



## CONTENTS

Fitting a round site into a square hole .....	1
Editorial .....	2
Boom time for Bitterns .....	3
Extreme WeBS Counting.....	4
WeBS Counts on your travels.....	5
WeBS Site in the Spotlight: Axe Estuary .....	6
International Swan Census 2010 update .....	7
WeBS Needs You .....	8
LOAC Update .....	9
Gulls allowed .....	10
Survey of summering Greylag Geese ..	12
WeBS Low Tide Counts Update .....	13
GSMP Update .....	14
WeBS Online Update .....	15
Gaps in winter distributions— can you help.....	16
Switching between WeBS Online and Atlas Online .....	17
Jim Wilson 1939–2009.....	17
WeBS News sparks school reunion ....	18
Bewick's Swan Action Plan .....	19
WeBS Core Count Dates 2010–2011.....	19
WeBS team Who's who — 2010 .....	20
Other News .....	20

# WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey  
Issue no. 26 Spring 2010

## Fitting a round site into a square hole

*The Bird Atlas will be the definitive picture of bird distribution within Britain and Ireland, showing every 10-km square where each species breeds or winters, and by submitting your monthly WeBS counts there is a good chance that many of your records are already helping to complete the distribution maps for waterbirds. “Why not all your records?” you ask. Simon Gillings explains...*

**T**he success of the Atlas relies on making the best use of all the surveying and birdwatching that goes on in every corner of these islands.

The nature of WeBS sites and sectors is such that many cross the boundaries of one or more 10-km squares and it becomes impossible for us to unambiguously assign WeBS counts from these sectors into grid squares for mapping. In all, around three quarters of WeBS sites or sectors can be assigned to a single 10-km square, but predictably it tends to be the larger and more important sites where we have problems. So, for instance, Loch Tay, a long narrow site aligned at 45 degrees to the Ordnance Survey national grid, spans five 10-km squares. Internationally important

Rutland Water spans two 10-km squares and the Deben Estuary (Figure 1) has nine sectors of which only four fall entirely within a 10-km square.

If your WeBS site is in, or on the border, of any of the counties or regions listed in Table 1 your records are especially valuable at tetrad resolution. All these counties are undertaking a tetrad (2km × 2km) scale Atlas and if assigning WeBS sectors to 10-km squares was difficult, assigning them to tetrads is impossible for 60% of sites. For example, none of the nine sectors of the Deben Estuary fall entirely within a tetrad, creating over 30 fragments of sectors and preventing us loading WeBS data for that site at the tetrad resolution.



**Figure 1:** Two sites split by grid squares. Left: Rutland Water falls in two different 10-km squares and Right: the Deben Estuary in Suffolk spans three 10-km squares and 15 tetrads and none of its sectors fall entirely within a single tetrad.

Continued on page 2

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 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales, Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.



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Information in this Newsletter is compiled from a variety of sources and does not necessarily reflect the views of the WeBS partner organisations.

Cover photograph: Bewick's Swan by Neil Calbrade

Photographs by Adrian Andruchiw (Bittern), Dawn Balmer (Knot), Lawrence G Baxter (Bittern), Neil Calbrade (Jack Snipe & Black-headed Gull), Rod Calbrade (Whooper Swans), Adrian Dancy (Brent Goose), Jerry Knights (RAFOS team), Terry Morley (WeBS stand), Margaret Sheddan (WeBS Counters), Mike Weston (Scaup), Karen Woolley (Axe Estuary)

Line drawings from Steve Carter (Oystercatchers), Rick Simpson (Grey Heron) & Donald Watson (Coot)

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## Editorial

Following a second consecutive winter with a prolonged freeze, it will be interesting to see what effect this has had on over-winter abundance of waterbirds, although the full extent of this will not be known until all the data are in and can be analysed. WeBS Counters in many areas reported increased numbers of Gadwall at their sites, however, there was no notable influx of species such as Smew, which are traditionally linked with hard weather.

In this issue of WeBS News we have two accounts from the WeBS front line, from Donald Campbell's "WeBS site in the spotlight" feature on the picturesque Axe

Estuary in Devon to John Wells's article about WeBS counts by RAFOS in the often inhospitable far reaches of Scotland. These articles give a good perspective on WeBS Counts through the eyes of the counters and we would like to encourage similar articles for future newsletters. If you would be willing to write a piece, please let me know.

We are currently in the process of loading the 2008/09 counts into the database and would like to thank all our counters for getting their WeBS data in quickly.

**Neil Calbrade**

### Fitting a round site into a square hole

...continued from page 1

So if you count Loch Tay, Rutland Water, the Deben Estuary or any of a number of WeBS sites that spans 10-km squares (or tetrad in atlas counties), you can maximise the value of your WeBS counts, and help the Atlas team a great deal, by submitting Roving Records. You can either submit them on paper (form enclosed) or online using a parallel system to WeBS online (see page 17).

There you can assess which species have yet to be reported in your area and submit your sightings from WeBS.

Finally, a word on the breeding season. If your spring and summer WeBS visits turn up any species that are potentially breeding we are especially keen to receive these records via Roving Records. Redshank displaying over saltmarshes; crèches of Eiders and Shelduck; even Skylarks flushed off nests on sea walls; all are very valuable breeding evidence records that will help to complete distribution maps. These should be submitted with the appropriate evidence of breeding on the Roving Records form.

**Simon Gillings**

Avon	Derbyshire	Isle of Bute	Peterborough
Bedfordshire	Devon	Isle of Wight	SE Scotland
Berkshire	Durham	Kent	Shropshire
Brecknock	Glamorgan	Kinross	Somerset
Buckinghamshire	Gower	Lancashire and North Merseyside	Suffolk
Caithness	Gloucestershire	London	Surrey
Cambridgeshire	Greater Manchester	North Wales	Sussex
Carmarthenshire	Hampshire	Northumberland	Wiltshire
Clyde	Herefordshire	Nottinghamshire	
County Waterford	Hertfordshire	Oxfordshire	
Cumbria	Isle of Arran	Pembrokeshire	

**Table 1:** Counties or regions undertaking local atlases and in need of records at tetrad resolution





# Boom time for Bitterns

*The recent cold weather has highlighted the impact of icy conditions and snow cover on a number of waterbirds in the UK. The plight of wintering Bitterns has been newsworthy, with birds increasingly noticeable through the icy weather as Simon Wotton, national organiser of the Bittern Monitoring Programme explains...*

**T**he UK Bittern population is largely resident, with adult males and most adult females thought to stay mainly at or near their breeding sites all year. Immature birds are likely to disperse from their natal sites, often soon after fledging. From July onwards there is a regular influx of wintering Bitterns, mainly from the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, whose Bittern populations are entirely migratory. Although it is difficult to accurately assess the numbers of wintering migrant Bitterns, in some years this is likely to involve a few hundred birds. Indeed, in recent years, increasing numbers of wintering Bitterns have been recorded at a number of sites across the country, many of which do not currently support booming males. Bitterns are not necessarily restricted to extensive reedbeds in the winter and can often be found in small wetlands with only patches of Phragmites.

Due to the prolonged frozen conditions this winter, Bitterns were much more noticeable across the country, as they had to forage more widely for food when their usual wetland habitats froze. They are known to take a variety of prey items, including small mammals, small birds and



Bittern / Lawrence G Baxter

invertebrates. Given the prolonged frozen conditions, however, it was considered that by providing suitable sized fish at sites across the country it would be possible to increase the survival of Bitterns this winter. Supplementary feeding was undertaken at a number of sites, including Potteric Carr in South Yorkshire, where the photograph below was taken.

From WeBS counts during 2007/08, Bitterns were recorded at 39 sites in England and two in Wales, with the peak count of 26 in January. As a comparison, during 1997/98, Bitterns were recorded at 20 sites in England and one in Wales, and the peak count was 14 in December.

Bitterns have been monitored annually through the breeding season since 1990, under a joint project between RSPB and Natural England. In 2009, there were 82 booming males at 43 sites, compared to the low point of only 11 booming males at seven sites in 1997. With an expanding Bittern population and increasing reedbed creation and management, we are increasingly reliant on landowners, site managers, wardens and local birders to report booming to us at new sites. Please keep an ear out for them this spring, even at sites where they have not been heard for many years.

**Simon Wotton**

To report any booming, or for more information, please contact Simon on 01767 693396 or 07880 787035, or at [simon.wotton@rspb.org.uk](mailto:simon.wotton@rspb.org.uk).



**A Bittern taking advantage of a fish provided during the severe weather in January /**  
Adrian Andruchiw

# Extreme WeBS Counting

*For many, venturing out to their local patch to carry out their monthly WeBS count can sometimes feel like an arduous task when the weather turns. Spare a thought then for the RAFOS team who visit remote areas in all weathers, all in the name of WeBS, as Publicity Officer and Team Leader John Wells explains...*

Between the 5th and 16th February 2009 a team of ornithologists from The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) undertook some serious WeBS recording over approximately 500 miles of remote Scottish coastline. This is the 8th time the RAF have sent a team to undertake Single Visit Core Counts (SVCC) to the Wester Ross, Highland and Sutherland regions of Scotland. The team consists of a mix of service and civilian members of the Society.

Spread between four accommodation sites and using three vehicles, the three teams recorded primarily wildfowl, divers and grebes whilst surveying river estuaries, open sea lochs, inland lochs and remote lochans as part of the national survey, the RAFOS team has the ability to undertake this field study where there are very few local birdwatchers that participate in WeBS. During 2009 we gathered a splendid total; 221 WeBS – SVCC record forms for the dataset.

The team liaise with the WeBS team at the BTO in preparing the survey forms and implementing and reporting on



Counting Whooper Swans on Loch Heilen / Margaret Sheddian

all aspects of the WeBS conducted in Northern Scotland.

In addition to the WeBS counts, the team collects Roving Records (RR) of

all species observed in each 10km square visited in support of 'Bird Atlas 2007 – 2011'. We submitted RR counts from 45 Grid Squares, equating to roughly 450 km<sup>2</sup> of coverage.

RAFOS first named this study expedition 'Winter Duck' and the name has 'stuck' ever since. We feel it sums up the survey well, although the data on over-wintering divers is probably of greater value, and all counts of waterfowl are critical to the WeBS effort, and the WeBS reports back up this assumption. In particular, our eight years' data from Loch Ewe, Loch Gairloch, Little Loch Broom, Loch Gruinard, Applecross and Red Point to Port Henderson of Great Northern and Black-throated Divers have proved to be very significant.

The RAFOS team is grateful for sponsorship support from Air BP International and Aircraft Service International Group. Without the generosity of these two organizations the overall survey aims could not have been met.



RAFOS team in wintry weather near Richonich north of Kinlochbervie / Gp Capt (Rtd) Jerry Knights



We are looking forward to continuing our survey for a 9th year during Jan/Feb 2010. Our base will be the Joint Service Mountain Training Centre at Dundonnell on Little Loch Broom. Look out for the white van emblazoned with our ASIG sponsor's logo or stop one of the three

groups for a chat on survey if you see us in your region. The scenery is stunning but the weather can be atrocious; wintry and cold — but like all counts it can be so rewarding when the day is over and you are back in the warm.

For more on RAFOS visit our web site at [www.rafos.org.uk](http://www.rafos.org.uk)

**John N Wells**  
Publicity Officer and Team Leader  
RAFOS



## WeBS counts on your travels

*Even whilst you are away from your WeBS patch, you can still help us gain a better knowledge of waterbirds using small sites as Chas Holt explains...*

Following the article on counting small sites in last year's WeBS News, we have launched a new leaflet, 'Make your day out count', aimed at encouraging casual one-off counts of small, out of the way sites.

Most of the larger estuaries, reservoirs and lakes in the UK do get counted regularly, but it is the small ponds, lochans and pools that get neglected. Many of these sites may hold species such as Mallards, Little Grebes and Moorhens. Species such as Goosander often favour rivers, which are not well monitored by WeBS and so may go unrecorded. In order to effectively monitor these species, we need to have a better idea of how abundant they are at small wetland sites throughout the wider countryside. This information can then also assist in deriving sensible national population estimates.

Anyone who enjoys the countryside and visits one of these small sites, whether it is a walker in the hills or

a family on an outing to a park lake, could make a big difference by recording the birds they see there.

If you or your friends go on holiday and walk round a small lake, lochan, canal, stream or river, and could spare a few minutes to note any birds you see, even if there are no birds at all, we would like to hear from you.

We aim to distribute these to B&B's and tourist information offices where bird watchers, walkers and day-trippers may pick them up. If you would like copies of this leaflet or know of a suitable place where they could be distributed, please get in touch.

Alternatively, to download a copy of the leaflet, please go to [www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs) and follow the links.

**Chas Holt**



# WeBS Site in the spotlight: Axe Estuary

Estuary Birds (Prater 1981) describes the small Axe Estuary as ‘fairly muddy with moderate areas of brackish and fresh marshes to its west and especially its northern side’.

Much has changed since that time. In 1999 East Devon District Council declared 10.5 hectares of fresh marsh to the west as Seaton Marshes Local Nature Reserve and in the next year appointed Fraser Rush as Nature Reserves Officer. Scrapes and lagoons — “Fraser’s muddy puddles”, were soon attracting birds and the popularity of the reserve led the Council to notify another Local Nature Reserve at Coleford Common, the brackish marsh to the north. The hide there looks out on a lagoon on Coleford Marsh that attracts migrant waders and winter duck. More recently land at Black Hide Marsh, between the two reserves, has been flooded and studded with islands.

The increase in bird records led David Walters (2004) to compile ‘*The Birds of the Axe Estuary Local Nature Reserves 2001–2003*’ which included records from an earlier study quoted in *Devon Birds 1966*. David produced two more reports before joining the editorial team producing ‘*The Axe Estuary and Seaton Bay Bird Report 2006*’ published by East Devon District Council. Editing the 2007 edition, Gavin Haig wrote of ‘*the best year ever for rare*



Axe Estuary / Karen Woolley

species’ but he emphasised that not all birding is about rarities.

My WeBS counts started in 1996 and focused upon the relatively common estuarine species. Gulls as well as wildfowl and waders are counted, but the gull numbers are of limited value because of tidal, weather and roosting movements. However, the attraction of the estuary for this family is shown by the fifteen species recorded in 2007. Steve Waite, who spends several hours each week scanning

through gull flocks, could not resist a huddle of Black-headed Gulls that April and among them found a smaller bird with duskier head and black bill. When it flew it revealed lovely pale underwings: a wonderful first-summer Bonaparte’s Gull. An elusive Audouin’s Gull, hidden among other species 500 metres away eventually showed, ‘a pure white beady-eyed head sporting a stonking (sic) red bill’. Gulls, including Ring-billed, Caspian and Yellow-legged, were the highlights of 2007, while

Species	Devon Birds 1966	Prater 1981	WeBS Peak 1996	Report Peak 2007	2008
Shelduck	70	50	64	139	110
Wigeon	150 – 200	170	205	550	475
Teal	70 – 100		20	130	100
Shoveler	up to 6		1	25	22
Little Egret	4 records		2	39	45
Lapwing	400 – 1000	1020	1850	638	1000
Dunlin	100 – 150	150	34	94	176
Snipe	250		39	80	100
Black-tailed Godwit	Up to 15		3	22	55
Curlew	300 – 400	135	156	190	160
Green Sandpiper	up to 5		1	11	14
Redshank	Only 15 since Winter 1963	60	40	84	200

Counts of selected species between 1966 and 2008



in 2006 three long-staying Alpine Swifts challenged by Purple and Night Herons, White Stork and Spoonbills were birds of the year.

Another highlight of 2006 was a Wigeon; one of 138 caught in a cannon netting session on Seaton Marshes that had been ringed 5000km away in Central Russia. In 2007, 43 species were caught and ringed and in 2008 over a thousand individuals were caught and ringed with the number of Shelduck and Reed Warbler suggesting that normal counts of these species were too low. The results of ringing are particularly interesting when the fortunes of an individual can be followed. A Light-bellied Brent Goose turned up at Coleford Marsh in March 2009; it had been colour ringed in Iceland in 2005. She had returned there for the next two summers, after wintering on Strangford Lough, but in November 2007 she was being 'pushed about' by other Brents in Dublin Bay. This could be why she had joined ten Dark-bellied Brents at Milford-on-Sea in January 2008.

It can be very cold catching birds early on a winter morning; it might be

just as cold on top of a tram taking birdwatchers along the old railway line beside the estuary.

The views of the valley of wheeling wader and duck flocks and the chance of a rarity make up for the cold but it is the sight of Kingfishers that keeps most people happy. Osprey and Marsh Harrier, Grey Phalarope and Snow Bunting have also helped to popularise these trips from Seaton.

In February 2009 a tram load of Councillors, representatives of Natural England and the Environment Agency, and those involved with the Axe Estuary Wetland Project, were there to celebrate the creation of the Black Hole Marsh Lagoon and the award of Higher Level Stewardship grants. A major attraction was the Environment Agency's 'Self Regularity Tidegate', which lets water into the lagoon in such a way that salinity can be controlled to encourage the development of large invertebrate populations to feed the birds. It may take three years to achieve optimum conditions and if all goes well there will be two hides on the lagoon, access along the planned 'Stopline

Way' — (a cycle track that will cross the south-west peninsula from Weston Super Mare to Seaton) and more land acquisition and habitat creation. The Wetland Project and Jurassic World Heritage Coast will be imaginatively interpreted at Seaton's 'Rock and Water' Visitor Centre.

In *'The Book of the Axe'* (4th edition 1875) George Pulman describes '*fleets of water birds rejoicing around the estuary*' but the destiny of '*the rarer seekers after southern shelter is to swell the triumph of the sportsman and rejoice the taxidermist's heart*'.

There is still some shooting around the estuary but the changed attitudes to birds and the environment is daily emphasised by the pleasure people take from the ever-changing world of the Axe.

Although dwarfed in size and number of birds by many other vital British estuaries, this local patch means much to many.

**Donald Campbell**  
**WeBS Counter**

## International Swan Census Update

Despite the heavy snow and icy conditions that dominated Britain and Ireland just days before the dates for the International Swan Census, 16/17 January 2010, feedback from counters suggested that survey coverage was not likely to be severely impacted and so we eventually decided to proceed. Thanks to the weather warming up just in time and the extra special effort made by many of the counters coverage does appear to have been good! We would like to thank everyone who took part, particularly those who took the extra time to visit additional sites, and those who surveyed in difficult conditions.

It does seem, however, that the weather had effected the typical distribution of both species. Numerous reports have been received from sites where swans were absent or only seen in low numbers, particularly where waterbodies were still frozen. However, at this stage it is difficult to draw conclusions about overall numbers as many counts are still awaited. We have,

however, received results from the Ouse Washes — the top site for Whooper and Bewick's Swans — that suggest numbers there were slightly higher than average, as were counts from a few other key sites.

To accurately estimate the population size of Bewick's and Whooper Swans, survey coverage of Britain and Ireland needs to be as complete as possible. Given the weather conditions during the 2010 census, there is a greater than normal chance that some sites, including irregular ones not normally utilised by the swans, were not counted, and as a result the total collated counts may not reflect the true number of birds present at that time. As a consequence, we will be reviewing whether it may be advisable to repeat the census again next year. In order for us to assess whether this is the case, we need to receive your counts as soon as possible so that a prompt decision can be made about the need for this...

We would therefore be extremely grateful if you could return completed

census forms to your Local or National Organiser as promptly as you can. Thank you very much to all of you who have already done so.

The final results will not be available until next year, but we will keep you all informed of any initial findings via the WWT monitoring web pages [www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring](http://www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring).

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# WeBS Needs You...

*Each year over 2000 wetland sites of all habitats are counted by our volunteers, however, there are still many important sites around the country that do not have regular counters. Heidi Mellan explains how you could help...*

**W**eBS is very privileged to have an army of willing volunteers who go out once a month, braving all weather conditions, to complete counts at 'their' sites. The data collected are used to help us estimate population sizes, determine the different trends in bird numbers, map their distribution across the country, and identify sites of national or international importance. However, as our volunteers' circumstances change, perhaps due to retirement from WeBS or a house move, some of our sites are now in need of regular counters. We have listed some of the more important sites opposite.

How can you help? Well, if you are confident at identifying the different species of waterbirds, including swans, geese, ducks, grebes, waders, and herons (counting gulls and terns is optional) and would like to cover one of the sites below please contact either the Local Organiser for the site or us here at the WeBS Office for more details. Interested but can't see a vacant site near you? Please still get in touch as there may be other sites in your area that are also vacant but that we have been unable to list here. There is also more information of this and other sites as they become available on the WeBS website: [www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs).

If you are not confident in your identification skills but would like the chance to help with WeBS please let us know as there may be an experienced counter near to you who would be happy for you to accompany them on a count. Alternatively there may be a BTO training course that might be suitable for you, in fact we are hoping to provide a WeBS training course later this year, keep an eye on the BTO website for more details [www.bto.org/notices/trgworkshops.htm](http://www.bto.org/notices/trgworkshops.htm)

All vacant sites can be found on the WeBS website at [www.bto.org/webs/takepart/vacantsite.htm](http://www.bto.org/webs/takepart/vacantsite.htm)

See the WeBS Website or contact the WeBS office for LO contact details [www.bto.org/webs/takepart/contactlo.htm](http://www.bto.org/webs/takepart/contactlo.htm)

\* These regions currently have no Local Organiser please contact the WeBS Office.

Site	Local Organiser/Region	Notes
Mersey Estuary	Graham Thomason, Mersey Estuary	Several counters needed
Langstone Harbour	John Shillitoe, Hampshire (estuaries/coastal)	
Ribble Estuary	Ken Abram, Ribble Estuary	Additional counters required
Durham Coast	Durham, contact the WeBS Office.	Several sites vacant
Several sites available including Kirkcudbright Bay and Dee Estuary	Andy Riches, Dumfries and Galloway	
Colne Estuary, Ardeley Reservoir & Dagenham Chase Gravel Pits	Essex*	Several sectors available on the Colne Estuary
Balnakiel Farm	Sutherland, *	
Loch Stiapavat	Lewis*	
Cleates and Pirnmill	Jim Cassels, Arran	
Orchardton Bay	Euan MacAlpine	
Forfar Loch	Bruce Lynch, Angus	
Several sites	Allan Brown, Fife	
Furness Coast Road and Sandgate Marsh	Clive Hartley, Morecambe Bay North	Requires some experience
Bowesfield Marsh	Chris Sharp, Cleveland (excl. Tees Estuary)	
Coed Bach, Gwendraeth Estuary	Ian Hainsworth, Carmarthenshire	
Cosheston Pill, Pwllcochran Flats, Eastern Cleddau & Trefloyne Pools	Annie Haycock, Pembrokeshire	
Dawsmere & Hunstanton, The Wash	Jim Scott, The Wash	Experience needed counting large numbers of birds
Stiffkey Fen, North Norfolk Coast	Michael Rooney, North Norfolk Coast	
Godmanchester Gravel Pits, Block Fen Gravel Pits & Mepal Gravel Pits	Bruce Martin, Cambridgeshire (incl Huntingdonshire)	
Seventy Acres Lake, River Lee Country Park	Cath Patrick, Lee Valley	
Maldon to Tollesbury	John Thorogood, Blackwater Estuary	7/8 sites needing counters
Foulness	Chris Lewis, Thames Estuary	Experience needed plus ability to be able to walk for 3-5 hours to cover this site
Thatcham Marsh Gravel Pits	Gavin Foster, Berkshire	
Radwell Mill & Stanborough Lake	Jim Terry, Hertfordshire	
Poole Harbour	Harold Lilley, Poole Harbour	Several sectors available
Ballysaggart Lough	Co. Tyrone*	
R. Lune – Mansergh Hall to Kirkby Lonsdale	Jean Roberts, River Lune & Morecambe Bay South	
Morecambe Bay – North Fylde; other sites also available	Jean Roberts, River Lune & Morecambe Bay South	2+ counters required
Sector 7 Orford Town Marshes and the River Ore	Ian Castle, Alde Complex (can provide training/help to get counters started)	2 counters required
Sector 2 Iken Marshes and Sector 6 Sudbourne Marshes	Ian Castle, Alde Complex (can provide training/help to get counters started)	2nd counter required to cover both sites
Roadford Reservoir	Pete Reay, Devon	
Ruxley Gravel Pits	Helen Baker, Greater London	
Shear Water and Westbury Ponds	Julian Rolls, Wiltshire	



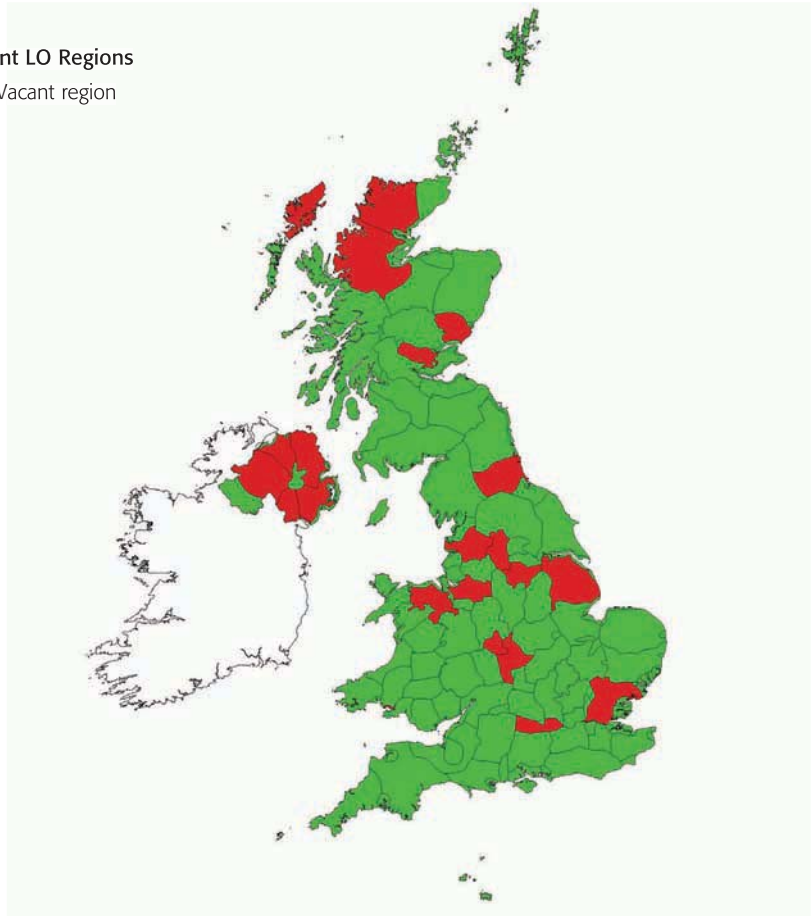
# LO Changes

We would like to thank Catherine Ross (Oxfordshire South), Alan Hetherington (Co. Londonderry), Marcus Craythorne (North Lincolnshire Inland), Rob Nottage (East Glamorgan), Wayne Morris (East Glamorgan), Graham Hobin (Cornwall), James Gloyne (Isle of Wight), Robin Allen (West Lancashire Inland), Matt Darby (West Midlands), Frank Carroll (Carlingford Lough), Steve Foster (Loughs Neagh & Beg) and Jon Carter (Morecambe Bay South), for all their hard work as Local Organisers and whom have retired from the scheme within the last year. Our special thanks go to Jim and Val Wilson (Glasgow/ Renfrewshire/Lanarkshire & the Clyde Estuary) for their many years of dedicated work as Local Organisers. Sadly Jim passed away in July last year and Val, very kindly, took on all Local Organiser responsibilities until John Clark took over at the beginning of the year.

We would also like to thank Ian Lees who has taken over as LO for Oxfordshire South; Ilya Maclean who has taken over in Cornwall (excl. Tamar Complex); Steve Turner who has taken over in Staffordshire, Harriet Dennison who has taken over the Mid-South section of the Humber Estuary; Jim Baldwin who has taken over as LO for the Isle of Wight; Tom Clare who has taken on West Lancashire (inland); Jean Roberts who has kindly taken on a second region and is now LO for Morecambe Bay (South); Gavin Foster who has taken over in Berkshire; Bruce Lynch who has taken over as LO in Angus; and John Clark who, as previously mentioned, is the new LO for Glasgow/Renfrewshire/Lanarkshire & the Clyde Estuary.

## Vacant LO Regions

■ Vacant region



## LOAC Update

We are pleased to announce that Ian Lees, who has recently taken over as Local Organiser for Oxfordshire South, has also taken on the position of Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) Representative for the Midlands Region.

The next meeting of the WeBS LOAC is scheduled to be held in Thetford at the Nunnery on 21st July 2010.

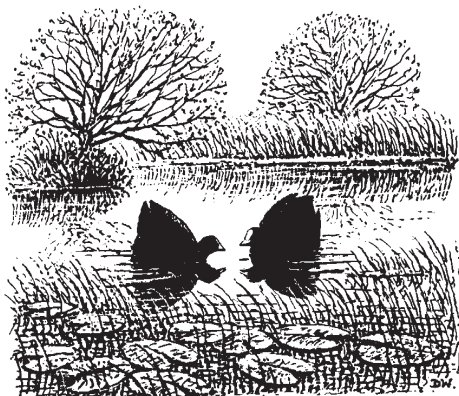
The minutes from previous meetings are available via the website at [www.bto.org/webs/resources/LOAC/](http://www.bto.org/webs/resources/LOAC/)

We are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future.

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS which you would like to be brought to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your local organiser or LOAC Regional Representative listed below.

**Heidi Mellan**

**WeBS Counter Network Organiser**



**Southwest England – Pete Reay**  
([peter.p.j.reay@btinternet.com](mailto:peter.p.j.reay@btinternet.com))

**Eastern England – Nick Mason**  
([nick.mason@btinternet.com](mailto:nick.mason@btinternet.com))

**Midlands – Ian Lees**  
([ianlees@me.com](mailto:ianlees@me.com))

**Northern England – Dave Shackleton**  
([dave.shack@care4free.net](mailto:dave.shack@care4free.net))

**South and East Scotland – Neil Bielby**  
([n.bielby@sky.com](mailto:n.bielby@sky.com))

**North and West Scotland – John Armitage**  
([jsa@ornquest.plus.com](mailto:jsa@ornquest.plus.com))

**Wales – Rhion Pritchard**  
([rhion678pritchard@btinternet.com](mailto:rhion678pritchard@btinternet.com))

**Northern Ireland – Vacant**  
(please contact WeBS Office if interested)

# Gulls Allowed

*Love them or hate them, gulls are a conspicuous feature of most WeBS Counts. However, as counting of gulls for WeBS is optional, Niall Burton looks at how best we can assess just how many gulls winter here...*

The recent 2003/04–2005/06 Winter Gull Roost Survey ('WinGS') has highlighted the importance of the UK for wintering gulls. Over 3.75 million gulls of five species — Black-headed Gull *Chroicephalus ridibundus*, Common Gull *Larus canus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*, Herring Gull *L. argentatus* and Great Black-backed Gull *L. marinus* — were estimated to be wintering inland or on the coast of Great Britain, with a further 69,000 in Northern Ireland, 27,000 in the Channel Islands and 12,000 on the Isle of Man. The survey has provided new national population estimates and also, for Great Britain, new 1% thresholds for use in identifying sites of national importance for these species (Banks *et al.* 2007).

## Comparison with monitoring by WeBS

Following this survey, the BTO undertook a review of the feasibility and worth of annual monitoring of (key) gull roost sites and in doing so made comparison with the current monitoring of wintering gulls by WeBS Core Counts (Burton *et al.* 2007).

National Winter Gull Roost Surveys have traditionally taken place every 10 years, with the aim of generating winter population estimates from single counts undertaken in January. Typically, counts of gulls at roosts provide the best means to estimate total winter populations, as in contrast to the day-time when birds may be distributed widely across a variety of foraging habitats, roosting gulls tend to be restricted to wetland habitats (typically large inland water bodies or coastal near-shore waters). Thus sizeable proportions of species' populations may be counted at a relatively few key sites.

Annual monitoring of gull roosts would potentially provide two main benefits:

- i. Better identification of nationally or internationally (wintering) sites; and
- ii. Indexing of species' UK winter populations.



Black-headed Gull / Neil Calbrade

Comparison of WinGS and WeBS Core Counts indicated that many more sites were identified as holding nationally or internationally important numbers of gulls using WinGS counts than using WeBS Core Counts (61 cf 26). This is primarily because the WeBS Core Counts are less comprehensive in their coverage of gull populations. In the case of Black-headed Gull, for example, a total of 1,176,011 birds was recorded in the UK by WinGS in comparison to an equivalent figure from WeBS Core Counts in 2003/04 of 239,353 birds. These figures compare to an overall winter population estimate from WinGS of ca. 2.2 million.

There are two main reasons for this difference — first, because WeBS Core Counts are usually made in the day-time when many gulls may be feeding away from monitored wetland sites and, second, because the counting of gulls during Core Counts is optional. The difference in numbers counted by the two surveys is most apparent for inland sites, such as reservoirs, which, though they may support large nocturnal roosts, may be little used for foraging in comparison to terrestrial habitats such as farmland or at landfill sites.

It is also notable that many important sites for gulls are included in the current

WeBS annual report (Holt *et al.* 2009) because of WinGS counts from 2003/04, and in the next report many of these sites will no longer be included in the species tables due to the lack of more recent roost counts.

Indices produced using WinGS (Banks *et al.* 2009) and those that could potentially be produced from WeBS Core Counts are broadly similar for some, but not all regions and species — see examples in Figure 1 — but the latter may be unrepresentative because of less comprehensive coverage of populations, particularly in inland regions. The indices from WinGS are, of course, presently limited by the fact that counts have only occurred at ten-year intervals and are based on single counts each winter.

## Possibilities for future monitoring

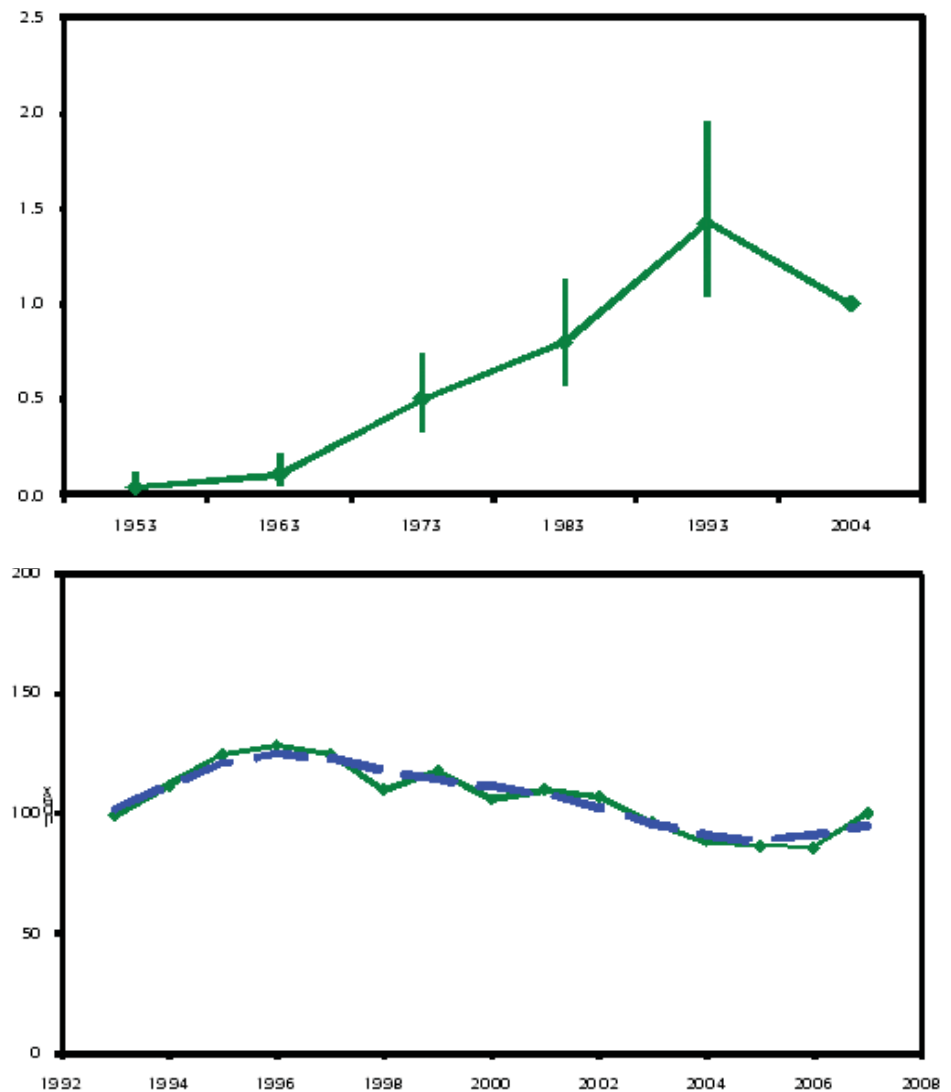
The feasibility study suggested that many (but not all) important gull roost sites were already counted on a regular basis (i.e. at least once a year) — although not all such counts are presently submitted to WeBS — and that there was considerable interest among both WinGS and WeBS counters in submitting more regular gull roost count data in the future.

The study concluded that annual monitoring of gull roosts would be most successful in fulfilling the first benefit, i.e. in providing better identification of nationally or internationally (wintering) sites, as it would allow the calculation of five-year peak means similar to those used currently for waterbirds from WeBS counts, which would be more representative of the numbers regularly occurring at sites.

Indexes produced from annual gull roost counts would potentially be more representative of each species' population than those produced using WeBS Core Counts, though there would be limits as to whether trends could be produced for all species at national, regional and site-specific scales. For both purposes, a minimum requirement would be a single count undertaken each January.

The BTO is currently exploring funding options for setting up and running a national annual gull roost survey – one possibility is to set up a scheme through *WeBS online*. However, in the meantime we would greatly encourage all WeBS volunteers to count gulls, whether as part of their regular WeBS Core or Low Tide Counts, or at roosts to be submitted to WeBS either through the website as “*Casual and Roost Counts*”, or on supplementary count forms, which available from the WeBS office or to download from the website.

Niall Burton  
BTO



**Figure 1.** Indices for the numbers of Black-headed Gulls wintering in northeast England produced using WinGS counts from January 1953 to January 2004 (top graph: after Banks *et al.* 2009) and an equivalent figure produced from WeBS Core Counts for 1993/94 to 2007/08 (bottom graph) and both showing a recent decline (see Burton *et al.* 2007).

## Acknowledgements

WinGS was funded by English Nature (now Natural England), the Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Environment & Heritage Service (Northern Ireland), the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Northumbrian Water Ltd. Thanks are due to the hundreds of counters who took part in the survey between 2003/04 and 2005/06, as well as BTO Regional Representatives and others who helped to co-ordinate the survey locally and Alex Banks and John Calladine who acted as national organisers on the survey. Our thanks to for all the WeBS volunteers who count gulls as part of their regular Core or Low Tide Counts. The study into the feasibility of a national annual gull roost survey was funded by Natural England.

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# Survey of summering Greylag Geese in Scotland, 2008–09

Greylag Geese *Anser anser* breed across a wide area to the north and west of the Great Glen, principally on the Outer Hebrides, Inner Hebrides (Coll & Tiree) and, increasingly,

thought to occur, in areas to the south and east of the Great Glen. A random stratified survey of another 246 out of 754 lochs >5 ha and 248 out of 4,636 lochs <5 ha was also carried out. Habitat categories,

Britain (including Scotland) and numbers were increasing at an average per annum increase of 9.4% (Austin *et al.* 2007) — similar to the figure calculated for re-established Greylag Geese using these data. The annual index based on WeBS data shows a period of continued increase in numbers since the 1990s (Austin *et al.* 2008) and, assuming a continued rate of annual increase (9.4% per annum), the number of re-established Greylag Geese in Britain is likely to have risen to c.50,000 birds by 2008.

Combining that estimate with the number of Greylag Geese recorded in north and west Scotland in the current study (c.34,000 birds) suggests the total number of Greylag Geese summering in Britain is probably c.84,000 birds.

We would like to thank all the volunteers that helped with the survey, including many WeBS counters who gave up their time.

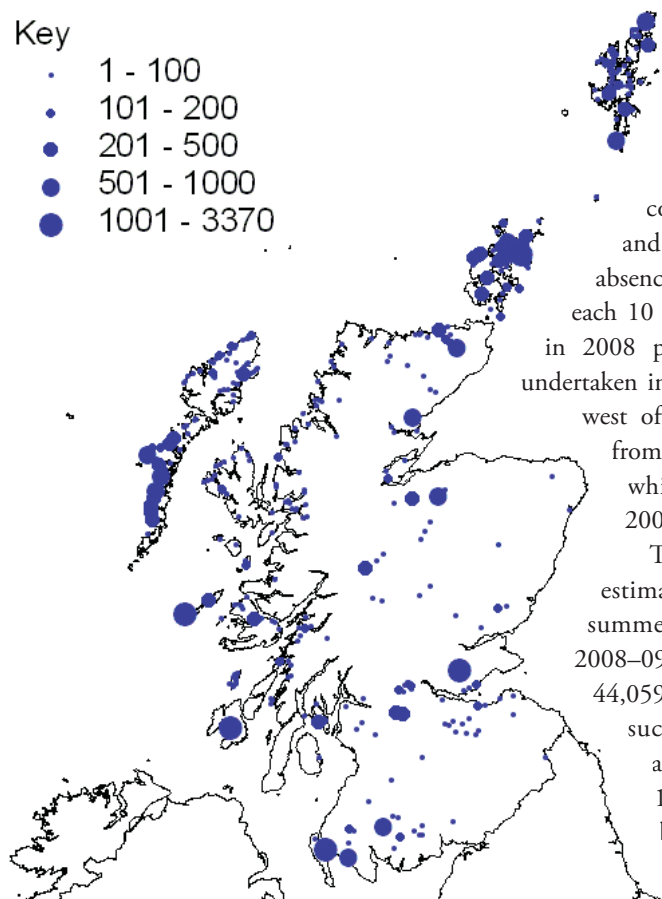
Carl Mitchell  
WWT

## References

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## Key

- 1 - 100
- 101 - 200
- 201 - 500
- 501 - 1000
- 1001 - 3370



in the Northern Isles. From a low point of c. 500 birds in the 1930s, the species has increased 40 fold in Scotland in 60 years. This conservation success story was due to a combination of direct conservation measures, favourable changes in agricultural systems and hunting mortality not keeping pace with recruitment. Furthermore, the re-establishment of populations in the south and east of Scotland in the 1930s and 1950/60s started a period of expansion there. In order to better assess the current abundance and distribution of the species in Scotland, a simultaneous comprehensive survey of summering Greylag Geese throughout Scotland was undertaken in 2008/09.

In summers 2008 and 2009, counts of moulting Greylags were carried out at 53 lochs where moult gatherings were

or strata, used in the stratification process were based on altitude, the proportion of water cover, the proportion of woodlands (both conifer and broadleaf) and the recorded presence/absence of breeding records in each 10 km square. In addition, in 2008 post-moult counts were undertaken in areas to the north and west of the Great Glen, apart from Caithness and Shetland which were counted in 2009.

The derived population estimate of Greylag Geese summering in Scotland in 2008–09 was 47,405 birds (range 44,059 to 51,763). Breeding success was estimated at 23.1% in 2008 and 13.3% in 2009 (the later based on a smaller sample size) and the mean brood size was 3.19 and 3.19 goslings per successful

pair, respectively. Using previous surveys as a baseline (Mitchell *et al.* 2000, Brown & Dick 1992), the annual rates of increase were thus estimated at 11.9% in north and west Scotland (1997 to 2008/09) and 9.7% in south and east Scotland (1991 to 2008/09).

The largest concentrations were found on Orkney (c.10,000 geese), the Uists (5,948), Shetland (4,133 – 5,133), Tiree (3,370), Harris & Lewis (1,912) and Islay (c.1,500). The figures for post-moult gatherings in late August represent *minimum* counts. In mainland Scotland, the largest gatherings of moulting Greylag Geese were found at Black/White Lochs combined, Stranraer, (1,395 geese) and Loch Leven, Perth & Kinross (1,014).

In 2000, there was an estimated c.24,500 re-established Greylag Geese in

# WeBS Low Tide Counts: Update

The winter of 2009–10 was relatively quiet for Low Tide counting, with just 16 different sites being covered under the scheme. Portland Harbour in Dorset was covered this winter for the first time.

Other sites counted were the Adur, Firth of Forth (partial), Medina, Stour, Orwell, Langstone Harbour, Strangford Lough, Killough Harbour, Burry Inlet, Carmarthen Bay, Breydon Water, Belfast Lough, Kingsbridge Estuary, Poole Harbour and Northwest Solent (partial).

The winter of 2010/11 however promises to be a very busy time for Low Tide Counts, with some large sites such as Humber, Solway and Thames estuaries, Southampton Water, Traeth Lafan and Crouch/Roach Estuaries either being proposed or confirmed so far.



Knot / Dawn Balmer



Low Tide sites counted in 2009/10

We will soon begin the process of organizing counts for 2010/11, but these are just a handful of the estuaries we will be looking to get counted. We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme, so please contact the WeBS office (email: [lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org)) if you have time to count one or more sectors once a month between November and February and would like to take part.

Don't forget that it is now possible to input your Low Tide Counts online in the same way as for core counts. Once you are registered for WeBS online, just contact us to let us know which site and sectors you count and we can set you up.

We are in the process of loading the 2008–09 data from the 23 sites covered into the database, the results of which will be produced in *Waterbirds in the UK 2008/09* due later this year.

Neil Calbrade



# Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme Update

*Colette Hall gives a summary of the surveys conducted in 2008/09 through the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP)...*

**P**ink-footed Geese reached our shores early and on mass in autumn 2008, with rapid increases witnessed at several major sites and numbers building to produce the highest population estimate to date...over 351,000! The top five sites/regions alone held nearly 64% of the population, including Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeen), West Water Reservoir (Borders) and South West Lancashire. In fact, during November the latter region saw the highest numbers ever recorded there, when a total of 90,500 birds were counted. The long-term trend for the Pink-foot population is one of continued increase, with their stable breeding success presumably more than compensating for annual deaths.

Not far behind the Pink-feet were the **Icelandic Greylags**, the majority heading for the North of Scotland, in particular Orkney, where a record count of nearly 68,400 was made in December. Including counts from Iceland, Southwest Norway and the Faroe Islands, the population was estimated to be just below 98,300, slightly lower than the previous season but still notably higher than a decade ago, when the population was in decline. It seems that this shift in distribution to Orkney has resulted in reduced hunting mortality that has reversed the fortunes of this population.

In Scotland, the Icelandic birds joined the resident **Northwest Scotland population of Greylags**, which are regularly monitored at key sites such as the Uists, Outer Hebrides, and Tiree, Inner Hebrides. Numbers were lower than the previous year, and it is possible that the added mortality from licensed shooting in both areas has halted the gradual increase seen over the last ten to twenty years.

Accurately assessing the number of Icelandic Greylags in Britain remains increasingly difficult due to mixing with British-breeding birds. However, results from the dedicated 2008–09-summer census in Scotland have given us greater confidence in estimating these population sizes as we now have a better understanding



Light-bellied Brent Goose / Adrian Dancy

of how many non-Icelandic birds are present. More information on the results from this census can be found on page 12.

On 1 October, a number of observers witnessed a spectacular mass arrival of **Svalbard Barnacle Geese** at Budle Bay, Northumberland. That night, these birds moved on to the Solway Estuary, where numbers rapidly increased from 4,500 to 23,000 over the next seven days. By mid October, almost the whole population had arrived at the Solway, when the size was estimated to be just below 30,000 individuals — yet another record count for the population.

At least 37,600 **Light-bellied Brent Geese** made it across the Atlantic to Ireland and, as always, the majority stopped at Strangford Lough during the autumn. Given their reasonably high breeding success during 2008, numbers were expected to have been in excess of 40,000, but it is possible that a number of birds from this East Atlantic High Arctic population had not arrived in the UK at the time of census.

A complete census of all **Greenland White-fronted Goose** wintering haunts produced a population estimate of nearly 23,200, just fractionally lower than that of

the previous year. Since 2006, White-front numbers have remained relatively stable, welcome relief from the rapid decline experienced since the population peaked in 1999. It would, therefore, appear that the removal of autumn hunting in Iceland has helped stabilise their numbers as previously it had been an additional source of mortality during a long period of poor breeding success.

**Dark-bellied Brent Geese** suffered another poor breeding season, with observers recording very few young amongst the wintering flocks. Lemmings — an alternative food source for predators at the breeding grounds — were, not that abundant, which together with the colder than average summer in the Arctic will have greatly influenced the Brents' success.

Similarly affected by these Arctic conditions is the breeding success of **European White-fronted Geese**. Records from two of their main wintering sites, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire and North Warren, Suffolk, indicated that the breeding success of birds wintering in the UK, 13.2%, was below average in 2008, although the sample size was only small with fewer than 800 birds aged.



Our small but site-faithful flocks of **Taiga Bean Geese**, totalling just under 400 individuals, returned to their favourite wintering sites at the Slamannan Plateau, Falkirk, and the Yare Valley, Norfolk, counts at both sites being slightly lower than during the previous winter.

And finally, counters reported an above average number of **Whooper Swan** cygnets amongst the UK wintering flocks, but for the **Bewick's** it was an exceptionally

poor breeding season with very few young observed at all three main locations; WWT Slimbridge, WWT Martin Mere/Ribble Estuary and the Ouse Washes. Whilst Whooper numbers continue to increase, Bewick's are currently in rapid decline. Results from the 2010 International Swan Census are, therefore, eagerly awaited to determine just how well the swans have fared since the last census in 2005.

Full species accounts and reports, along with more information about the GSMP, can be found on the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust's website at [www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring](http://www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring), where it is also possible to download the annual GSMP newsletter, GooseNews, and other more detailed reports.

Colette Hall

WWT Species Monitoring Unit

## WeBS Online Update

The number of WeBS counters who submit their counts online continues to grow at a steady rate. Nearly 1,250 counters now submit their WeBS counts in this way and as Figure 1 shows, these submissions now account for about two-thirds of all submissions, with nearly 20,000 visits in 2008/09.

However, as Figure 2 shows, plotting the time delay between observation and submission for all BTO online surveys shows that WeBS submissions clearly lag behind the other surveys. We do not know why this should be, but would like to encourage counters to submit their counts as soon as possible after each count. This would help us in that data would be available to use sooner and we are less likely to have long delays at the end of the year when we have to chase outstanding records, especially for key sites, for use in the annual report. It would also benefit the counter who would be able to validate their records and check for any errors more effectively whilst the count is still fresh in the mind, rather than several months later.

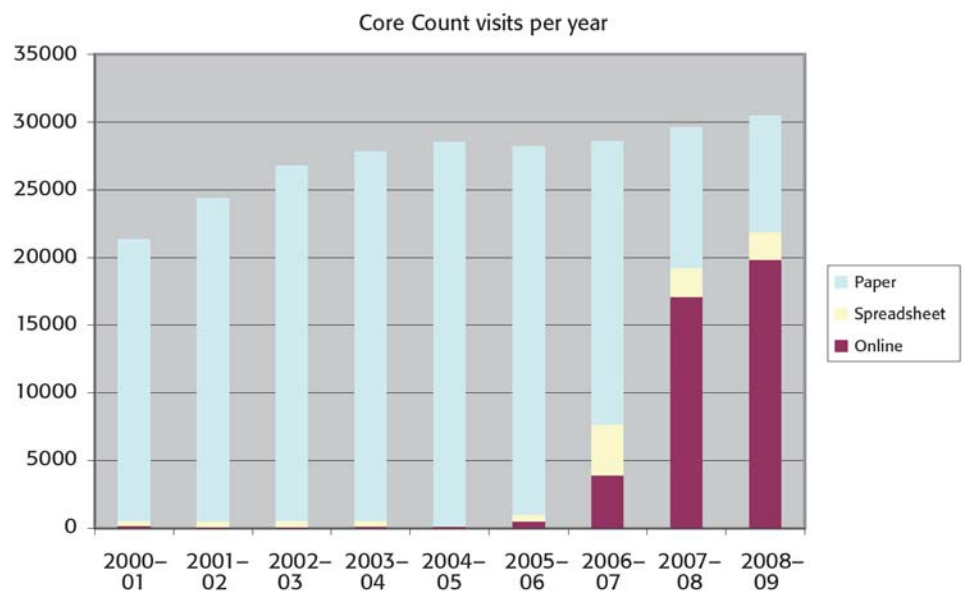


Figure 1

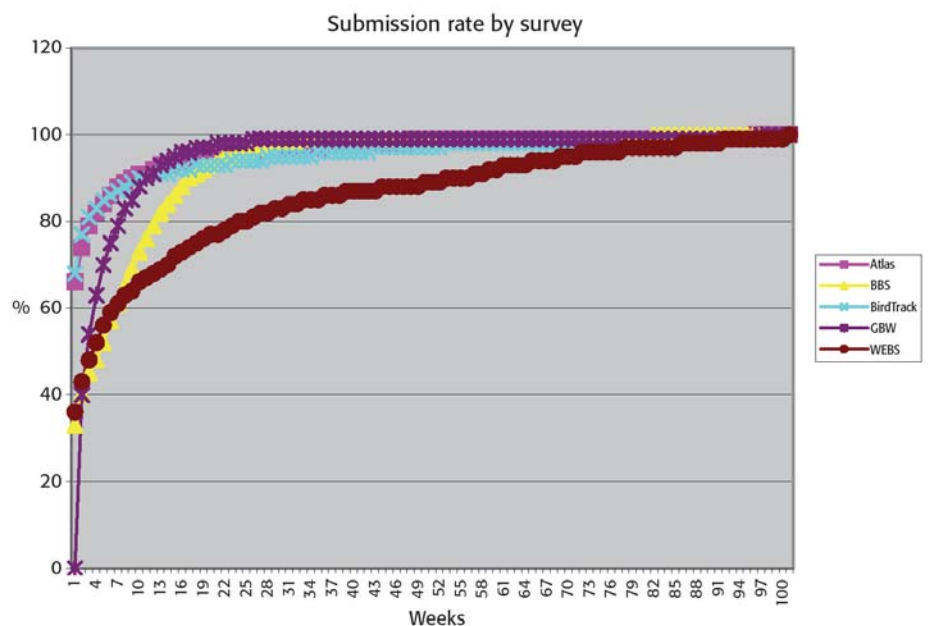


Figure 2



# Gaps in winter distributions – can you help?

By now, the third winter of fieldwork for the Bird Atlas 2007–11 will have finished and we will be looking forward to starting atlasing for the breeding season on 1 April. Coverage in the winter has been good across much of Britain and Ireland although there are still gaps for many species in the remote and difficult to access areas and those areas with few birdwatchers. The winter distribution maps for common and widespread species on the website ([www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net)) tend to show gaps only where coverage has been poor or are mountainous areas.

There are a number of species where WeBS counters can help to fill gaps, either by submitting Roving Records from their monthly WeBS counts or from their general birdwatching notes. Maps for some scarce or hard-to-find species such as Scaup, Smew, Jack Snipe and Water Rail have gaps — can you help fill them? The cold snap in December 2009/January 2010 saw some displacement of waterfowl with unusual grebes, divers and ducks turning up at inland lakes, lochs and reservoirs. The atlas is keen to gather all these records. Can you help to fill any gaps for these species?

The distribution map for Scaup (Fig 1) is similar to the 1981/84 Winter Atlas map, although we have more records from the Norfolk Broads and the well-watched lakes and reservoirs in the Bristol area. The last winter atlas also recorded two ten-day periods of severe weather in December 1981 and January 1982.

Jack Snipe is a bird rarely encountered, most often flushed whilst birding, than viewed from the comfort of a hide. They are sparsely distributed across Britain (Fig 2) although there are some areas where they have been well recorded. In Ireland they are very thin on the ground, but almost certainly under-recorded.

Records can be submitted as Roving Records to [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net) or to BirdTrack [www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net) if you can define your site at the 1km, tetrad or 10-km level. On sites which overlap 10-km boundaries, records are best submitted as Roving Records.



Jack Snipe / Neil Calbrade



Fig 1: Scaup

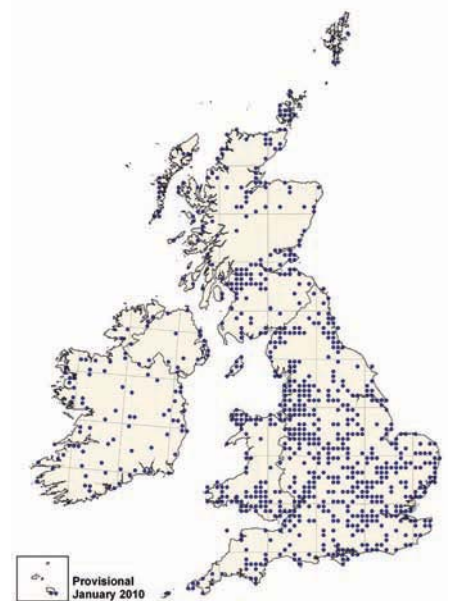


Fig 2: Jack Snipe

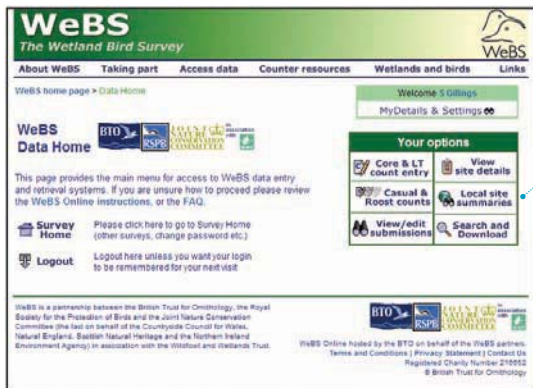


Scaup / Mike Weston



# Switching between WeBS Online and Atlas Online to submit roving records is very straightforward...

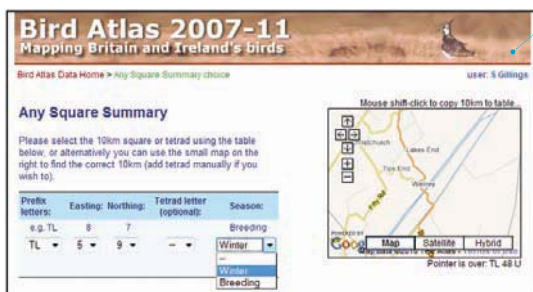
Jim Wilson  
1939–2009



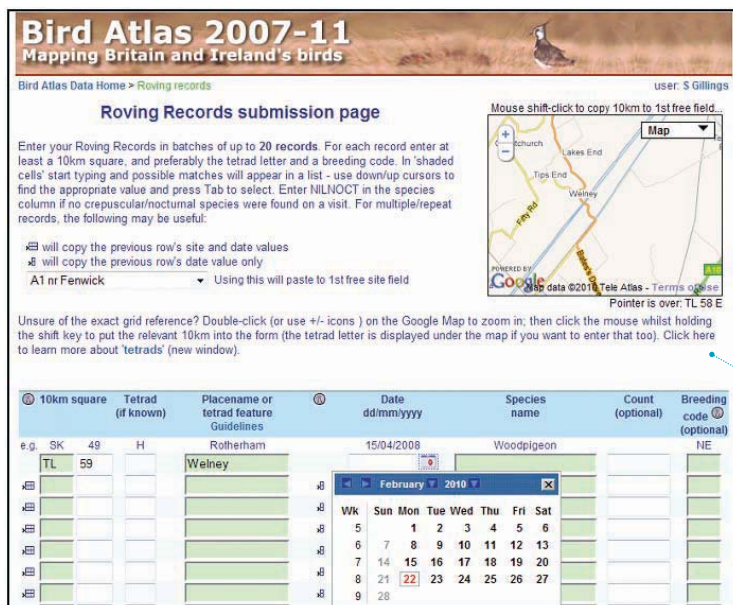
**Step 1** Click on Survey Home to see the other surveys you can do



**Step 2** Click Set up or Go to Bird Atlas



**Step 3** There is also a useful summary called "Any Square Summaries" which lets you see which species have already been seen in a particular 10-km or tetrad. You can easily check if you have seen a species during WeBS that is currently missing from the Atlas, and then add it to fill the gap.



**Step 4** Click Add Roving Records. You can use the map to zoom in to your location and find the grid reference, and then add as many species as you wish. Counts are optional, and during the breeding season evidence of breeding (e.g. birds singing, carrying food, fledglings) is especially valuable.

Sadly Jim Wilson died on 8 July 2009. Jim and his wife Val have been two of our most dedicated and hard-working WeBS Organisers since taking over in the Clyde area in 1996. It is thanks to their tireless efforts that over 140 sites are now regularly covered by a WeBS team of around 45 counters.

Val has been the public face of Clyde WeBS over the years, whilst Jim was the driving force behind the scenes. He was a modest man of many talents, and relished the digital challenge that most of us oldies attempt with trepidation. Data was captured for both WeBS and various other recording schemes organised by the Clyde SOC, including an impressive gazetteer of 2188 place names.

Both Jim and Val were exemplars in making the most of life after retirement. It was after leaving their jobs as architect and classics teacher respectively, that together they embarked upon a plethora of extra mural educational activities, which didn't take long to turn into a passion for birdwatching. Whether holidaying in a far-off land, or local patching at Balgray Reservoir, Jim and Val clearly enjoyed their life together.

As far as WeBS was concerned, Jim was not just a desk-based organiser. He and Val actively covered many sites themselves, including a sector of the Clyde estuary. They saw the value of providing feedback to maintain the enthusiasm of volunteers, and infected many with their own enthusiasm. In doing so they developed a number of friendships, which have helped Val to come to terms with her sad loss. Jim will always be remembered by those who knew him, and always as part of that close partnership we all came to know as "Jim and Val". We wish Val well for the future.

Iain Gibson



# WeBS News sparks school reunion

Soon after my name appeared in the 2009 *WeBS News* (as LOAC representative for Southwest England), I received a surprise email from Peter Kitchener, a Norfolk WeBS counter, who had recognized my name and decided to make contact. We had both been keen members of the Bedford School Natural History Society, but hadn't seen each other or been in touch since about 1962.

An exchange of emails followed, and we eventually met up when I was in Thetford for last July's LOAC meeting. As well as visiting Peter's delightful WeBS site at Marlingford and catching up on nearly half a century of news, we began to wonder what had become of other members of the old BSNHS. We had lost contact with all but a few, so plans were made to try to find some of the others.

A combination of memory and a list of names in a copy of the BSNHS 1st Annual Report (1959–1960), produced about 40 members from the 1958–1965 period and, with the help of the Old Bedfordian's office, we started to try to contact them. Surprisingly, about 20 responded and provided potted life histories and updates on their natural history interests. By chance, our attempts to round up the former members coincided with an official school reunion at Bedford in late November 2009.

Eight of us made a brief appearance at this, but also used the occasion to visit some old haunts, Stewartby Clay Pit and Bedford Sewage Farm, as well as nearby Paxton Pits Nature Reserve which didn't exist in the 1960s (and in any case would probably have been too far away for a Sunday cycle ride in winter!).



Four former members of Bedford School Natural History Society at Stewartby Clay Pit November 2009 – from L to R Pete Reay, Peter Kitchener, Steve Haggie & John Marlow / David Purser

Fired by the success of the initial reunion, another meeting has been arranged at Cley and Upton Fen in May of this year. Cley was chosen because, fifty years ago, on 1 May 1960, it was the destination for the BSNHS annual outing. The highlight was a Kentish Plover, but coypu were also described as 'devastatingly abundant' and it was a particular privilege to watch the legendary R A Richardson catch and ring a Whitethroat at the Cley observatory.

It is clear that, for some of us at least, our brief acquaintance with natural history at school has had a big influence on developing these interests later in life. This makes school natural history societies themselves an interesting subject of study, and another plan we have is to compile a history of the BSNHS from the various reports available. We have established that it was formed in 1942 as a section of the Alchemists and broke away two years

later. It was still active in 1965, but we don't yet know when it eventually fizzled out. Certainly, and disappointingly, there is no natural history society at the school today.

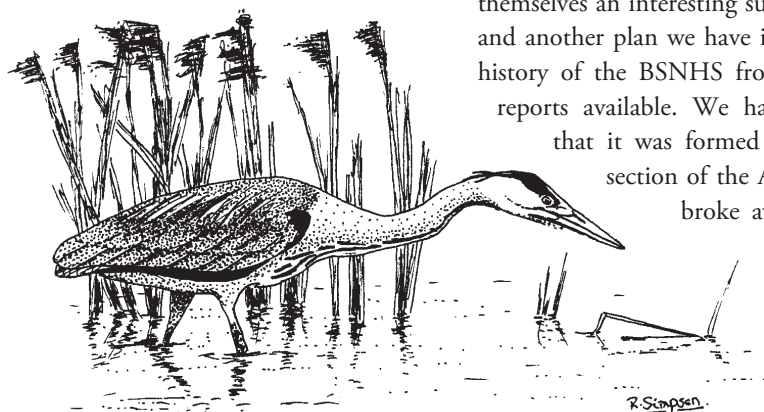
It is particularly appropriate that it was WeBS that provided the catalyst for this reunion, since it was 50 years ago, that several of us started to become involved in the National Wildfowl Counts (one of the WeBS predecessors) by cycling to sites such as Stewartby Clay Pit, Bedford Sewage Farm, Southill Park and Wyboston Gravel Pits to count the ducks.

Although we no longer cycle to our sites, at least two of us are still counting!

Peter Kitchener, at [birdykitch@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:birdykitch@yahoo.co.uk), would be very happy to hear from any former members of BSNHS, from any era, who have not already been contacted.

**Pete Reay**

If you have any similar stories or anecdotes relating to your time or experiences as a WeBS Counter, please do get in touch, we are always happy to hear from you



# Bewick's Swan Action Plan

There has been increasing concern regarding the conservation status of the NW European Bewick's Swan (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) population in recent years, with counts made during International Swan Censuses and International Waterbird Censuses (coordinated by Wetlands International) indicating decreasing numbers at the swans' main wintering sites throughout the flyway. A group of 30 Bewick's Swan experts therefore convened at a workshop in Saint Petersburg, Russia, during September 2009 to develop a Flyway Action Plan for the conservation of this population under the auspices of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). The workshop was organised jointly by Wetlands International, the WI-IUCN SSC Swan Specialist Group and the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, and was hosted by Lenoble Priroda (the local project partner in Saint Petersburg).

Results of the most recent (at the time) coordinated international census were presented at the workshop. These confirmed a decline of 26% from the peak count of 29,000 in 1995, to 21,500 in 2005. Subsequent discussions revolved around the population trends, potential factors contributing to the decline and conservation measures needed to stabilise

and increase the population size. The workshop drew several key conclusions and highlighted the importance of continued population monitoring through co-ordinated international counts. Knowledge gaps were identified including, in particular, the main driving force behind the decline. Further study into the causes underlying variation in survival and breeding success, were considered necessary to identify factors contributing to population change.

Given the confirmed decline, the main purpose of this Action Plan will be to identify mechanisms for halting and reversing this. The critical importance of sustaining a network of critical sites sufficient to support the population throughout its annual cycle was immediately identified as a priority. For this to happen, we will need to ensure that important roosting and foraging sites in the breeding, wintering and staging grounds do not deteriorate and that potential new sites are identified and protected.

Efforts will be made to reduce direct human induced death such as hunting, poisoning and flying accidents with man-made objects. A recent WWT study has shown that illegal hunting is still a problem for the Bewick's Swan, with 22% of the swans caught and X-rayed since

2000 recorded with shotgun pellets in their body tissues.

With such poor legislative compliance there is a clear need for increased enforcement of the hunting ban and raised awareness about the protection status of the Bewick's Swan. Flying accidents, and in particular, collision with power lines, have been found to be one of the largest causes of swan deaths in the UK, despite a range of possible solutions having been available for many years. Lead poisoning through the ingestion of spent gunshot also remains a major threat to wildfowl throughout Europe and urgently requires the phasing out of lead shot and enforcing legislation where lead shot has already been banned.

The Action Plan, which provides an agenda of prioritised actions to safeguard the future of the Bewick's Swan, will be completed in early 2010, and will then be forwarded to AEWA for comment and ratification. Implementation of the Plan will be taken forward by the WI-IUCN SSC Swan Specialist Group in collaboration with the relevant governmental organisations, research institutes and non-governmental organisations.

**Julia Newth**  
WWT

## WeBS Core Count Dates 2010–2011

18th April 2010	16th May 2010	20th June 2010	18th July 2010
15th August 2010	19th September 2010	10th October 2010	14th November 2010
19th December 2010	16th January 2011	13th February 2011	13th March 2011
17th April 2011	15th May 2011	12th June 2011	17th July 2011
14th August 2011	18th September 2011	16th October 2011	20th November 2011
18th December 2011			



## ....Other News.... Other News....

### Inputting help wanted...

We have recently come into possession of some old WeBS data from WWT in the form of ledgers and cards which we would like to get input into the WeBS database. These counts from as far back as the 1940s will give us an even better perspective on changes in waterbirds over time. If you have some time to spare and would be willing to help with the inputting, please let Heidi know.

### LO, LO, LO

Local Organisers (LOs) play a pivotal role in the running of WeBS, and should be the first point of call for WeBS Counters, both current and new, with any queries about their site or region. These details can be found on the WeBS website at [www.bto.org/webs/takepart/contactlo.htm](http://www.bto.org/webs/takepart/contactlo.htm)

Also now on the WeBS Website are minutes of both the WeBS Steering group and LOAC meetings.

### Calling all photographers and artists

We are always on the look out for good quality photographs and also small drawings and vignettes of birds we can use in both the WeBS Report and Newsletter, with full credits given of course. Any WeBS species or habitat welcome.

Please do get in touch if you have anything you would be happy for us to use.

### The list continues to grow...

Following the announcement that the Baikal Teal at Minsmere in 2001 has been officially accepted as a wild bird, this brings the number of WeBS species recorded on WeBS Counts over the years to 269.

### WeBS at the Bird Fair

We will again have a stand at this summer's British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland between 20th–22nd August.

We aim to be back on schedule this year and able to launch the 2008/09 WeBS Report at the Bird Fair. We look forward to meeting all the counters who come along to the stand to collect their reports.

So if you are attending the Bird Fair, please do drop by for a chat and a glass of wine, we like to be able to put faces to names.



## Who's Who within the WeBS team – 2010

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team at BTO. 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

**Neil Calbrade**, WeBS National Organiser  
(Low Tide Counts)  
Low Tide Counts  
Data Requests  
WeBS News

**Iain Downie**, Web Software Developer  
WeBS Online

**Chas Holt**, WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)  
Core Counts  
Annual Report

**Heidi Mellan**, WeBS Counter Network Organiser  
Counter and Local Organiser database management  
WeBS Online

**Andy Musgrove**, Head of Monitoring  
Overall management of WeBS

**Marcia Sayer**, WeBS Secretary  
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports

#### Email:

General correspondence: [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)

or

Specific person, use the format of  
[firstname.surname@bto.org](mailto:firstname.surname@bto.org) e.g. [andy.musgrove@bto.org](mailto:andy.musgrove@bto.org)

#### Web site – WeBS web site:

[www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs)

#### WeBS Alerts – WeBS Alerts report:

<http://blx1.bto.org/webs/alerts/index.htm>