get missed. These include species such as Lapwing and Golden Plover, which often favour terrestrial habitats, and Moorhen and Snipe which are dispersed over damp habitats such as ditches and damp meadows that seldom feature in other WeBS surveys. Although the proportion of these species' populations missed by existing WeBS surveys is unknown, it is likely to be large given the disparity between the numbers appearing in the WeBS totals and the crude estimates published in *The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland*. The DWS will aim to estimate the populations of waterbirds dispersed across the wider countryside (i.e. away from sites covered by the main WeBS surveys) and provide baseline data against which future surveys could be compared.

Clearly, with about one-quarter of a million 1-km grid squares containing land, it would be impossible to cover all such habitat. We therefore need to sample a representative part of the wider countryside, being careful not to choose just the most promising habitats for waterbirds. If we selected just those habitats, then when we extrapolated the results to the whole country we would end up with gross over-estimates of the number of birds present. The only way to ensure that the

survey is representative is to randomly select areas to be counted. It may sometimes be disheartening for the counter who gets asked to visit an area in which they expect to find few or no birds but it must be emphasised that true zero counts are no less important than counts of large numbers of birds. Also by using habitat stratification the organisers strive to keep the number of visits to such areas to a minimum. This leads me to give an especially big thank you to those counters who returned count data from the 127 tetrads (2 x 2 km squares) covered for the pilot survey in January 2001. Without your zero returns, counts from areas holding larger numbers of birds could not have been interpreted meaningfully.

The methods used for the pilot survey were a departure from the normal WeBS approach of counting birds at distinct sites. They are, however, similar to those successfully employed by surveys such as the BTO/RSPB/JNCC Breeding Bird Survey in which some of you may take part. Short of WeBS undertaking specialised species surveys these methods are probably the only valid and defensible approach to surveying these dispersed populations. The WeBS partners will need to further discuss how to proceed with the DWS before a final decision is made and we will be taking on board your feedback following the pilot survey. Your comments have certainly given the national organisers plenty of food for thought, as a wide range of opinions was expressed. Some thought it easy while some thought it difficult; some found it interesting while others did not. We hope that WeBS will be able to tackle the full DWS in January 2003 and would ask you to make a note of the survey in your diaries. Watch this space for further details.

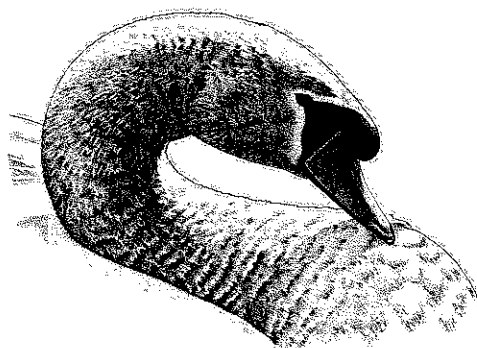
*Graham Austin*

## Mute Swan Census

The national Mute Swan census for Great Britain, originally scheduled for April and May 2001 but postponed due to Foot & Mouth Disease, will now take place in 2002. Most of the organisation for this survey was put in place last winter, with 10-km squares (the survey unit) allocated to each county, Local Organisers appointed (in many cases, the normal WeBS LO) and recording forms and instructions mailed. By the time you receive this Newsletter, most LOs should have been

contacted to ensure that they are still willing and able to undertake the survey, and provided with a list of allocated squares. We hope that coverage for most areas has provisionally been arranged, but if you wish to help with the survey and/or have not been contacted, please get in touch with your LO or me here at Slimbridge. Fingers crossed, there will be no last minute hitches this year.

*Peter Cranwick*



# A future for our protected sites

In the second of two articles on the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, **Duncan Huggett** and **Mark Pollitt** review the importance of the Act's changes to wildlife conservation . . .

**T**he passing of the Countryside Rights of Way (CRoW) Act in November 2000 saw the first major review of wildlife legislation in England and Wales for 20 years. The new Act gives increasing powers and responsibilities to the Government's conservation agencies, English Nature (EN) and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), and has the potential to provide significant enhancements to our network of protected sites.

There could be no doubt that our national wildlife legislation was in need of a significant overhaul. The continued deterioration of our important sites had been evident for years, with damage or loss to over 300 sites reported annually by Government conservation agencies, and many (over 40% by area in England) recording 'unfavourable status'. Loopholes in the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act cost millions of pounds of taxpayers' money in preventing damage to SSSIs, whilst parts of the Act proved impossible to enforce in the courts. Outlined below are some of the key measures that should strengthen the hand of the nature conservation agencies in ensuring that our key wildlife sites remain in favourable condition.

## Management

So what are the greatest threats to our SSSIs? Pollution? Development? Intensive farming? None of these, in fact, threaten our important wildlife sites as much as neglect. The new legislation places a much greater emphasis on securing positive management of each SSSI so, as well as producing the traditional list of potentially damaging operations, the country conservation agencies must produce a management statement for every SSSI which contains their views about the management of the land (including conservation and enhancement).

The mechanism of 'voluntary agreements' to ensure favourable management of SSSIs is still the favoured approach, although new measures in the CRoW Act should improve the chances of success for such agreements. Payments may be made to encourage positive management, though not for 'profits foregone' as in the old system, and agreements may extend to non-SSSI land where such management is needed for the conservation of the SSSI. Where a voluntary management agreement cannot be negotiated, a process can be initiated eventually enabling the agencies to carry out the works themselves and claim the costs from the owner or occupier. In the event that agreements cannot be reached, the conservation agencies have compulsory purchase powers, allowing the acquisition of



Estuary saltmarshes / Chris Comersall (RSPB Images)

SSSI land and land that might be needed for the conservation of an SSSI. This combination of 'carrot and stick' measures should however mean that voluntary agreements are far more likely to be successful without cause to resort to harsher methods.

All public bodies (a broad definition to include amongst others government ministries, local councils and 'Statutory Undertakers' such as water companies and port authorities) will now have a duty to take steps to further the conservation and enhancement of SSSIs. This duty applies to activities outside SSSIs that may have an impact on protected sites.

## Preventing Damage

Every owner and occupier must give notice of his or her intention to carry out a potentially damaging operation on an SSSI. The agencies hand has again been strengthened, allowing them to attach conditions before approval or to refuse permission outright. However, ultimately they cannot prevent a public body from carrying out a damaging operation where it relates to the exercise of their functions, though the body must demonstrate they have taken account of any advice given and carry it out in a way that minimises the damage.

To take account of damage by third parties, it is now an offence for anyone intentionally or recklessly to destroy or damage SSSI interest, or to disturb SSSI fauna, although only after they have been informed

that what they are/intend to do is likely to be damaging. Byelaw making powers are also extended to allow EN/CCW to make byelaws for all SSSIs.

## Monitoring and enforcement

There are a range of new penalties for breaking the law including significant fines (e.g. \$20,000) and courts may order offenders to restore the damage caused. EN/CCW will have new powers of entry in order to check that management measures are being carried out, to enforce byelaws, and to establish whether sites are in favourable condition or merit notification.

## A boost for conservation?

So what of the new Act? Will it provide our important wildlife sites with the protection they need? The passing of the CRoW Act has, at least for the time being, created significant differences in conservation legislation across the UK, and there are still challenges remaining in Scotland and Northern Ireland where legislation has still to be passed. The views from most conservation organisations have been positive, although it will be several years before we can judge how effective the Act has been. Nevertheless, the importance of this new legislation cannot be understated and the future for some of our key wildlife sites is undoubtedly rosier as a result.



# Bulletin Board

## Keep us posted!

This year we mailed over 1,000 copies of the WeBS annual report direct to individual counters at the request of many Local Organisers. To ensure they all reach the intended recipient, this is a quick reminder to everyone to let us know if your address has changed (either in the box on the recording forms or by letter via your Local Organiser). For Local Organisers where not all of the counters' names appear on WeBS forms, please enclose a separate list of current counters' names and addresses with the completed forms in spring so we can update our records.

## Progress on new WeBS database

Historically, counts of wildfowl and waders have been held in separate databases (at WWT and BTO respectively), reflecting the organisation of the then National Wildfowl Counts and Birds of Estuaries Enquiry. Clearly, there are large benefits to holding all of these data in a single database and, with the formation of the Secretariat three years ago, this process was initiated. This activity has occupied a large amount of the Secretariat's time since then, and we hope by the end of this winter to have a truly 'Integrated Waterbird Database'. This will result in greater efficiency, enable us to manage our data effectively, and provide a springboard for future development.

Whilst I hope that the changeover will not cause any undue disruption, I hesitate to say that moving data for in excess of 3,000,000 individual counts, 9,000 sites and 3,000 counters to a single database will be problem free! My apologies in advance if there are any knock-on effects, but the IWD really should make a big difference to handling the ever growing dataset in the future . . . and Mark and Colette will heave a very big sigh of relief not to have to duplicate every request on different systems again!

*Peter Cranswick*

## Counter handbook & leaflet

This winter we will begin distribution of the first parts of the new WeBS Counter Handbook. The handbook will consist of a folder and loose-leaved A4 sheets which, in time, will encompass all aspects of WeBS and act as a valuable 'reference manual' of information for new and existing counters. Initially, we hope to include sheets covering a general introduction to WeBS (including

background and history of the scheme), the WeBS atlas project (see below) and WeBS Core Count methodology. Further information sheets will be added in due course. We are also in the process of producing a leaflet to promote the WeBS scheme and encourage participation in waterbird counts.

*Mark Pollitt*

## Monitoring protected sites

Many thanks to all our counters and co-ordinators who have provided information for our review of WeBS monitoring at sites designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The project will inform decisions about future interpretation and use of WeBS data, and has helped us to identify areas where more detailed counts or additional monitoring would be desirable. A report on the first stage of this process has been prepared and discussions between WeBS partner organisations this winter should help to identify future actions. In the small number of cases where modifications to existing monitoring would prove beneficial to our understanding of the SPA, we will be in touch with Local Organisers or counters in due course to discuss the potential for, and implications of, any proposed changes.

*Paul Marshall*

## WeBS atlas

Although it may sound odd, WeBS is not simply about counting as many wildfowl and waders as possible. The important aspect that makes WeBS, and the data you collect, different from casual records is that counters make repeated visits to the same area again and again. For many sites, these records go back to the 1940s and it is this regularity that allows us to produce population estimates and trends from the data.

During the last few months we have made further progress on updating the WeBS atlas of count boundaries. The atlas provides us with a reference of the areas covered by each counter, and helps to keep the information we hold up to date. As well as ensuring that WeBS partners and other users of the data interpret the counts correctly, we will issue copies of the relevant maps to Local Organisers and current counters so that, when the time comes to pass the responsibility for counting to a new counter, the new person covers the same area and continues the run of data. This winter we will begin to distribute the first batches of maps to Local Organisers and counters with the first pages of the new counter handbook.

*Colette Hall and Paul Marshall*

## Errata for annual report

Thanks to a number of counters for pointing out some minor errors in the 1999-2000 report. To date the following mistakes have been noted:

- p16 dots on the distribution map have been slightly displaced.
- p128 the flattering count of 337 Greenshank on Chichester Harbour in September should read 188.
- p142 headings for Table 4 should begin 95-96 through to 99-00 rather than as printed.
- p175 the UK annual index values for Dunlin, Knot and Sanderling have been transposed. Figures for Knot refer to Sanderling, for Sanderling refer to Dunlin and for Dunlin refer to Knot.
- p193 Alton Water is in Suffolk, not Essex.





## Letters

### Redshank roosting in trees

With reference to Mr Rothery's letter about the Deben Redshanks roosting in trees, there is one tumbledown tree in South Pool creek, off the Kingsbridge Estuary, where we have seen Redshank roosting at high tide on a number of occasions. Once every year or two we go for a ride on the ferry boat which spends its time taking folks from Kingsbridge to Salcombe and vice versa. To earn a little extra it also takes people on cruises up and down some of the creeks, and this year I tried for a photograph.

*Harry & June Huggins  
(WeBS counters on the Erme Estuary)*



*Redshank roosting in trees / Harry & June Huggins*

## WeBS Counters' Conference 2002

The next annual WeBS Counters Conference will be held at the Birdwatching Centre at Rutland Water on Saturday 16 March 2002. Rutland will be familiar to many of you through the annual British Birdwatching Fair, which traditionally takes place there every August. The facilities offered by the Birdwatching Centre, coupled with the possibility of enjoying some interesting

winter birding in a warm environment (!) should ensure an enjoyable day.

The full programme of speakers is currently being finalised, but we will ensure the traditional eclectic mix featuring both locals and the WeBS partners. Amongst others we are hoping to include talks on the results of the WeBS Little Egret Survey, WeBS and SPAs, Black-tailed Godwits on the Ouse

Washes and about Rutland Water itself. There will also be time for barracking the WeBS representatives over all those burning issues you have been storing up!

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 the Midlands. 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 first come, first served basis.

*Steve Holloway*

### 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.

