WeBS

WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 21 Summer 2005

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Waterbirds in the UK 2003–04

WeBS counters will be pleased to learn that their exceptional efforts over recent years are soon to be translated into the printed word with the publication of two Wildfowl and Wader Counts annual reports. Firstly, there will be a report for the winters of 2001-02 and 2002-03 combined and, soon afterwards, the report for the winter of 2003-04.

By way of a preview of the 2003-04 annual report, Mark Collier and Andy Musgrove describe below some of the main findings, focussing on the ups and downs of key waterbird species in the UK....

The long tradition of the counting of thousands of wetland sites around the UK continued into 2003-04, contributing to a highly successful season for the Wetland Bird Survey. WeBS counters covered 3,400 count sectors at around 2,000 count sites, during the crucial 'winter' period of September to March. At least 1,500 were counted in any one of these months and almost 1,200 were covered continually through this period. A fantastic effort all around and a huge thank-you must go all those involved.

Whilst Black-throated and Great Northern Diver numbers were similar to those in the previous year, Red-throated Diver totals were somewhat lower than of late, although very large numbers were recorded flying past the Suffolk coast. Little and Great Crested Grebe totals remained high and have exceeded their five-year mean counts in every year since their inclusion in WeBS in 1985-86 and 1982-83 respectively. In contrast, counts of Red-necked Grebe were at their lowest ever and the Black-necked Grebe maximum was almost half that of the previous year. Numbers of Cormorant, Grey Heron and Little Egret all continued to rise; each reached their highest totals to date, although this increase was small in the two former species.

There were mixed fortunes among swans with no change for Mute Swan, a slight decline for Bewick's Swan and an increase of a third for Whooper Swan. Fewer European and Greenland White-fronted Geese were recorded than during 2002-03, both totals falling by around 20%. In contrast, counts of Pink-footed Geese remained high and totals of Icelandic Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese did not differ greatly from the previous year. The recent decline in Dark-bellied Brent Goose numbers continued and resulted in the lowest total for over twenty years. Encouragingly, however, the percentage of young and mean brood sizes increased, indicating higher breeding success during 2003. WeBS counters at Lindisfarne and Strangford Lough were kept busy documenting an increase of around 10% in both the Svalbard and East Canadian High Arctic populations of Light-bellied Brent Geese respectively. Special mention (sorry, no prizes!) goes to Strangford counters, who recorded their highest ever Light-bellied counts during October 2003.

Counts of Shelduck, Teal, Mallard, Pintail and Gadwall were each similar to those made in the previous year, although the latter continued its long-term increase and reached record levels. Over the past couple of years similar patterns have been evident in the peak counts of Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. Following unusually low totals of these species in 2002-03, numbers rose in the following year, although each remains below the average of recent years. Shoveler numbers fell by around 20% from their record peak of 2002-03, whilst conversely, Wigeon rose by a similar amount to their highest total to date.

Declines were witnessed in several other duck species, most notably Pochard, Common Scoter and Velvet Scoter. The government's Ruddy Duck control programme may have contributed to this species exhibiting its

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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

Welcome to the summer 2005 edition of WeBS News, packed with useful and interesting information on all issues to do with wetland birds. As I write this, at the end of June, Green Sandpipers are reappearing at many wetland sites, on their way back south again. Brightly-plumaged Knot are also starting to appear on the Wash, joining the thousands of over-summering first-year birds that decided not to risk the trip to Canada. On the other hand, numbers of many wildfowl species on inland waters are at their lowest in June, with some species not returning in numbers until late autumn. Your counts for the year ahead will be of great importance to help us bring together the annual and between-year patterns exhibited by our waterbird species. If we add together the standard WeBS Core Counts you've made over the years, the combined total comes to a staggering 549,470,816 birds, and that's not even including the Low Tide Counts, supplementary counts, goose roost censuses and the like!

You should all be extremely proud of this combined effort, whether you count a massive roost site like Snettisham on the Wash, with an average count of 35,000 birds over the last five years, or one of the select group of 30 count units that have managed an average of less than one bird per visit over this period (you know who you are!) In some respects, the information gained about low numbers of birds on some sites can be just as important as that gathered for the more high-profile sites, as it will enable us to make better quality estimates of national population sizes. It is worth repeating that the counts we all make for WeBS are of crucial importance in measuring the implications for waterbirds on a range of issues over many different scales. From assessing the impact of local watersports provision on a single lake, through looking at the potential impacts of the siting of wind turbines, all the way up to monitoring the effects of global climate change on an international scale.

WeBS counters come from the whole range of UK birdwatchers. The majority are volunteers who have nothing to do with the "professional" world of ornithology, but generously donate their time to contribute to the scheme. Staff members from all of the WeBS partners also carry out WeBS counts in their own time.

My own is Whitlingham Country Park, a relatively new site formed from the flooding of two gravel pits on the southern side of Norwich. Compared to some of the internationally important waterbodies covered by WeBS, it could hardly be described as a hugely significant site on the world stage. Nevertheless, I still find it fascinating to document the changes in waterbird numbers that have occurred over the years, as the nature of the lakes has changed. For the first few years after their creation, peak winter Gadwall numbers built up from 115 to 358. However, this last winter they peaked at just 72. Is this due to increasing disturbance at the site, changes in the plant-life of the lake, or perhaps conditions at other sites in the country or even on the continent? I await this coming winter with interest.

Like many other counters, as well as submitting my counts using the standard WeBS forms, I also keep a summary of my own sightings for personal interest. However, some exciting work during the forthcoming winter will mean that I will no longer have to do this. Our WeBS Online system now in development (and discussed on page 4) will mean that my counts will be there for me to access whenever I want, neatly tabulated and usefully summarised. This facility will be available to every single WeBS counter, as well as the much-requested facility to input our own counts directly from our notebooks to an online form. Of course, the paper forms will still be widely used for the foreseeable future, but hopefully this will give a new level of flexibility.

The flagship product of The Wetland Bird Survey is still the annual report, *Wildfowl and Wader Counts*. I'm pleased to announce that the long delay between reports is nearly at an end. The combined report for 2001-02 and 2002-03 has now been written and I've just finished commenting on the draft; rest assured it is an excellent read. Our priority is then to get back on track with reporting within a year of the end of the counts. Our 2003-04 report is not far off being ready for publication now and we are simultaneously logging and checking your 2004-05 forms. Please make sure if you have any outstanding forms up to the end of June 2005 you send them in today. Finish reading WeBS News first though!

Andy Musgrove

Avian Influenza and Migratory Waterbirds

The current avian influenza outbreak, which began in South East Asia during 2003, continues to cause concern for economic and human health reasons. The precise origin of the virus, subtype H5N1, is, to date, unknown. However, avian influenza viruses are isolated not uncommonly from wild migratory waterbirds such as wildfowl and waders and, to a lesser extent, from gulls and terns. It has long been assumed that wild birds act as a reservoir of viruses, which may periodically infect poultry or other domestic bird flocks.

The viruses within free-living waterbirds are typically non-disease-causing and termed low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) viruses. These viruses have high rates of mutation and recombination and once in poultry can become more virulent and cause highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). In Asia, the presence of large scale intensively managed flocks and widespread small-scale poultry farming of varying husbandry standards, together with the use of live bird markets allows infection to become established and spread relatively easily. Thereafter the long-distance spread of the disease is almost certainly due to movement and commercial trade of domestic birds and infectious manure and not due to migratory wild birds.

These viruses cannot infect humans easily, however deaths have occurred in people exposed to high levels of the highly pathogenic virus e.g. poultry workers or veterinarians. The problem becomes serious for humans when the bird virus recombines with a human influenza virus and human to human transmission can then occur. This is probably what has caused some of the previous human influenza pandemics, for example, those of 1957 and 1968.

The human and economic risks of this disease are clear, but is this disease of conservation concern? You'll be glad to know that it is not - avian influenza viruses are almost never associated with mortality or illness within wild birds. Unusually, an outbreak of the disease was reported in Common Terns *Sterna hirundo* in South Africa in 1961.

Any HPAI viruses found in wild birds are invariably from birds in contact with infected poultry and this is probably the cause of an apparent outbreak at Qinghai Nature Preserve in western central China in April/May 2005

Over 500 dead birds were found including Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus*, Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*, Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*, and Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*. H5N1 virus was isolated from birds during this die-off and if this was the cause of their death (rather than being a concurrent but irrelevant infection) then it is likely to have been as a result of contact with local infected poultry.

It remains important to monitor the health of wild bird populations for conservation reasons as well as those of economic and human health. WWT does just this in collaboration with DEFRA's Veterinary Laboratories Agency. To date, only one innocuous avian influenza virus has been detected, and that was from a European White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* at Slimbridge.

Whether the viruses from poultry in South East Asia will recombine with a human influenza virus and start the dreaded pandemic, remains to be seen. However, the good news for us is that there are no known cases of transmission of any avian influenza viruses between wild birds and humans. Thus, there is no known risk to the public (or hard-working WeBS counters!) visiting places where wild birds live.

Dr Ruth Cromie
Waterbird Biology Research Manager
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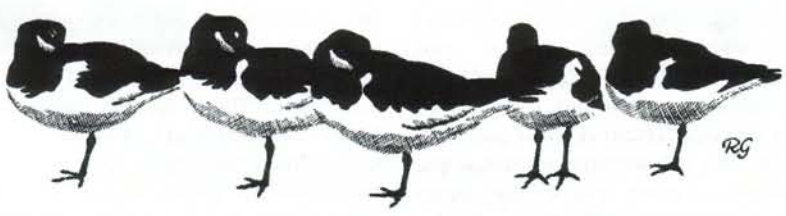

Waterbirds in the UK
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lowest total for eight years. Coot numbers suffered their fourth consecutive decline after the record peak of 2000-01.

Avocet numbers were up on the previous year, to a level just below the exceptionally high peak in 2001-02. Counts of both Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover were slightly below those of the previous year, although they hardly differed from their respective five-year means. The downward trend of Grey Plover continued and counts were at their lowest since 1989-90. More encouragingly, Golden Plover and Lapwing totals both rose by a quarter. The usual caution should be reiterated, however, namely the occurrence of large numbers of these plovers on non-wetland habitats that are not covered by WeBS. Knot numbers remained similar to 2002-03 although totals were 9% below the five-year mean. The British index for Sanderling fell to its lowest level for over half a decade. Notably, although the overall British Turnstone index has been in steady decline since the high point in 1987-88, more fortunate Northern Irish counters have recorded an increase for the past two winters. Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank counts were similar to recent winters, whilst a fall in Bar-tailed Godwit numbers was well within the highs and lows of the variable numbers that have occurred over the past 13 years. WeBS counters continued to record increasing numbers of Black-tailed Godwit and the British index for this species continued its upward trend that has been apparent for the past two decades.

The forthcoming *Wildfowl and Wader Counts* will cover the fortunes of all species in more detail. We hope that volunteers, who have counted enthusiastically and tirelessly, will enjoy the publications that they have worked so hard to contribute to. After reading the reports, we would also encourage counters and Local Organisers to get in touch with any comments they might have (good or bad!) so that we can make the next edition of *Wildfowl and Wader Counts* even better!

Mark Collier and Andy Musgrove

WeBS Online is taking shape

Progress update on the development of the new WeBS website

Following last year's WeBS News article regarding electronic and on-line data submission, comments and feedback from counters and Local Organisers have been lively and generally positive. It seems that many people that are involved with WeBS are keen to enter the electronic age. With that in mind, the WeBS team and Dr Iain Downie with the rest of the BTO Information Systems Unit, have been working closely together to develop a dedicated, revamped WeBS website…

It should be said from the outset that data submission using the traditional paper forms will still be very much welcomed. For those that do not have access to computers or do not wish to use an online system, rest assured that all waterbird counts will be entered in the database, whether they arrive by post or electronically. However, even the paper form stalwarts should read on, there's a lot more to WeBS Online than the submission of data….

There will be a wealth of waterbird and wetland related information on the website that will be in a 'public area'. Here, WeBS will be introduced with general information regarding its history, aims and methods. Downloads of *Wildfowl and Wader Counts*, *WeBS News* and WeBS Alerts will also be available. Other resources that can be downloaded will include data request forms and information. News and announcements relating directly to WeBS will also be posted, which may include, for example, the launch and interim progress reports of special surveys. In time, further news related to wetland conservation issues and waterbird species identification hints and tips will also be included.

Existing WeBS counters and LOs who wish to use the system will be, at their first visit to the website, required to register before they can access further sections of the website. This will involve filling in a simple online registration form and setting up a username and password. There may be some who undertake other online BTO surveys, such as BirdTrack or the Breeding Bird Survey, in which case they will be able to use existing usernames and passwords.

New counters to WeBS will also be required to fill in a short pre-registration form to enable them to be matched up with the appropriate Local Organiser for their area. The LO and WeBS Office will be automatically contacted by email and advised that a new counter wishes to register. After this initial contact has been established and site(s) to be counted have been discussed and agreed, the new counter will then be able to proceed with the usual registration form.

One of the 'check boxes' on the registration page will ask whether counts can be forwarded to local bird recorders. This is an optional feature and, in common with other BTO online surveys, it enhances the link between national and local monitoring schemes. By ticking this box, the counter automatically agrees to the passing on of personal details such as their name and contact information as well as count data, to enable county recorders, if they wish, to discuss records further with submitters. Counters are under no obligation to forward their records and not all local bird recorders are involved.

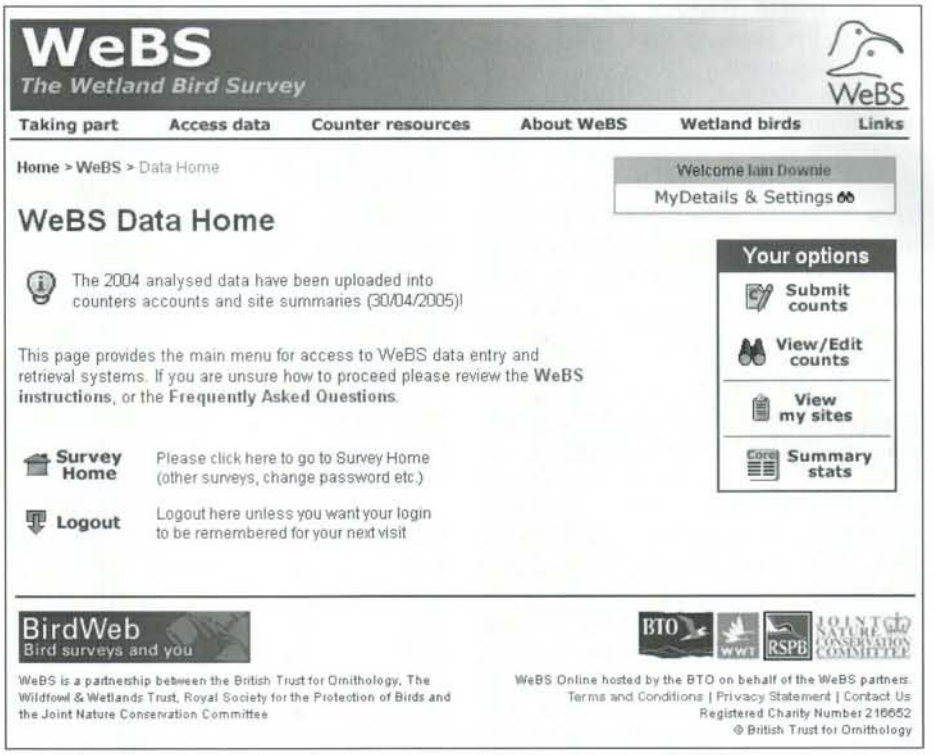

Figure 1. *Screenshot of the proposed counter data home page.*

After successful registration, counters will then be able to access WeBS data pages relating to the site(s) they count (see Figure 1). Once site, count date and start and finish times have been logged, counts can then be entered into online versions of Core Count, Low Tide and supplementary count forms. Initially, a near-complete list of common waterbird species will be viewed, initially in the same order that currently appears on the paper forms (although other ordering systems can be selected, e.g. one reflecting the BOU systematic list). As more counts are submitted, a history of species recorded from a particular site builds up. For subsequent submissions, only those species that have been previously recorded will appear in the initial list. This will minimise the chance of inputting errors and reduce the time counters spend submitting counts. The initial list can also be added to from a section listing the less common waterbirds. Any additional species will be 'remembered' for a particular site and future submissions will list the additions automatically, without the counter having to add them to the list again. Once the 'submit' button is hit, the count enters the WeBS system. Remembering to post forms or hand forms over to Local Organisers will no longer be necessary and neither will keeping a photocopy of the paper form.

As in all data recording systems, there will be times when mistakes are made. A system of checks will be built into the online data submission process, which will flag up obvious errors.

As an example, unseasonal mid-winter counts of Little Ringed Plover will be immediately queried as will the appearance of coastal species that are recorded inland, such as Purple Sandpiper. These queries will take the form of warning messages asking counters (politely!) to check their submissions. These 'automatic' checks will reduce, but not replace, the lengthy

process of data verification that Local Organisers and the WeBS team undertake. There will also be a significant reduction in the time (and associated costs) it takes to input data from paper forms. The knock-on effect will be that the lag time between the end of a recording year and the publishing of *Wildfowl and Wader Counts* will be much reduced, although this will be highly dependent on the uptake and popularity of the online system.

Counters will also be able to view, check and, if necessary, edit their own count submissions. Those that burn the midnight oil in front of their computer screens and subsequently realise they've made a mistake will be able to rectify the error via the editing pages. This facility, however, will be only be available up until the time the counts are loaded into the central WeBS database, which will happen at the end of every recording year. After that event, if counters realise an error has occurred that has slipped through the automatic checks, they will have to get in touch with the WeBS Office via a separate email or telephone call.

There will be a host of exciting, additional online features for counters and LOs (more below for LOs). Site details will be just a click of the button away, which will include grid references, 1: 25 000 Ordnance Survey maps and boundary definitions (see article on page 10). Registered counters can access summary data for their own site(s), which will show summary tables by, for example, year. Where counters cover part of a multi-sector site, they will be able to view and compare (but not edit) other sectors' counts with their own, as well as summaries for the entire consolidated site.

The new website will provide additional assistance for LOs and support their responsibilities as regional WeBS coordinators. As well as the features and benefits described above, LOs will be able to view a list of counters and sites in their area and view summary data for all these sites (see Figure 2). It will be possible to easily identify sites that are not currently counted, which will improve the allocation of new counters to vacant sites.

Enhanced access to view submitted counts from all their counters will provide an added data verification facility. By adding 'comments' to submitted counts, LOs can 'flag' unusual counts or species before data are loaded into the database. Automatic emails containing the comments will then be fired off to the relevant counter and the WeBS Office for further checking. As for counters, queries and comments will still be able to be raised after the WeBS team have uploaded the central database, however, this will not be via an automatic web-based process, rather by separate emails or telephone calls. By way of reassurance, the role of the LO will not be made redundant if most counters decide to submit on-line. Their local knowledge, expertise, advice and support for counters will always be pivotal to the success of WeBS, whether they're online or on paper! Furthermore, even if the LO does not have access to the internet, but most of their counters submit online, we will be able to arrange regular print-outs of the online summary pages to be posted to the LOs, again to aid their coordination work.

The benefits of this system will be felt by an even wider audience. It will speed up access to WeBS data by conservation organisations, such as the local country agencies, the RSPB or WWT who make use of the data in a wide range of monitoring and research projects that work towards the conservation of waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

Although the initial development and design work is well underway, there will be a further important period of testing the system. This pilot study will cover the coming winter, up until June 2006.

The WeBS Online development team now require a number of counters and LOs to act as guinea-pigs for the new system. They need a representative sample of inland and coastal counters, from both single sector and multi-sector sites, so if you're raring to go online and give it a try, get in touch immediately. Testing with a complete 'set' of counters from a multi-sector site, such as an estuary, would be particularly useful. Ideally, to test the user-friendliness of the system, they also require the pilot study to include counters and LOs with a range of internet and computer knowledge, from the complete beginner to the experienced user.

Following the pilot study and any subsequent tweaks to the system, the official launch of WeBS Online is planned for the summer of 2006. It will then be available to all who want to use it.

This is a major development within WeBS and it is recognised that it may take several years for the system to gain acceptance amongst counters. If any paper form enthusiasts are still reading and haven't been convinced, or do not have access to computer facilities, fair enough! The WeBS Team will continue to accept traditional Core Count, Low Tide and supplementary count forms. All counts, regardless of the way they get to us, will still play an invaluable role in the conservation of waterbirds and wetlands around the UK.

For further information or to apply to join the pilot study contact Andy Musgrove.

Stella Baylis, Andy Musgrove and Iain Downie

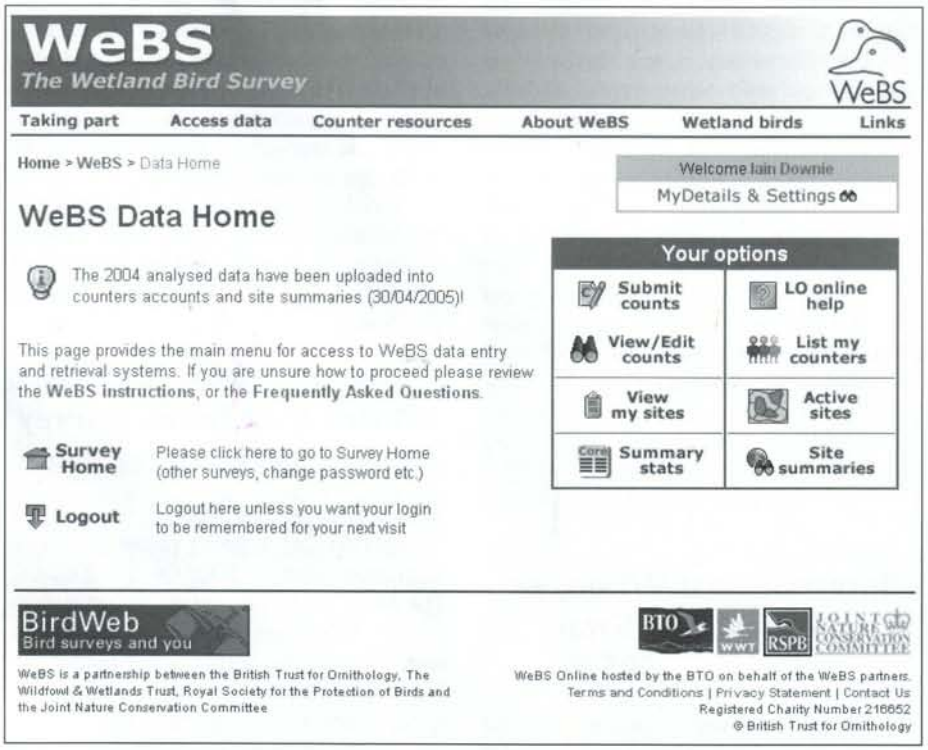

Figure 2. *Screenshot of the proposed Local Organiser data home page.*

. . . Special Surveys . . .

The NW Scotland Greylag Goose Census 2006

The second co-ordinated census of Northwest Scotland Greylag Geese is currently being planned for August 2006. Plans are still at an early stage, and the precise methodology has yet to be finalised, but all counters who may be able to assist with fieldwork are asked to contact the Waterbird Monitoring Unit at WWT Slimbridge. An outline of the background and current plans for this census is provided below, and further details will be presented on the WWT website as they become available.

The NW Scotland (or Native) Greylag Goose population is the remnant of a population that was once much more widespread throughout the British Isles. In recent decades it has been confined to the more remote parts of Scotland, with key areas of abundance on the Inner Hebridean islands of Coll and Tiree, the Outer Hebrides and in Sutherland. The only previous census of this population was conducted in 1997, although annual counts take place in key areas such as the Uists and Tiree. Anecdotal information suggests that since 1997, a considerable increase in abundance and, importantly, range has occurred, such that in some areas it is not possible to determine whether the Greylag Geese present are from the NW Scotland population or the 're-established' population that also breeds in the British Isles. Re-established Greylag Geese were re-introduced into areas formerly occupied, through releases of birds derived almost entirely from those within the current NW Scotland range, mainly by people with wildfowling interests. Re-established Greylag Geese are currently considered a discrete population, but have also increased in abundance and range, further complicating the separation of these two populations.

The 1997 census covered the area to the north and west of Glen Mor between Fort William and Inverness, with additional counts conducted in west Argyll as far south as the Kintyre Peninsula and on islands to the west. However, due to the uncertainty over the current distribution of NW Scotland Greylag Geese, it is not possible to define the boundary between the two Greylag Goose populations, and thus the area that should be covered by the 2006 census in order to estimate the size of the NW Scotland population. Therefore, it is likely that the 2006 census will be extended so that a more complete understanding of the post-breeding distribution of Greylag Geese in Scotland can be obtained. It may then be possible to make an estimate of the NW Scotland population, although this is far from certain and will depend on the degree of proximity between these two populations. Consequently, the 2006 census may cover an area as large as the whole of Scotland, but the feasibility of this and other census areas is currently being assessed.

The methodology employed may also need to be modified, depending on the size of the census area selected. The 1997 census used a basic 'look-see' methodology to survey all sites known to support Greylag Geese, as well as any others with suitable habitat. However, given the remoteness of much of this region, extending this approach to a larger census area is likely to be problematic. Thus, it is probable that an extended census will adopt a 'look-see' approach in known core areas, supplemented by a stratified random approach in other areas.

As a part of the feasibility assessment for the census area and methodology, WWT wishes to consult with bird watchers who may be able to assist with this survey, in order to gauge the level of likely support, so that we can be confident of selecting the most appropriate census area and methodology for the resources available.

We would also welcome opinion on the timing of the census. The 1997 census was carried out in the second half of August, but preliminary discussions with some counters suggest that in some areas this may be too early for effective survey, or too late. Therefore, if you feel able to provide support for this census in any way, either as a potential counter in 2006, or by providing advice and expertise on the questions raised above, please contact the Waterbird Monitoring Unit at WWT Slimbridge.

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Co-ordinator, Ringing & Goose
Monitoring Programmes
Assistant Co-ordinator Wetlands
International/IUCN-SSC
Duck Specialist Group

International Whooper and Bewick's Swan Census 2005

The International Swan Census is organised by Wetlands International Swan Specialist Group every five years and records migratory swans throughout their European wintering grounds. The latest census in the UK and the Republic of Ireland was coordinated in January 2005 by WWT with a huge input by both UK-WeBS and I-WeBS networks and The Irish Whooper Swan Study Group. Although it is too early to report the results of this census, we are looking forward to analysing the data in the autumn, once all WeBS data and census forms have been inputted. Many additional sites, other than those routinely covered by WeBS were surveyed and indications are that good coverage was achieved. Additional data were also collected which will allow an assessment of productivity and habitat use.

Results of the census in 2000 showed an increase of 32% in Whooper Swan numbers since the previous census in 1995, whilst numbers of Bewick's Swans remained similar to 1995 figures, but were lower than the previous census of 1991. WeBS data suggest a declining trend in Bewick's Swan numbers since the early 1990s in Britain and Northern Ireland.

This trend may reflect a change in winter distribution due to milder winters, with more birds stopping further east in continental Europe. A recent decline however, in numbers at key sites in the Netherlands, gives cause for concern. The results of the 2005 census should help to determine whether there has indeed been a substantial drop in Bewick's Swan numbers, or whether the trend reflects a redistribution in the wintering range.

Very many thanks go to all those counters and Local Organisers who took part in the census – your help is as always much appreciated. If you still have Swan Census forms to return, please could you send them to Jenny Worden at WWT, Slimbridge as soon as possible.

Jenny Worden
Waterbird Monitoring Officer
WWT

The 2003-04 – 2005-06 Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS)

The sixth national Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS) is taking place over three successive winters, 2003-04 to 2005-06. The first part of the survey, undertaken in January 2004, targeted the most important known roost sites across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, both at inland waterbodies and on the coast. Results from the counts at these Key Sites (and some additional sites surveyed) have been used to index gull numbers over the last 50 years

. . . Special Surveys . . .

and the results of this analysis will be reported in an upcoming paper.

As well as looking at population change, the Winter Gull Roost Survey also aims to produce the first total non-breeding population estimates for the five main gull species that winter in the UK: Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull. To be able to do this it is also necessary to estimate the numbers of gulls away from the Key Sites.

This is being done by surveying sample Randomly Selected Tetrads inland and also Randomly Selected Stretches of Coast.

As of 1 April 2005, completed count forms had been returned for 413 (86%) of 482 Key Sites – a wonderful effort by all involved. In addition, 425 (61%) of 701 sample Tetrads and 251 (27%) of 914 sample Random Coastal Stretches had been covered.

Forms for remaining sites, to be covered next January, will be distributed to BTO Regional Representatives this autumn. For this last winter of the survey, we will be concentrating particularly on covering the sample Random Coastal Stretches.

If you are interested in taking part in this last winter of the survey, please contact either your BTO Regional Representative or Alex Banks at the BTO who has taken over from John Calladine as National Organiser for the last two winters of the survey.

Alex Banks
Niall Burton

WinGS is funded by the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, the Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland), the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Scottish Natural Heritage and Northumbrian Water Ltd.

News from the front line . . .

WeBS counters and Local Organisers are often best placed to see how wetland sites develop and change over time. Below, Vince Chambers, LO for Berkshire, describes some of the issues relating to sites in his area....

Having lived in Wraysbury for almost 30 years, I have become fully acquainted with the rich diversity of wildlife that makes use of the important conservation sites that are known as Wraysbury Gravel Pits. I was asked to become responsible for monthly wildfowl counts in 1985 and immediately identified further sites that were worthy of being counted. These have increased steadily over the years until, now, there are 12 pits, two tracts of river and drain and Staines Moor for which Wraysbury's WeBS counters are responsible. I was proud to assist in studies involving extra counts when the designation of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) was being considered. Over the years I have seen the sites mature and hold large numbers of certain species of wintering waterbirds.

There has always been a degree of disturbance on the pits. Organised, permitted boating and angling occurs along with other, sometimes illegal, practices such as motorcycling, quad-biking and shooting. In the past, these remained at a level that did little to be of detriment to wintering bird numbers. When the original and subsequent Wraysbury 1 Gravel Pit SSSIs were designated in 1993 and 1999 respectively, most believed that action would be taken to lessen the problems. Furthermore, in 2000, additional strengthening of the site protection process resulted in the inclusion of three pits and Staines Moor within the SW London Waterbodies SPA and Ramsar sites, which it was also believed would provide added protection for the area. Unfortunately, illegal practices described above have increased in recent years. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence that baited hooks used for illegal fishing activities are now catching surface feeding ducks. Activities undertaken by local residents living adjacent to the pits also add to the disturbance and, in some cases, directly damage the habitat. For example, firework parties (occurring in the winter period when waterbird numbers are highest!) have occurred on the banks of two of the SPA designated pits.

Over the past few years, WeBS counters, who, by spending hundreds of hours in the field, have been aware that all is not well with certain species and have seen their counts decline, in some cases quite dramatically. Furthermore, evidence from the WeBS Alerts analysis has highlighted recent large declines in Gadwall and Shoveler, species for which the SPA was originally cited. Other species have also declined.

So, what is the future for this area that has been officially recognised as internationally important for the wintering waterbirds it holds? A report, commissioned from the Wetlands Advisory Service, was critical of the management of the SPA and few of its recommendations have been implemented as yet. Meetings between interested parties (including WeBS counters) and the authorities responsible for the management and policing of the area will, however, continue to try to reach agreement on the way forward.

Now that declines in wintering waterbirds have been documented, the next stage should be for the relevant authorities that are responsible for the maintenance of designated sites to formulate a relevant plan of action. WeBS counters hope that any such plan would include habitat management and security/disturbance issues and be focussed on safeguarding the future of this rich and complex wildlife sanctuary

Vince Chambers
Local Organiser for Berkshire

Join the WeBS family

New counters are needed in all areas of the UK to monitor waterbirds and help protect wetlands

The lifeblood of WeBS is undoubtedly the volunteer counters and Local Organisers that have devoted many tens of thousands of man and woman hours to ensuring that WeBS is an internationally successful monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds and wetland habitats. Currently, there are around 2,500 WeBS volunteers around the UK, who provide monthly counts of waterbirds at approximately 2,000 wetland sites.

Inevitably, there will be a turnover of counters over the years. Some will retire from WeBS service and some will pass on to the great wetland site in the sky, achieving immortality by leaving their WeBS counts as a legacy. For the continuing success of WeBS, new counters are always encouraged and welcomed with open wings.

What provides the motivation for these volunteers to venture out into the winter weather and spend their valuable free time counting waterbirds? Some people might prefer to sit by the fire drinking cocoa on cold winter days, others might be tempted by the endless hours of televised football and other sports and some might just enter semi-hibernation and not see the light of day until spring. Not WeBS counters though. They are a knowledgeable group of amateur ornithologists that are made of sterner stuff. They enjoy the great outdoors, feel inspired by being part of the natural world, although they also appreciate a well-constructed hide where the thermos and sandwiches can sit.

Some counters enjoy the peace and quiet that they find during counts. Some operate on a 'need to know' basis and tell their families that they will be out all day doing important and vital counts when just a few hours will do (the family at home don't need to know that!)

Other counters are more gregarious and join together with other volunteers to count larger sites such as estuaries, reservoirs and gravel pit complexes. Being part of a flock has worked pretty well for many species of waterbirds and the same advantages can apply to WeBS counters: added protection, sharing of information and learning new skills. It is not often, however, that avian flocks find their way to the local hostelry for some much needed post-count refreshment.

WeBS counters know that they are contributing to an internationally renowned scientific study of waterbirds and their habitats. Counts provide the primary source of data used by decision-makers to designate sites for purposes of conservation and protection, at both national and international levels. Many counters are aware that the UK is endowed with a wealth of wetlands, especially estuaries and that geographically it lies in the path of major migratory flyways.

Surely this means that WeBS counters must be very serious scientists indeed? Actually, the truth is that they are as diverse as the waterbird species they love and count. The common thread is that they are serious about wetlands and waterbirds rather than serious scientists. WeBS counters come from all walks of life, from estate agents to teachers and farmers to politicians.

Many counters are also retired from working life, although this group certainly cannot be described as being retired from active life. WeBS counters can be both male and female, sometimes one of each operate together as a team, although there is no compulsion to do this. Romance has even been known to blossom between counters. No guarantees though!

Wetland sites covered by counters are also diverse. Estuaries and non-estuarine coastal sites are counted. Further inland, lakes, reservoirs, marshes, gravel pits and defined river and canal stretches are also covered. Many counters develop strong attachments to 'their' sites through WeBS counts and diary notes and become experts in their area, passing on knowledge and skills to others. Waterbird counts are also of great value at the local level. Often counts are sent to local bird clubs and appear in county or regional annual reports.

WeBS counters are able to identify all waterbirds that commonly occur in the UK. The families of birds involved are divers, grebes, cormorants, herons, storks, ibises and spoonbills, wildfowl, cranes, rails, waders and gulls and terns. Whilst some counters are avid gull fans, the recording of gulls and terns is not compulsory for those that haven't been bitten by the gull identification bug.

Support for WeBS counters is provided by a Counter Handbook and help and advice is available from a Local Organiser (LO). Counters also receive an annual newsletter (which you are currently reading) and a free copy of *Wildfowl and Wader Counts*, the annual report for WeBS (usually retailing at around £30).

A WeBS counter at work / Photograph by Dawn Balmer

Essential equipment for a WeBS counter / Photograph by Dawn Balmer

The role of the LO is pivotal, they provide the main point of contact between their team of counters and the counter liaison staff at the BTO. LOs coordinate counts and counters for a particular county, region or specified area such as an estuary. If you feel your skills are a little rusty or you are unsure as to whether your waterbird ID is up to scratch, don't let this put you off. Talk to your LO; it may be possible to do counts alongside experienced WeBS counters for a while before becoming a fully-fledged counter. Some regions even have non-counting LOs – the often unsung work behind the scenes organising a scheme feeds into waterbird conservation just as much as getting out and counting the birds.

The skills needed to count large flocks of waders or wildfowl at larger estuaries, for example, may take some time to perfect. Again, by joining a team of established counters you can gain the necessary skills and practice before 'flying solo'.

New counters are needed in all areas of the UK to ensure that WeBS continues to play a vital role in wetland and waterbird conservation and research. This success of this long-running survey is largely due to the vitality and enthusiasm of the counters.

If you're keen to join the WeBS family or just want further information, get in touch with Steve Holloway. He will, on your behalf, contact the Local Organiser for your area. You may have a particular site in mind that you want to count or you may prefer to be directed to a site near to you. Whatever your preference, we are sure that a home can be found for you within the WeBS family.

Stella Baylis and Steve Holloway

COUNTERS AND LOCAL ORGANISERS

This article has been written with recruitment in mind. Apologies to all existing counters who are already on board. For LOs, if you require further copies of this newsletter, to circulate to potential new counters in your area, please get in touch with the WeBS Office at the BTO.

Who's Who within the WeBS team

Many counters and Local Organisers will already be aware of the recent operational changes to the day to day running of WeBS. For the benefit of those that are not sure who does what and who to get in contact with for various matters, the following 'Who's who' is included to clarify the roles of the various personnel.

Graham Austin, WeBS Database Manager
WeBS Alerts
WeBS database management
Statistical analyses

Alex Banks, WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts)
Low Tide Counts
Wintering Gull Survey, Carmarthen Bay Common Scoters, etc

Mark Collier, WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)
Wildfowl and Wader Counts
Standard data requests
WeBS News

Emma Davis, Assistant WeBS Secretary
WeBS count unit boundary mapping
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports

Iain Downie, Web Software Developer
WeBS Online

Steve Holloway, WeBS Counter Coordinator
Counter and Local Organiser liaison
Recruitment of new counters and Local Organisers
WeBS News

Ilya Maclean, Research Ecologist
WeBS Alerts

Heidi Mellan, WeBS Secretary
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports
WeBS count unit boundary mapping

Andy Musgrove, WeBS National Coordinator
Overall management of WeBS
WeBS database management
WeBS Online

Stella Baylis, responsible for the production of this edition of WeBS News, in addition to making extensive progress with the CUDI digital mapping project, has recently completed her time working for the WeBS team and we wish her well in the future.

Email
use the format of firstname.surname@bto.org e.g. andy.musgrove@bto.org

Web site
WeBS web site: http://www.bto.org/survey/webs/index.htm

WeBS Alerts
WeBS Alerts report: http://blx1.bto.org/webs/alerts/index.htm

Defining the boundaries of WeBS sites — entering the digital age

During the past six months, the WeBS team have been undertaking a mammoth task that has involved checking the grid references and boundaries of WeBS Core Count sites across the United Kingdom. From the most northerly WeBS site, 'Nor Wick and Skaw' on the island of Unst in the Shetlands, to the most southerly, Longueville Marsh on Jersey, thousands of sites have been checked, defined, mapped and digitised using Geographical Information System (GIS) software.

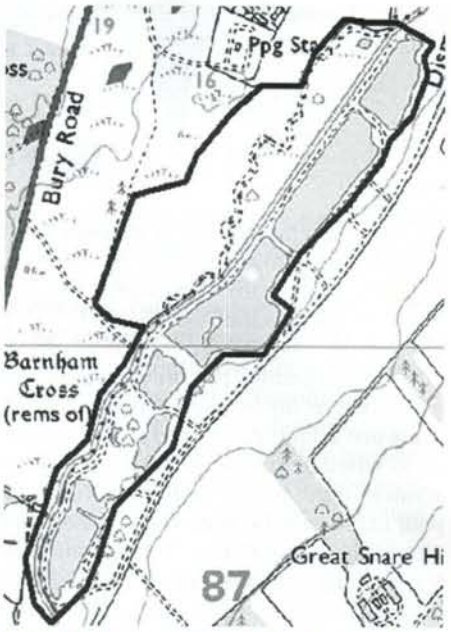

Figure 1. Nunnery Lakes Core Count site
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This lengthy but essential exercise is a basic requirement and will mean that the count areas are clearly defined and that boundary information relating to changes to sites is promptly reported. It is vital that this process is completed and continually updated to ensure meaningful comparisons of sites from one year to the next are made. In turn, this produces valid annual and monthly indices of population change.

WeBS counters will be pleased to learn that the count boundary paper maps that they have carefully drawn and sent back to the WeBS organisers have been instrumental in providing the information needed to enter the digital age. These so-called 'CUDI' maps (Count Unit Definition Inventory) have been painstakingly checked site by site. Boundaries have been 'drawn' over Ordnance Survey (OS) maps on the computer and polygons created (see Figure 1) which give a vivid picture of which sites are being counted across the UK.

'Phase 1' of this exercise has seen us map and digitise around 80% of all sites, both single-sector and multi-sector. The most clearly defined types are the reservoirs and lakes with obvious geographical boundaries. Mapping these 'simple' sites, however, is not always straightforward. For example, grazing wildfowl such as geese may be counted on grassland around a reservoir or on flooded areas adjacent to rivers.

For complex multi-sector sites such as estuaries, sector boundaries have been digitised wherever possible. The dynamic nature of estuaries presents the WeBS mapping team with challenges. As sediments shift, or sea walls are breached, new areas that waterbirds use may be created.

The changing nature of gravel pit complexes can also be difficult to keep track of for boundary definition purposes. New pits may be dug or enlarged whilst other pools are infilled. These events usually occur under the auspices of man rather than nature so, in theory, it should be easier to monitor these changes. In the field, however, it isn't always that straightforward. Access arrangements can alter, sometimes without notice and the birds may not always be on the areas that are accessible. Vegetation can grow very quickly around new pits, restricting visibility. The local knowledge that counters pass on is an invaluable source of information and much appreciated. Unfortunately, it also keeps the WeBS team very much in front of their computers, rather than out in the field!

This GIS mapping project is 'work in progress'. For some sites, the CUDI information that we hold may be out of date. For sites that have come into WeBS over the past few years, we may not hold CUDI maps at all. So, over the next 12 months, the WeBS mapping team will be getting in touch with some counters and Local Organisers for more information regarding their site boundaries.

It is particularly important that any potential new sites or proposed changes to site boundaries are initially discussed with Local Organisers and, if clarification is needed, the WeBS Office. Should it prove necessary to redefine boundaries or add a new site, suitable maps can be provided for counters to draw on the boundaries in the field.

The polygons created on the GIS maps are only the start of an ongoing process that will see sites more clearly defined in terms of size, their habitat type and position within the UK.

For example, codes relating to whether the site is a reservoir, natural lake, riverine stretch, coastal saltmarsh or intertidal zone can be 'attached' to every site. This will allow analysis of WeBS counts by habitat type as well as geographical location. Once digitised, the size of any defined WeBS site can be easily measured using GIS. This has potential value in terms of calculating densities of birds, such as has been used for WeBS Low Tide Counts since the inception of that scheme.

Perhaps most significantly, however, we have recently been granted access to the OS "Mastermap", which allows us to see where every waterbody in the country is. The importance of this is that, for the first time, we will be able to say what proportion of waterbodies are actually covered by WeBS. This means that we should be able to work out how many birds WeBS is currently missing, which is known to be a large proportion for some species, notably Mallard, Moorhen, Little Grebe, *etc*. Access to the Mastermap has been made possible through a Pan-Governmental Agreement with OS, which covers work part-funded by JNCC and the Country Agencies.

Over the next 18 months, the improved WeBS website will be launched. One important feature of the new system will allow registered counters to access a map of their site(s), which will show the boundaries. Feedback from counters regarding these boundaries will be encouraged to ensure we hold accurate information. The paper CUDI maps will be also be held on file for the foreseeable future and, for those who do not have access to computer facilities, copies can be mailed out in the usual way.

Eventually, all sites will be accurately mapped and held in a format that is accessible for counters and LOs. The whole process will take some time and will require ongoing communication and liaison. So, for those that count Hell's Mouth, Loch Drunkie, Peepy Pond or Scotsman's Flashes (all genuine WeBS core count sites) rest assured that we know where you are!

Stella Baylis

WeBS Low Tide Counts

2004-05 was another busy winter for low tide counters, with data from 16 different sites already returned to the WeBS Office. Some new sites were covered, some old favourites were revisited for the first time in several years, and some hardy perennials continued their annual surveys. The data from these counts are currently being checked and input, and we hope to process the results with returns to organisers and counters as soon as possible. A big thank you to all involved with low tide counts – the scheme is flourishing thanks to the efforts of these individuals.

Dunlin by Glenn Bishton

The previous winter of 2003-04 was another successful year for Low Tide Counts, with around 130 counters observing over 36,000 ha of coastline. The estuaries surveyed were distributed around the country, with sites in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In total, over 380,000 waterbirds were counted – an average of about 2,900 per individual counter.

The principal aim of the Low Tide Count scheme is to record relative distribution of birds at times when intertidal habitats are exposed – in other words to assess important feeding areas for waterbirds. Count sectors can be digitally drawn on maps, over which the bird data recorded by counters are plotted. Usually, average winter distributions are plotted from monthly totals on the various sectors, allowing visual interpretation of bird feeding areas.

As an example, Figure 1 shows the relative distribution of Dunlin on the Cromarty Firth in the winter of 2003-04. It can immediately be seen that most of these birds were recorded in Nigg Bay and Alness Bay, and this type of information can be used to help safeguard such areas for wildlife interests. Low Tide Counts therefore continue to provide vital supplementary information to Core Counts, providing the full picture as to trends in bird numbers and spatial distribution.

Soon we shall be looking forward to the winter of 2005-06, and selecting sites for survey. We will target those estuaries not counted for many years, and those that have been only partly covered in the past. If you would like to take part in Low Tide Counts on any estuary in the UK this winter, please do contact the WeBS Office. We are particularly keen to hear from people interested in counting the Colne Estuary in Essex. A maximum of four counts are required during the period November to February, so please do get involved – not only will you be making a valuable contribution to scientific research, you may even enjoy it!

For those already counting at low tide, some changes to the count form are afoot, as we look to simplify and improve the scheme, and ensure greater consistency with Core Counts. Furthermore, we now have the option of a standardised electronic spreadsheet for submission of data, which we hope will satisfy technophiles until the introduction of WeBS Online. Please contact the WeBS Office for more details.

Alex Banks
WeBS Low Tide Count
National Organiser

WeBS Staff available for talks

Maintaining and strengthening the communication links between the WeBS Office and the network of counters and Local Organisers is an important area that we are keen to develop. With that in mind, WeBS staff members will be available over the coming year to give talks to groups of counters, or to local bird clubs around the UK. These wetland orientated talks are designed to be entertaining and informative and follow on from the highly successful WeBS visit to Islay and Mull in March 2005. Following these talks, several new local counters were recruited and existing counters were updated on the recent developments within WeBS.

It may also be possible for WeBS staff to spend time in the field at a local wetland site with a group of existing and/or potential counters instead of, or in addition to a talk. Field-based sessions can be tailored to local needs. For example, there may be a number of new counters that require training on WeBS methodology or waterbird identification. Existing counters would also be encouraged to come along and share their WeBS expertise.

If you're a counter wishing to attend such an event, get in touch with your Local Organiser (or direct to the WeBS office if you have no LO). For LOs wanting more information, or to check the availability of staff members, email the WeBS office on webs@bto.org or speak to Steve Holloway at the BTO.

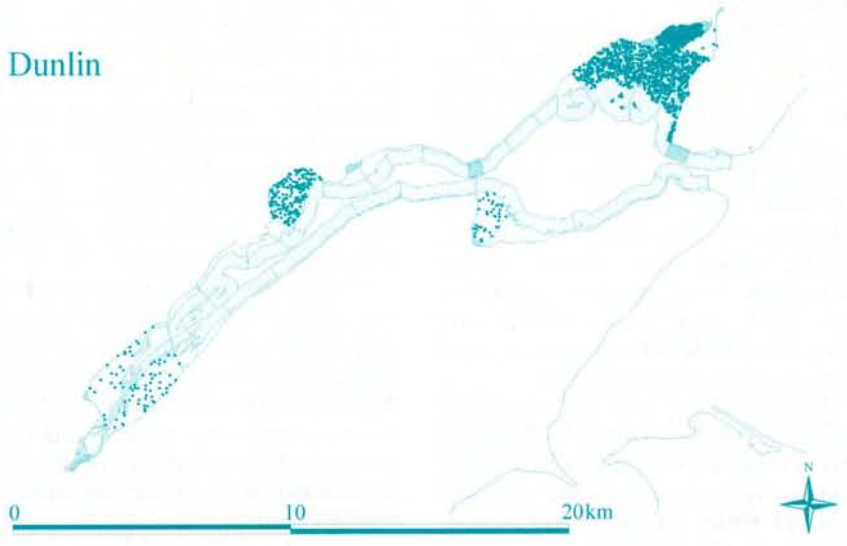

Figure 1. *Relative distribution of Dunlin on the Cromaty Firth in the winter of 2003-04*

'The times, they are a changin'....

Following discussions amongst the WeBS partners, it has been decided to change the WeBS reporting year from April to March, to July to June, starting July 2005. This is a fundamental shift and the decision has been taken on sound, biological grounds. However, the WeBS team fully recognises that these changes may cause some inconvenience to counters and LOs, especially with regard to the timing of the submission of counts.

WeBS is predominantly concerned with the monitoring of non-breeding waterbirds, whose peak numbers generally occur during the winter months for most species and sites. The most sensible cut-off point for a winter-based survey is at the end of June. This is because many overwintering species, such as Brent Geese, are recorded into May before returning to their breeding grounds. Likewise, many migrant waders, such as Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Whimbrel, pass through the UK northwards in the spring. It is more logical to include these April and May counts of such species in the same recording year as the previous winter, rather than include them in the following winter after migratory movements have occurred to and back from breeding areas.

At the same time, the major migratory period of passage and returning wintering waders often starts during July. In a similar vein, it makes little sense to report these counts with the previous spring's birds as happens with a reporting year of April to March.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general pattern for certain species. The 'summer' species, Little Ringed Plover, Garganey and terns will continue to be analysed and reported following a calendar year basis.

Counters and LOs are encouraged to discuss the timing and frequency of form submission. The WeBS team recognises that there will be a period of bedding-in of these changes. For those counters that cover only the seven 'winter' months of September to March, an annual submission is still fine, as soon as possible after the March count. Alternatively, forms could be submitted twice yearly after the December and March counts respectively if this is more suitable for local circumstances.

Other counters provide counts for some or all of the months April-August, often at those sites supporting important numbers of certain species at these times. In these cases, a twice-yearly

submission of forms would be more suitable; after the December and June counts.

We recognise that not all counters currently wish to count in the summer months, and these changes in no way imply an obligation to do so if you do not wish to.

Some LOs have additional responsibilities involving local bird clubs and the submission of counts for county records and reports. Concern has been raised that the changes to the WeBS year will mean that the publication of annual local reports (that generally follow a calendar year basis) will be delayed. Although this is a matter for LOs and their counters to discuss region by region, if counts are submitted as soon as possible after December (rather than waiting until March), this may in fact assist local reports rather than delay their publication.

Any counts that cover the winter of 2004-2005 should be submitted without delay. For this year only, there will be a period of 3 months (April – June 2005), which does not fit in with either the old system of April to March or the new system of July to June. These months will not be missed out, any notable counts or events will still appear in the annual report for 2004-2005. It would be very much appreciated if any counts from these three 'missing' months are also submitted as soon as possible to allow for a fresh start in July 2005. However, if this causes too much extra work to LOs and counters, forms will be accepted at a time convenient to LOs.

The WeBS partners appreciate that this change has occurred at very short notice. On balance, it was felt that the change should be initiated sooner rather than later as there were already inconsistencies within the annual report that needed to be promptly addressed for the publication of the next 'Wildfowl and Wader Counts'.

By the summer of 2006, the new WeBS website will be up and running (detailed in the article on page 4) and counters can submit their returns online if they so wish. Hopefully, on-line counters will eventually get into the habit of doing this after every month's count, which will mean they needn't even have read this article at all!

The times certainly are a changin' (with thanks to Bob Dylan) within WeBS and the evolution of this internationally important waterbird survey continues. Although the WeBS partners oversee the strategic development of WeBS (in other words, changes!), the undoubted success and achievements of WeBS can be attributed to the thousands of volunteers that take part.

Stella Baylis

WANTED URGENTLY! LOCAL ORGANISERS

Although we currently receive WeBS data from most corners of the UK, there are a few regions/areas where we are currently lacking both a Local Organiser and/or counters. We have included the list to hopefully encourage any current counters who are secretly harbouring a desire to become a full blown LO for the any of the areas/regions below:

Colne Estuary
Warwickshire
Merseyside Inland
Doncaster area
Sheffield Area
Barnsley area
Huddersfield/Halifax area
Irt/Mite/Esk Estuary
Isle of Cumbrae
Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin)
Co. Down (inland sites)
Outer Ards
Co. Fermanagh
Co Tyrone (except Loughs Neagh/Beg)
Co Armagh (excl. Loughs Neagh/Beg)
Co. Londonderry (exc. Lough Foyle)

Steve Holloway

Filling in those forms — hints and tips

No-one takes part in WeBS simply for the joy of completing count forms! However, this is the crucial link between making the field observations and making use of those records to direct research and conservation. Spare a thought then for the staff who have to look at more than 7,000 of them that arrive each year. Making sure that the counts are transferred accurately to the database is a big job and anything we can all do to make things easier will free up time for other work. To this end, we'd like periodically to remind counters of a few key ways in which you can help make the process as painless as possible.

Save some ink!

Here's one that should save a few counters time and ink. There is no requirement to fill in zeros on the form for every species not recorded. This simply uses up your time to no benefit, unless you happen to be a biro manufacturer!

We can deduce zero counts of birds from other information provided. Firstly, the fact you made a visit at all without a count of, for example, Black-throated Divers being written on your form, enables us to deduce that zero Black-throated Divers were present. Secondly, this is refined by the three lines on the form with tick boxes, along with the "species codes" XX, XG and XT (referring to waterbirds, gulls and terns respectively). This means that we can deduce whether a visit entirely devoid of any gull counts, for example, should be treated as no gulls being present or, alternatively, no information about gulls being provided.

The lone gull...

As mentioned above, if you decide not to count gulls, then this is fine. Leave the box on row XG unticked and we will assume nothing about the presence or absence of gulls for that visit. However, if you do record ANY gulls for the visit, we have to assume that you have told us about ALL the gulls present. For example, if you record 30 Black-headed and 20 Herring Gulls, we have to assume that there were no Common Gulls etc. This is clearly a reasonable assumption in 99% of cases.

However, there are a few cases where we suspect otherwise. Occasionally, we see a form with a nice selection of wildfowl and waders, plus perhaps a single Glaucous Gull but no other gulls. In these cases, our computers have to assume that gulls were looked for but no other species were present. Although this is possible, most WeBS counters would recognise that it's actually unlikely and it is more likely that there was a mixed flock of gulls present but that the Glaucous was recorded because it was a rarer species

What could you do in such a case? Ideally, the best option would be to record the numbers of the other species present. However, if you still felt that the numbers were too great and you didn't feel up to recording a full count of gulls, the second-best option would be to at least note which other species were present and fill in 'NC' (for no count) for each of those species on the form. In this way, we will not make any false assumptions about birds being absent.

Tell us where there AREN'T any birds!

When we get the full set of forms back each year, there are always some gaps. This is inevitable and can be due to a variety of perfectly good reasons, for example, sickness or a holiday. However, it is most important that you don't fail to send in a return for a count section, simply because there aren't any (or many) birds there on the day of your count. This is most important on multi-section complex sites, where such missing counts can have large ramifications.

To explore further how this works, consider an imaginary estuarine site 'A' made up of three sections, which we'll call 'B','C' and 'D'. Suppose that occasionally, large numbers of Wigeon graze on section D. However, D is often heavily disturbed and, as a result, the section is virtually abandoned by most waterbirds, with most of the Wigeon subsequently found on section C. The counter at site A decides only to send in counts for section D when there are some birds on it, as there seems little point in reporting the lack of birds. What effect does this have on the overall count for the site?

When we sum the counts for a complex site, to come up with a 'consolidated total', we take account of missing sections and consider whether the fact that a section was missed will have a significant effect on the consolidated total for a given species. To do this, we look back at the times when the missed section was counted and see what sort of numbers the species was present in on those occasions. In our fictitious example here, we would see section D was missed and discover that whenever it had been counted in the past it supported large numbers of Wigeon. Therefore, our automated procedures would conclude that the lack of section D was a very big deal indeed (and this would also lead to the consolidated total count of Wigeon for site A being bracketed as an undercount in *Wildfowl & Wader Counts*). From the counter's perspective, however, he or she may consider that the omission of section D wouldn't have had much of an effect on the total and so this count should not have been bracketed.

What the counter should ideally have done would be to submit a count for section D, but to tick the box at the top saying "Please tick box if no waterbirds were present". This would mean that we would know that there were zero Wigeon on the section, and wouldn't try to account for a missing count.

If you do count at a complex site, please take a moment to consider if this sort of scenario might apply to you. If you have sections that are irregularly counted and where we only get counts submitted when there is a large flock of birds present, this can lead to consolidated totals getting bracketed in the annual report that may not actually be undercounts.

Finally, if you do have a section where you feel counting should permanently cease for lack of waterbird interest (e.g. a field that gets concreted over and turned into a car park!), then let us know and we will deal with this in the database in a slightly different way. In all cases, if you are unsure, then please call the WeBS Office for guidance. As a general rule though, it is often just as important to record an absence of birds as to record their presence.

Submitting counts using Excel

In the last issue of WeBS News (No. 20), we touched upon the issue of electronic submission of counts by way of Excel spreadsheets.

Briefly, most people currently submit their counts on paper forms, although (as discussed on page 4 of this edition) we hope that an increasing number of

counters will use the new online system when it becomes operational. However, a small number of counters send us counts using Excel spreadsheets.

Whilst such sheets are fine in themselves, they are all slightly different from one another. Whilst we can come up with a way of transferring data from the spreadsheet for one site to our database, this procedure will not be the same when we look at the spreadsheet for another site, as different pieces of information will have been stored in different cells in the spreadsheet. This means that it can be very time-consuming to read in all the Excel sheets to the database.

To solve this, we have designed a standard inputting form in MS Excel that you can use if you wish. This form has spaces for all the critical information, plus optional information, all in a standardised format so that we can simply run a single program and read it into the database in a few seconds. If you would like to have a go with this spreadsheet, please contact webs@bto.org or phone us, and we'll send you the latest version and discuss its use with you. One slight problem with the sheet is that to get all the information in place, you ideally need quite a big monitor to display everything comfortably, so counters using older PCs may find it slightly less straightforward.

We recognise that many sites have spreadsheets that have been set up for some time, or that serve purposes additional to those of WeBS. If it is going to cause you as counters a problem switching to our form, then please feel free to stick with what you've got and we'll continue to deal with it. However, if you could have a go with our standard Excel sheet (particularly if you're thinking of setting up something similar yourself for the first time), then this would save us a huge amount of time and effort.

Of course, we would still prefer data to be submitted using the paper forms (or online!) than via Excel, but rest assured that however you want to get your counts to us, we'll get them processed somehow. There are so many WeBS counters, however, that we always need to keep an eye on making the processing as efficient as possible.

Andy Musgrove

....Other News.... Other News....

Satellite-tracking of Light-bellied Brent Geese from Ireland to Canada — The "Supergoose" Project

The East-Canadian High Arctic Light-bellied Brent Goose population undertakes perhaps the longest migration of all the geese. The 4,000 km journey from its wintering grounds in Ireland to the breeding grounds in the Queen Elizabeth Islands of northern Canada involves not only three ocean crossings (from Ireland to Iceland, Iceland to Greenland and Greenland to Canada), but also a 700 km flight over the vast Greenland ice-cap. The geese therefore have to put on the body fat needed to fuel their long flights not only on the wintering and breeding grounds but also at staging sites along the way. Moreover, since large parts of the journey are over habitats that do not provide feeding opportunities (notably sea and glaciers), the availability of food at just a few key staging sites is essential if the birds are to complete migration in both spring and autumn.

In 2005, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust therefore extended its Light-bellied Brent Goose study (initiated in 2002) to include further satellite-tracking of geese from Ireland and Iceland to Canada. This will throw further light not only on the location of staging areas used by the birds, but on how they use these sites and the hazards encountered in different parts of the flyway. In previous years, one goose with a transmitter was found in an arctic fox den and a second in the hut of an Innuit hunter! The work is being undertaken in collaboration with BBC Northern Ireland, which has taken a keen interest in the population, since 99% of the geese winter in Ireland. As in previous years, the study is conducted in collaboration with Irish, Icelandic and Canadian scientists, providing a truly international and coordinated approach to the study and conservation of this species.

The "Supergoose" project kicked off on May 18th 2005, when 23 Brent Geese were caught in Iceland and six were fitted with 30-35g satellite transmitters. Four were battery-powered, on continuous transmission, and 2 solar-powered with data downloads every four days.

Information on their migratory flights and current location is shown in maps on the WWT website, at www.wwt.org.uk/supergoose, and via the BBC website on www.bbc.co.uk/supergoose.

The tracks of four geese fitted with transmitters in Ireland earlier in the year are also shown. By the second week of June, at least seven of the geese had reached the breeding range, two were in west Greenland and one transmitter is thought to have failed.

In addition to catching geese for the transmitter study, about 250 birds were fitted with leg-rings in Ireland during the winter, and over 200 were ringed in Iceland in May. The latter included cannon-netting 90 geese on a golf course near Reykjavik, a record Brent Goose catch in Iceland! Ringing and ring re-sightings form a major part of the study, since these describe Brent Goose movements within Ireland and also determine annual survival rates for the population.

The earlier satellite-tracking work focussed mainly on spring migration, so far less is known about the return flight by the geese in autumn. The two solar-powered transmitters should continue signalling for some time, but the battery-powered transmitters stop transmitting once the batteries expire. An expedition to catch Brent Geese on the breeding grounds in arctic Canada, planned for August 2005, therefore aims to fit at least five more transmitters to geese to record their southbound flight via Greenland and Iceland to Ireland. These tracks will also be shown on the WWT website as they occur.

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Recent taxonomic changes to the British List

The British Ornithologists Union Record's Committee (Taxonomic Sub-Committee) (BOURC – TSC) has recently made two announcements regarding the taxonomy of species that may potentially be recorded during WeBS Core and Low Tide Counts.

....Other News.... Other News....

The species affected are Common and Velvet Scoters and Canada Goose.

As far as the BOURC – TSC is concerned, these changes will become 'official' following the publication of their report in the next issue of Ibis.

Black Scoter *Melanitta nigra*

The two currently recognised subspecies of Black Scoter, the Eurasian *M.n.nigra* and the North American and East Asian *M.n.americana* should now be treated as separate species:

Common Scoter *M.nigra* (monotypic)

Black Scoter M.americana (monotypic)

Both taxa are currently on the British List.

Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca*

Eurasian populations *M.f.fusca* are now considered to be distinct from East Asian *M.f.stejnegeri* and North American *M.f.deglandi* populations, and should be recognised as a separate species:

Velvet Scoter *M.fusca* (monotypic)

White-winged Scoter *M.deglandi* (polytypic, with subspecies *M.d.deglandi* and *M.d.stejnegeri*)

Velvet Scoter is currently on the British List. White-winged Scoter is not yet on the British List, although it has been claimed (most recently off Cleveland in November 2004) and is clearly a potential addition.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

Canada Goose is currently treated as a single polytypic species. Molecular, ecological and behavioural evidence suggest that populations of 'large-bodied' and 'small-bodied' taxa are best treated as separate species:

Greater Canada Goose *B. canadensis* Polytypic, with subspecies: *canadensis*, *fulva*, *interior*, *maxima*, *moffitti*, *occidentalis* and *parvipes*

Lesser Canada Goose *B.hutchinsii* – Polytypic, with subspecies: *hutchinsii*, *leucopareia*, *minima* and *taverneri*

Note that *B.c.parvipes*, often referred to as a 'lesser' Canada Goose, is placed within the Greater Canada Goose group.

Greater Canada Goose is on Category C of the British List on the basis of the established naturalised population. No vagrant 'Canada Goose' had, prior to this recommendation, been assigned to subspecific level. Records will now be reviewed to determine whether any individuals can be assigned to either group.

At the time of writing, supporting information relating to these decisions has not been published. For further information, visit the BOU's website at www.bou.org.uk.

Implications for WeBS counters

Whilst Lesser Canada Goose is not yet on the British List, this "new species" is certainly at large in Britain, at least as an escape and many counters will have come across such birds. From now on, if you come across this species, please add it on a separate line on your count form and use the two-letter code LQ. Please continue to use CG for Greater Canada Goose however (and obviously we'll assume that any unspecified "Canada Geese" refer to Greater Canada Geese!)

Black Scoter has also been recorded for WeBS. If you are lucky enough to record this species, please use the code DX.

Of course, the above information refers to Great Britain, and not to Northern Ireland, which is covered by the Irish List. At the time of writing, the above changes have not been incorporated into the Irish List as listed on www.birdsireland.com. Nevertheless, whatever the 'official' taxonomic viewpoint, we would also welcome records of Lesser Canada Goose from Northern Ireland.

WANTED — ARTICLES FOR THE NEXT EDITION OF *WeBS News*

The WeBS team is already thinking about next year's WeBS News and, in particular, they are keen to include articles from counters and/or LOs. If you are a budding journalist and have a story to tell, perhaps about your site or your experiences as a WeBS counter, start writing now or get in touch with the WeBS Office at the BTO for further information or guidance.

PRIORITY CORE COUNT DATES

2005 – 2006
24 July 2005
21 August 2005
18 September 2005
16 October 2005
6 November 2005
4 December 2005
15 January 2006
12 February 2006
12 March 2006
9 April 2006
14 May 2006
11 June 2006
2006 – 2007
16 July 2006
13 August 2006
17 September 2006
8 October 2006
19 November 2006
17 December 2006
21 January 2007
18 February 2007
18 March 2007
15 April 2007
13 May 2007
17 June 2007

WANTED URGENTLY!! WeBS COUNTERS

We are particularly short of counters in **Co. Armagh** (excl. Loughs Foyle and Beg), **Co. Londonderry, Co. Antrim (smaller inland sites)** and the **South Down Coast** (Northern Ireland). In Wales, counters are needed for the **Cefni/Braint estuaries**. Counters to cover Low Tide Counts at the **Colne Estuary** are also in very short supply so apply now!

Although these are the areas that are particularly urgent at the moment, we are also looking to increase the counter network in general across the UK. Wherever you are, if you are interested in joining the WeBS family, please get in touch with Steve Holloway, he will liaise with your Local Organiser and get you started.

WeBS Alerts

WeBS counters help to reveal the extent of waterbird declines on some of the UK's important wetland sites

WeBS data are often used to guide conservation policy and management. Here Ilya Maclean and Graham Austin describe some of the potential conservation concerns highlighted by the latest WeBS Alerts update.

The UK hosts internationally important numbers of over-wintering waterbirds, and the government has international obligations to protect these birds. Efficient targeting of the finite resources available for protection is crucial. One way this can be done is to identify sites that contain the most important numbers of waterbirds and monitor changes in bird numbers at these sites. Resources can then be directed towards rectifying the biggest problems. Whilst such monitoring is helpful, it does not provide the full answer. Alerting people to declines depends upon placing recent population changes in a long-term context. Also, declines or increases at any given site may not necessarily be due to local site conditions, but could be linked to large-scale population changes, perhaps driven by conditions on breeding grounds. In order to identify whether problems at any given site are responsible for decreasing bird numbers, it is necessary to compare changes at that site with those occurring regionally and nationally. That's where WeBS counts and WeBS Alerts can be used.

Making use of WeBS data, the Alerts System was developed to provide a standardised method of identifying the direction and magnitude of changes in bird numbers at a variety of spatial and temporal scales for a range of waterbird species for which sufficient WeBS data are available (see WeBS News Issue no. 20). Site trends are compared to regional and national trends, allowing distinctions to be drawn between declines due to site-specific factors and those driven by large-scale population changes. Species that have undergone major declines can then be flagged by issuing an Alert. This year's update has seen some important changes in the methodology and has provided some illuminating insights into changes in waterbird numbers.

Previously, the WeBS Alerts process reported trends in bird numbers on a three year rolling basis, on all Special Protection Areas (SPAs) (aside from a few, which haven't been counted) and key Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) designated for waterbirds.

Thus, in any given year, we reported on only one third of sites and subsequently information was potentially several years out of date. We now aim to report on an annual basis. This has been made possible because much of the process is now automated. Complex computer programmes have been developed that pull all the necessary data off the database, spend hours crunching it and churn out ready-formatted graphs and html code which can be put directly onto the internet. This saves many hours of manual data analyses and page formatting. The important parts are still done by people – computers can perform calculations on numbers, but only humans can tell you what they really mean!

One of the biggest conservation issues highlighted by WeBS Alerts is the demise of diving ducks on Lough Neagh and Beg in Northern Ireland. Species such as Pochard (see Figure 1), Tufted Duck and Goldeneye have all undergone precipitous declines triggering High-Alerts. This drop in numbers is particularly worrying given the international importance of this site for these species. To illustrate the scale of the problem, back in the winter of 1995-96, these Loughs hosted almost 30,000 Pochard, about 8% of the northern European population and almost three-quarters of the UK population. In the winter of 2003/04, less than 8,000 were recorded by WeBS counters (Fig. 1).

The story for Tufted Duck is much the same. Numbers peaked in 1997/98, when over 27,000 were recorded (over 2% of the NW European population and almost half the UK population). In the winter of 2003/04, less than 9,000 were recorded. The next stage of course is to find out why, and efforts are ongoing to do this.

It is not only on freshwater sites that diving ducks are declining. The Firth of Forth has also seen some serious declines in Goldeneye numbers. In the winter of 1996-97 this site hosted more than 8,000 (still only two thirds of the numbers recorded in the early 1970s), but have declined such that less than 1,000 have been counted in recent winters. It's not all bad news though. Waders have tended to fare somewhat better than diving ducks, and dabbling duck numbers on some sites have gone through the roof. For example, after a drastic decline in the late-1980s, Pintail numbers on the Wash have increased from 152 in the mid-1990s to over a thousand in recent winters.

At the time of writing, we are in the process of producing the next report. The old report is available online and can be found at http://blx1.bto.org/webs/alerts/index.htm Sometime towards the end of July 2005, the new report will replace this one and be available for downloading. Thanks must go to all the WeBS counters, without whom, important conservation monitoring projects like this one could not be undertaken.

Ilya Maclean and Graham Austin

Figure 1. *Trends in the number of Pochard overwintering on Loughs Neagh and Beg.*