WeBS

WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 18 Summer 2003

Contents

Gull roost counts at Bewl Water in 2002

Counting gull roosts may not be everyone's cup of tea, but the results can be very rewarding. ***Phil Bance****, WeBS counter at Bewl Water, reports on the extraordinary results of supplementary gull roost counts in late winter 2002 . . .*

Bewl Water, a large inland reservoir in East Sussex, has always heldimportant numbers of roosting gulls. At peak times there were always between ten and twenty thousand gulls, though sadly observers were often unenthusiastic to undertake counts. Thus, for many years roost counts were undertaken only sporadically. This continued to be the case until January 2002 when unusually large numbers began to build up at Bewl Water. It became clear that documenting these events would be important to increase the understanding of what was driving these changes and to understand the true importance of roosts such as Bewl in these circumstances.

The English Channel and the southern North Sea suffered many strong gales with heavy rain in the latter half of winter 2001–02, causing increased numbers of gulls inland in East Sussex. Gale force winds with heavy rain on 20 January accounted for unusually large numbers of Black-headed Gulls seen inland the following day, with as many as 3000 seen in one field alone. With inclement weather continuing, a large roost in excess of 20,000 small gulls was noted at Bewl on 30 January but heavy rain prevented an accurate estimate. The following evening an organised count was made (from the shelter of the clubhouse), resulting in a staggering total of more than 40,000 small gulls (an estimated 33,000 Black-headed Gulls with the balance being Common Gulls). The previous maximum roost count was 28,000 small gulls in 1993. A few of the three larger species were also present but most of these moved on before darkness prevailed.

On 11 February there were more strong south-westerlies prompting a decision to make a count on the following evening. Whilst travelling to the reservoir about 1,000 adult Common Gulls were noted in a field beside the road. This was thought to be unusual as it was the Black-headed Gull which had so recently been present in such large numbers. Black-headed Gulls numbered around 22,000, but on this occasion they were supplemented by huge numbers of Common Gulls, arriving continuously between 4pm and 5pm and included over 20,000 which flew in from the north-east. A minimum of 35,000 Common Gulls was estimated to be present by dark fall. This was the largest number of Common

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Black-headed Gull / Joe Blossom

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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Cover photograph: Mark Pollitt.
Line drawings by Mark Hulme, Joe Blossom and Sir Peter Scott.
Compiled by Mark Pollitt.
Designed and typeset by Alcedo Publishing, Colorado Springs, USA • engli@mailsnare.net
Printed by Crowes of Norwich, UK • (01603) 403349 • graphics@crowes.co.uk
Printed on Barbican Laser Matt paper in Cheltenham ITC BT and M Gill Sans fonts
Published by BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC.

Editorial

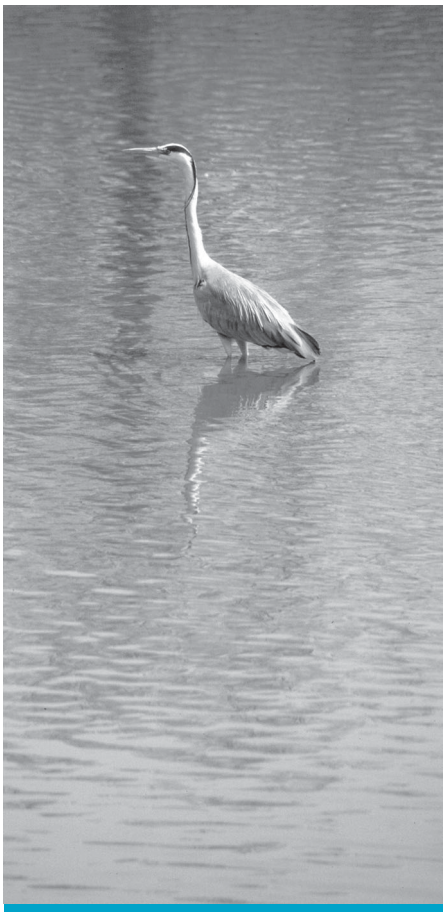
This autumn, it will be 10 years since I joined WWT to work on the Wetland Bird Survey, one of the largest wildlife monitoring schemes in Europe, begun almost 50 years ago as a result of the vision of conservationists such as the late Sir Peter Scott. I started in October 1993, the month that saw the official launch of WeBS, formally merging the National Waterfowl Counts and the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry. Whilst these two surveys, led by WWT and BTO, respectively, and supported by RSPB and JNCC, had been liasing closely and sharing data for many years, the launch of WeBS integrated the organisation of the counts and enabled the WeBS partner organisations to use the data more effectively for conservation.

It seems timely, therefore, to look at the information that WeBS – or more accurately the counters who participate in WeBS – has gathered over the last 10 years. In processing over 70,000 recording forms during this period, sent in by more than 5,000 different participants, WeBS has collected counts from 6,000 different count areas comprising 3,500 different sites. More than 170 of these sites hold internationally important numbers of waterbirds and are monitored regularly thanks to the considerable efforts of WeBS counters. In addition, Low Tide Counts have been carried out at over 70 UK estuaries, and counters have participated in ten special surveys aimed at targeting species and habitats where WeBS counts alone provide insufficient information. A fantastic effort, mirrored nowhere else in Europe on such a scale.

And for what purposes has this wealth of data been used? During the last ten years, national population estimates for wildfowl and waders have been revised twice, and the international estimates, to which WeBS data contribute, updated three times. These figures provide an important baseline for protecting key waterbird sites. When WeBS was launched, just 65 Special Protection Areas (SPAs), sites recognised under European legislation for their importance for birds, were designated. Today, that figure rests at 242, the majority of which have been selected as a result of information collected by WeBS, affording legal protection to 1.4 million hectares of land valued for its wildlife interest. The corresponding increase in the number of Ramsar sites, from 53 to 144, has also drawn heavily upon data collected by WeBS counters. Two major reviews to identify 'birds of conservation concern' in the UK have been carried out, enabling conservation organisations and government agencies to prioritise limited resources on species and habitats that are threatened or in decline; and a UK-level indicator, based on wintering waterbirds, has been produced for the first time. More than 1,500 requests to access WeBS count data have been processed, contributing to public enquiries, environmental impact assessments, site and species management plans, and numerous research projects on a local, national and international scale. Over the same period, we like to think that we have enhanced the recording forms and data storage methods, produced ten annual WeBS reports and 18 WeBS Newsletters (again, we hope you will agree, both improved during the period), mapped the boundaries of most current count units . . . and the list of behind the scenes improvements goes on and on.

This autumn the WeBS partners will be discussing their plans for WeBS over the next six years. We will be critically assessing our past achievements and examining the challenges that lie ahead of us in coming years. Uppermost in our thoughts will be you, the counters, who give their time freely to the scheme and without whom the achievements of the last 10 years could not have been made. Many of you have counted throughout this period, some for the last fifty years! Amazingly more than a third of the Local Organisers who were co-ordinating the counts when I started are still doing the same job today – such commitment and dedication is highly valued and respected by all the WeBS partners. It is upon the goodwill of yourselves, the counters, that the scheme depends and its continued success rests. I hope that we can count on your support in the future and achieve even more for conservation in the next decade.

Mark Pollitt



Grey Heron / Mark Hulme

Bewl Water gull roosts count

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Gulls ever experienced, completely overshadowing the previous maximum of 8,000.

It was now becoming apparent that severe weather conditions appeared to be having a strong influence on the numbers of gulls moving inland and roosting at Bewl. To test this theory, a roost count on a calm day was made on 18 February when it was very calm with sunshine and a gentle northerly wind. The roost count was 7,500 Black-headed Gulls and a mere 700 Common Gulls.

Inclement weather on the 25 February brought in more than 43,000 small gulls, though weather conditions were so bad that an accurate count was impossible. The following day was less windy and counts of approximately 30,000 Black-headed and 45,000 Common Gulls. Two days later numbers of Common Gulls had risen to 51,000.

Weather conditions on 6 March saw strong south-westerly gales in the North Sea and the Channel whilst the reservoir remained relatively calm. An astonishing 88,000 gulls roosted on the site, the roost stretching for over a kilometre. Counts comprised of 25,000 Black-headed Gulls and 63,000 Common Gulls, the latter including approximately 2,000 immature birds. Further counts later in March involved large numbers, though none surpassing this figure. As spring passed and weather conditions subsequently improved the number of gulls decreased.

The flocks of gulls described here were much larger than previously recorded. Whilst counts of Black-headed Gulls were extremely high, the number of Common Gulls was even more surprising and unprecedented in the region, the largest previous count being 32,500 from Rye Bay on 18 March 1991. That the counts were strongly influenced by adverse coastal weather conditions is scarcely in doubt, and it appears that gulls may have been unable to roost at their usual sites on the coast where large flocks would normally be found. It seems reasonable to assume that numbers as large as this could not possibly have been missed in the past, but since previous counts were made in calm, favourable viewing conditions weather then who knows? It just goes to show how important counting is in revealing how birds make use of a network of wetland sites.

Phil sent his gull counts in on supplementary recording forms, and the counts will undoubtedly feature in the WeBS report covering this period. Only one other supplementary roost count has exceeded the numbers of Common Gulls Phil recorded. Sites regularly holding counts in excess of 20,000 waterbirds may qualify for designation under national and international legislation — continued counts at this clearly important roost site may help secure greater protection for this important hard weather refuge. And check out the Winter Gull Roost Survey being organised by BTO this winter (see Bulletin Board for more information). Ed.

WeBS Counters' Conference 2003

The 2003 WeBS Counters' Conference took place at the Lee Valley Information Centre near Waltham Abbey on a gloriously sunny day in April. Although the total attendance was lower than in recent years, those folk present were treated to an array of excellent and varied presentations. A theme common to the majority of the talks was just how important WeBS data are for the continued protection of our aquatic native wildlife.

The conference was opened by Dave Perkins (Director of Park Services), who gave an informative overview of the history of the park, from its industrial past to the present day balancing of recreational interests and nature conservation. The latter theme was further developed by Ian Kendall (Lee Valley Central Park Manager), whose talk revealed the remarkable variety of wildlife present within the park. The Lee Valley is now internationally important for Gadwall and Shoveler during the winter months, and continues to be a haunt for wintering Bitterns, with up to five present during 2002-03. In a similar vein, John Arbon (one of the wardens at the Wetland Centre at Barn Elms) showed what can be achieved with imagination and hard work (and loads of money as well), with the transformation of four concrete reservoirs into a matrix of diverse habitats and a residential area. Bitterns were a recurring theme, as three had turned up to spend a few weeks in one of the newly created reedbeds last winter. The wealth of wildlife already present at the site is remarkable, and the diversity has been further increased by the translocation of endangered species such as Water Voles. The importance of the Wetland Centre in WeBS terms is likely to continue to grow, with increasing numbers of waterbirds attracted to the centre throughout the year.

Stuart Newson (BTO) reviewed his work on UK inland breeding Cormorants (or the 'Black Death' as known by some anglers!) It was assumed that these tree-nesting individuals belonged solely to the *sinensis* continental race. However, Stuart's research indicated that although *sinensis* were most likely to have established the first tree-nesting colonies in England, our own cliff-nesting *carbo* birds are now breeding within these colonies and that hybridisation between the two subspecies occurs. The productivity of the tree-nesting birds is greater than those at traditional coastal colonies, apparently due to a better food supply being available to the young of the tree-nesters during late chick development (from three weeks onwards). Whilst the inland-nesters are increasing, many of the cliff-nesting colonies in Scotland are currently in decline. 'Ramsar Roundup' was the title of the talk given by Elizabeth Moore (International Designations Officer at JNCC). Elizabeth's presentation was commendably clear and succinct, and dealt with the nature of Ramsar Designations, and how WeBS data were key to the process. There was even a picture of the bizarrely named 'Golden Duck' award.

The setting and conducive weather permitted an outside lunch, with a nearby Blackcap providing a musical serenade. With the park covering some 25 miles in length, there was no excuse for anybody failing to find something of interest to look at. During the afternoon session, two talks featured the Stour Estuary in Essex; Chris Gibson (English Nature) showed how WeBS data had revealed a decline in several species of wader over the last few years, including Redshank. Currently, the reason for these declines is unknown, although loss of saltmarsh habitat is a possible contributing factor. Neil Ravenscroft (ecological consultant) concentrated on the importance of freshwater flows in estuaries. His research on several estuaries in East Anglia has confirmed that waterbirds are attracted to these flows. Wildfowl loaf around them and waders actively feed around them, in some cases in considerably greater densities than elsewhere within the estuary. It is not clear as to why these flows attract so many birds, and further research is required. Factors such as nutrient enrichment leading to greater numbers of invertebrates is a possibility. Freshwater is probably better for feather care than saltwater, so wildfowl may be attracted to the flows for the purposes of bathing. We hope that Neil will be able to enlighten us further at a future conference!

The final presentation of the day was an RSPB 'double act' by Perry Haines and Michael Ellison on the threat of an airport at Cliffe Marshes. We were treated to a 'tour de force' of what makes the area so important, with facts and figures based on WeBS data. This must be one of the most important cases ever in which WeBS data have been instrumental in presenting a case against a proposed development. Perry was able to update us with the latest developments, with the warning that although the Civil Aviation Authority had recently publicly stated that Cliffe was not a suitable site due to the increased risk of bird strikes, the government had not yet abandoned the idea.

Before the closing of the conference, there were short summaries on forthcoming surveys such as the Winter Gull Roost Survey (BTO) and Winter River Bird Survey (WWT), and updates on the WeBS Low Tide Atlas and Mute Swan Survey. Several counters also took the opportunity to raise WeBS related issues

Steve Holloway

National estimates and 1% thresholds for wintering wildfowl and selected waterbird species in Great Britain

A key aim of WeBS and other waterbird monitoring schemes is to estimate the total numbers of these species wintering in the country. These national estimates are used to derive 1% thresholds (literally, 1% of the total number) which in turn are used to identify nationally important wetland sites worthy of conservation and protection. Estimates are also used to assess changes in numbers of those species for which monitoring data are insufficient to calculate annual indices of population change.

At an international level, estimates are revised every three years and 1% thresholds every nine. The intention in the UK is to follow this timetable at a national level. Sites in Northern Ireland are assessed for their domestic importance against numbers of waterbirds in the whole of Ireland, and those in England, Scotland and Wales against totals for Great Britain, rather than the UK.

The latest estimates for wildfowl and selected waterbird species in Great Britain are given below. The data are derived from a variety of sources and different methods have been applied to calculating the estimates, e.g. WeBS data provides contemporary data for wildfowl, but requires a 'correction factor' for widespread species such as Mallard since they occur on many small wetlands not covered by WeBS; national goose surveys count more or less the whole population, and therefore the estimate can be derived simply by taking the mean of the last five year's counts; for many seaducks, estimates have been calculated using a compilation of site-based surveys, although some sites may not have been counted for many years; while for a few difficult to monitor species, where no comprehensive survey has occurred, estimates are based on expert guesses.

Full details of the methods and data used are published in Kershaw, M & Cranswick, PA. 2003. Numbers of wintering waterbirds in Great Britain, 1994/1995-1998/1999: I. Wildfowl and selected species. *Biological Conservation* 111: 91-104.

Peter Cranswick & Melanie Kershaw

Pintail / Mark Pollitt

Table 1 notes:

Species: this column contains the English and scientific name of the species. Where more than one population of the same species occurs in Britain, the population name follows (normally subspecies and/or a brief geographical description) which distinguishes this population from others of the same species.

Winter estimate: the numbers of individuals.

1% threshold: criteria for assessing the importance of wetlands have been agreed by the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention. Under criterion 6, a wetland is considered internationally important if it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird. A wetland in Britain is considered of national importance if it regularly supports 1% of the total numbers in Britain.

Date: this denotes the period of years in from which data were used to derive the estimate. Estimates are based on the most recent data available but, for some species, suitable surveys have not been undertaken for a number of years. Estimates are then based on the most contemporary suitable data.

Method: WeBS = species for which WeBS counts provide estimates; extrapolation = where a correction factor has been applied to WeBS counts to account for sites never counted; census mean = average of national totals from complete surveys; compilation = sum of data from different sources; other = other survey method or source.

[a] Estimates and 1% thresholds have been rounded as follows: >100,000 to nearest 1000; 10,001-100,000 to nearest 100; 1001-10,000 to nearest 10; <1001 to nearest 1.

[b] The minimum 1% threshold for site designation in Great Britain is normally 50 birds

[c] Site designation does not occur for non-native populations

Table 1. National population estimates and 1% thresholds for wintering wildfowl and selected waterbird species in Great Britain

Species	Winter estimate[a]	1% threshold[a]	Date	Method
Divers				
Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*)	4850	49[b]	1980-86	Other
Black-throated Diver (*Gavia arctica*)	700	7[b]	1980-86	Other
Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*)	3000	30[b]	1974-80	Compilation
Grebes				
Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)	7770	78	1994-99	Extrapolation
Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristata*)	15,900	159	1994-99	Extrapolation
Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)	200	2[b]	1981-99	Other
Slavonian Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*)	725	7[b]	1986-93	Compilation
Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)	120	1[b]	1981-84	Other
Cormorants				
Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)	23,000	230	1994-99	Extrapolation
Swans				
Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)	37,500	375	1994-99	Extrapolation
Bewick's Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*)	8070	81	1994-99	WeBS
Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*)	5720	57	1994-99	WeBS
Geese				
'Taiga' Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis*) *fabalis*	400	4[b]	1994-99	Census mean
'Tundra' Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis*) *rossicus*	100	1[b]	1994-99	Compilation
Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)	241,000	2400	1994-99	Census mean
White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) *albifrons* Baltic-North Sea	5790	579	1994-99	WeBS
'Greenland' White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) *flavirostris*	20,900	209	1994-99	Census mean
Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) *anser* Iceland (br)	81,900	819	1994-99	Census mean
Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) *anser* NW Scotland	9620	96	1997	Census mean
Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) naturalised	28,500	-[c]	1994-99	Extrapolation
Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)	96,100	-[c]	1994-99	Extrapolation
Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*) E Greenland (br)	45,000	450	1999	Census mean
Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*) Svalbard (br)	22,000	220	1994-99	Census mean
Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*) naturalised	1000	-[c]	1991-99	Census mean
'Dark-bellied' Brent Goose (*Branta bernicla*) *bernicla*	98,100	981	1994-99	WeBS
'Light-bellied' Brent Goose (*Branta bernicla*) *hrota* Svalbard, N Greenland (br)	2900	30[b]	1994-99	Census mean
Egyptian Goose (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*)	1000	10	1991-99	Census mean
Sheldgeese				
Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*)	78,200	782	1994-99	WeBS
Ducks				
Mandarin (*Aix galericulata*)	7000	-[c]	1970-87	Compilation
Wigeon (*Anas penelope*)	406,000	4060	1994-99	WeBS
Gadwall (*Anas strepera*)	17,100	171	1994-99	Extrapolation
Teal (*Anas crecca*)	192,000	1920	1994-99	Extrapolation
Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)	352,000	3520	1994-99	Extrapolation
Pintail (*Anas acuta*)	27,900	279	1994-99	WeBS
Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*)	14,800	148	1994-99	Extrapolation
Pochard (*Aythya ferina*)	59,500	595	1994-99	Extrapolation
Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*)	90,100	901	1994-99	Extrapolation
Scaup (*Aythya marila*)	7560	76	1990-99	Compilation
Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)	73,000	730	1990-99	Compilation
Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)	16,000	160	1990-00	Compilation
Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*)	50,000	500	1990-99	Compilation
Velvet Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*)	3000	30[b]	1990-99	Compilation
Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)	24,900	249	1994-99	Extrapolation
Smew (*Mergellus albellus*)	370	4[b]	1994-99	WeBS
Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)	9,840	98	1986-91	Compilation
Goosander (*Mergus merganser*)	16,100	161	1994-99	Extrapolation
Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)				
Rails, gallinules and coots				
Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*)	unknown			
Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)	750,000	7500	1981-84	Other
Coot (*Fulica atra*)	173,000	1730	1994-99	Extrapolation

Waders declining on the UK's non-estuarine coasts

The 1997-98 Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird Survey (NEWS) was a repeat of the 1984-85 Winter Shorebird Count (WSC). It provided new estimates with confidence intervals of the number of waders on the UK and Isle of Man's non-estuarine coasts. In total NEWS recorded over 170,000 waders of 19 species on 4,959 km (38%) of the United Kingdom's non-estuarine coastline – a great effort by WeBS counters. The Isle of Man held 887 Ringed Plover (1%), 8,895 Curlew (2%) and 5,220 individuals of the other species. The highest densities of waders were in the north of the UK (Figure 1). The new estimates of wader numbers on the UK's non-estuarine coast are given in Table 1.

Between 1984-85 and 1997-98, Oystercatcher, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Knot, Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank, increased by over 10% on the UK's non-estuarine coasts. However, Bar-tailed Godwit decreased by 44%, Purple Sandpiper by 21%, Sanderling by 20%, Turnstone by 16% and Ringed Plover by 15%. Particularly large proportions of the flyway populations of four of the declining species, Purple Sandpiper, Sanderling, Turnstone and Ringed Plover, are found on non-estuarine coasts, and as such these declines are of great conservation concern.

Changing weather may be driving both changes in distribution and population declines. The distribution of the UK's waders is changing and recent work has shown that the increasingly mild winters since the 1980s appear to be responsible for an eastwards shift. We are investigating whether some of the waders that used to winter in the UK are now overwintering in continental Europe. Additionally, as a result of the EC Bathing Water and Urban Waste Water Treatment Directives, sewage inputs into Europe's coastal waters are increasingly receiving treatment before discharge, or are no longer being discharged. If these organic inputs provided nutrients for the invertebrate prey of waders on non-estuarine coasts, the decline in inputs may have contributed to the observed change in wader numbers between 1984-85 and 1997-98.

Table 1. Estimates of wader numbers on non-estuarine coasts in the UK

Species	Estimated numbers	% of East Atlantic flyway population
Oystercatcher	70,790	7%
Ringed Plover	24,110	33%
Golden Plover	28,670	2%
Grey Plover	2,175	1%
Lapwing	41,180	1%
Knot	7,625	2%
Sanderling	13,660	11%
Purple Sandpiper	17,220	9%
Dunlin	27,880	2%
Bar-tailed Godwit	3,670	3%
Curlew	66,330	16%
Redshank	33,820	18%
Turnstone	39,560	42%

The results of NEWS have important implications for the conservation of waders. Decreases have been identified in the wintering populations of four predominantly non-estuarine coastal species for which the UK holds 9-42% of the flyway population. It is necessary to assess whether these decreases are due to a redistribution of the waders away from the UK or a decline in their flyway populations, and what has driven these declines. Additionally, NEWS data have made it possible to update previous estimates of the total wintering wader population in Great Britain (see http://www.bto.org/survey/webs/webs-waderpopest.htm for a summary) and will thus contribute towards updating the East Atlantic Flyway population estimates. Finally, NEWS data may help in the designation of new areas or sites of conservation importance for waders.

We would like to finish with an enormous thank you for all counters who contributed to NEWS. Your efforts help the conservation of internationally important wader populations.

The complete survey details and full acknowledgements can be found in Rehfisch, M.M., Holloway, S.J., Austin, G.E. 2003. Population estimates of waders on the non-estuarine coasts of the United Kingdom and the Isle of Man during the winter of 1997-98. *Bird Study*, **50**, 22-32.

Mark Rehfisch, Steve Holloway & Graham Austin

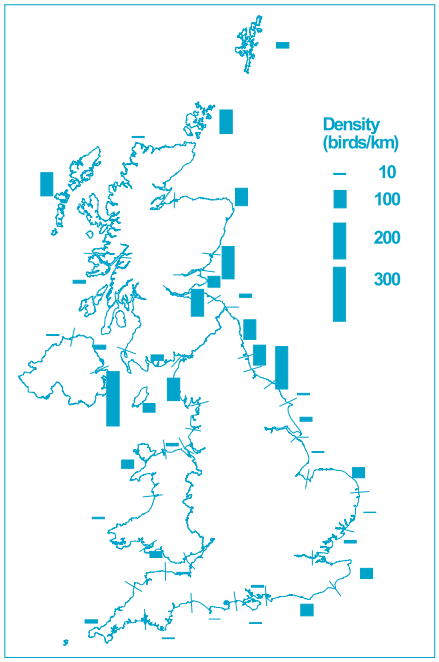
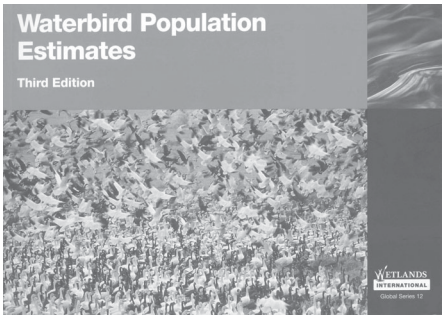


Figure 1. *Regional patterns in density of all wader species combined along the UK and the Isle of Man's non-estuarine coasts during the 1997-98 winter. The coasts have been divided according to county boundaries.*

Juvenile Ringed Plover / Keith Stone

International waterbird population estimates

Two of the most important questions you need to be able to answer if you want to conserve a population of a species are 'how many are there?' and 'where are they?'. Launched at the 8th Ramsar Conference in November 2002, the third edition of Waterbird Population Estimates provides this information at a global scale for 33 families of waterbirds. The publication supports the Ramsar, Bonn & Biodiversity Conventions, EU Birds Directive, and other policy frameworks at international and national level and will play a major role in the identification of wetlands of international importance for waterbirds since the revised estimates form the basis of the 1% levels widely used for identifying key sites. It also serves to identify priorities for waterbird conservation and research and gaps in our knowledge. In total, over 2,000 bio-geographical populations of 868 species of waterbird are identified and reported on. Estimates of the numerical abundance of 76% of these populations are presented and estimates of population trends for half of these populations.



A major improvement on the first and second editions (1994 and 1997) is the inclusion of distribution maps generously provided by Lynx Edicions, publisher of Handbook of the Birds of the World. Inclusion of these maps at species level, and of more detailed range descriptions at population level, make it easier than ever for users to identify which populations occur within their country, region or site. The usefulness of the publication is further enhanced by the inclusion for the first time of English names for species.

The publication is available to download from Wetlands International's website www.wetlands.org/pubs&/WPE.htm. A paper copy can be ordered from the Natural History Book Service at www.nhbs.com/xbscripts/bkfsrch?search=103650, priced £25.

Simon Delany

Low Tide Counts

During the winter of 2002-03, another successful winter of WeBS Low Tide Counts was carried out by dedicated volunteers around the UK. Most of these data have been returned to the BTO now (if you've got a few forms still please pop them in an envelope ASAP!) and will be processed shortly for a wide variety of uses, notably in assisting the statutory agencies assess Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites and in contributing to assessments of the impact of proposed developments around the UK's estuaries.

In 2002-03, the north Kent shoreline of the Thames Estuary was counted at low tide to provide further contextual information to guide decisions concerning the Cliffe airport proposal. Lavan Sands (Traeth Lafan) was counted for the second time, with new areas covered along the Anglesey shore. Second winters' worth of data were also returned for the Dyfi Estuary, Pegwell Bay and the Tamar Complex, the latter already counted at low tide during WeBS Core Counts, whilst more regularly counted sites visited again were the Stour and Orwell Estuaries, Belfast and Strangford Loughs, Breydon Water, Portsmouth Harbour and Lindisfarne. Partial counts were also made at the Blackwater and Duddon estuaries whilst another set of mid-tide counts was made in the north-west part of Morecambe Bay. By far the largest area covered, however, was the Severn Estuary, for which almost complete coverage was achieved for the first time ever. The majority of the Severn was counted by volunteers but the inaccessible and distant central banks of the estuary were visited by BTO staff member Mike Armitage by boat on two occasions.

We're starting work now on the sites we'd like covering for winter 2003-04 but particular priorities this winter are going to be the Firth of Forth and the Humber Estuary, the latter in conjunction with a year-long project by English Nature. Other areas of particular interest are Rough Firth and Auchencairn Bay, Carlingford Lough, Swansea Bay and Lough Foyle, whilst we'd like to try for repeats of counts at the Burry Inlet, Colne Estuary, Crouch-Roach Estuary, Fal Complex and Poole Harbour amongst others. We'll be approaching the 'usual suspects' but if you think you would be able to help out with counts at any of these sites we're very keen to hear from you.

Andy Musgrove & Steve Holloway

Conservation Update

A new approach to gathering wetland site information in the Republic of Ireland

Human recreational activities around wetlands generally affect waterbird usage to some degree. Most activities pose minimal threat, and may simply alter spatial and/ or temporal usage of a given site, while some are more severe and, particularly if prolonged, may cause a reduction in waterbird numbers. The most frequently occurring recreational activities deemed to cause disturbance to waterbirds include walking, bait collecting, shooting, horse-riding and watersport activities (see WeBS News, No. 17). Additionally, some waterbird species/ groups, for example small waders such as Dunlin and Redshank, are more sensitive to disturbance than others, such as the majority of wildfowl species. A person walking through a wetland site happily watching his two dogs rampaging through a dense roost of mixed-species waders is probably a counter's worst nightmare!

Therefore, human activities and their effects on count quality ought to be taken into account when interpreting wetland bird data. Up until recently, counters were provided with the option of submitting information on disturbance on the back page of recording forms. This approach was shown to be relatively ineffective, with less than 60% of counters opting to complete this section. It was suggested that more detailed information on human activities may be better gathered through periodic consultation with key counters (see WeBS News, No. 17).

WWT and the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) Office in the Republic of Ireland recently designed a questionnaire aimed at gathering as much possible detail on wetland sites surveyed, including habitat type, ownership, protection and management, bird usage and movements between sites, regular activities occurring within sites and any significant developments or gradual changes. These details were urgently needed by the I-WeBS Office for a publication on waterbirds and their wetlands currently in preparation, and in August 2002, questionnaires for each of 175 major wetland sites were circulated among 58 counters.

The initial response was slow, with less than ten people completing their questionnaires within the first three months. Follow-up contact revealed that several counters did not feel competent enough to complete the level of detail required on the

...continued on next page

Conservation Update

questionnaire. However, when reassured that any detail they could provide would be the most up to date, and for some sites the only, information available and would prove most useful, there was another influx of completed questionnaires.

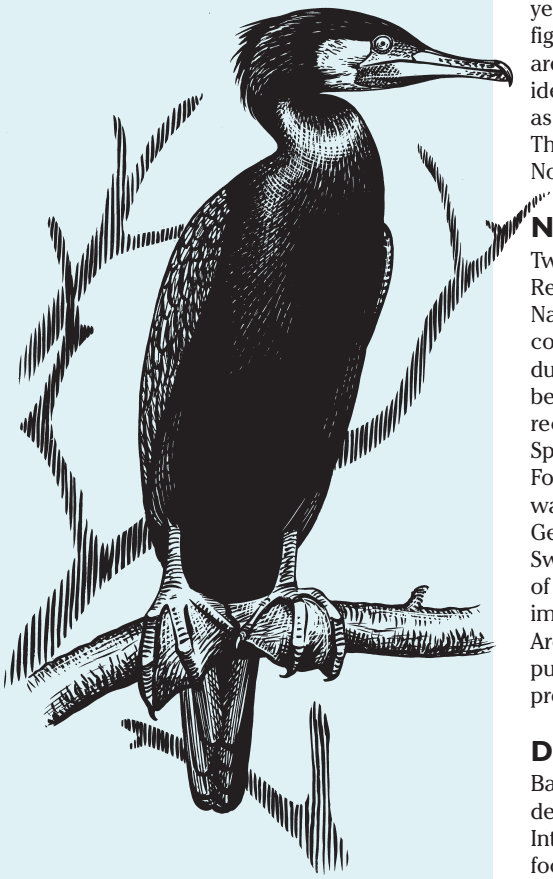
To date, questionnaires have been completed for 40% of the main wetland sites. All details provided have been included in the above draft publication and are being included in the main I-WeBS core count database. It is hoped that these details will be updated on a regular basis, and will over time allow more rigorous analyses of wetland bird data which will facilitate the better protection and management of our most important wetlands.

Olivia Crowe, BirdWatch Ireland

WSG conference

The annual conference of the Wader Study Group will be held during 26-28 September 2003 at Cádiz, Andalucia, southern Spain, organised by the Group of Coastal Wetlands Conservation (University of Cádiz).The conference will start with a workshop on Friday 26 September on 'Are waders world-wide in decline? Reviewing the evidence'. The Annual General Meeting and talks will take place on Saturday 27 and Sunday 28 September respectively. More information about the conference can be accessed at www.uca.es/grup-invest/geam/indexwsg.html. For more general information about the Wader Study Group visit www.waderstudygroup.org.

Robin Ward



In Brief . . .

UK gets first marine SPA

Carmarthen Bay has become the first wholly marine area in the UK to be designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA). Welsh Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside, Carwyn Jones, said: "Carmarthen Bay is widely recognised as the most important site in Britain for wintering common scoters, one of the species protected by the European Union Birds Directive." 06/2003

Offshore windfarms

The go-ahead has been given for the construction of two new offshore wind farms. Thirty turbines will be built on the Kentish Flats in the Thames Estuary, which will power up to 100,000 homes. The second will be located in the Irish Sea off Barrow, Cumbria, powering up to 87,000 homes. Ex-Energy Minister Brian Wilson said, "Britain is the windiest country in Europe and these locations provide the shallow waters needed for offshore wind technology." 03/2003

On 14 July 2003, the Department for Trade and Industry released proposals for the next generation of offshore windfarms to provide up to 6GW (gigawatts) of new energy generation by 2010, enough to power 15% of all households in the United Kingdom. This is the biggest ever proposed expansion of renewable energy in the UK. The government is committed to providing 10% of energy from renewable sources by the year 2010, and aspires to doubling that figure by the year 2020. Three strategic areas of shallow waters have been identified by the Crown Estate and the DTI as appropriate for development: the Thames Estuary, the Greater Wash and North West England. 07/2003

Nature reserve purchase

Two thirds of the Forvie National Nature Reserve (NNR) has been bought by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The reserve, consisting of almost 1,000 hectares of dunes, heath, lochs, cliffs and saltmarsh, became an NNR in 1959 and has more recently been designated as part of a Special Protection Area and Ramsar site. Forvie NNR is visited by large flocks of waders and wildfowl, including Greylag Geese, Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swans. The site also has the largest colony of Eider in the UK and an internationally important tern colony with Sandwich, Arctic, Common and Little Terns. SNH purchased the 655 hectares of reserve previously leased to them. 03/2003

Designation and destruction?

Bathside Bay on the Stour Estuary has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The site is currently the focus of plans for a controversial port development, and designation has been forthcoming following assessment of data collected and analysed as part of the port planning process. Public consultation on the proposed development closed on 30 May, amid considerable local opposition. The port proposal, which would impact on the adjacent Stour and Orwell Special Protection Area, must show that there is an over-riding case for development in the public interest to go ahead. 05/2003

Compensation for wetland losses

Plans for a major wetland creation project at Weymarks near Bradwell-on-Sea in Essex were announced by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The plans would see the realignment of the existing sea wall creating 170ha of mudflat and saltmarsh, improving sea defences and compensating for the previous loss of wetland habitats at Fagbury Flats and Lappel Bank to developments which the European Court of Justice ruled should have been protected for their wildlife interests. 02/2003

East coast Purple Sandpiper study

A study into the use of Bridlington Bay by wintering Purple Sandpipers is to be carried out by staff and students of Bishop Burton College in conjunction with the Institute for Estuarine and Coastal Studies at Hull University. It is feared that plans for a proposed marina development at Bridlington Bay may affect the birds use of the Bay, one of the most southerly wintering grounds for this species. Birds will be colour-ringed and feather samples taken to understand which of the arctic breeding populations the birds are from. 02/2003

New National Nature Reserve

Insh Marshes reserve, owned and managed by RSPB Scotland, is to become a National Nature Reserve. Covering almost 2,500 acres of floodplain beside the River Spey the marshes are one of Britain's few natural floodplains, flooded several times a year by the river. The site is host to high numbers of breeding waders, wintering Whooper Swans and is particularly important for breeding Goldeneye. Fiona Murray, RSPB Scotland's conservation policy officer said "Insh Marshes is a fantastic example of natural sustainable flood management. It protects places like Aviemore from flooding and creates areas of wetland habitat." 06/2003

Gravel extraction conditions revised

County planners have issued a revised set of planning conditions for ongoing gravel extraction at Ibsley Quarry and Ellingham Pits near Blashford, on the Hampshire/Dorset border. Concerns had been raised

. . . In Brief

over mud and silt from extraction works clogging Mockbeggar Lakes, a flooded gravel pit SSSI owned by the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. The problem had been added to by the recent collapse of a sluice designed to protect the lakes. 03/2003

A bridge too far?

Outline proposals for a 12-mile structure across Morecambe Bay have been by submitted a private consortium to Lancaster city and Barrow Borough Councils. The plans, propose that a bridge be built from Heysham to Rampside, Barrow, coupled with a hydropower scheme and offshore wind turbines to harness renewable wind and tidal energy. Similar schemes to bridge Morecambe Bay, host to 13 internationally important populations of waterbird, have been proposed in the past but have fallen on environmental grounds. It seems likely that the proposed scheme will provoke similar resistance from environmental groups. 04/2003

Fen restoration boost

A major project to recreate a major wetland habitat near Huntingdon has been given a £40,000 boost by the Environment Agency. The Great Fen project aims to restore more than 7,400 acres of fen and link Woodwalton and Holme Fens, two of the remaining fragments of the area's natural fenland habitat. The funding will go towards understanding the movement of water in and around Great Fen. 04/2003

Wildlife trust concerns over control measures

Essex Wildlife Trust have decided to refuse government officials access to its land to control Ruddy Ducks. The trust said that marksmen would not be allowed on its nature reserves unless compulsory access orders are issued, expressing fears over disturbance caused by shooting to other wintering waterbirds and concern over the strategy adopted. 03/2003

Severn barrage proposal re-appears

Proposals suggesting that the feasibility of a barrage across the Severn Estuary should be re-considered have been presented in a report to government. The barrage, a ten mile long structure connecting Lavernock Point to Brean Down via the island of Steep Holm, would harness the power of the Severn's tidal currents and be a major source of renewable energy; it could generate up to 7% of Britain's energy requirements and deliver a 3% cut in greenhouse gas emissions. The potential cost of such a scheme would be in the region of £10-14 billion, though impacts on waterbirds, migratory fish and navigation would be high on the list of concerns if such a development was to be considered. 02/2003

Coots can count!

Studies at the University of California have shown that Coots may be smarter than we thought. Researchers conducted tests to see if the birds could detect and count their own eggs, even in the presence of eggs laid by other birds. This ability is thought to be a 'defence' mechanism against other Coots who lay their eggs in neighbours' nests. Bruce Lyon, who carried out the four year study, commented "The ability of females to count only their own eggs in a mixture of eggs is a remarkable feat that provides a convincing, rare example of counting in a wild animal." 04/2003

Salmon in the Mersey

Monitoring by the Environment Agency on the Mersey Estuary has shown that, for the first time since the industrial revolution, oxygen levels are now high enough to support fish along the entire length of the river. The legacy of years of discharging raw sewage and industrial effluents have caused problems, though concerted efforts by all bodies involved are now paying dividends. Last year, humane traps upstream at Woolston Weir saw 26 Salmon caught and returned. "George Ager of the Environment Agency said, "Nearly 20 years of hard work have paid off and now we have an estuary to be proud of." 05/2003

Avocets head west

A pair of Avocets has nested in Wales for the first time ever. The pair took residence at the Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve and were rearing four chicks on an island in one of the lagoons. 05/2003

Oil slick at Blyth Harbour

A clean-up operation was carried out at Blyth Harbour, Northumberland after an oil slick was discovered. Around half a tonne of fuel oil was thought to have leaked from a docked ship, but the slick was contained and mortality of fish and birds was expected to be low. 05/2003

Cliffe rejected by air industry

The proposal to build an airport at Cliffe in Kent was given a resounding thumbs down by the airport industry. The backers of the Freedom to Fly campaign, which include British Airways, Virgin airways and BAA were to deliver a letter expressing their wish to withdraw consideration of the area. In an earlier statement following a study into the risk of bird strikes, Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State for Transport, admitted that, " . . . the hazard proposed [*sic*] by birds is severe and would probably be higher than at any other UK site." 05/2003

Little Terns move home

Little Terns have all-but deserted the breeding site at North Denes, Yarmouth this summer. The colony was formerly Britain's largest with 256 pairs nesting in 2001, but following a poor breeding season last year this summer only one pair returned to nest at the site. Others are known to have moved to smaller colonies along the Norfolk and North Suffolk coasts. 06/2003

Irish Cormorants face call for cull

Irish anglers are calling for a cull of cormorants which they claim are destroying inland fish stocks. John Paddy Burke, chairman of the Trout Angling Federation of Ireland, said the cormorant was damaging an industry worth •55m in tourism revenue each year. Some fishery owners are known to have taken the law into their own hands and shot cormorants on their waters. Fishery and conservation interests across Europe are collaborating on an EU-funded project – REDCAFE – aimed at reducing the conflict between cormorants and fisheries on a pan-European scale. 04/2003

Breeding waders in decline

A survey of breeding waders in England and Wales has highlighted dramatic declines in the numbers of breeding waders. The research, carried out by BTO and funded by RSPB, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and English Nature, showed that Snipe (-60%), Lapwing (-40%), Curlew (-40%) and Redshank (-20%) numbers had fallen rapidly in the last twenty years. Wales was particularly badly affected, with declines in excess of 60% in the last three species, whilst in some regions, Snipe were found to be nearing local extinction. Land drainage is thought to be a key factor in the decline. Phil Rothwell, RSPB's head of countryside policy, commented, "It is a tragedy that once widespread birds are now largely confined to the oases of nature reserves within the desert of the wider countryside." 06/2003

Bitterns set to boom

A celebration event at RSPB's Minsmere reserve launched the latest stage of a project to double the number of Bitterns in the next ten years. The project, aided by £2.4m of funding from the EU LIFE Nature programme, will see eight conservation groups working together to improve the bird's reedbed habitats at 19 sites across England. 05/2003

Compiled by Mark Pollitt & 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.*

George Atkinson-Willes, 1922–2002

George Atkinson-Willes, who died on 6 December 2002, was the first Central Organiser of the National Wildfowl Counts, from 1952 to 1983. Based in WWT's Research Department at Slimbridge from 1954, George steered the scheme from a few hundred sites in the early 1950s to a network of two thousand volunteer counters throughout the UK by the 1970s. Armed with a mechanical calculator in those pre-computer days, he analysed the data provided, assessed the relative importance of individual wetlands and developed an innovative system of Priority Count sites to monitor trends in the main species. The National Wildfowl Counts subsequently evolved into an integral part of the BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey, with its Secretariat at Slimbridge.

George-Atkinson Willes (front, fourth from right) at the launch of the second edition of 'Wildfowl in Great Britain'.

George edited and largely authored Wildfowl in Great Britain, a detailed review covering all the counted sites, with species accounts and extensive summaries of all relevant aspects of research and conservation, published by HMSO in 1963. Liquid Assets, a landmark account of the importance of wetlands in the broader context, followed in 1964, and became a key tool for those responsible for drawing up and implementing wetland conservation policies. By then, George was involved in moves to co-ordinate waterbird counts on an international scale. As Chairman of the Duck Research Group of IWRB (now Wetlands International), he launched the international waterbird censuses in January 1967, with 13,000 sites soon covered throughout Europe and into Africa and Asia. He readily established a successful personal rapport with the national organisers of these diverse countries during their visits to Slimbridge and at the regular conferences of IWRB.

George was a major player in the establishment of the intergovernmental Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, writing the baseline paper presenting criteria for the selection of sites at the launch of the Convention at the 1971 Ramsar (Iran) Conference. He then developed this work by linking the principal criterion for site selection — at least 1% of the north-west European midwinter population of an individual species — to the study of waterbird distribution. For each species, he hand-plotted maps showing with great clarity the average January numbers counted across Europe, by use of symbols grading up to the '1% level'. The successful development of the Ramsar Convention to its present 133 signatory countries and 1,180 designated wetlands, covering over 100 million hectares, is testament to such pioneering work.

George continued to fight for the conservation of UK wetlands, eloquently setting out the case for saving a succession of threatened major wetlands on the grounds of their importance to waterbirds. His final project before retirement was to co-author the second, greatly enlarged edition of Wildfowl in Great Britain, published by Cambridge University Press in 1986. George's successors have continued the development of the counts and their analysis, as shown by the current 200-page annual Wetland Bird Survey reports and by the recent publication by Wetlands International of a third edition of Waterbird Population Estimates, covering all species on a global scale.

George's generosity, vivid sense of humour and fascination for figures and mind-twisting puzzles, not to mention his great love and talent for gardening, kept him and the many friends who called on him entertained and busy during his retirement. We send our heartfelt condolences and warmest wishes to his widow, Nina, whom he married in 1954 while she was working as Peter Scott's secretary at Slimbridge, and to their sons Anthony, Richard and Michael and daughter Mary Jane.

David Salmon (former National Wildfowl Counts organiser) & Geoffrey Matthews (former Head of Research at WWT)

. . . Special Surveys . . .

DWS update

Fieldwork for the WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey was completed during winter 2002–03. Volunteers were asked to survey one-kilometre OS grid squares during a single visit, recording numbers of waterbirds and gulls encountered in different broad-scale habitats. Using the results, we aim to improve the current population estimates of waterbirds, particularly those species (e.g. Heron, Moorhen, Mallard, Teal, Lapwing, Golden Plover) often found in dispersed habitats, such as ditches, ponds and fields. At the time of writing, we are busily inputting the contents of the 700 completed forms that we have received. If anyone has any count forms that haven't been returned yet, it's still not too late to send them in.

Many thanks to everyone who participated in the Dispersed Waterbirds Survey, particularly the Local Organisers who coordinated coverage in each region. We hope to report back on the results in the next WeBS News.

Michael Armitage

Bulletin Board

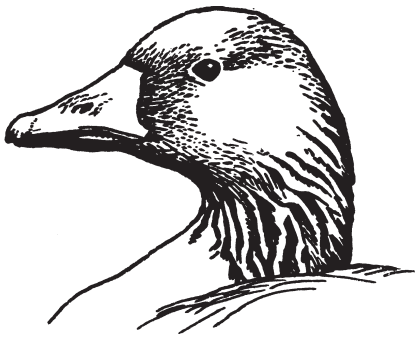
Filling gaps in the Icelandic-breeding Goose census

The Icelandic-breeding Goose Census (IGC) has been carried out each autumn since 1960 and thus provides a continuous run of population estimates for Pink-footed and Icelandic Greylag Geese that span the past 43 years. A separate census for these two species is carried out because their habit of moving away from wetlands during the daytime means that a high proportion are not counted during Wetland Bird Survey Core Counts.

Two counts are carried out each autumn for the IGC, one in October and another in November. Counts are made primarily at roost sites, either at dawn as birds flight out to feed, or at dusk as they arrive. In a few areas where roost sites are inaccessible, poorly known or infrequently used, counts of feeding birds are carried out during the day. Plans to include a third count in September are also being developed. This is considered desirable due to the need to gain a better understanding of the degree of mixing between Icelandic and Re-established Greylag Geese.

As with WeBS, the IGC is almost totally reliant upon the continued interest and commitment of a network of Local Organisers and counters. In order to ensure the longevity of the IGC, new counters are sought in all major goose areas, but particularly in Galloway, inland Dumfries-shire, Angus, inland Aberdeenshire and Ireland. If any WeBS counters are interested in participating, or would simply like to find out more about the IGC or other censuses carried out as part of WWT's Goose Monitoring Programme, please contact Richard Hearn at WWT, Slimbridge (richard.hearn@wwt.org.uk or 01453 891900 x185).

Richard Hearn



Winter River Bird Survey

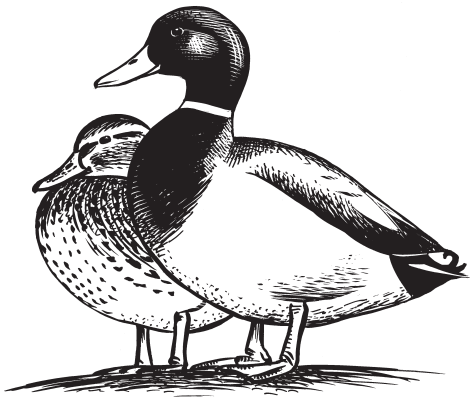
This winter will see the launch of Britain's first national Winter River Bird Survey organised by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT). Currently, WeBS coverage is concentrated on estuaries, coastal regions and inland stillwater wetlands such as reservoirs, lakes and gravel pits. In comparison, coverage of linear waterways such as rivers and canals is, by comparison, much more limited. We know that a significant proportion of wintering birds that use these habitats is not being recorded.

The Winter River Bird Survey aims to estimate populations of waterbirds on linear waterways during the non-breeding season and this will help to evaluate the extent to which WeBS currently underestimates certain waterbird populations. In addition, data from this survey will be used to identify those stretches of river most appropriate for long term monitoring. Changes in waterbird distribution and population may give a valuable indication of the health of our rivers helping to focus appropriate and effective action to help conserve one of the UK's most vulnerable and threatened habitats.

We are grateful to the many WeBS organisers and counters who were involved in the pilot studies completed in winters 2000 and 2001(see Newsletter no. 15), the results of which have enabled a nationwide survey to be launched. An analysis of the findings indicated that the national survey should cover at least 8000 river sections of 500 metres length to allow an accurate estimation of population sizes for waterbirds wintering on linear waterways within the UK. The full national Winter River Bird Survey will take place in January 2004 and will focus on Mallard, Goosander, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Cormorant and Little Grebe, although all species currently recorded by WeBS will be counted.

We hope that this exciting new survey will appeal to many as an attractive opportunity to contribute to and expand on our current knowledge of the population and distribution of wintering birds in the UK. Volunteers can choose how many stretches they would like to count and only one visit will be required to each. It is encouraging that the majority of participants of the pilot study stated that they thoroughly enjoyed the survey and on many occasions the survey took people to areas previously unknown to them, some of which were exceptional for waterbirds and provided some very satisfying bird-watching!

If you would like to help us make the first national Winter River Bird Survey an outstanding success or would like more information, please contact Jenny Worden at WWT, Slimbridge, Glos GL2 7BT (tel: 01453 891900, ext 189, email jenny.worden@wwt.org.uk). We will be happy to send you further information and details of river survey sections in your locality.



Jenny Worden

Referring requests for data to partner organisations

Each year the WeBS partners deal with well over a hundred requests to access WeBS count data. The uses vary widely, from assessing the potential impact of developments to protection of important sites, from local studies by students to collaborative projects on global climate change. The data request service we operate ensures users are provided with data in a consistent format and with full interpretation about the WeBS scheme and the data collected.

We know that counters and organisers may, from time to time, be approached directly to provide data. We would ask that, should such circumstances arise, requests are referred to WWT (for Core Count data) or BTO (for Low Tide Counts). We are not seeking to restrict counters use of their own data; we simply hope to ensure that the WeBS partner organisations are informed of potential threats to sites at the earliest possible stage and that the data being used for important assessments are not misinterpreted or misused. Importantly, it also removes the need for administration on your part.

Mark Pollitt

Apologies for late report

We hope that by the time you receive this newsletter you will also have received a copy of the 2000-01 annual report. Our sincere apologies that this report has been such a long time coming. An electronic copy of the report is also available to download from the WWT website at www.wwt.org.uk/publications.

Mark Pollitt

Bulletin Board

New database

Considerable progress has been made over the past few months towards reconciling all the past and present records into a single database. The task of merging together over 4 million records has been a considerable one, and we hope to have the new Integrated Waterbird Database fully functioning this autumn. The benefits of the new system will be significant, improving the quality and efficiency of inputting and outputting data from the system and integrating the management of the sites, counts and the counter network. Undoubtedly there will be a 'settling in' period as we adjust to using the new system so please bear with us during this time.

Mark Pollitt

List of priority Core Count dates

The priority count dates for WeBS Core Counts are as follows:

2003

20 July
17 August
14 September
12 October
16 November
14 December

2004

25 January	18 July
22 February	22 August
21 March	19 September
25 April	17 October
23 May	14 November
20 June	12 December

WeBS Counters' Conference – 20 March 2004

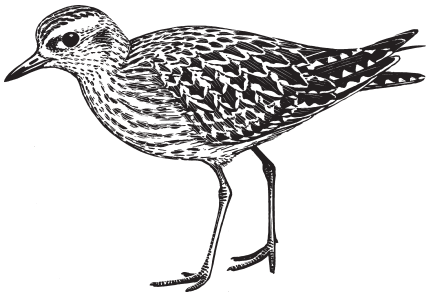
The 2004 WeBS Counters' Conference will be held at the Split Willow Hotel at Llanfairfechan, north Wales, on March 20th, so keep your diaries free! The talks and discussions will encompass a wide range of topics including daring aeronautical tales of monitoring the Welsh offshore scoter flocks, the ornithological delights to be found on the nearby Conwy RSPB Reserve, some of the researches of the Liverpool Bay Wader Study Group (no doubt illustrated by one of the groups legendary multi-media presentations), the importance of WeBS data in highlighting population declines in wintering Welsh waders and lots more. With the coast nearby, there will be a chance to test those grebe and seaduck identification skills. We will even have the option of bar facilities at lunchtime, so it should be a lively day. Further details and booking form will be included in the next *WeBS News* but if you would like to confirm your booking in advance feel free to contact us at the BTO at any time.

Steve Holloway

International Golden Plover count

On the weekend of the 11-12 October 2003 an international Golden Plover count is planned, centred in southern Scandinavia and the Baltic region. Due to the widespread nature of this species, and the short timescale involved, it will be impossible to arrange complete coverage in the UK but the count perfectly coincides with the WeBS count weekend. All WeBS counts will automatically be incorporated into this survey, but during the period 8-15 October we would also welcome counts of flocks from areas not covered by WeBS counts. Please do not add counts of Golden Plovers from outside your usual count area to your recording forms, but if you think you could cover additional areas, or have any questions about this survey, please contact Simon Gillings at the BTO (simon.gillings@bto.org: 01842 750050).

Simon Gillings



The 2003/04 Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS)

The BTO has organised surveys of winter gull roosts each decade since 1953. The last survey took place in January 1993, during which over 2.5 million gulls were counted in Great Britain. A further 19,000 gulls were also counted in Northern Ireland, 3,850 in the Isle of Man and 8,500 in the Channel Islands.

In England, at least, winter gull numbers have increased between the first BTO survey in 1953 and that of 1993, with the greatest increase apparent for Lesser Black-backed Gull. At the same time, the numbers of gulls breeding in the UK, notably Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gull, have also increased. These population rises are thought to be the result of increased food availability, particularly from rubbish tips and fishery waste, along with reduced human persecution (hunting and egg-collection). However, more recently there appears to have been some declines, notably in the numbers of Herring Gulls. Previous surveys have concentrated on inland sites, with a few coastal sites also being covered during the 1983 and 1993 surveys. We would like the 6th Winter Gull Roost Survey, planned for 2003/04, to improve upon previous surveys by producing the first total winter gull population estimate for the UK. To do this, all key inland and coastal sites will be targeted in January 2004. In addition, the number of gulls roosting inland, but away from key inland sites, will be estimated from a random sample of 600 tetrads (2 km x 2 km). A pilot survey undertaken earlier this year confirmed that substantial numbers of gulls roost offshore in small groups away from known key sites. Thus, we are also intending to cover 1,200 short (1-2 km) stretches of coastline around the UK over the next three winters.

The populations of gulls in the UK vary considerably over the winter. Numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gull, for example, peak in September/October, as birds move south on passage. On the other hand, numbers of Black-headed, Common, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls tend to peak in mid-winter or early spring. Thus, in this survey, volunteers will be encouraged to undertake additional counts at the key sites in any month between September 2003 and March 2004 (although this element of the survey is optional and the January 2004 count is the most important one).

If you would like to take part in the survey, please contact the BTO Regional Representative for your area or Mike Armitage/Steve Holloway at the BTO.

Mike Armitage

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.