WeBS

WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 16 Summer 2002

30 years of the Ramsar Convention

The recognition of the need for a worldwide approach to wetland problems gave rise to the Ramsar Convention 30 years ago. Mark O'Connell provides a brief overview of the convention and the contribution of WeBS in identifying Ramsar sites.

For every 15 square kilometres of land on the surface of the earth, one of them is covered by a wetland of one sort or another. Freshwater wetlands hold more than 40% of the world's known species (including 12% of all animals), and economists estimate that wetlands provide nearly five trillion dollars worth of services for humans each year. They also provide a range of vital functions such as water storage, storm/flood protection, erosion control, recharging underground water supplies, water purification, and control of local climates. They are therefore of vital social, economic and agricultural importance to all people on earth, as well as being ecosystems that cradle high levels of biodiversity. Unfortunately the best estimates suggest that 50% of the world's wetlands have been lost or degraded in the last 150 years, and further extensive loss is predicted for wetlands in the future. It was the recognition of the need for a worldwide approach to wetland problems that gave rise to the Ramsar Convention.

The official name of the convention is "The convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat". More commonly called the 'Ramsar Convention', it was signed on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar. In the last 30 years, 131 nations across the world have become members and over 100 million hectares designated as Ramsar sites.

Ramsar has five integrated elements that make up the main body of the convention:

1. The contracting parties

Countries who sign up to the Ramsar Convention are called Contracting Parties. Every three years, they must provide a National Report on Ramsar related activities in their country, and send government representatives to a Conference of Contracting Parties (known as COPs). COPs review the national reports, and make recommendations on improvements in how to achieve Ramsar objectives. These objectives are encapsulated in the Ramsar Strategic Plan. This plan covers six years and is broken down into two triennium work plans that outline a framework of actions by which contracting parties can conserve their wetlands.

2. The secretariat

The Ramsar Bureau has 14 staff and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the convention. It is based in Gland, Switzerland.

3. The Standing Committee

The committee has 13 representatives from the six Ramsar regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Neotropics, North America and Oceania), and meets every year to organise COP matters and supervise policy implementation by the Ramsar Bureau.

4.The Scientific & Technical Review Panel

The STRP is formed in a similar fashion to the Standing Committee, but involves key people who can provide scientific and technical guidance to the COPs. There are currently 12 STRP working groups covering a range of important issues connected with Ramsar sites.

5. International Organisation Partners

International organisations can given the status of Ramsar 'partners', where they are considered to have a role in the delivery of the Ramsar Mission). There are currently four such organisations: BirdLife International, IUCN, Wetlands International, and WWF.

When a country signs the Ramsar Convention, they agree to four key commitments. These actions have been developed over the last 30 years and there is now a wealth of written material to help countries fulfil their major obligations. The four commitments are:

1. The Ramsar List. Countries agree to put at least one of their wetlands on the *Ramsar List*. This is a list of wetlands that meet one or more of eight qualifying criteria.

2. Wise use. Countries agree to include wetland conservation needs within their national land-use planning and to promote the 'wise use' of wetlands.

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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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Editorial

The commonest theme in correspondence from our dedicated network of Local Organisers is less obvious than you might expect. Perhaps comment on the unusually high (or low) numbers encountered during the winter counts? No. Maybe threats to valuable habitats and sites in their area? Thankfully not. Passing comments, favourable or otherwise, on WeBS or pointing out inaccuracies in our publications? The latter, I can truthfully report, are relatively few and far between. By far the most frequently raised topic is that of counters, and most usually the lack of them or the difficulty in finding new ones. In a country practically obsessed by birdwatching, and possessing an enviable level of support for bird and conservation charities, this is a significant concern.

The considerable undertaking of collecting the invaluable data and information that sits behind the purchase of new nature reserves, the highlighting of species faring well or poorly, and the designation and protection of important habitats rests on the shoulders of a relatively small number of people. Thanks to the continuing efforts over the past 50 years we currently have more knowledge and information about waterbird numbers and distribution than ever before. Similarly, the special sites that support them are afforded increasingly better protection.

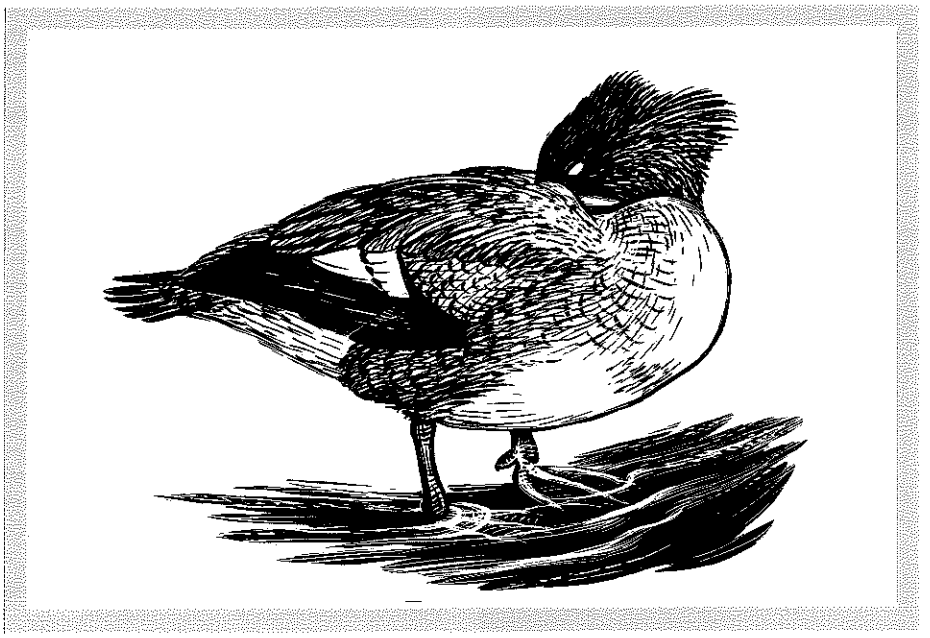
At the same time, the demands on the data are also increasing. Given that information collected through surveys such as WeBS may afford legal protection to certain places or species, it is important, quite rightly, that we can scientifically justify and defend the results and findings of our work which may influence decisions worth millions of pounds. We must also ensure that users of the data are able to interpret the information you provide correctly. It is for just such reasons that we request maps of the areas you count and fill gaps in our knowledge by carrying out special surveys.

Yet at this time when demands on our counters are perhaps greater than ever, I can but come to the conclusion that this small army of counters and fieldworkers is a dwindling one. Whilst not yet an endangered species, it is one whose population appears to grow ever older, whose numbers are starting to fall and where a concerted effort is required to ensure that the benefit it gives to the conservation community is not undermined by a population decline. Put simply, we need to encourage more birdwatchers to take part in survey work.

Whilst we have ideas for increasing recruitment and raising the profile of WeBS (amongst which are the launch of a new WeBS leaflet this summer), to make a real difference we need to foster greater support locally. Raising awareness in the local birdwatching community of the value of long-term monitoring schemes, such as WeBS Core Counts, and the importance of special surveys in plugging gaps in our knowledge is vital if WeBS is to continue to achieve its aims. We would be only too happy to give more talks to local bird clubs about WeBS and the importance of waterbird monitoring. If, during your time as a WeBS counter, you encourage just one person to get involved in monitoring, or if you help to fill the vacant Local Organiser positions, the future of waterbird monitoring, both locally and nationally, will be considerably rosier.

So remember, next time you're sat in a hide or walking along the seawall talking to a fellow birdwatcher, remind him or her that by taking part in local or national surveys they can make their birdwatching contribute towards conservation — it may be because of the efforts of people like yourself that the birds are still there!

Mark Pollitt



30 years of Ramsar

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3. Reserves & training. Members of the Ramsar Convention agree to establish nature reserves in their country and promote training associated with wetland research, management and wardening.

4. International Co-operation. Many countries in the Ramsar Convention share water resources and waterbirds species that migrate across their boundaries. Contracting parties agree to consult with each other to overcome trans-boundary issues.

The three-year Ramsar Work Plans provide a structure for how the objectives in the Strategic Plan will actually be achieved. The STRP also has its own work plan for each of the 12 working groups. The plans are reviewed and approved at each COP, and then each country interprets the plan and how it can be implemented nationally. In the UK, there is a National Ramsar Committee, on which government and conservation organisations sit to take forward Ramsar in the UK.

Contracting parties agree to make sure that the ecology and diversity of sites on the Ramsar list don't change. If serious and potentially damaging changes occur as a result of human activities, the contracting party inform the Ramsar Bureau, and the wetland site can be put on to the 'Montreaux Record'. Plans are then drawn up to reverse the changes occurring. In the UK, the Ouse Washes is currently listed on the Montreaux Record.

How does WeBS contribute to the Ramsar Convention?

Sites supporting 20,000 or more waterbirds are eligible for selection as Ramsar sites, as are those which hold 1% or more of a population for a particular species. These criteria will be familiar to readers of the WeBS annual report, since they have become a widely used for site selection for other purposes such as SPA designation and the identification of nationally important sites. WeBS data have been fundamental in identifying sites meeting these criteria and in the assessment of population estimates upon which the 1% thresholds are set. Equally important is the continued monitoring of these sites, without which threats and damaging ecological changes may not be identified. It is no exaggeration to say that well over half of the UK's 142 Ramsar sites have used WeBS data during their designation, and subsequent monitoring of waterbird numbers through WeBS is of great importance in assessing the status of these sites.

Mudflats in the Upper Solway flats and marshes Ramsar site / Nikki Straughan (WWT)

The BTO's Winter Gull Roost Survey

Surveys of winter gull roosts have been undertaken each decade since 1953, organized by the BTO. The last survey took place in January 1993, during which a total of 2,599,333 gulls were counted in Great Britain (see table). A further 19,030 gulls were also counted in Northern Ireland, 3,853 in the Isle of Man and 8,477 in the Channel Islands.

Numbers of Gulls in GB in 1993 roost census

Black-headed Gull	1,679,341
Common Gull	428,441
Lesser Black-backed Gull	60,757
Herring Gull	374,358
Great Black-backed Gull	42,990
Others	13,446

The BTO hopes to run the next Winter Gull Roost Survey in the winter of 2003-04 and in order to refine and standardise field methodology and data collection, plans to organise a Pilot Winter Gull Roost Survey during the coming winter. Pilot work could aim to test methods of counting gulls flying in to roost along defined stretches of coast. It could also include a study of the timing of arrival of gulls at roosts, so as to provide an indication of the proportions of birds arriving after dark in differing situations.

Previous surveys have used one-off counts of known roosts (usually undertaken in January) to provide an indication of site, regional and national populations. However, as some roosts have inevitably been missed, particularly on the coast and in less populated regions such as northern Scotland, these surveys have underestimated the overall populations of wintering gulls (though they have provided a more complete picture than that given by WeBS Core Counts, which miss those birds which forage away from wetland sites during the day). Future surveys will aim to cover all major roosts previously known, from earlier surveys or more recent bird reports and may use monthly counts across the winter. Outwith these areas, a sampling approach to surveying will help provide estimates (with confidence limits) of the numbers of gulls roosting on other waterbodies and along those parts of the coast away from major sites. This element of the survey would thus adopt a similar approach to that used by the Non-Estuarine Waterfowl Survey of 1997-98. In this way it is hoped that more accurate estimates of the national populations of the five main species of wintering gulls will be obtained and that sites that hold significant numbers will be more readily identified.

The Pilot Winter Gull Roost Survey will be heavily reliant upon the input of experienced volunteers, many of whom will have taken part in previous surveys. The BTO will be approaching some of these counters directly in due course. However, if you would like to help in the full survey in 2003-04, please could you contact either Niall Burton or Andy Musgrove at the BTO.

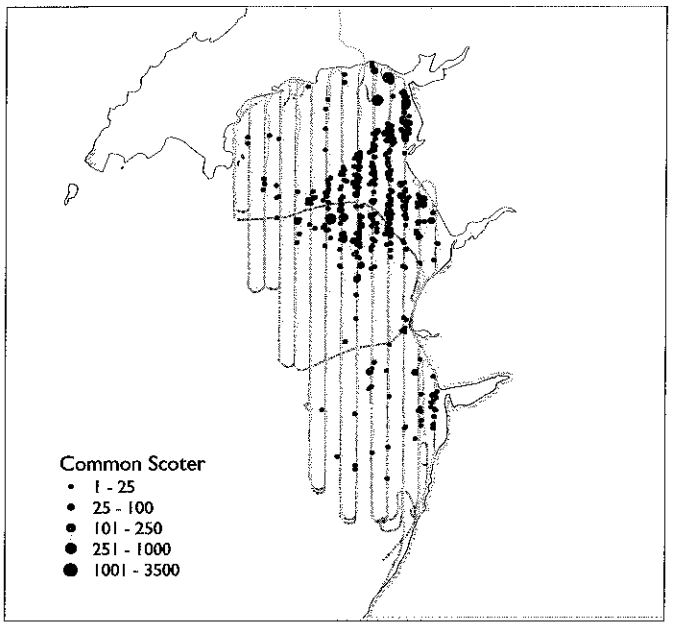
Niall Burton & Andy Musgrove

Seaduck surveys in the Irish Sea

This winter has seen the most extensive aerial surveys of waterbirds in the UK by a considerable margin. A team from WWT covered inshore waters — to about 20 m in depth; a distance of up to 25 km from shore — in much of the Irish Sea (including Liverpool Bay from Anglesey to Morecambe Bay, the Solway Firth, and Wigtown, Luce, Dundrum, Cardigan, Carmarthen and Swansea Bays). Work around Wales has been chiefly supported by CCW, with additional funding from a number of commercial companies.

Data are only just available for analysis, and the report will not be available until late summer. It is already clear, however, that the scoter flocks seen only irregularly from land are a regular feature of the UK's fauna during winter, with large flocks off Blackpool and in Colwyn, Conwy, Cardigan and Carmarthen Bays. The key concentrations were often between 5 and 10 km from shore, explaining why large numbers are only seen infrequently from land. Combining data from all flights, we counted over 100,000 scoter this winter (albeit that this will have involved a considerable degree of double-counting due to repeat coverage). Large numbers of divers were also observed, with auks and gulls making up the majority of the other bird records. Infrequent but regular sightings of cetaceans were made throughout the surveyed areas.

The data will form the basis for revising population estimates for seaducks and divers in the UK, help determine the location of marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and assist environmental assessments of proposed offshore windfarms. It will take some time before the analytical techniques have been fully developed to provide accurate estimates of the total numbers of birds present, but it is already clear that scoters occur in areas of shallow water (less than 10 m in depth) at considerable distances from shore and that to survey these populations will require appropriate, extensive surveys. It is also clear that the previous estimate of 27,350 scoters in Britain was only around half the true total. More surveys are already planned for this coming winter and, with the interest in the marine environment greatly elevated due to the need to identify and define marine SPAs and the requirement for clean, green energy, it is likely that we will see a much greater understanding of the numbers and distribution of fauna in this habitat in the coming years



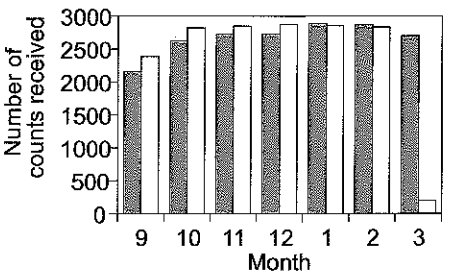
Distribution of scoter in Cardigan Bay. Dotted lines indicate the route of the aircraft; black dots indicate the location and number of scoters. All data from flights in October and February are shown.

This work was commissioned by CCW as part of its programme of research into sustaining natural beauty, wildlife and outdoor enjoyment in rural Wales and its inshore waters.

Peter Cranswick

FMD & WeBS Core Counts 2000-01

The end of winter 2000-01 saw the first outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in the UK for over 30 years, bringing counts in most places to an early halt after the February count. The figure below shows the number of counts received compared with the average for the previous five-year period, and highlights the very greatly reduced coverage in March. Analysis of the summer months, which will fall in the 2001-02 WeBS recording year, will no doubt show a similar picture. Thankfully for WeBS, few species occur in peak numbers in March and consequently the absence of data should have only a small effect on our long-term analyses and understanding of waterbird numbers and trends. Despite the paucity of March counts, Core Counts in winter 2000-01 still provided interesting results.



Number of counts received each month for winter 2000-01 (white) compared to average for previous five years (blue)

Numbers of many wildfowl species reached record levels in Great Britain. Peak counts of Little and Great Crested Grebes, Cormorant, Canada Geese and Teal surpassed all previous totals, whilst Mute Swans exceeded 20,000 for the first time. The peak count of Mallard rose slightly though numbers remain low in comparison to former levels. Other species fared less well, perhaps most notably European Whitefronts whose numbers continued to fall to the lowest levels for almost forty years. All three regular sawbill species recorded low numbers compared to recent years.

For wader species in Great Britain, numbers during passage periods were low, presumably because count dates did not coincide with peak passage movements in spring or autumn. Peak winter numbers were high for many species, with Avocet and Grey Plover reaching record levels, while there high numbers in more than one winter month for species such as Knot and Sanderling.

Numbers in Northern Ireland were unexceptional for almost all species, perhaps the most noteworthy count being of Light-bellied Brent in November when more than 18,500 birds were recorded, the majority being at the regular autumn stronghold of Strangford Lough.

Mark Pollitt

Waterbirds, Stoneworts and Disturbance at Hickling Broad

Improvements in water quality at Hickling Broad brought potential problems in accommodating nationally rare aquatic vegetation, wintering waterbirds and recreation users. ***Mike Armitage*** *reports on research into waterbird numbers using the site . . .*

Hickling Broad is located within a large area of low-lying land in east Norfolk and forms part of an internationally important area for nature conservation. Although it is managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust as a nature reserve, the Broad is also an important area for recreational tourism, with water sport activities include windsurfing, sailing, leisure boating and fishing.

The Broad was eutrophic (nutrient enriched) and dominated by planktonic algae for around 30 years. Then, as nutrient levels gradually fell, the Broad became less eutrophic and began to revert to a condition with a diverse assemblage of aquatic plants. In 1998, the water became clear again. One likely consequence of the improved water quality was a marked increase in the amount of aquatic vegetation, including the nationally rare plant, Intermediate Stonewort *Chara intermedia*. In autumn 1999 however, the water became turbid again and the amount of *Chara* in the Broad was considerably reduced.

The unprecedented growth of *Chara* in the central portion of the Broad in 1998 caused hindrance to navigation and recreational activities and an assessment was undertaken by the Broads Authority to consider the possible effects of cutting *Chara* at Hickling Broad.

It was considered possible that cutting the *Chara* might affect the populations of eight waterbird species which spend the winter at Hickling Broad and were likely to feed on *Chara*: Mute Swan, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard, Shoveler, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot. Following the assessment, the BTO (funded by the Broads Authority) carried out experimental research into the use made of the *Chara* beds by waterbirds during the winters of 1999-2000 and 2000-01. High water levels at Hickling during these winters meant that much of the submerged vegetation was out of reach of the dabbling species, which were therefore largely absent from the Broad. However, there were good numbers of the diving species.

In late summer 1999, experimental partitions totalling 14.85 ha of *Chara* adjacent to the navigation channel were cut and waterbird populations were monitored in the subsequent winter. A reversal of the pattern of cut/uncut partitions planned for summer 2000 was never undertaken due to poor growth of the *Chara* that year, although the waterbird monitoring was continued. The biomass of vegetation was also estimated in each partition. During the waterbird monitoring, disturbance events were quantified and recorded. This article reports on the results of the second winter of monitoring.

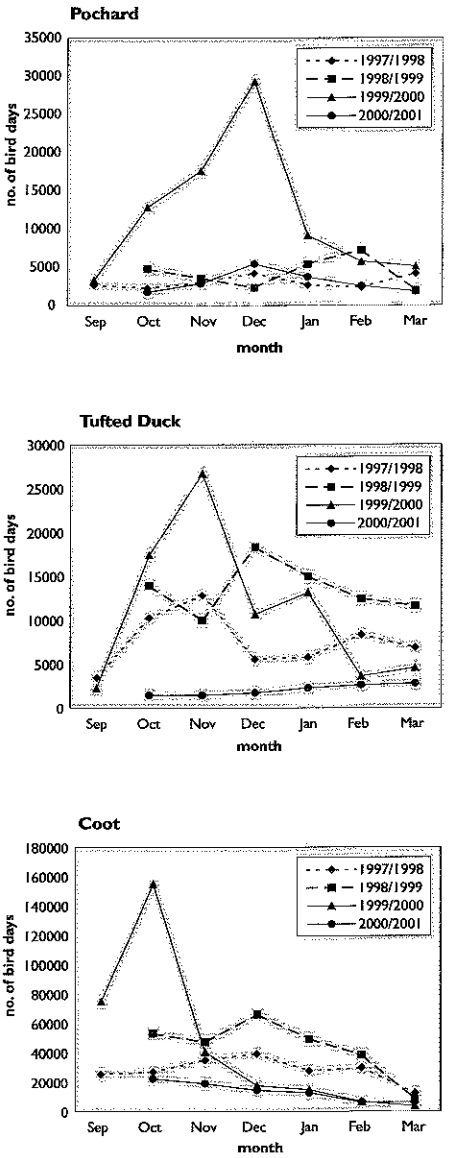


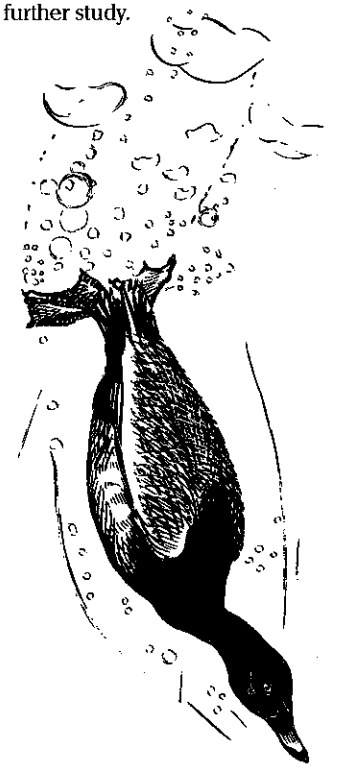
Figure 1. *The number of bird-days of Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot at Hickling Broad during winters 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-01. (bird-days = number of birds recorded on the monthly WeBS count multiplied by the number of days in the month).*

The number of Coots in a partition increased with increasing *Chara* biomass. However, Pochard and Tufted Duck distributions did not appear to be affected by the amount of *Chara* available in the partition, possibly because they are more omnivorous than Coot and were likely to be feeding invertebrates as well. Coot, however, are more restricted to a herbivorous diet and may rely more on *Chara* for their nutritional requirements.

Monthly WeBS counts of the main species of waterbird at Hickling between winter 1997-98 and 2000-01 were also examined to identify differences in numbers of birds on the Broad between winters (Figure 1). In 1999-2000, when *Chara* intermedia was present in great abundance, the numbers of Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot were very high, particularly in the early part of that winter. However, waterbird numbers were low again the following winter, when there was poor *Chara* growth.

Disturbance was also of interest with regards to bird distribution, as it had a negative impact on the number of birds present in a particular area. The greatest disturbance was caused by windsurfers. All three species were negatively affected for up to an hour after the source of the disturbance had gone. Windsurfers are known to have a considerable disturbing effect while sailing and rowing boats had more limited effects. Motor-powered boats, however, did not appear to have a significant effect on the distribution of any species, possibly because they move predictably within the central navigation channel, where there were few birds.

Although the two years of work have provided much interesting data, the dynamics of the Hickling Broad ecosystem remain very unpredictable, and there is plenty of scope for further study.



Conservation Update

Progress on Special Protection Areas

The first account of the UK's best bird sites, protected under European legislation as Special Protection Areas (SPAs), was launched by the JNCC in September 2001 (see *WeBS Newsletter 14*). Together with Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), UK SPAs will form an integral part of the pan-European Natura 2000 Network of protected sites designated under the EC Habitats and Birds Directives. The entire 'SPA Review' is available on JNCC's website at www.jncc.gov.gov.uk/UKSPA.

The 'SPA review' has been widely circulated to critical acclaim in Europe. It will be presented at the next ORNIS committee meeting which brings together EU governments to discuss progress under the Directive.

Since the publication of the 'SPA Review', a Scientific Working Group charged with the further development of the SPA network has been established by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This consultative group is made up of Governmental and non governmental agencies and organisations, including JNCC, WWT and RSPB, and will ensure that the SPA Network evolves using the very best scientific information.

In addition to overseeing the coherent management of the network as a whole and the monitoring of individual sites, the Working Group will be considering the provision of SPAs for wetland birds not yet effectively covered by the network, such as Smew, Spotted Crake and wintering gulls. The Group will also consider boundary extensions and attempt to set common standards for collecting and analysing data used in the selection of SPAs.

WeBS has already played an essential role in aiding the identification and designation of SPAs for non-breeding waterbirds. A range of activities is currently underway to underpin and enhance the capabilities of WeBS, much of which will enable the Government to fulfil many of its obligations under the EC Birds Directive. These include the development of an alerting system for WeBS which will provide an objective means of indicating the significance of the changing numberts at SPAs, against defined thresholds, continuing progress with the WeBS atlas of count boundaries and investigating how count boundaries used by WeBS overlap with SPA boundaries.

James Robinson

Track the epic migration of the Irish Light-bellied Brent Goose

The population of Light-bellied Brent Geese that over-winters almost exclusively in the island of Ireland undertakes one of the most amazing animal migrations, passing through Iceland and over the Greenland ice-cap to breeding grounds in Arctic Canada.

In May 2002, a team from WWT attached satellite transmitters to six Light-bellied Brent Geese to understand more about their migratory routes and to identify key staging areas. This project is part of an international programme of research

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In Brief . . .

Montrose Birthday

The Montrose Basin Local Nature Reserve celebrated its 21st birthday this year. The site, well known for the large number of Pink-footed Geese that visit each winter, was declared a Local Nature Reserve by Angus Council in 1981. The Scottish Wildlife Trust now manages the site on the council's behalf. (21.6.02)

Pipe protection

Bright yellow gas pipes, buried on the beaches off North Gare, Crimdon Dene and Teesmouth, could help make the area safer for young Little Terns. Around 50 pairs of Little Terns nest along the coastline each year, helping to qualify the site for SPA designation. It's hoped the pipes will provide young terns with additional cover from predators and the weather. (22.5.02)

Lottery boost for Old Moor

The RSPB have received more than £800,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop the Old Moor wetland and other sites in the Dearne Valley. Over the next four years the award will be used to improve the centre's visitor facilities and wildlife habitats. Future plans include the creation of 100 acres of reedbeds and more than 500 acres of wet grassland. (25.6.02)

Ythan pollution incident

The Tarty Burn, a tributary of the Ythan Estuary, was hit by a toxic slurry spill in April. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency estimated that several million litres of pig muck may have leaked into the burn, raising fears over possible fish deaths and potential long term effects on the estuary. (24.4.02)

New Teeside reserve

Plans for the creation of a wetland reserve at Billingham were unveiled by the Teesside Environmental Trust earlier this year. The proposed site, on the north side of the River Tees, is former industrial land previously owned by ICI. The reserve has been designed in partnership with the RSPB and is expected to take up to five years to develop. (8.5.02)

Port plans at Seaforth reserve

The future of Seaforth Dock nature reserve is currently the subject of debate. The site was set aside by the owners, Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC), for future expansion of the port in the early 1970s. Over the years the land developed into a rich wildlife habitat and the reserve was established in 1984. The site is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The MDHC have earmarked the site for further development and negotiations are under way over the future of the site. (6.5.02)

Wetland creation on Tamar

The National Trust has been carrying out studies and negotiations into plans to create a wetland habitat at Hayesmarsh, on the border of the Tamar in Cornwall. Around 35 acres of grazing land would be flooded to create a salt marsh and flood defences would be built to protect adjacent land. The Trust hopes the site will develop into a habitat that will attract a lot of wildlife, including the once rare Little Egret, now a relatively common site on the Tamar. Local residents have expressed concern that the flooding will hamper navigation on the river. (11.4.02)

New reservoir proposals in Wales

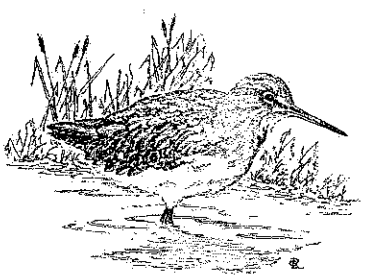
Proposals to create Europe's largest man-made reservoir in the Elan Valley, near Rhayader will be put to ministers for consideration. The reservoir, which would store up to 55 billion gallons of water and create a lake larger than Windermere, would protect southern England & Wales from future water shortages should climate change produce hotter, drier summers. The long term plans, which will undoubtedly cause controversy amongst the local community and conservationists, are being overseen by Severn Trent Water on behalf of Water UK. (6.5.02)

Lough Neagh strategy launched

A major new strategy for protecting and enhancing the Lough Neagh wetlands was launched by environment minister Dermot Nesbitt. The strategy follows years of hard work by the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee will promote sustainable development of the area, with key objectives including the improvement of water quality, a reduction in the number of pollution incidents and monitoring and conservation of important habitats and species. (19.06.02)

Designation for capital wetland

English Nature announced that WWT's London Wetland Centre has been notified as a Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) just five years after work began to restore the former redundant Victorian reservoirs. The centre, close to the heart of one of the



world's largest cities, is an inspiring example of wetland recreation and a hotspot for biodiversity in the country's capital. Gadwall and Shoveler occur in nationally important numbers, and are amongst the 140 species of bird already recorded on the reserve. (2.2.02)

Rare tern colony vandalised

Vandalism at one of the UK's largest breeding colony of Little Terns at North Denes, Yarmouth may seriously affect the birds breeding success this year. In a night time attack, predator proof fencing protecting the site was uprooted and fence posts thrown at the nests, leaving only 20 of 98 nests remaining, and causing adult birds to abandon the site. (7.6.02)

EC take action on conservation legislation

The European Commission has decided to take legal action against 8 countries for non-compliance with EU laws concerning nature conservation. France, Italy, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Spain and Luxembourg face action for failing to make good their commitments to the Wild Birds and Habitats Directives which, amongst other things, require members to designate important sites as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). (14.3.02)

Airport proposals 'ridiculous'

A report that marshland on the banks of the Thames at Cliffe in North Kent has been identified as a potential site for a new airport has been dismissed as 'ridiculous' by the RSPB. Chris Corrigan, RSPB South East Regional Manager said, "In environmental terms, it is hard to think of a worse site for an airport in the South East, and we look forward to hearing that this proposal has been immediately consigned to the wastebasket where it belongs." (9.3.02)

Negative response to new SSSI

The designation of an SSSI for breeding Red-throated Divers on the Shetland island of Yell has been unfavourably received by parts of the local community. Many islanders feel that the designation, which will provide increased protection for the 79 pairs of divers breeding on the lochs and lochans, will provide yet more restrictions on the islanders' way of life in an already hard-pressed rural community. (10.3.02)

NBN support

A £250,000 boost for the National Biodiversity Network has been announced by Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett. This extra funding will help support the Network's web project, and will bring the total committed by DEFRA to over half a million pounds. (2.2.02)

Swanbourne restoration

Work has begun to revive Swanbourne Lake in Sussex. The lake, which is fed by springs from the South Downs, has suffered from over abstraction of drinking water. Works being carried out by the Environment Agency and Southern Water will reduce abstraction and remove silt build up from the lake. (21.5.02)

Goose management on the Uists

A scheme developed by the local Goose Management Committee in the Uists to help minimise agricultural damage caused by resident greylag geese in the Southern Isles is to attract almost £46,000 to the Uists and Barra over the next year. Funding will be provided by Scottish Natural Heritage. (5.6.02)

Greylag Goose / Mark Pollitt

Offshore windfarm given green light

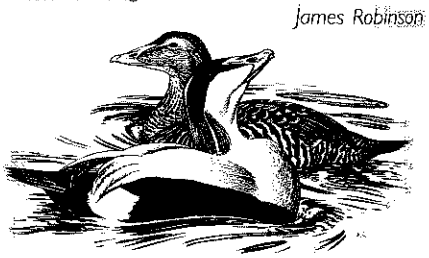
Environment Minister, Michael Meacher, and the Minister for Energy, Brian Wilson, gave the green light to a 76 megawatt offshore windfarm to be built at Middle Scroby Sands some 2.5km off the coast of Great Yarmouth in Norfolk. The development will be the single largest offshore windfarm in the UK and consist of up to 38 wind turbines and should provide enough green electricity for 52,000 homes. Work on the development is scheduled to begin next winter for completion by the summer of 2003. (17.5.02)

Compiled by Colette Hall & Mark Pollitt

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.*

on this threatened population of geese, co-ordinated by WWT. You can follow these amazing journeys and find out more about these birds on www.wwt.org.uk/brent.

James Robinson



Eider declines

Wetlands International's Seaduck Specialist Group held a workshop at Roosta, Estonia in April 2002 to discuss Eiders, attended by 36 experts from 13 countries, including WWT. This was prompted by the major declines in wintering numbers of the Baltic/Wadden Sea population, by up to half in the last 10 years, and reductions in breeding numbers at colonies around the Baltic Sea. Other talks highlighted declines elsewhere, notably the discrete population in Shetland.

As with other long-lived species, just small changes in the survival of adult females are likely to be the biggest influence on changes in population size, and mass deaths of incubating females from Avian Cholera, particularly in Denmark, and from starvation in the Dutch Wadden Sea, in years when mussels were scarce, are likely to have contributed to the decline.

The 'Roosta resolution' recommended the establishment of a working group to identify current and future potential threats to this Eider population and to draw up an integrated monitoring strategy. It urged the Oms Committee to recognise the Baltic/Wadden Sea population of the common eider as being of unfavourable conservation status and that an EU management plan should be drafted.

Peter Cranswick

Cormorants in the spotlight

In March 2002, the Conseil Supérior de la Pêche Protection des milieux aquatiques in France organised a meeting to discuss the status and dynamics of Cormorant populations in Europe and the impact of management. The meeting was attended by representatives of a wide range of different interest groups with an involvement in aspects of Cormorant conservation and management. Recommendations from the meeting included the need for a European action plan and a reduction of Cormorant numbers on a global scale. This latter recommendation, of unclear legality under the Birds Directive, does not reflect UK policy or UK approaches to the resolution of conflicts between fisheries and Cormorants.

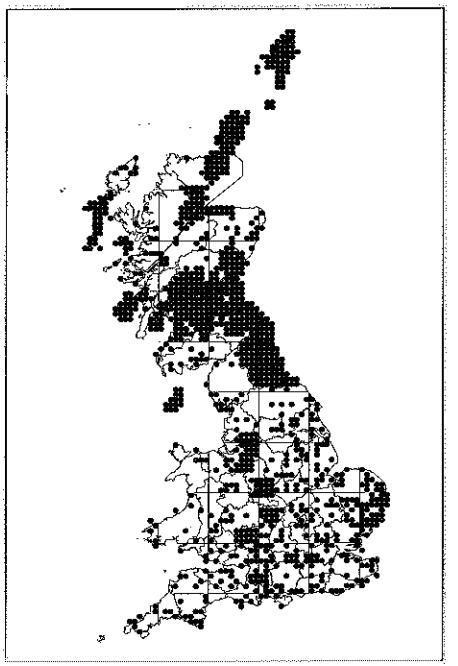
At the latest round of REDCAFE (a pan European cormorant and fisheries project) workshops in Denmark, there were recommendations made for a co-ordinated pan-European Cormorant roost count, to complement the IWC counts in January 2003.

James Robinson

Mute Swan Census Update

The 2002 National Mute Swan census was undertaken in May and June, organised by WWT, the Swan Study Group (SSG) and Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC). The basic methodology involved simply locating and counting all Mute Swans, using a 10-km square as the basic recording unit.

Coverage of the whole country was impractical, and thus a sampling approach was required. However, we first gave counters the opportunity to select any squares they definitely wanted to cover (SSG members already cover large tracts as part of their long-term studies, while the SOC also selected large areas for survey) and all squares that held 50 or more swans during the 1990 census were also pre-selected. This has two positive effects: a high proportion of the total population is counted, increasing the accuracy of the final estimate, and counters are ensured of encountering a large number of swans. Randomised sampling was used to select remaining squares for coverage. Although it is important to visit squares suspected to hold no or few swans (in case the population has increased in these areas or habitats), the sample was stratified according to the number of swans counted in 1990; this enabled us to minimize the number of squares with few swans that needed to be covered.



10-km squares selected for coverage for the for the Mute Swan Census 2002

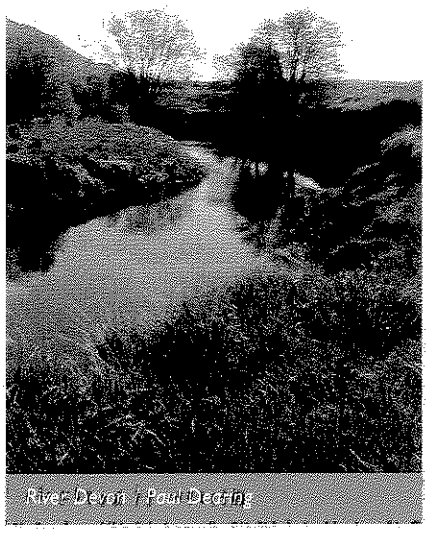
In the end, 1,100 10-km squares were identified for coverage (see figure). Early indications suggest that nearly all of these were visited, a particularly impressive achievement by the counter network given both the rather different survey method and the increased number of surveys trying to catch up ground lost during the outbreak of Foot & Mouth Disease. Very many thanks to over a thousand counters who participated; and we are confident that the survey will provide the most accurate estimate of the Mute Swan population in Britain to date.

Please send any outstanding recording forms to your Local Organiser as soon as possible. If you have any queries, please contact either myself or Peter Cranswick at WWT, Slimbridge.

Robin Ward

Timetable for future special surveys

Whilst WeBS Core Counts and Low Tide Counts provide valuable information on numbers, trends and distribution of waterbirds, not all species and habitats are well represented by these counts. In order to address these gaps in our knowledge, a program of special surveys supplements this information. Listed in the table below are planned surveys over the coming three years which we hope to draw upon the expertise and skills of WeBS counters to achieve. Information on each will appear in future editions of *WeBS News* as the surveys approach, as will results and findings as soon as these are available. We hope that many of you will be able to support and participate in these in future years.



River Devon - Paul Deering

Survey	Aims	Last survey	Next survey
Dispersed Waterbird Survey	To improve population estimates for those species where a significant proportion of the population winters away from Core Count sites	2000-01 (pilot)	Winter 2002-03
European wintering Cormorant Survey	An international census of wintering Cormorants at night-time roosts.	no previous survey	January 2003
Riverine Survey	To improve knowledge of waterbird numbers on riverine habitats and identify areas to target future monitoring within Core Counts	1999-2000 (pilot)	Winter 2003-04
Moulting Wildfowl Survey	To identify key sites for moulting wildfowl in summer	Summer 1992	Summer 2004
International Wintering Swan Census	To update national and international population estimates for Whooper and Bewick's Swans and monitor key sites not counted by WeBS	January 2000	January 2005

European census of wintering Great Cormorants

Regular national censuses of the main breeding colonies of Cormorants in Europe have shown a large increase in the population in recent years. By comparison, knowledge of numbers and distribution during winter is poorly known, with estimates ranging between 350,000 and 700,000 birds. Consequently, Wetland International's Cormorant Specialist Group has decided to organize a European census of wintering Great Cormorants in January 2003.

The aim of the census is to count all the night-time roosts in each European country and in North Africa in mid January 2003. Counts will be made at the end of the day (from about two hours before dusk). Because birds may move considerable distances between feeding areas and night roosts, counts of daytime roosts will not be used.

The survey in the UK is being co-ordinated by WWT, and will draw upon a number of counter networks, including the existing network that covers roosts for the Christmas Week Cormorant Survey. To obtain complete coverage of the *c.*300 Cormorant roosts in the UK will, however, require additional observers, so we may contact you for possible assistance should we have any notable gaps.

We have, at the time of going to press, only just received news of this survey from Wetlands International, so apologies for the short notice. We plan to assess coverage at a national scale in the next month in order to give as much forewarning as possible to counters and organisers in those regions where extra coverage might be required.

If you have any queries or would like to participate in the survey, please contact Colette Hall, WWT Slimbridge.

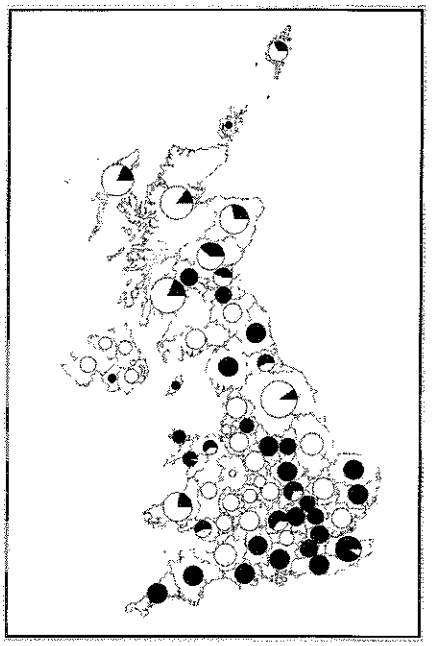
Peter Cranswick & Colette Hall

WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey

The Pilot WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey (DWS) took place over the winter of 2000-01 and produced enough useful results to suggest that it would be worthwhile to organise a full survey. The rationale behind the survey remains the same, although we have made some changes to the methodology to make the whole exercise simpler. For example, the sample unit for the full survey is a 1-km square, rather than the tetrad (2x2 km squares) unit used in the pilot survey. The DWS aims to provide information on the populations of those waterbirds away from the regularly monitored WeBS sites. Species such as Water Rail, Moorhen, Jack Snipe, Snipe and Woodcock are mainly found away from the regularly monitored sites. Additionally, species such as Teal, Mallard and Ruff have important population components in areas with irregular monitoring.

We are aiming to cover 2,000 1-km squares from a list of 4,000 squares selected at random from all parts of the UK, knowing that many will prove to be inaccessible (for example due to difficulties with terrain or land-ownership). Coverage of this number of squares will provide us with a sample that is representative of the habitats across the quarter of a million 1-km squares in the UK. The methods for the survey are a departure from the normal WeBS approach of counting birds at distinct sites, and it may be a little disheartening for the counter who is asked to visit an area in which they expect to find few or no birds. However, the true zero counts are no less important than the counts of large numbers of birds when it comes to estimating the size of the bird populations in the wider countryside. That is, after all, the purpose of this survey—to find out how many waterbirds are really out there in these habitats.

At the time of writing we have received responses from over two-thirds of the Local Organisers we approached to help with the survey. Many thanks to all who responded so promptly. Results suggest that the desired levels of coverage may not be achievable in all parts of the country, and we are currently considering how this likely shortfall will affect interpretation of the survey results. An update on the DWS will be sent to all Local Organisers shortly.



Estimated coverage of squares for the Dispersed Waterbirds Survey (as of mid-June 2002). The size of the pie-chart is proportional to the number of squares required for that region. Black colouring depicts covered squares e.g. a pie-chart coloured half black and half white depicts a region for which half the required number of squares are estimated to be covered

Steve Holloway

Defending SPAs: the use of count data

Given that a high proportion of SPAs and Ramsar sites in the UK are designated because of their importance for waterbirds, WeBS is one of the most commonly used data sources in the designation process. However, with designations having significant consequences for land uses and developments, it is no surprise that these may be questioned. ***Peter Cranswick*** *elaborates...*

The designation of many of the important sites for birds in the UK, whether as SPAs, Ramsar sites or SSSIs, is based on data from one or more of the well-established monitoring schemes. Data collected by volunteer networks thus provides hard evidence of the value of a site.

Clearly, the process of designation, and subsequent defence of that site against other pressures, may not all be plain sailing, especially if it compromises other parties' interests in the site, e.g. because a company wishes to see development on the land. Thus, the conservation status of a site may be challenged, and this ultimately may bring the survey data into question.

A recent public inquiry into a Scottish SPA designated for Hen Harriers saw the landowner query the bird data used to notify the site. To satisfy these concerns, the observer's original notebook was presented as evidence that the person had indeed visited the site on the days in question and seen the birds in the precise location specified. Thankfully, this was deemed sufficient proof, and the challenge to the site was rejected.

WeBS data are widely used for site designation and, indeed, given that a high proportion of SPAs and Ramsar sites in the UK are designated because of their importance for waterbirds, WeBS is the most oft used data source in this process. It is testament to the high regard in which WeBS is held that we have received relatively few challenges to date. It is clear, however, that as consultants and developers become more familiar with WeBS, challenges have increased and become more sophisticated in recent times.

WeBS tries to stay ahead of the game, and we look to the statutory agencies, as the bodies responsible for defending designated sites, for feedback and forewarning of impending issues. Initiatives such as the Atlas of Count Boundaries (boring as we appreciate they are) prove extremely valuable in this respect, and are designed to ensure the credibility of WeBS data and that they remain defensible in court even when subject to close scrutiny. Another key factor in the success of WeBS is the long run of data for many sites. Data collected for many years provides its own measure of validation, increasing confidence in the representativeness of the data, something that a one-off assessment can never achieve since the data have no precedent.

We will endeavour, as always, to keep involvement in WeBS an enjoyable activity, and to keep any additional information required (and particularly any paperwork) to a minimum. We do, always, consider very carefully if and how new data requirements are put to the network, and consult widely beforehand to ensure this is done in the most efficient manner. The challenge to the Hen Harrier SPA is, however, a salutary case that supporting data may be needed to ensure that WeBS counts continue to be used successfully to defend the conservation of waterbirds and the sites they use.

Loch Ken and River Dee Marshes SPA / E Jackson (WWT)

Low Tide Counts

During the winter of 2001-2002, WeBS counters carried out low tide counts at the Alde Complex, Belfast Lough, Breydon Water, Bridgwater Bay, Chichester Harbour, Dee Estuary, Dengie Flats, Dornoch Firth, Dyfi Estuary, Eden Estuary, Hamford Water, Lindisfarne, North Norfolk Coast, Orwell Estuary, Solway Firth, Stour Estuary, Strangford Lough, Swale Estuary and Wigtown Bay. Additionally, further mid-tide counts were made in the northwest part of Morecambe Bay. If you've got any low tide count data still to return for last winter then please stick it in an envelope now and post it!

The list of sites to be targeted during winter 2002-2003 has not yet been finalised but is likely to include some or all of the following: Blackwater Estuary, Colne Estuary, Camel Estuary, Carlingford Lough, Duddon Estuary, Exe Estuary, Firth of Forth, Humber Estuary (outer south), Kingsbridge Estuary, Pegwell Bay, Poole Harbour, Severn Estuary, Tamar Complex and Taw/Torridge Estuary. We shall be contacting potential Local Organisers shortly.

Thanks as always to everyone who takes part in the Low Tide Counts, which continue to be used widely for the conservation of the UK's estuaries and their birds.

Andy Musgrove & Steve Holloway

Bulletin Board

Publishing W&WC and a new database

I offer our apologies for the late arrival of *Wildfowl & Wader Counts* this year. Last winter has been a particularly busy time for WWT, particularly in the development of a new database. Currently, wildfowl and wader data are stored separately, in keeping with the historical separation of these databases. Clearly, merging these into a single dataset is advantageous for all sorts of reasons, not least efficiency. Unfortunately, and as is often the case with databases, the task turns out to be considerably more complicated than first envisaged. The new database will be compatible with recent developments in storing biological data, not least the National Biodiversity Network (see www.ukbiodiversity.net). The need to provide a database that will accommodate all special surveys means that we are at the 'cutting-edge' of database design but inevitably means we enter into the unknown. Thankfully, this has not brought WeBS to its knees (despite this seeming possible on a number of occasions!) and we can continue to provide the same services and outputs as previously, albeit that we effectively have to maintain two systems at present and, inevitably, this means things take longer. The database should be up and running later this year, and this should result in improvements to WeBS all-round. In the meantime, my thanks for bearing with us and, again, my apologies for any delays that arise.

Peter Cranswick

Changes to the recording form: disturbance and Shag

Since the official launch of WeBS in 1993, we have collected information on human activities during WeBS counts with the aim of assessing the effects of disturbance on counts and waterbirds in general. WWT has recently analysed these data to assess their value and provide recommendations for future action. The analyses concluded that to tease out the precise effects of disturbance is extremely complicated and requires a sophisticated experimental approach, something that is simply impractical at a national level within WeBS counts.

We will provide a fuller report of these findings in the next edition of *WeBS News* when the relevant papers have been published. In the meantime, given the limited value of these data, WeBS partners agreed to stop recording of this information during WeBS counts. We assume that, with the reduced paperwork, this change would not be too unpopular among counters! WWT is developing a national scheme for assessing human activities at wetlands in time, but this would be separate to WeBS and not undertaken during counts.

Although these sections have been dropped from the recording form, there are no new sections or requirements. Consequently, please feel free to use existing stocks of old forms to send in your counts. We have taken the opportunity when printing the new forms to add a few more species to the list, to save both you and us time having to write out names and having to code forms before data are input.

We have, however, decided to add Shag to the list of the species to be recorded. Shag is, under the Ramsar definition, a waterbird and, as a member of the Cormorant family, it is somewhat curious that this species has not been recorded previously; quite simply, having not been included initially, the reluctance to change the *status quo* has been the main reason for it not being added before now. Recording Shags is likely to affect only a proportion of counters, but if you feel strongly that you do not wish to do so, please write 'NC' in the relevant box to indicate that Shags were present even if not counted. We hope, however, that you will be happy to provide counts; indeed, many counters already do so on WeBS forms. It is true that WeBS counts are likely to pick up only a proportion of birds in the UK, but the data that are provided from sites with birds present will prove valuable nonetheless.

Many thanks to all who have provided disturbance data over the years; they have been extremely useful if only to establish definitively the value and application of data collected in this way, but also to shape how we collect data to assess activities and disturbance in the future.

Peter Cranswick

Severn Estuary WeBS counts - a new study

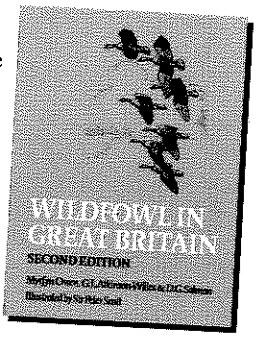
It has been suggested that wader numbers have dropped considerably over the past decade or more in southwest England (and Wales). Possible causes could be global warming, milder winters, disturbance or a combination of all three. But first we must be sure that a real drop has taken place, and that the observed counts are outside normal fluctuations.

The WeBS counts are ideal tools for trying to answer these questions. In the early 1970s, when the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry counts started, Peter Ferns published a detailed account of the waders of the Severn Estuary. I propose to redo Peter's survey, again using the WeBS counts, to compare the situation in the early 1970s with that of today. No special or extra counts are needed, but I am asking the Severn Estuary counters to be as thorough as possible with their normal counts and, where at all possible, to undertake counts on the 'proper day'. Thirty years ago, the counting year was July to June; I will keep to this and use July 2002 to June 2003 for the direct comparison with the earlier work. Please submit your counts to your local organiser as usual. Thank you.

Harvey Rose
WeBS Core Count Local Organiser – Severn Estuary (Bristol & Somerset)

'Wildfowl in Great Britain' available at discount price

A limited number of copies of the second edition of *Wildfowl in Great Britain* are available at discounted price. Published in 1986 as an update to the landmark 1963 first edition, the book draws upon information from the first 30 years of the then National Wildfowl Counts (later merged with the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry to become WeBS). The habitat and distribution section provides an interesting historical regional perspective to current counts, and although our knowledge in certain areas has moved on considerably over the last 15 years, the species accounts still much provide valuable information and detail about the ecology of wintering wildfowl and the use of individual sites. The discussions on the influences of man on wildfowl and wetland conservation are thought provoking, particularly given the progress in some areas and lack of it in others. This 600 page tome is available by sending a cheque (made payable to WWT) for £16 to Clare Lee, WWT, Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT. The price includes packing and postage.



Mark Pollitt

Low Tide Count atlas

The initial draft of the forthcoming Low Tide Count 'atlas', to be entitled *Estuarine Waterbirds at Low Tide*, has been completed and the book is now being revised following comments. It is hoped that the book will be published this autumn, with free copies to all counters who have taken part in the scheme.

Andy Musgrove

Bulletin Board

Colour-marked wildfowl sightings

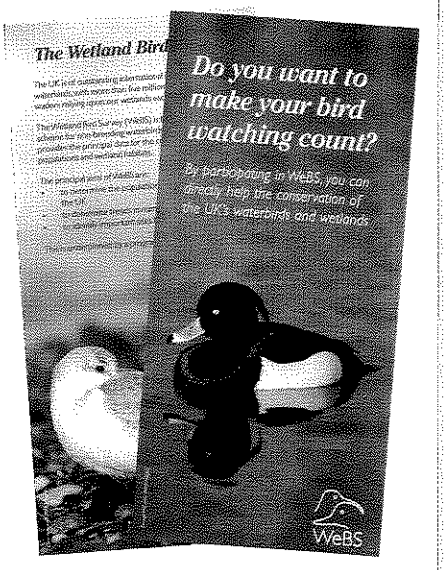
A brief reminder to all counters to keep an eye open for colour-marked birds during their counts. Many wildfowl are marked using coloured leg rings or neck collars, providing valuable information on movements and survival of individual birds. Please remember to note the colour, position (i.e. which leg) and any engraved letters or numbers, the location (including grid reference) and the date on which the sighting occurred. Sightings should be sent to Richard Hearn at WWT Slimbridge, or can be emailed to colourmarkedwildfowl@wwt.org.uk. Sending sightings in direct rather than as notes on the back of recording forms helps to cut down on administration. Please remember to include your own address details so we can contact you if we have any queries and scheme co-ordinators can inform you of any previous sightings.

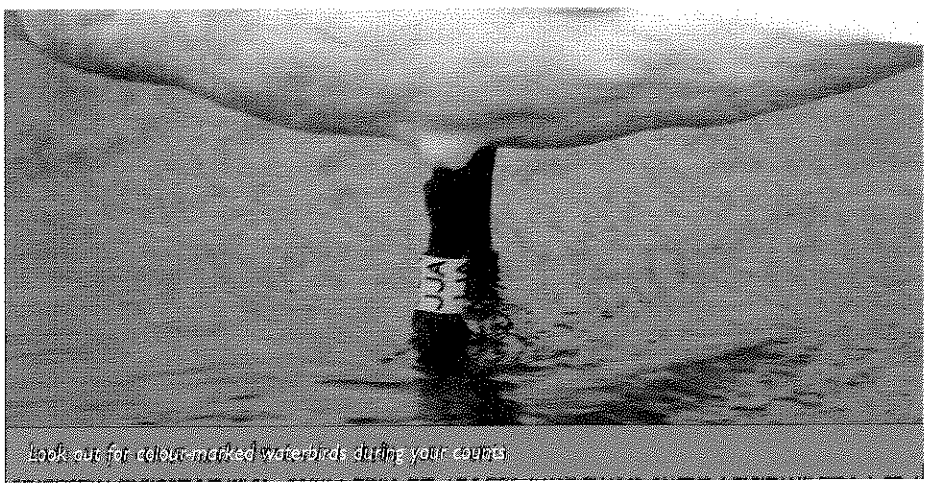
Richard Hearn

WeBS flier

To help raise the profile of WeBS and encourage greater participation we have now published a leaflet explaining about the scheme, what it aims to achieve and how to become involved. Copies have been sent to Local Organisers and will soon be distributed to all bird clubs. If you have further suggestions for distributing leaflets in your local area please don't hesitate to contact the staff at the WeBS Secretariat.

Mark Pollitt




Look out for colour-marked waterbirds during your counts

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.

WeBS Counter's Conference – Rutland Water

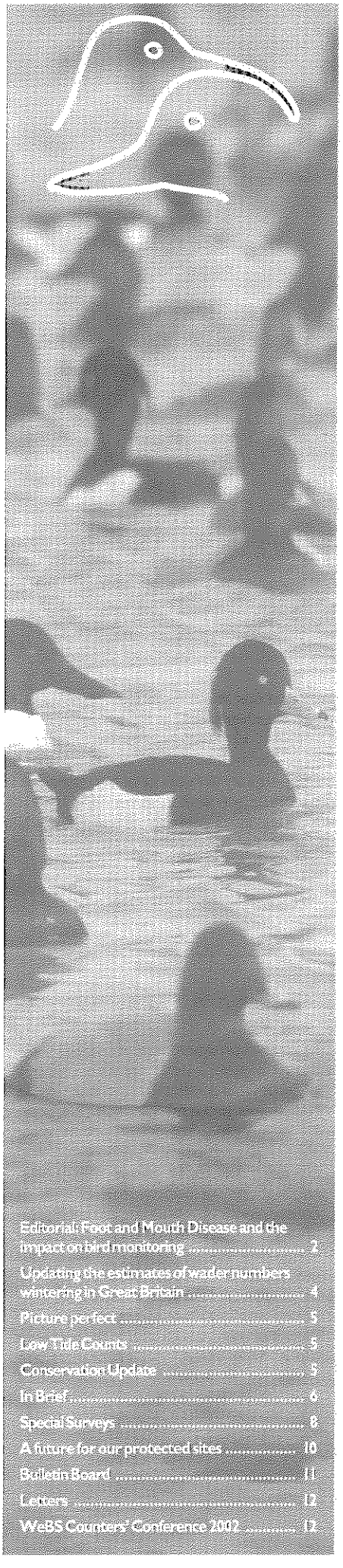
The Annual Counter's Conference took place on 16 March at the Birdwatching Centre, Rutland Water. A total of 50 participants attended, and enjoyed a varied programme of excellent talks. Rutland Water is nationally famous for its wintering wildfowl (indeed it is an SSSI, an SPA and has recently become a Ramsar Site), and more recently for the Osprey re-introduction scheme of the last few years. We were very fortunate that Rutland Warden, Tim Appleton, could be with us both to open the conference and present a brief history of the site, and later to give a presentation on the Osprey project. Unfortunately, he was unable to supply us with the real thing on the day. The importance of WeBS data to the statutory agencies was shown in Helen Baker's talk on the rationale behind SPAs, whilst James Robinson presented the results of analysis of three years of WeBS disturbance data, as recorded on the count forms. Most birdwatchers are probably aware of the recent remarkable expansion of Little Egrets into the UK, changing its status from a rarity to a breeding species within a decade. Andy Musgrove summarised the results from the recent WeBS Special Survey and looked to the future when this attractive heron could be even more widespread than today. Mitigation is an increasingly used term, both within an industrial and conservation context. Mitigation measures are often required to 'make good' loss of habitat by some form of development, and an increasing amount of research is currently being directed at habitat 'creation'. Phil Atkinson's overview of saltmarsh habitat creation, with based on recent experiences in southeast England, was therefore most timely.

We always try to ensure that at every Counter's Conference there are some talks with a local theme. Norman Ratcliffe from the RSPB showed the precarious nature of the breeding population of Black-tailed Godwits on the Ouse Washes, and the need for greater remedial intervention if they are to survive the next quarter of a century. The final talk of the day by Eric Palmer of the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust concerned the Besthorpe Heronry Project. For the last seven years, a proportion of the fledgling Grey Herons have been afflicted by a bone weakening condition, resulting in large numbers of youngsters with broken, grotesquely contorted limbs, wings and even bills. Harrowing illustrations graphically illustrated the plight of these luckless individuals, and despite several years of investigations, the root causes are still uncertain.

After this last talk, it was indeed a relief (!) to retreat to a short discussion on 'Random count sections and WeBS: the rationale', which gave everybody the opportunity to voice their opinion on this alternative style of survey.

The day went quickly, and we have received much positive feedback on the event. Many thanks to all involved.

Steve Holloway



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.

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.

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 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

...continued on page 3

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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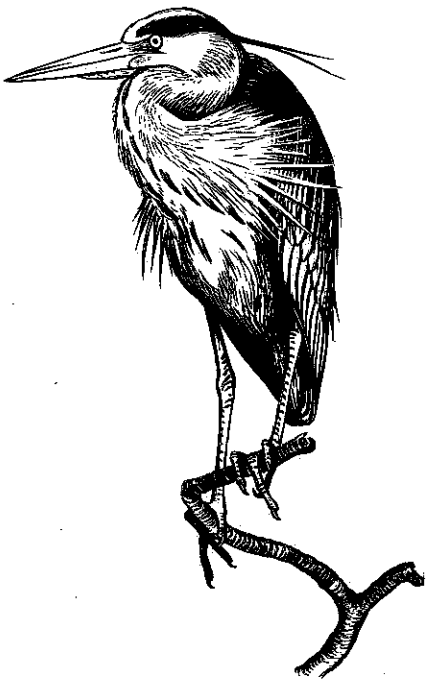
Editorial

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 . . .

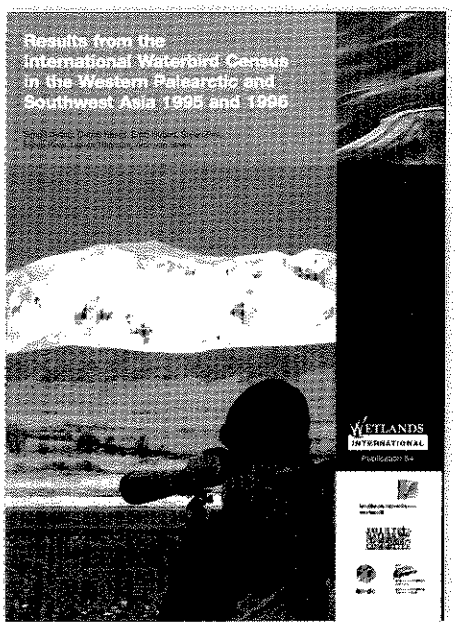
Mark Pollitt

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.



Waterbirds on Bonanza saltpans / Martin McGill

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.

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.

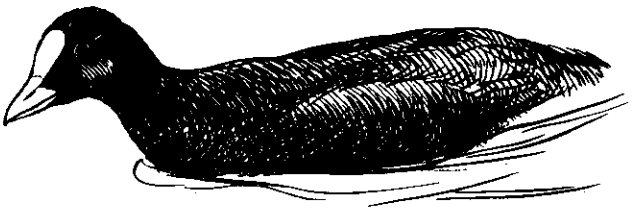
Altogether, 23.6 million waterbirds were counted in January 1995 and 19.4 million in January 1996. Between two and three million Coots and Mallards were counted in each of these seasons, and between one and two million of the following species (in decreasing order of abundance) Wigeon, Dunlin, White-fronted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

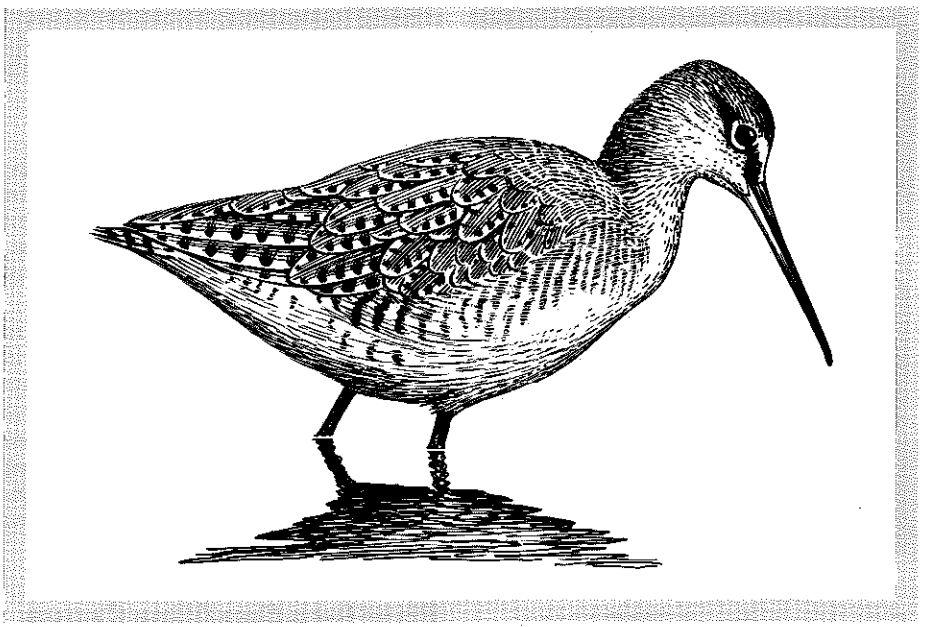
Following the article on revisions to national wildfowl population estimates in the summer 2001 newsletter, ***Mark Rehfisch, Graham Austin*** and ***Andy Musgrove*** *provide similar updates on wintering wader populations . . .*

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



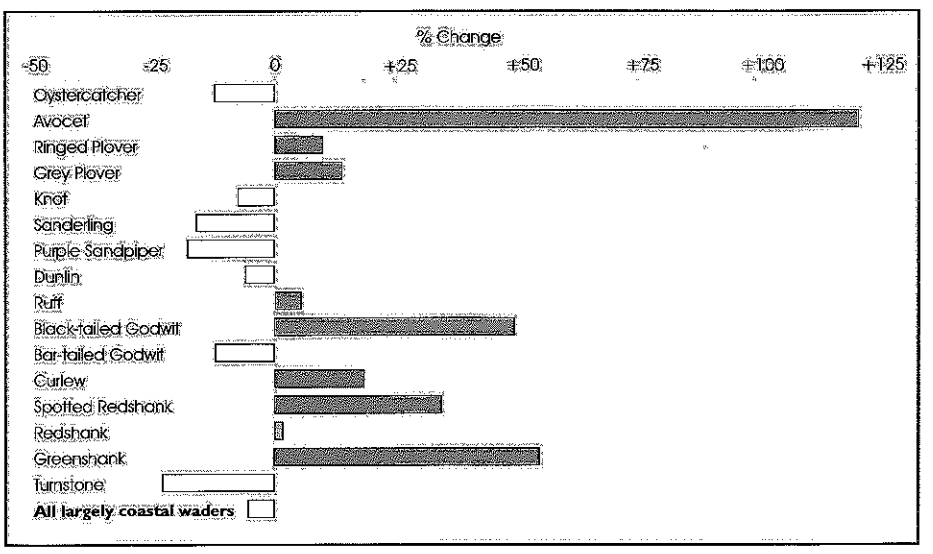


Figure 1. *Changes in population estimates of predominantly coastal waders*

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.

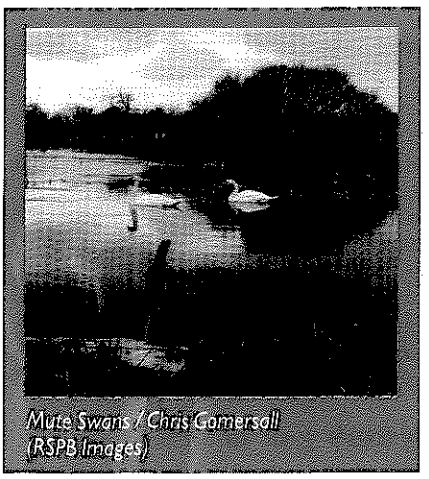
Picture perfect

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 Gomersall (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, Alde 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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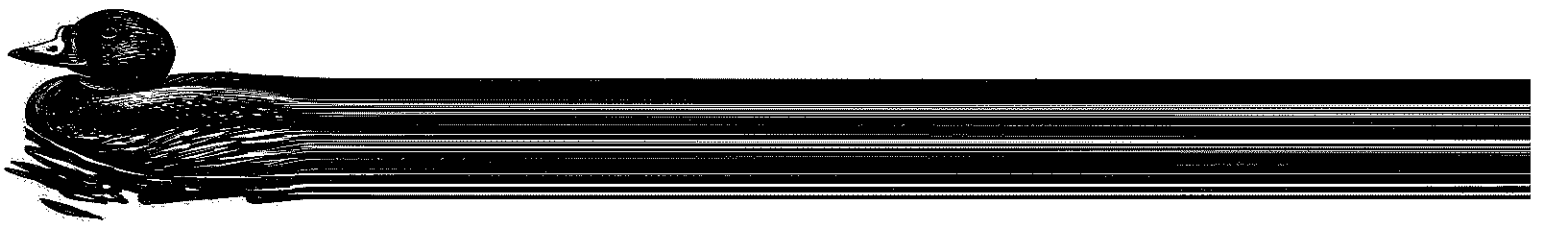

Cold weather

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Dams 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

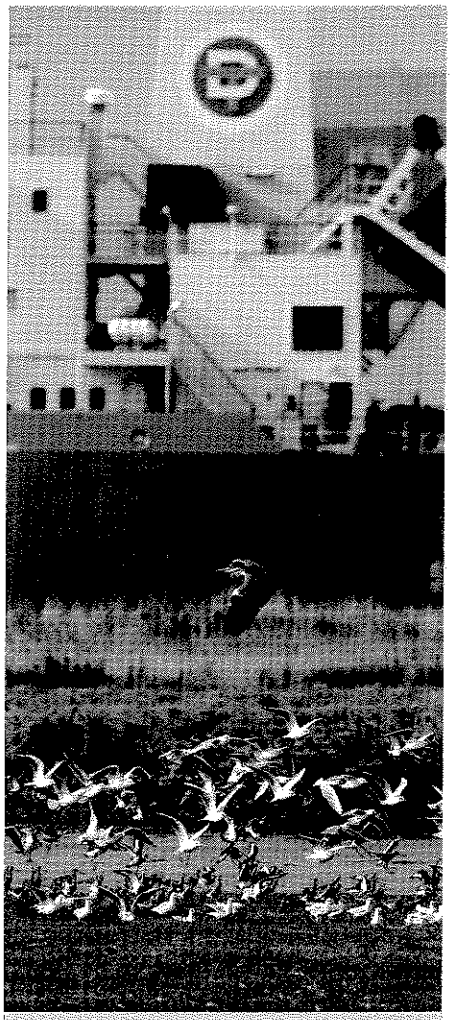
A number of wetland sites, including the Firth of Forth, Marazion Marsh and parts of the Isles of Scilly, were classified Special Protection Area (SPA) in the last six months. The Forth is recognised for its waterbird and seabird numbers, Marazion for its importance for Bittern and Aquatic Warbler, and 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.

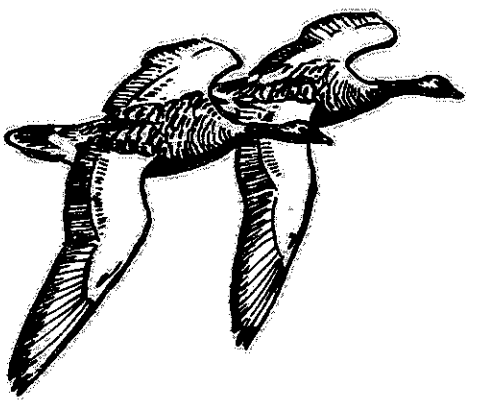
Whilst wildfowling bans are an obvious way to reduce disturbance during cold weather, it is perhaps worth remembering that disturbance may come from many sources, particularly at estuarine sites. Naturally, WeBS counters wish to avoid disturbing birds for obvious reasons, but it is perhaps worth being 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

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 38,556, 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 21%, 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

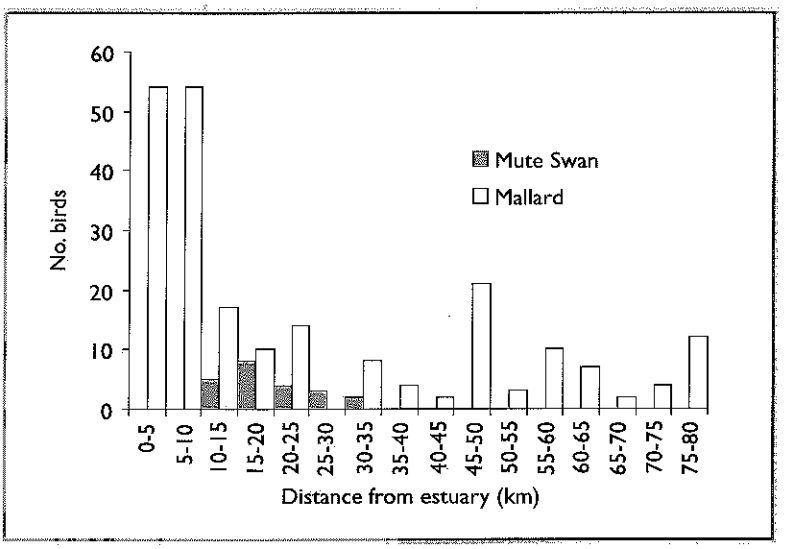


Figure 1. Numbers of Mallards and Mute Swans recorded on the river Tamar, Southwest England, winter 1999-2000

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

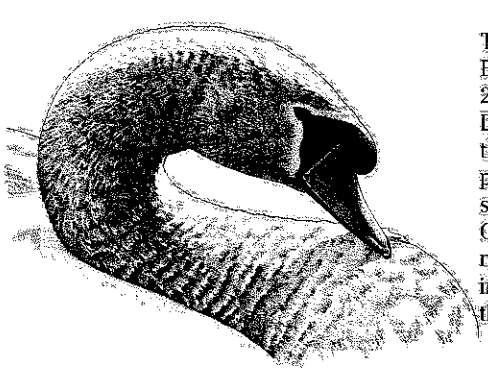
During the winter of 2000-01 a small number of WeBS counters were involved in the pilot survey for the Dispersed Waterbird Survey (DWS) which is planned for next winter (January 2003). We always knew this would be a difficult survey as it aims to plug the gaps left by the current suite of WeBS surveys. 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 by 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 Cranswick

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 . . .*

The 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.

Estuary saltmarshes / Chris Gomersall (RSPB Images)

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 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 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:

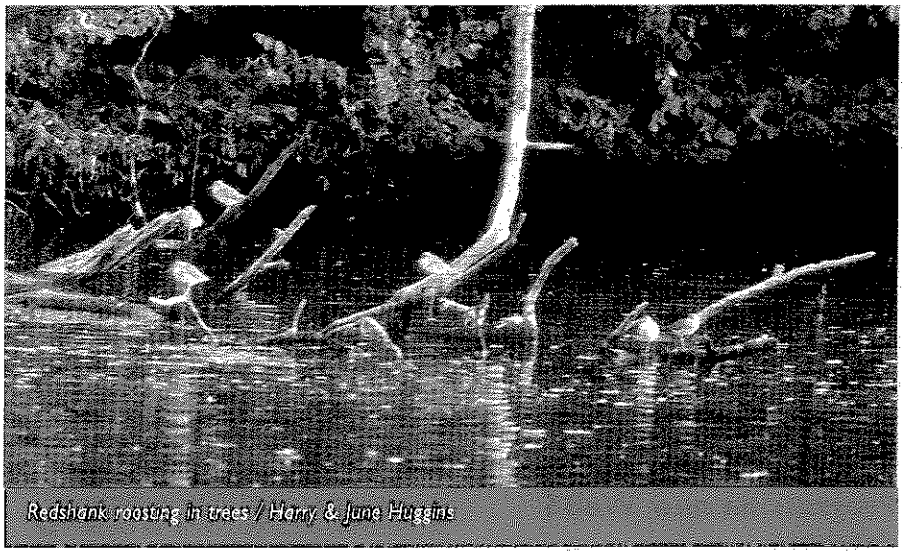
- p16 dots on the distribution map have been slightly displaced.
- p128 the flattering count of 337 Greenshank on Chichester Harbour in September should read 188.
- p142 headings for Table 4 should begin 95-96 through to 99-00 rather than as printed.
- p175 the UK annual index values for Dunlin, Knot 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

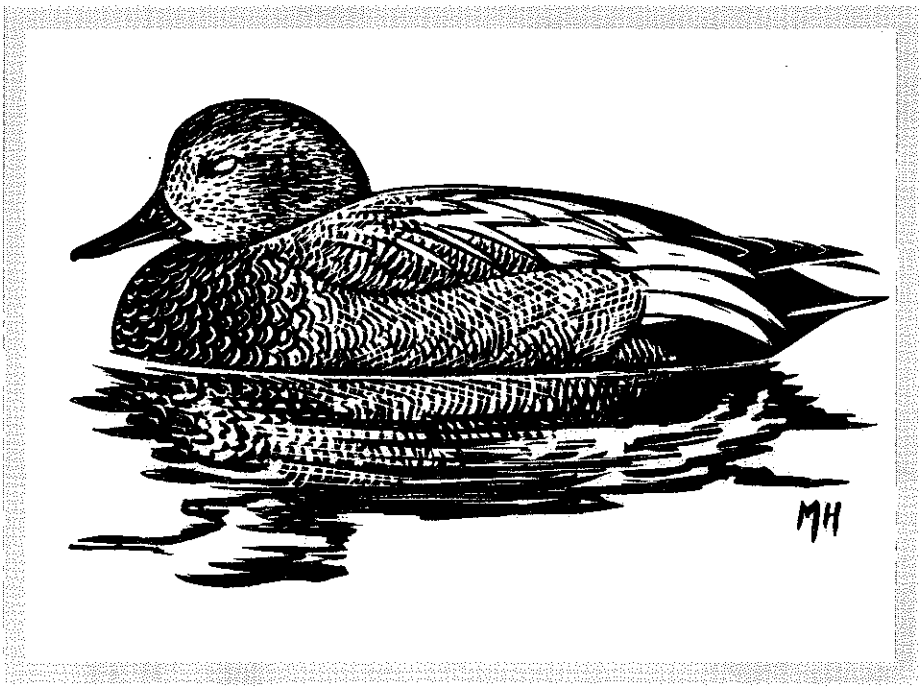
WeBS Counters' Conference 2002

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.