

WeBSnews

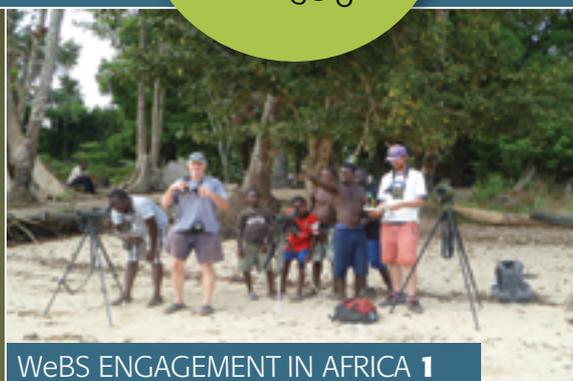
The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey



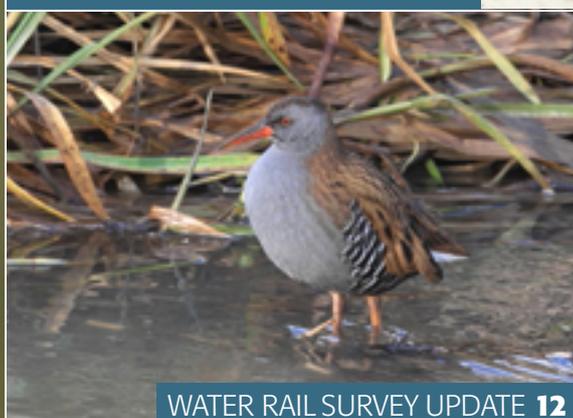
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WeBS support for the IWC in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries in west Africa are currently gripped by an outbreak of the Ebola virus. Consequently, recounting a rewarding visit earlier this year to one of the world's poorest countries now under further immense pressure, is poignant for Chas Holt...

January 2014 saw a coordinated effort as part of the International Waterbird Census (IWC) to count waterbirds along the whole of the East Atlantic flyway, focusing on major sites that usually receive no coverage. Of course, thanks to the sterling efforts of the WeBS counter network and contributors to other schemes such as GSMP, the UK's wintering waterbird populations are well monitored and changes in

populations are readily detected. Furthermore, not only are all the UK's most important wetlands covered, but the majority of them receive monthly counts through the course of the key passage and winter periods. However, we should remember that away from northwest Europe most other areas along the East Atlantic flyway do not receive such thorough coverage. The January 2014 effort to collect data from such areas included expeditions



FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News.

This issue of WeBS News is slightly later than usual due to the launch of the new-look paper report in January and the subsequent 2012/13 report in July.

Releasing two reports in one year has allowed us to catch up and the next report will be out in the spring with all the findings of the 2013/14 year.

With winter now firmly upon us, many thousands of waders will be in their wintering grounds in West Africa. WeBS' own Chas Holt visited there last year to help monitor these birds and you can read about this important work in our opening article.

Local Organisers play a vital role in the running of WeBS, and in this issue we hear from a local organiser about what it takes to do the job and how much satisfaction can be gained from it.



Neil Calbrade

Neil Calbrade Editor of WeBS News

CONTINUED FROM COVER

to all countries in west Africa to some key stopover and wintering areas, including the Sierra Leone coast.

WeBS supported the initiative by covering the expenses of Chas Holt (BTO), Richard Hearn and Dave Paynter (both WWT) to travel to Sierra Leone. There we worked with colleagues from the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) to count waterbirds at important sites in Sierra Leone. The initial planning and additional support for the expedition was provided by the Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative, a project coordinated by Sovon (the Dutch Centre for Ornithology) which formed the overall umbrella for the coordinated census of waterbirds in the East Atlantic Flyway in January 2014. A full report of the trip to Sierra Leone is being produced, and importantly will focus on how

best to undertake surveys of the most important stretches of the Sierra Leone coast in the future in order to ensure comparability with our own results.

Having arrived into Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, the majority of time was based out of Shenge, a fishing village further south in Moyamba District, although we did have a brief period away on the aptly-named Turtle Islands and the town of Bonthe. Our accommodation, by Sierra Leone standards, was good and we were well looked after by the locals. Most of the fieldwork was boat based, and included trips out to the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of Yawri Bay and Sherbro Estuary, and involved surveys of tidal mudflats and adjacent mangrove creeks. As for the birds, well where does one start? The mangrove channels held relatively low densities of birds, ►

WeBS NEWS

People and organisations responsible for WeBS News.

WEBS NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

Graham Austin Senior Research Ecologist, BTO graham.austin@bto.org
Neil Calbrade WeBS Low Tide Count Organiser, BTO neil.calbrade@bto.org
Andrew King WeBS Local Organiser for Breconshire
Colette Hall Species Monitoring Officer, WWT colette.hall@wwt.org.uk
Chas Holt Head of WeBS, BTO chas.holt@bto.org
Heidi Mellan WeBS Counter Network Organiser, BTO heidi.mellan@bto.org
Simon Sanghera WeBS Counter

Photography Cover: Amy Lewis, Dave King and Richard Hearn.

Inside: Neil Calbrade, Toni Cross, Adrian Dancy, Edmund Fellowes, Chris Knights, Amy Lewis, Philip Mugridge, Keith Noble, Dave Paynter and Simon Sanghera

NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION

Design Neil Calbrade

Printing Swallowtail Print, Norwich

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 statutory nature conservation bodies: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.



BTO
The Nunnery, Thetford,
Norfolk IP24 2PU
Tel: 01842 750050
www.bto.org



RSPB
The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk



JNCC
Monkstone House, City Road
Peterborough PE1 1JY
Tel: 01733 562626
www.jncc.defra.gov.uk



WWT
Slimbridge, Gloucestershire
GL2 7BT
Tel: 01453 891900
www.wwt.org.uk

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Counting terns on sandbanks exposed at low tide in the shallow waters around the Turtle Islands

DAVE PAVNTER

but did provide encounters with a range of species including Hamerkop and African Finfoot. Many thousands of waterbirds were counted on the vast mudflats however. The spectacle provided a nice mix of wintering species familiar to the British birder, such as Curlew Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Redshank, Greenshank, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover and Sanderling. Many of these winter on the coast of Sierra Leone in internationally important numbers, sharing that habitat with more exotic birds such as Western Reef Egret, Palm-nut Vulture, Pink-backed Pelican, and much more. More unusual discoveries included a couple of Terek Sandpipers (not expected to be found wintering in west Africa) while my personal pick of countless highlights included a 400+ strong flock of Great White Pelicans flying over our boat in Yawri Bay at near touching distance, a small group of delightful African Skimmers in Sherbro Estuary, and among a flock of Black-tailed Godwits one sporting a geo-locator deployed as part of a study of Dutch-breeding birds! Yawri Bay, Sherbro

Estuary and the intertidal coast between were undeniably impressive for waders, herons and terns, but the offshore Turtle Islands were especially memorable and blew us Brits away in terms of both their paradise setting and particularly large flocks of Royal, Sandwich, Lesser Crested and Little Terns.

As well as counting birds in Sierra Leone, our work included engagement with local communities and training of CSSL staff. This is hopefully the start of a developing relationship between naturalists in Sierra Leone and the UK; both have much to gain from the opportunities that such a relationship can provide. The overall aim is to carry out repeat surveys of key sites in Sierra Leone, but importantly, everyone involved in the initiative is keen for some regular monitoring by locals to become established where possible. It is important that the relevant conservation-minded people in Sierra Leone continue to develop their bird identification and counting skills.

The trip itself was a great experience for the three of us from the UK. We

had all been fortunate enough to have visited west Africa before, but we all agreed that the combination of friendly atmosphere, natural history and overall experience engendered within Sierra Leone had been second to none. Sierra Leone is a beautiful place and it is amazing to think that as recently as the 1990s the country was being ripped apart by militant warfare. And now, as mentioned at the start, Sierra Leone is on our TV screens and news channels again, for further negative reasons, following the spread of the Ebola virus within west Africa. We can only hope that the outbreak is controlled soon to allow Sierra Leone to return to the relaxed state that characterised our visit in January 2014. It is sad to think that the communities and people that were so hospitable to us just a few months ago are now suffering.

If you would like to find out more about waterbird monitoring and capacity building in Sierra Leone, please contact Chas Holt.

WeBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT



Litton Reservoirs

Although not boasting the numbers of birds as its near neighbour Chew Valley Lake, Litton Reservoirs provides one counter with a tranquil site to count each month.

Simon Sanghera WeBS Counter

Narrow country roads. Small villages. Beautiful countryside. Being a WeBS counter at Litton Reservoir highlights everything great about the southwest corner of the UK. Just three miles south of Chew Valley Lake, hidden away behind some semi-confusing turns, Litton Reservoirs are a picturesque setting for any activity, surrounded by trees and farmland, with fantastic views of the Mendips. It is a quiet area, well away from the sounds of the roads, and with only the occasional family or individual out walking their dog, or enjoying the countryside.

Built around 1850, Litton Reservoirs were constructed to compensate a then-reduced water flow in the River Chew and provide water to the houses and mills operating in the region. Today, the reservoirs still support Chew Valley, although are

mainly used as fly fisheries for trout. The reservoir is split into two lakes by a 20m high dam and spillway, although habitat is fairly homogeneous through both. The shallower Lower Litton is ringed by trees with a secluded, reed-filled corner that is perfect for breeding waterbirds. Walking along the path on the northern edge of Lower Litton, past the perennially empty lodge, an old, broken shed, takes you to the top of the dam and Upper Litton. This upper reservoir is much larger and deeper (up to 70 feet), with a longer and narrower profile. A path runs with the ringlet of trees, with steep banks meeting the water's edge. This makes it an unattractive location for small waders, but the inner lining of reeds and trees growing up through the water provide excellent cover for dabbling and diving ducks. Upper Litton ends at a small stream, which in itself continues under a road and on through a small farm, back towards

Chew Valley. Thanks to the winter floods, the water level underwent a drastic change from my first visit; when there was only a puddle on show in the lower lake and the ability to stand next to the water's edge in the upper lake and the small row boats languishing on the partially exposed lake bottom, to depth increasing by almost two metres across the whole upper lake and water re-filling every inch of the lower lake, leaving only the tips of the reeds above the surface. With both lakes being so small, and paths alongside the water's edge, visibility is excellent and the distance makes identification of species a simple task with a regular pair of binoculars.

WeBS Counts at Litton have a sporadic history. Starting in the 1960s annual counts were carried out, sometimes with as few as two visits in a year, and between 1985 and my first count in December 2013 there were only 18 core counts. The small size of Litton doesn't attract a wide range of species, with only 14 species counted during my tenure. My constant companions at the site are Mallards, Tufted Ducks, Coots, Moorhens and five Little Grebes – a personal highlight of my visit as they can be relied upon to be seen in the same areas every visit. Gadwall and Teal were present during the first couple of counts, but have since departed and not returned. In their place, a couple of breeding pairs of Great Crested Grebes arrived, alongside Canada Geese and the odd Cormorant sunning themselves on the logs protruding from the water. Surprise visitors have included Grey Herons and Little Egrets perched in the shrubbery and Mute Swans calmly preening on the lakes. Herring and



SIMON SANGHERA



AMY LEWIS



TONI CROSS PHOTOGRAPHY

Great Crested Grebe and Canada Geese are regularly recorded at Litton Reservoirs.



SIMON SANGHERA

Black-headed Gulls pass overhead, but rarely land on the lakes. Total numbers have varied between 40 and 200 (February) birds, although typical numbers are between the 50 and 80 mark. Numbers of Mallards have been boosted by a successful breeding season, with 58 ducklings counted in May with at least 30 surviving into June at least.

I started volunteering for WeBS after being drawn into the world of waterfowl and waders through an inspirational lady, whose contagious affection for these animals was hard to resist, and to gain experience of bird identification and monitoring to help with my career in behavioural research. Yet counting at Litton has gone beyond that, turning into a cathartic excursion that I look forward

to every month. During every count I realise how much I owe to the animal kingdom and how grateful I am to be able to count at such a small and peaceful location. An escape from the city, an excuse to forget about my thesis for a couple of hours, and knowing that I am helping avian research in some small manner, are just a few more reasons why I enjoy being a WeBS counter.

.....
I would also like to offer thanks to Jim and Kostas, who have joined me on every count so far and the following "nature explorations" to Chew Valley Lake and other protected wildlife areas.

WeBS Snippets



Opting out of paper reports

The WeBS Partner organisations strive to reduce the use of paper where possible. While we will continue to produce paper WeBS Reports and Newsletters for the foreseeable future, we are always looking at ways to reduce the number of copies printed. If you are a WeBS Counter and you would like to opt out of receiving them, please contact **webs@bto.org** to let us know. Remember, both the report and newsletter are available to download from the website at **www.bto.org/webs-publications**

Recording null counts

The recording of gulls and terns is optional under WeBS, but in order to ensure we correctly record true zero counts, please be sure to tick the box in WeBS Online or on the paper form if gulls or terns were looked for but were not present.



LO, LO, LO

Without Local Organisers, WeBS wouldn't be able to run as smoothly as it does, working as a link between the counters on the ground and the WeBS Office. Andrew King explains his role in Breconshire...

Andrew King WeBS Local Organiser for Breconshire

One of the most important jobs of an LO is to ensure the coverage of key sites such as Llangorse Lake



KEITH NOBLE

The value of Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) counts to monitor non-breeding waterbirds, assessing trends and in site protection is immense. Much hard and dedicated work goes into getting data – from counters out on their patch, to Local Organisers (LOs) who arrange coverage over an area, estuary or county level, and to the WeBS team at BTO in overseeing the Survey and

analysing and reporting on the results. So what is the role of a WeBS Local Organiser? The main ones are to acquire good quality data, and to ensure that as many sites are covered as possible, with priority given to key sites where possible through liaison with birdwatchers, Bird Clubs and local communities. With the advent of on-line data submission and reporting, the task of Local Organiser is less

onerous now that fewer recording sheets are handled at the start and finish of a count season. Contact with counters on a regular basis is required to check progress and coverage in any particular season. Many LOs also facilitate liaison between land-owners and counters as there may be local considerations there, particularly when new sites or counters are being introduced. Where owners

take an interest in the survey, and to maintain good working arrangements, counters are encouraged to provide some feedback to land-owners with discussion or occasional data printouts. The loss of a count site for whatever reason is regrettable and fortunately rarely occurs, but there is a small turn-over of counters which requires managing. New counters generally arrive with some previous knowledge of BTO survey work and are familiar with the range of species covered by WeBS, but the LO may offer a joint visit in the first season to inform the counter about the site, its species, and to show the new counter the best access and viewing sites. Depending on the site and the counter's background, this may not always be necessary but in my experience it does have many advantages. This is especially important for counting estuaries which brings different challenges for the LO and counters with a teamwork approach fostered as the new counter is a member of a larger team each counting specific sectors of estuary at a pre-defined state of tide.

Local Organisers employ a number of systems to allow them

to carry out their role, based on personal choice and the extent of local WeBS coverage. Those with many sites/observers have devised a 'blog' approach, or more simply via a spreadsheet or notebook to manage WeBS in their area. Counters across all areas are encouraged to promptly input monthly data into the online data entry of the WeBS pages of the BTO website as that greatly assists the LOs in their work. The BTO keeps in touch with Local Organisers and counters through the annual meeting of the Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) which allows a two-way understanding of how new developments might influence WeBS, as well as transferring any changes or difficulties in the field back to BTO.

For the counter, the appeal of undertaking monthly counts seems to gather momentum as interest in understanding how wildfowl and waders use a site becomes strangely addictive. This relationship is good for the counter, the site and WeBS and is to be encouraged – there is often a surprise too, perhaps a rarity or changed numbers or behaviour of common species. Just to be out there

on a winter's morning is appealing in itself!

For the Local Organiser there is much to gain – from the knowledge that the long tradition of WeBS 'duck-counts' is still upheld (some water-bodies have been covered constantly for well over 50 years) and that you have assisted in conserving both species and sites of importance in your area. So, if you see from WeBS reports or the BTO website that there is a vacancy for a WeBS LO in your birding area, please give it serious consideration; you won't be disappointed!

LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff providing ideas, feedback and advice.

One issue raised during the last meeting is how best to engage with younger birdwatchers who are the future of surveys such as WeBS. Currently, WeBS is active on social media and has Facebook and Twitter pages which have gained many followers. These methods of engaging with a wider audience have proved to be very useful, especially as a tool for launching the WeBS Report.

The format of the new paper report was also discussed and the feedback was positive and there were suggestions for further improvements. The online element of the report was widely praised, as a "mine of information" and again discussed opportunities

to develop it further in the future by adding tabs for extra elements of WeBS such as the forthcoming Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS).

The next meeting of the WeBS LOAC is scheduled to be held at the Nunnery on 16th July 2015. The minutes from previous meetings are available via the website at www.bto.org/webs-loac

As always we are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future. If you would like to know more about what is involved please contact Heidi (webs@bto.org).

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 here.

WeBS LOAC Representatives

Southwest England

Gladys Grant

gladysgrant@talktalk.net

Eastern England

Nick Mason

nick.mason4@btinternet.com

Midlands

Brian Moore

b_moore@ntlworld.com

Northern England

Dave Shackleton

d.shackleton@btinternet.com

Wales

Andrew King

andrew.king53@virgin.net

South and East Scotland

Neil Bielby

n.bielby@sky.com

North and West Scotland

John Armitage

jsa@ornquest.plus.com

Northern Ireland

Shane Wolsey

shane.wolsey@bto.org

Wild Goose Chasing

The recording of geese in WeBS is complicated by many species having different distinct populations. By assigning geese to specific populations in the field, you can help improve our understanding of their distributions.

Graham Austin Senior Research Ecologist, BTO

Reporting goose numbers and associated trends does not come without its complications. This is partly because we know more about the origins of our wintering geese than for most other species, and historically have been able to assign birds at particular sites to populations of known origin. Although we have mixed populations of other waterbirds in the UK, unlike the geese we cannot assign birds at particular sites to particular populations and so don't attempt to.

In winter the UK supports, for example, Barnacle Geese from two distinct natural populations, one breeding in Svalbard and another breeding in Greenland on top of which there is now a substantial naturalised population breeding in the UK. Similarly, Light-bellied Brent Geese from two distinct populations visit the UK, and we have Greylag Geese from the Icelandic population visiting in the winter where they join the resident British/Irish Greylags. Previously we were able to separate and report separately the numbers and trends of the re-introduced population of Greylags which were confined primarily to England from their forebears in Northwest Scotland, but now the former has spread throughout Scotland this has become tricky to say the least as they now occupy part of the winter range of the Icelandic birds.

So what does this mean for WeBS counters? There are some goose species in which individuals can be assigned to their subspecies in the field. Generally counters will be able to distinguish European White-fronted Goose from Greenland White-fronted Goose and Tundra Bean Goose from Taiga Bean



Bean Geese are usually separable in the field as either Tundra or Taiga, but this is often not possible for biogeographic populations of other geese.

Goose. However although views will normally enable us to distinguish between Dark-bellied and Light-bellied Brents Goose, we cannot distinguish between the three Barnacle Geese or Svalbard from Canadian Light-bellied Brents, and nor can the various Greylag Geese be readily distinguished in the field.

WeBS Online and the old WeBS count forms allow counters to specify the population for all geese or record them as the generic species. When the WeBS office at the BTO process the data for the online report, we have rules for assigning counts recorded at the generic species level to particular populations. These rules are not set in stone and may change over time as we learn more about the origins of birds at particular sites or when the distributions of the birds themselves

change over time.

So how can a WeBS counter help by recording the most appropriate option? Firstly, it should be noted that if a counter has specified that a bird comes from a particular population we will not question this when preparing the report even if that population is not considered the norm for the site in question. So if you have strong evidence as to the origins of a particular bird or group of geese (maybe they are ringed or otherwise marked, or have arrived with a flock of another species which must have come from a particular country of origin), you can record the bird as specific to the relevant population and be assured that it will be reported as such. But if you are uncertain as to the true origin of the birds at a given site please don't make a best guess. Let those of

DETAILED DATA...
For more information on how we assign populations of geese to sites, see www.bto.org/webs-geese



NEIL CALBRADE

Svalbard and Greenland Barnacle Geese populations look identical in the field and the picture is confused by naturalised birds in many regions.

us preparing the report make those judgement calls and hence shoulder the risk of getting it wrong. There is no advantage to recording the specific population if they follow the same rules as the processing team will apply anyway (although to do so will not cause any problems).

Bean Goose

You will probably be able to distinguish Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese in most cases. If so please record specifically which you have seen. Otherwise, just record them as Bean Goose and the processing team will assign them to one or the other where our rules allow.

Brent Goose

In rare cases where you cannot distinguish whether they are Dark-bellied or Light-bellied you can simply record them as Brent Goose, but this should only be necessary when they occur unexpectedly on sites away from their main wintering areas. Otherwise please record them as either Dark-bellied or Light-bellied. Generally there is no need to distinguish between the two populations of Light-bellied because they cannot be separated in the field. But if you had hard evidence (e.g. a darvic ring or neck collar) that a bird on the west coast or in Northern Ireland was a Svalbard bird or one on the east coast was from Greenland, then it would be useful to record them

as such - otherwise it will be assigned to the expected population.

Barnacle Goose

The populations cannot be separated in the field and so should simply be recorded as Barnacle Goose.

White-fronted Goose

In rare cases where you cannot determine in the field whether they are Greenland or European White-fronted you can record them simply as White-fronted Goose. But normally you should record them as to their specific population. If they are regular at your WeBS site you will know which you are dealing with. However, a word of caution if you only get White-fronted Geese occasionally; the 2007–2011 Bird Atlas (Balmer *et al.* 2013) shows that Greenland White-fronts can reach as far as southeast England and European White-fronts can reach as far as Lancashire. Furthermore, a large flock of European White-fronted Geese made it as far north as Orkney in 2012. So, if White-fronted Geese turn up unexpectedly on your WeBS Count, please do your best to get a good look at them and don't assume which race they are solely because of where you are!

Greylag Goose

These have become the most problematic of the geese because whilst it is important to monitor

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2014-2015 and 2015-16 seasons...

2015...
18 January
8 February
8 March
19 April
17 May
14 June
19 July
16 August
13 September
18 October
15 November
13 December

2016...
17 January
21 February
13 March
10 April
8 May
5 June

On large sites counted by teams of counters, please try to ensure the counts are carried out on the same day to avoid double counting.

Keep up-to-date with counts and dates at www.bto.org/webs/coredates

the fortunes of the two populations separately, the best rules we have been able to come up with for assigning birds to population based on location are nonetheless inadequate. This is not so much of a problem in Wales and England where Icelandic birds are probably few on the ground but what to do about wintering birds in Scotland? Historically, the re-established birds and the Icelandic birds barely overlapped and we could be reasonably confident that winter counts from Scotland (away from the traditional sites occupied by the northwest Scotland population) and northern England were from the Icelandic population. But now that the British/Irish population has a UK-wide distribution there is complete overlap. Moreover, the resident birds are not necessarily sedentary which means that they are likely to be seen in the winter at sites not frequented in the summer.

Most Greylag Geese are recorded simply as Greylag and not assigned to population. Based solely on field characteristics this is as it should be. But whilst we still don't want you to guess at which population your birds are from there may be good evidence that your winter birds are from the resident population. This information will not only help us when preparing the report but also help us monitor the spread of resident Greylags through Scotland on a site by site basis. So, for



The different Light-bellied Brent Goose populations have separate wintering grounds.

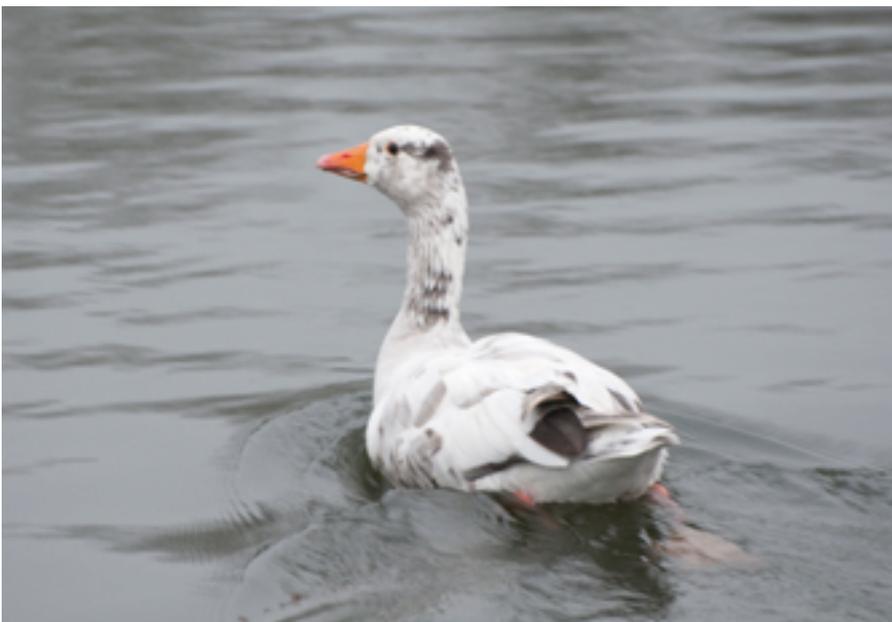
ADRIAN DANCY

example, maybe you record a regular flock at your site throughout the summer and their numbers remain stable throughout the winter in which case you may feel confident enough to assign your winter counts to the British/Irish population. Alternatively, maybe the birds wintering on your site have plumage characteristics such as white feathers indicative of a small local breeding population with little genetic exchange, something often seen when local British/Irish Greylags are sedentary, or maybe they arrive on your site too early in the autumn or leave too late in the spring to be Icelandic birds.

'Domestic' Greylag Goose

We wouldn't mention these here except there is a lot of confusion over recording domestic Greylag Goose and what we used to refer to as the re-established population. A domestic Greylag Goose is a goose that has escaped from captivity or maybe a direct descendant of such a goose and should not be confused with the re-established population of British/Irish Greylags. The latter are descendants of mainly north-west Scottish birds that were translocated to England by wildfowling. There are sites where many of the Greylags present have characteristics, such as a few white feathers often associated with domestic geese, but this can equally be the result of inbreeding within a relatively closed population and have nothing to do with regular interbreeding with escaped domestic geese. In fact, individuals with domestic ancestry are probably the exception rather than the rule. It can be difficult to know where to draw the line but as a general rule, unless you have evidence that true domestic escapes have contributed to the makeup of the local birds we would prefer them to be recorded as British/Irish Greylag.

As with all populations and subspecies of geese, if you are not certain, simply record them as their generic species and we will do the rest based on current knowledge.



NEIL CALBRADE

Only true 'farmyard' type geese should be recorded as Domestic Greylag Goose.

International Swan Census

January 2015 sees the next International Swan Census take place across Europe, and there is still time for you to get involved.

Colette Hall WWT

The International Swan Census, organised by the Wetlands International /IUCN SSC Swan Specialist Group, is carried out every five years and aims to estimate the size and distribution of the Iceland Whooper Swan and Northwest European Bewick's Swan populations.

Since the first census in 1986, the Whooper Swan population has increased by 76%, with the previous census in 2010 recording an estimated population size of 29,232, compared with 16,742 in 1986. Although the majority of birds are usually recorded in Ireland, an increasing proportion of the population has been wintering in Britain; particularly in England, which in 1986 held just 10% of the population compared with 32% in 2010. The winter of 2009/10 was, however, one of the coldest and snowiest for many years and will have likely affected the swans' distribution, pushing them further south away from their usual wintering haunts in Scotland.

In contrast to the Whoopers, the Bewick's Swan population has seen a large decline with the population falling from 29,277 in January 1995 to c. 18,000 counted during the January 2010 census (Beekman et al. in prep). National trends in the UK mirror this decrease, with the WeBS trend indicating a decline of -47% between 1985/86–2011/12. Ireland has seen a particularly large drop in numbers, with the census in 2010 recording just 80 birds compared with 1,244 in 1984.

Overall, the census in Britain and Ireland is coordinated by WWT; whilst counts in Ireland are organised by



PHILIP MUGRIDGE

▲ Bewick's Swan numbers have fallen dramatically, with a third of the birds wintering in Europe disappearing since 1995.

I-WeBS and the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group, and WWT organises the survey in Britain. Although a large proportion of sites are covered by WeBS and I-WeBS, we also need to find coverage for areas not regularly covered by these surveys, such as non-wetland areas like agricultural fields. These additional sites will be visited in coordination with the WeBS/I-WeBS counts to locate any flocks that have not already been recorded by the national schemes. The census also involves collecting additional information on breeding success and habitat use of the swans, as well as counts of roosting birds made at dawn or dusk.

The 2015 census date is 17/18 January, coinciding with the WeBS priority count dates. WWT have already contacted WeBS Local

Organisers to ask for assistance in organising the census in their respective WeBS regions – and many thanks to all those who have responded so far – but there may still be some gaps to fill. Please contact Colette Hall (colette.hall@wwt.org.uk) if you would like to get in involved in the census.

Further information about the census can be found on WWT's Waterbird Monitoring website at <http://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/get-involved/> and details about findings from the census will be made available here in due course.

Water Rail Survey Update

In Issue 28, we piloted a survey on Water Rails to see if the use of tape lures could give us a better understanding of true numbers of this secretive bird, and the results were clear.

Neil Calbrade WeBS Organiser

In the winter of 2012/13, six sites took part in the pilot study. This study consisted of counters carrying out their WeBS Core Count as usual and then revisiting the suitable Water Rail habitat and, using a tape lure to try to illicit a response, record the number of Water Rails heard. As it has already been discovered that Water Rails are very responsive to tape lures, it was not surprising that the number of birds recorded when using tape lures far exceeded those encountered by chance on a WeBS Count, although we had underestimated the difference between the two. Across the six sites that took part, 78 Water Rails were recorded in total, 71 of these were as a result of tape lure playback. This huge difference was especially apparent on the Conwy Estuary where just a single bird was recorded on WeBS Counts, yet 41 other records were achieved using tape lures.

Providing the tape luring is done responsibly so as not to cause unnecessary disturbance to the rails or any other birds you are trying to count on your WeBS Count then we are happy for counters to use this technology. Water Rail counts using tape lures away from your standard Core Count should be submitted as supplementary counts.

Finally, a big thank you to all that took part in this trial and for help with developing the methods.

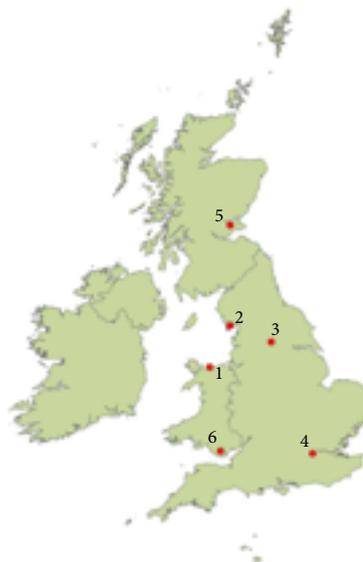
If you are interested in trying this out for yourself, excellent quality MP3 files can be downloaded from www.xeno-canto.org/26925 onto an MP3 player or mobile smart phone.

Water Rails, widely distributed across Britain, are rarely encountered, but certainly under-recorded.

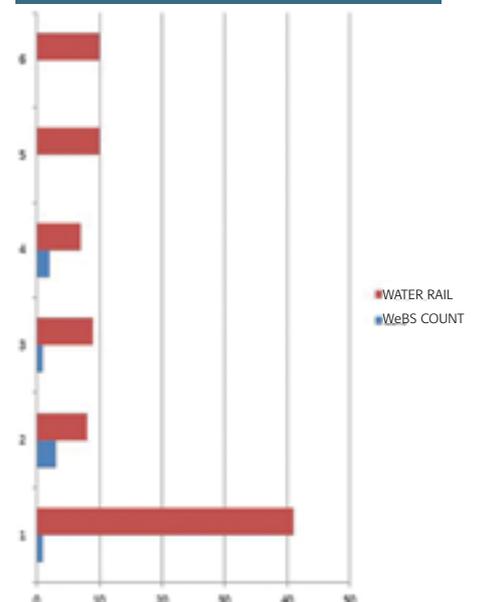


NEIL CALBRADE

Map 1 Participating sites



Tape lure vs Core Counts



Using the Search and Download Facility in WeBS Online

Once you have entered your counts into WeBS Online, you can then download them to send to county bird recorders or for your own records...



Heidi Mellan WeBS Counter Network Organiser

The Search and Download facility is an often overlooked tool available within WeBS Online. This tool enables you to extract any or all of the data submitted for your site(s). It is easy to use, as our step by step instructions below show, and there are various filters available that allow you

to pull out very specific data.

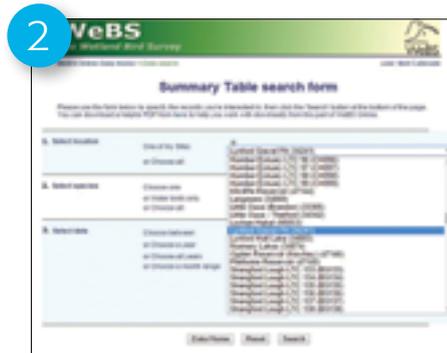
Once you have made your selection you can choose to either view the results as a table or a graph on screen, or you can download the data into an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet can be helpful when using the BirdTrack List Template and if

you wish to send your counts to your County Bird Recorder, the downloadable pdf help file (available from www.bto.org/webs-download-guide) explains how to reformat the results from a list into a more user-friendly table.

Your step-by-step guide:



▲ On your data home page, click on "Search and Download".



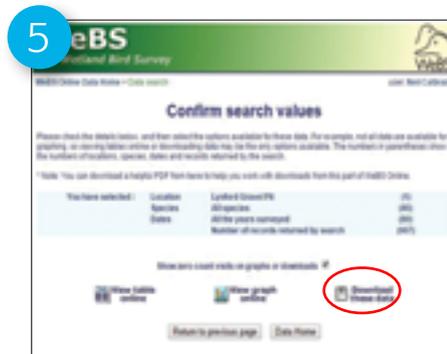
▲ Now, from the dropdown list, select the site for the records you wish to download records for.



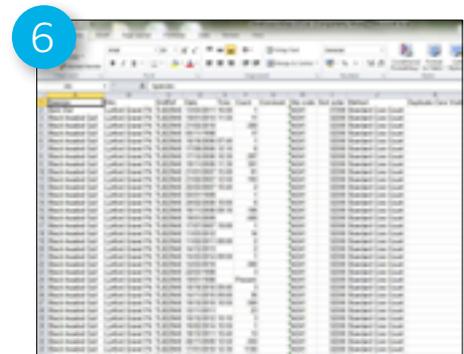
▲ Select which species you want, either individual species, all waterbirds or all species.



▲ Select a date range, a WeBS Year or a specific month. Once you have done this, click "search".



▲ You will then be presented with a screen to confirm your search values. Once you are happy with that selection, click on "download these data".



▲ The data will be presented in an excel spreadsheet. There is a downloadable pdf on www.bto.org/webs-download-guide to help you work with the data.

COUNTER NETWORK

Local Organiser News

Heidi Mellan WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Bruce Lynch (Angus); Gary Hobson (Nottinghamshire); Dick Squires (Cardigan); Simon Taylor (Cornwall (excl. Tamar Complex)); Terry Chaplin (Taw/Torrige); Jim Williams (Northamptonshire); Ian Lees (Oxford South); Alistair Flannagan (West Glamorgan & Burry Inlet); Heather Hilton (East Lancashire & Fylde); Joan Wilcox (Lothian); Malachy Martin (Dundrum Bay); Clive Hartley (Morecambe Bay North); Pete Findley (Pegwell Bay); Roger Warren (Buckinghamshire); Julian Rolls (Wiltshire); John Jones (Dorset) and Ed Rowsell (Chichester Harbour) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter was published.

Our special thanks go out to Phillip Deacon; who retired in February after counting at Bowmoor, Cotswold Water Park for 18 years; and to Bertha Govan who has recently retired from the Firth of Forth after 26 years (including 12 years as Local Organiser). They have been nominated by their Local Organisers to receive a special mention as a thank you for his support over the years!

We would also like to thank the following new Local Organisers: Kane Brides (Cheshire North); David Parkin

(Nottinghamshire); Peter Roseveare (Cornwall (excl. Tamar Complex)); Duncan Halpin (Clwyd inland); Steve Brayshaw (Nene Valley); Brian O'Leary (Taw/Torrige); Allan Brown (Lothian (also Fife LO)); Jamie Dunning (South Yorkshire (also Greater Manchester LO)); Russell Jones (Cardigan); Patrick Lynch (Dundrum Bay); Ian Hodgson (Pegwell Bay); Steve Dunstan (East Lancashire & Fylde); Bill Quantrill (Wiltshire); Ben Carpenter (Oxfordshire South); Lyndon Jeffery (West Glamorgan & Burry Inlet); Richard Barnard (Humber mid-South); Malcolm Balmer (Dorset); Chris Coppock (Buckinghamshire North); Kevin Feeney (Mersey Inland); James Parkin (Chichester Harbour); Adam McClure (Co. Antrim) and Stephen Hewitt (Co. Armagh). Welcome to you all!

Desperately seeking Organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Aberdeenshire; Angus; Buckinghamshire (South); Clwyd (coastal); Durham; Essex; Kent (East and West); Halifax/Huddersfield area; Northamptonshire; Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin); West Inverness/Wester Ross; Co. Down; Co. Fermanagh; Co. Londonderry and Co. Tyrone.

If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office webs@bto.org

SURVEY

WeBS Low Tide Update

Neil Calbrade WeBS Low Tide Organiser

The winter of 2013/14 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 17 estuaries around the UK, including the Medway and Deben Estuaries, Pagham Harbour and Montrose Basin. In addition to these, the Blyth Estuary in Northumberland was counted for the first time, taking the number of estuaries which have ever been counted under the scheme to 82.

The counts for 2014/15 are currently underway on the Dee, Alt, Dyfi Estuaries, Hamford Water and Portsmouth Harbour among other sites. I hope the weather is kind to all counters!

Although the winter of 2015/16 is quite a way off, we are already beginning to look ahead at sites



▲ The reporting interface allows between year comparison of distributions

that are due for Low Tide coverage. Among the larger sites that have not been counted for at least six years include the North Norfolk Coast, Colne Estuary, Southampton Water, Pegwell Bay and the Firth of Forth.

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme. Please contact the WeBS office (email: 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.

As part of the online WeBS Reporting interface, dot density maps for most sites and years have now been uploaded and more will follow shortly. This allows the user to compare the low tide distributions of birds using a site between years. The density statistics for all species are also given. See www.bto.org/webs-reporting-lowtide

IN THE NEWS...

RESEARCH

Project: Photo Goldeneye 2015

Range shifts of wintering waterbirds are occurring along the NW European flyway due to climate change. This can be seen as increasing bird numbers in the north-eastern and decreasing numbers in the south-western part of the flyway. To understand mechanisms of range shifts, it is important to study individuals which are contributing to the range shifts. Are young birds responding more strongly than adults or vice-versa? It is poorly known whether the demographic structure of waterbird populations differ spatially. In Pochards and Goldeneyes, the proportion of adult males increases towards the north, but knowledge of the geographical age structure is limited. In addition, individuals wintering on the northern edge are more likely to be exposed to cold spells during winter and therefore at a higher risk of mortality. Therefore, investigation of the spatial structure of the population can also help to understand how climate may affect population demographics of waterbirds.

A pilot experiment will be carried out during January 2015, and researchers at the Finnish Museum of Natural History are kindly asking observers to collect samples from the wintering population in different parts of the wintering flyway by photographing flying flocks.

To study potential demographic differences in habitat use they would like to also receive information about the habitat and size of the flocks.



EDMUND FELLOWES

Goldeneye can be identified in flight based on the wing patterns as adult males, adult females and young birds

The aim of this project is to investigate the demographic structure of the Common Goldeneye population wintering along the NW European flyway.

For further information about how to take part in this exciting new project, see www.luomus.fi/en/goldeneye-2015

TRAINING

WeBS training and mentoring

Neil Calbrade, BTO

WeBS data are widely used by both conservation and government bodies to ensure protection of important areas and also by developers as part of Environmental Impact Assessments. In order to ensure that data are used correctly and so that these organisations get the most out of the huge WeBS dataset, bespoke training courses have been run for Natural England staff and an environmental consultancy. These courses explained how WeBS works, how the data are collected and how to use data provided.

There has recently been discussion within the WeBS LOAC regarding mentoring by current WeBS counters.



Often, new WeBS counters are daunted by the prospect at taking on a site and would welcome guidance. If you would be willing to take a new counter under your wing to increase their confidence in doing WeBS Counts, please let your Local Organiser know.

Did you know?

The oldest Pink-footed Goose on record was a bird that reached the age of at least 39 years old.

A bird ringed as an adult in Tayside in 1959 was recovered in 1998 (38 years, 7 months and 7 days later) in Lothian. Although the distance between the ringing and recovery site was only 66km, with at least 38 return trips to Iceland on its clock, one can only speculate how many miles that particular bird flew within its lifetime.

It is often not appreciated how quickly birds can travel large distances to different locations. A

young male Teal was ringed on the Mersey Estuary on 4th September 1979 and remarkably was shot on the Humber Estuary, some 164km away later the very same day.

BACKCHAT

Word of mouth...

WeBS in social media

In 2011, WeBS joined the social media revolution by creating a Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/WetlandBirdSurvey) which to date has over 600 people liking the page. Earlier this year we created a dedicated Twitter feed (@WeBS_UK) which has already received nearly 1,000 followers. If you use either of these social media websites, look us up to keep up with all the news from the WeBS Office and beyond.

Irish population estimates

This year has seen publication in *Irish Birds* of new population estimates for wintering waterbirds in Ireland. The work combines information collected by WeBS in Northern Ireland and by I-WeBS in Eire. These estimates are used to derive associated 'All Ireland' 1% thresholds, which in turn help identify wetlands of conservation importance. In summary, Lapwing and Golden Plover are the most numerous wintering species in Ireland, collectively comprising over a quarter of all waterbirds. For many waterbirds, there has been a decline in population, and for some, such as Bewick's Swan and Pochard, this is likely to reflect changing migration patterns probably due to altered conditions caused by climate change. For more detail see: Crowe, O. & Holt, C. 2014. Estimates of waterbird numbers wintering in Ireland, 2006/07–2010/11. *Irish Birds* 9: 545–552

Apologies



In the recent WeBS Report, *Waterbirds in the UK 2012/13*, during the production process, James McCallum's excellent artwork of Little Grebes and Goldeneye inadvertently got stretched. We would like to apologise for that and reproduce here the artwork in its full glory. More of James' work can be found on his website: www.jamesmccallum.co.uk

Golden Plover records wanted

An International Golden Plover census took place on 11–12th October 2014. If you have any Golden Plover records from that weekend away from your WeBS Counts, please send them in via BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net), using the 'Pinpoint' feature to accurately record the location and record the habitat they were using.

The WeBS team & contacts

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help.

Graham Austin

WeBS Alerts, WeBS database management, Statistical analyses
graham.austin@bto.org

Neil Calbrade

WeBS Low Tide Counts, Data Requests, WeBS News Editor
neil.calbrade@bto.org

Chas Holt

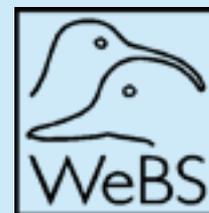
Management of WeBS, Core Counts, Annual Report
chas.holt@bto.org

Heidi Mellan

WeBS Counter Network Organiser, WeBS Online
heidi.mellan@bto.org

Dave Turvey

Web Software Developer
dave.turvey@bto.org



The WeBS Office

The Nunnery,
Thetford,
Norfolk.
IP24 2PU
Tel: (01842) 750050
Fax: (01842) 750030
Email: webs@bto.org
Web site: www.bto.org/webs