

# Waterbird*news*

Monitoring internationally important waterbird populations across the UK



WeBS



GSMP

ADDITIONAL  
COUNTS IN  
WeBS  
See page 16



## Welcome...

to the newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey and the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme

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## (Re)Introducing WinGS

By Emma Caulfield, BTO

The Winter Gull Survey (WinGS) is back after 20 years! The BTO is organising the upcoming WinGS for the winters of 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Gulls are a source of both fascination and frustration for both the public and birders alike, with their raucous personalities and puzzling plumages. A ubiquitous presence throughout the year, UK numbers of Black-headed Gull and Great Black-backed Gull swell in winter with breeders from the Baltic and Arctic, and in autumn Lesser Black-backed Gulls visit, before heading south to Portugal and beyond. These adaptable birds are famously a common sight at the seaside, but their presence extends to human environments, making use of agricultural and urban areas, seeking out our rubbish, loitering on our rooftops and helping themselves to our food and that of our farm animals. They use wetlands during the day for feeding, preening and resting, and when doing so they are optionally recorded on monthly WeBS Core Counts.

These charismatic creatures are of substantial conservation concern and BTO is increasing efforts on monitoring overwintering populations through the Winter Gull Roost Survey, also known as the Winter Gull Survey (WinGS). This initiative is particularly important due to the recent and ongoing challenges faced by gull populations, particularly the outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) which is known to have caused mortality at gull breeding colonies this summer (pgs. 6–7). It is possible their use of many habitats may contribute to the spread of the virus between coastal seabird colonies, waterbirds on wetlands and farmed and wild birds in agricultural landscapes. Information about wintering gull numbers



# Editorial

By Neil Calbrade, Waterbird Surveys Officer and *Waterbird News* editor, BTO

You may have noticed the name change to this newsletter, as the WeBS Newsletter now encompasses the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP), and so *WeBS News* has now become *Waterbird News*. In future editions, we hope to include more goose and swan-specific articles, as well as those from WeBS counters.

The monthly WeBS counts continue to provide vital information on waterbird populations, especially in light of the recent Avian Influenza outbreak, which for a second consecutive year took its toll on both wintering and breeding waterbirds and seabirds. With the winter fast approaching and migratory birds arriving from the north, we wait with bated breath to see how their populations may have been affected (pgs. 6–7).

The enthusiasm of WeBS counters is one of the underlying successes of WeBS. From a single birder doing regular monthly counts on their patch like the Aln Estuary (pg. 4) to a team undertaking an expedition and covering the west and north coasts of Scotland (pgs. 10–14), every count we receive can make a massive difference.

Having taken over the organising of GSMP from WWT just over 12 months ago, we will soon begin analysing the Icelandic-breeding Goose Census (IGC) counts from last winter, ahead of the coming winter. If you haven't taken part in the IGC before, and you live in an area where Pink-footed and/or Icelandic Greylag Geese winter, or your WeBS site has a roost of either of these, check the IGC Site Map to find a vacant site near you (pg. 21). We are also keen to improve the geographic spread of age assessments of migratory swans and geese to help assess breeding success, especially given the potential effects of Avian Influenza and climate change (pg. 22).

and their distributions will be helpful in understanding the potential impacts of HPAI on their and other species' populations.

The previous WinGS, which took place during the winters of 2003/04 to 2005/6, concluded that the UK inland and near-shore coastal waters supported over 3.8 million wintering gulls at that time. Black-headed Gull and Herring Gull were well represented in this total.

Since then, the winter trends from WeBS suggest that there may have been recent declines in the five commonest species. The most recently published 10-year trends are for the

period 2010/11 to 2020/21 and are -39% for Lesser Black-backed Gull; -35% for Great Black-backed Gull; -34% for Common Gull; and -18% for Black-headed Gull. The longer-term trend is more stable for Herring Gull than the other species, but the 10-year change was still -10%. Whilst still scarce, Mediterranean Gull is becoming a more frequent sight on WeBS counts, however, with the index tripling over the past 10 years.

Despite being such an important component of our wintering waterbird fauna, we have been unable to update the population estimates for gulls using WeBS data. Whilst the total

## NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

We are grateful to Tom Cadwallender for his account of his WeBS site on the Aln Estuary in Northumberland, and to the RAFOS team who welcomed Gill Birtles into their ranks for their annual 'Winter Duck' expedition. Thanks also for Charles Nodder's study of Avocets on the Tamar Estuary, which highlighted the importance of synchronisation of counts on large sites.

## WEBS PARTNERSHIP

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitors the UK's waterbirds and contributes to the International Waterbird Census.

WeBS is a partnership jointly funded by the BTO, RSPB and JNCC, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers.

## GSMP PARTNERSHIP

The Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) monitors the abundance and breeding success of the UK's native geese and migratory swans during the non-breeding season.

GSMP is a partnership, run by and jointly funded by BTO, JNCC and NatureScot, with fieldwork conducted by both volunteer and professional surveyors

-  [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)
-  [www.jncc.gov.uk](http://www.jncc.gov.uk)
-  [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)
-  [www.nature.scot](http://www.nature.scot)

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number of gulls counted by WeBS in January 2022 was a respectable 367,000, the data collected by WeBS are biased towards individuals that use inland wetland and estuarine habitats during the day, which may change over time compared to other habitats. As recording gulls is optional in WeBS, the sites being counted can also change over time. As with the goose censuses in the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme, targeted surveys with methods specialised for recording the species are needed to fully understand what changes are occurring.

Dispersed over the landscape during daylight hours, gulls' habit of gathering to roost provides the best way to make accurate assessments of their numbers. WinGS will therefore involve coordinated visits to known substantial roost sites such as large estuaries and reservoirs. Gulls will be identified and counted in flight as they arrive at roost around dusk. To generate complete UK-wide population estimates, additional visits to random sample sites at inland and coastal locations will also be carried out. Both key and random sites need to be visited at least once, in either January 2024 or January 2025 and in autumn 2024 to assess post-breeding aggregations. Some major key sites will necessitate team coordination and create fantastic opportunities to connect with fellow gull enthusiasts!

Attempting a census on this scale is a huge challenge, and we are particularly grateful to those WeBS Local Organisers who have already agreed to join some of the BTO regional survey organisers to help us reach the required volunteer coverage of roosts on some of the biggest estuarine and inland key sites. Whilst there is no requirement for you to carry out the survey at your WeBS or GSMP sites, if you do have the time and knowledge to carry out an evening visit and count gulls as they arrive, we would be very grateful.

Comprehensive roost counts over the next two years will make a significant step towards addressing the information gaps that have arisen in the past two decades. These roost count data will be combined with other key monitoring of the group, including the annual WeBS trends and breeding surveys from the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP). Gulls are being counted by an increasing number of WeBS counters and this targeted roost survey will aid in understanding changes in wintering population dynamics, and how representative the WeBS trends are. It is noteworthy that the UK provides critical support to globally significant populations of some of these species, and we are looking forward to establishing a clearer picture of how they are faring with all the pressures these populations are under.

### GET INVOLVED

Visit [www.bto.org/wings](http://www.bto.org/wings) for more information on the survey. On the Taking Part page you can find more information on the survey methods and gull ID training videos. From here you can also find a link to the survey portal at [app.bto.org/wings](http://app.bto.org/wings) where you can check the vacant sites map to see if your WeBS/GSMP site or other sites near you still need counters and/or team leaders to help coordinate small teams at the site. You can also keep an eye on the WeBS social media accounts for updates, or contact us at [wings@bto.org](mailto:wings@bto.org)

The Winter Gull Survey is supported by Defra, Country Nature Conservation Agencies and BTO.



# Aln Estuary

By Tom Cadwallender



Small and perfectly formed, at least I think so, the Aln Estuary is not only at the end of our street, it is my WeBS site, and lastly but certainly not least, my local patch. Very importantly, only a few minutes' walk from home.

The River Aln from source to sea is only around 26 kms long. It meanders its way through some of North Northumberland's most wonderful landscapes, until it finally tumbles into the North Sea at Alnmouth. There is only one small tributary to the estuary and that is the Hip Burn, which flows in from the west, well down into the estuary proper. It should be of no surprise that this landscape sits perfectly within the 'Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)'. The saltmarsh and estuary also make up the smallest designated Marine Conservation Zone in the UK.

Historically, the course of the lower river and estuary, which was a once thriving seaport, has changed. During a storm in 1806, the final few hundred metres of the route significantly altered from flowing south of Church Hill

to its present-day route north of the hill. Following that event there was a gradual siltation of the lower reaches, which contributed to the decline in the trading ships coming into the harbour and by the end of the 19th century, commerce had eventually faded away.

Another huge change came in 2006, when an ambitious project, led by Environment Agency and Northumberland Coast AONB Partnership, which removed old flood embankments that were designed to protect farmland on the west side of the estuary (by coincidence I just happened to have worked for the AONB and was significantly involved). The principle was to restore natural processes and allow tidal water to flood onto adjacent farmland and thereby recreating a floodplain once more. It was hoped the project would create extra mud and saltmarsh. Several scrapes were also made which worked in combination with the 'rig and furrow' (undulations left by ancient ploughing) and regularly filling with tidal water. The project provided fantastic and welcome muddy areas

and wet grassland which have proved to be extremely attractive to waders and wildfowl. Numbers of wintering Wigeon, Teal, and passage and wintering waders have significantly increased since the completion of the enhancements. Natural modifications continue to this day with the ebb and flow of the tides creating yet more saltmarsh on a daily basis.

A diversity of wetland habitats within the estuary has been a boon for breeding waders and wildfowl. Lapwing, Snipe, Redshank and Oystercatcher raise young here as do Eider, Shelduck, and most recently Red-breasted Merganser and Shoveler. Recently, feral geese have played a part within the estuary with Greylags and Canada breeding and gathering year round.

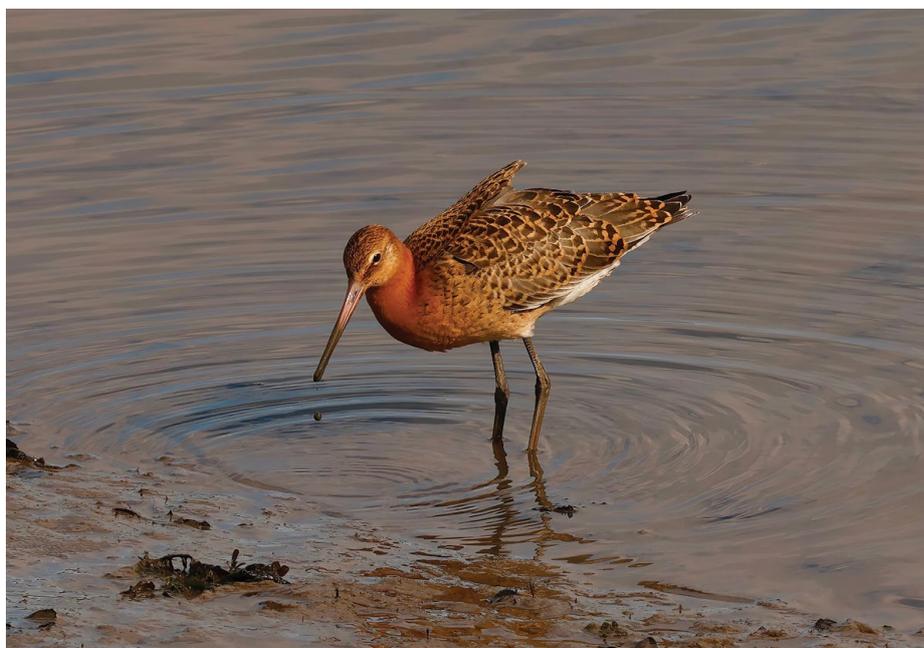
The WeBS story on the Aln Estuary started in 1966–67, however, only one survey was made during that winter. Following on, surveys were quite sporadic until the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a consequence, there are large holes in that early dataset.

We moved into the area in 1989, but I didn't carry out my first WeBS until 2004. Subsequent years have been fascinating in terms of watching the development of the habitats and therefore the changes in bird populations of the estuary.

Ever since my first counts I have tried to cover, and have largely been successful, all months of the year. Wader migration really does appear to occur throughout the year here, when we have passage birds, such as Common Sandpiper and Greenshank well into May, and first returners, possibly failed breeders, coming in June. July and August can also prove interesting as numbers of potential winterers, like Black-tailed Godwits, Curlew, Lapwing, and Redshank, are starting to build up. It really is important to me that I have a clear picture of those 'summer' months.

Autumn, particularly September, with the very high spring tides, can bring some amazing high-tide roosts to one favourite field within the estuary. When most of the surrounding fields are flooded, this area is the last safe haven, for a few hours at least, for wading birds.

The Aln Estuary has long been recognised as hosting regionally important wintering populations of four species in particular – Wigeon, Teal, Curlew, and Redshank. There can be 300–500 Curlews gathering here,



and they have particular favourite fields during high tides; some even will hold winter territory. Similarly, Redshank also stay in locally significant numbers with 200–300 at any given time. However, numbers do fluctuate which suggests local transfer or birds staging on their journeys elsewhere.

Other wintering species will include small numbers of Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Eider, especially when the sea 'cuts up rough'.

### RIVER MOUTH AND THE SEA

From late July, all five species of breeding terns gather on the sandy



beach at the south shore of the river mouth at Alnmouth, to loaf through the tides. The majority of these birds will probably be from the nearby RSPB Coquet Island which is extremely important for breeding Roseate Terns.

Late summer into autumn, rafts of several hundred Common Scoter will gather offshore and, just occasionally, they are joined by the odd Velvet or single Surf.

In winter, divers and grebes, in particular Great-crested Grebe, often feed in the rich waters off the river mouth. Also, we see high tide roosts of regionally important numbers of Grey Plover, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, and Bar-tailed Godwit on the sandy bar on the 'south side', as it is one of the last refuges at the top of the tide in the whole of Alnmouth Bay.

Like all coastal sites, the Aln Estuary is constantly changing, endlessly fascinating, and I'm glad to call it home.



Aln Estuary, Black-tailed Godwit and Wigeon: Tom Cadwallender/BTO

# Avian Influenza update

By Teresa Frost, BTO

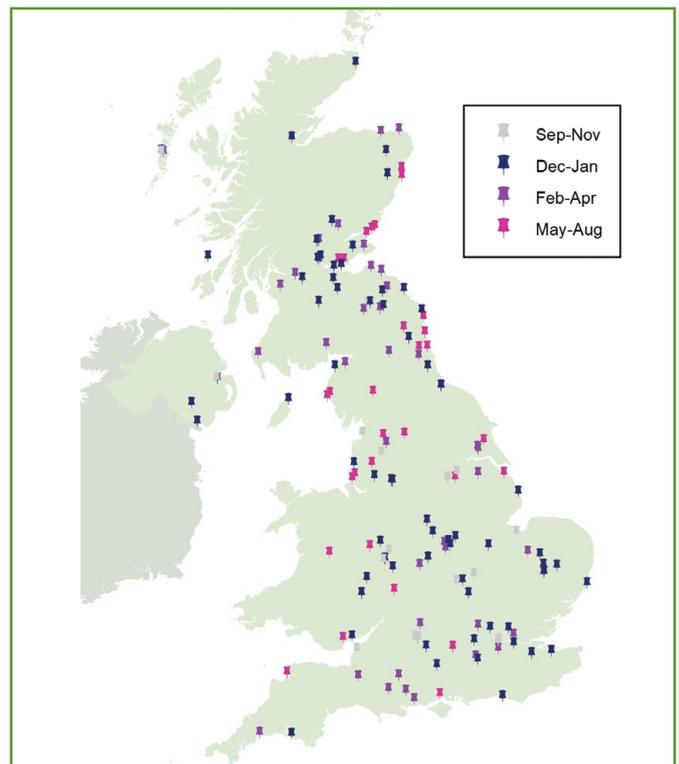


Deceased Black-headed Gull; Dawn Bejmer/BTO

In the Autumn 2022 edition of *WeBS News*, we asked you to keep an eye out for any signs or reports of possible avian flu present on your WeBS and GSMP visits by adding a note in the comments mentioning ‘flu’ if you found dead or sick birds, as well as reporting to the government for testing.

We’ve received over 330 comments of possible cases so far, some of these being multiple birds or instances at a site, shown in the map opposite. Every month, following the WeBS core count date the latest comments are shared with colleagues from RSPB, the relevant Statutory Nature Conservation Agencies (Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot, Northern Ireland Environment Agency) and other public bodies and NGOs. They are combined with reports from BirdTrack and a system called Epicollect that is used by some key sites/reserves that have been selected to collect more detailed information on wild bird mortality, including some WeBS sites. This approach is helping to build a real-time quantitative picture of mortality alongside the official tested results, which only test a limited number of individuals.

Thankfully, although the virus continued to circulate and more deaths were confirmed in winter 2022/23, including in Greenland Barnacle Geese, at most sites the effects were not too severe.



Reports received via WeBS Online and GSMP Online of possible HPAI cases September 2022–August 2023.

However, once the 2023 breeding season began, mortality in Black-headed Gull colonies, and then Common Tern colonies, began to rise. Thanks to reports by WeBS counters, birdwatchers submitting dead bird reports to BirdTrack together with confirmed cases and investigations from the government, we have been able to track developments in a much more coordinated way than was previously possible.

Reports suggest that as many as 20,000 Black-headed Gulls, including adults and young birds, have died at one Lancashire site alone. In total, collating reports from all sources suggests that more than 10% of this species' UK breeding population may have been killed. The outbreaks began in inland colonies in England but quickly spread throughout the UK and to coastal colonies.

Latest indications are that larger gulls may now also be being particularly affected by the disease. Please do continue to report over the coming winter as you carry out your waterbird surveys through our online applications as soon as possible after you carry out your count, so we can spot any emerging or increased impacts on other species, as the virus continues to evolve and adapt to new hosts.

## WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

Commonly known as bird flu, this is an influenza caused by viruses adapted to birds, in a similar way to the human adapted influenza known as simply 'the (human) flu'. Flu viruses can vary in their ability to cause disease: these are high pathogenicity (HPAI) or low pathogenicity (LPAI) variants. Over the last couple of years, wild birds and the poultry industry have been dealing with the onslaught of a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, strain 'H5N1'.

Symptoms of a bird with HPAI include: swollen head; blue discolouration of the neck and throat; loss of appetite; respiratory distress such as gaping beak, coughing, sneezing, gurgling, rattling; diarrhoea; fewer eggs laid; increased mortality; neurological signs such as trembling, falling over, swimming or walking in circles.

Outbreaks of Avian Influenza are not uncommon. However, the effects of the current H5N1 strains appear to be particularly severe and the virus has been confirmed in more than 70 different bird species. Over the winter of 2021/22 an outbreak was confirmed on the Solway Firth and shocking images were released showing hundreds of dead Barnacle Geese strewn across the estuary landscape. Normally, we see the outbreaks subside during summer, however in summer 2022, the virus spread to the UK's seabird populations as well as other bird species. In winter 2022/23 the virus continued to circulate, and in summer 2023 the main mortality observed was in Black-headed Gull and Common Tern colonies.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Keep counting** and help us fill any gaps in coverage – the regular monthly counts of live birds collected by WeBS and GSMP will be the primary way we will be able to identify which species and sites have likely been hardest hit. **It is more important to properly count live birds than look for dead ones.**
- If you suspect bird flu in a **dead bird** due to unusual mortality, or symptoms in other live birds present (e.g. twisting of the head, tremoring, respiratory distress, loss of balance) then **report to the government for possible testing**, following the guidelines that are currently in effect. This is particularly important if bird flu has not yet been recorded near to your suspected case.  
[www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds)  
[www.daera-ni.gov.uk/services/daera-dead-wild-bird-online-reporting-tool](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/services/daera-dead-wild-bird-online-reporting-tool)
- Whilst this is a disease of birds, there is zoonotic potential to cause disease in humans. **Do not touch dead birds.**
- **PLEASE ADD A NOTE OF SUSPECTED CASES TO YOUR WeBS/GSMP/WinGS COUNT FORMS.** Add to the relevant species comment and mention flu so we can find the comment. Give the number, age if possible, and if the bird was dead or sick, e.g. "3 sick adults showing flu-like symptoms", "2 adults and 1 young bird dead, bird flu possible" or "10 birds dead, avian flu suspected as known to be present at site".
- It is important that only live birds are marked as present when you submit your counts, so if there were no live birds of the relevant species present, instead add your record in the 'Extra Details' comments box at the top. Please specify the species if adding to the extra details comment box, e.g. "2 dead Mute Swan, bird flu suspected, no live birds present".
- Note it is possible to optionally record seabirds and birds of prey in WeBS Online as well as waterbirds, either in the 'Other Common Species' tab if they have previously been recorded, or by adding as a new species. You can add avian flu comments to these other species. For species that aren't included in WeBS/GSMP/WinGS data entry, please record your suspected incident in BirdTrack.
- If you can do so safely without touching the dead bird, **check for rings** and report to [www.ring.ac](http://www.ring.ac) – this too will help enable research into the scale of mortality and which populations are most adversely affected.
- **Report to site managers, landowners or councils** as appropriate, who may decide to collect carcasses with appropriate PPE.

# Avocets in the Tamar Complex

By Charles Nodder, WeBS Local Organiser

At the suggestion of Peter Reay, who carried out much research on overwintering Avocet numbers in the Tamar Complex up until 2011, I invited local WeBS counters to take part in a one-off synchronized count of Avocets on 15 January 2023. The response was very positive and despite less than ideal conditions, everyone turned out that day to count Avocets on the falling neap tide three times, at 11:00, 12:00 and 13:00. High water had been at 10:40 (4.7 m).

Blustery heavy showers driven on a strong westerly breeze made counting tricky at times, but sunny intervals provided good visibility in between. Following recent prolonged rainfall, the tide was remarkably slow to fall and indeed it never approached its predicted low water level. Because of this, several counters felt their first one or two counts were unreliable due to birds still being hidden in marshland but by the third count at 13:00, the Avocets were out on the mud and visibility was much improved. This third count is therefore considered by far the most reliable of the set but for completeness, the overall sector counts are in the table below.

One advantage of the strong breeze may have been that the Avocets were less inclined to move than usual. No counter reported seeing birds fly from one sector to another so double counting is unlikely to have occurred. It remains

possible that not all Avocets were seen, of course, even on the third count, so the total of 194 must be considered the minimum number of birds present that day.

## How does this total compare with earlier years?

Avocets first overwintered on the Tamar Complex in the winter of 1946/47, using the main river between the South Hooe bend and Tamerton Foliat. For a decade or so they never reached double figures but their numbers slowly rose thereafter and by 1965/66 exceeded 60, always in that same area. [E.L Johns, *'The Avocet'* Birds Illustrated Vol XIII No. 6, October 1967].

In the years thereafter, WeBS counts and occasional casual counts submitted by individuals to the Cornwall Bird Watching and Preservation Society (CBWPS), indicate this increase continued and quickened, with peak winter numbers exceeding 100 for the first time in 1987, 200 in 1991 and 300 in 1996. [P Reay and P Kent, *'Tamar Avocets – How Many Now'*, Devon Birds Vol 64, No1, April 2011].

These authors recognized, however, that as a highly mobile species the Avocet is prone to being over-estimated if the totals from unsynchronised WeBS counts on different days

Avocets in the Tamar Complex: 15 January 2023 (HW 4.7 m at 10:40)			
WeBS Sector	11:00 hrs	12:00 hrs	13:00 hrs
1	0	0	0
1a	0	0	0
2	0	4	14
3	0	0	0
4	59	63	63
5	0	0	0
6 (Tavy)	28	23	53
7	0	0	0
8	7	2	23
9	0	2	0
10	0	0	0
11 (St John's)	21	41	41
12 (Millbrook)	0	0	0
<b>Total Counted</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>194</b>

(and even to an extent at different times on the same day), are simply added together. Thus, they felt that estimates which postulated overwintering totals here of 400 to 600 birds were too high.

Reay and Kent's own more cautious analysis, backed by synchronised Tamar Complex Avocet counts which they organised in January 2008 (total seen: 257) and January 2011 (total seen: 274) concluded that for the period 1997 to 2011, the overwintering Avocet population in the Tamar Complex was probably in the range 250–350 birds.

Against this background, our count of 194 on 15 January 2023 seems low. It is, of course, no more than a one-off snapshot and it may not have coincided with this year's winter peak but we can learn more about its likely accuracy by putting it in the context of the normal WeBS counts conducted since the last synchronised count in 2011. These provide the following January totals for Avocets (all Tamar Complex sectors combined):

2012	363
2013	396
2014	196
2015	306
2016	89
2017	162
2018	237
2019	370
2020	300
2021	147
2022	295
<b>Mean</b>	<b>233</b>

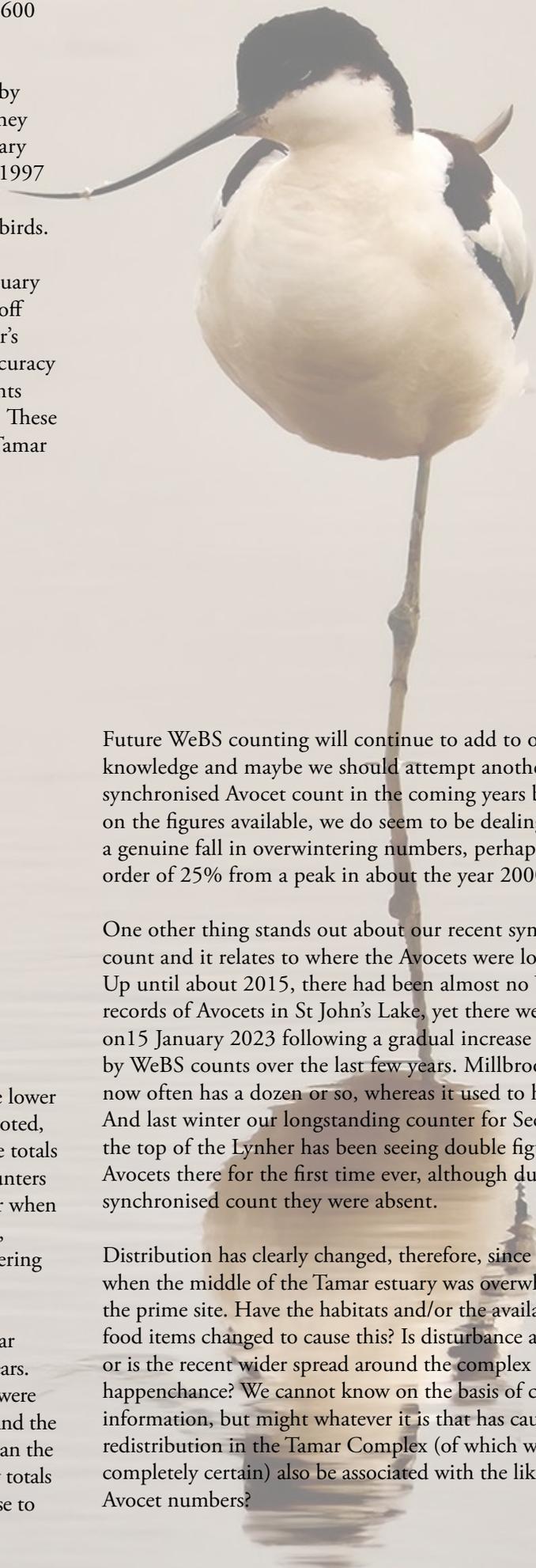
Our 194 total sits within that range, albeit towards the lower end. But we need to bear in mind, as Reay and Kent noted, that WeBS counts on the Tamar can tend to exaggerate totals because they are often not truly synchronous, with counters tending to visit their sites at a time of day/tide/weather when they think they will see the most birds! In that context, 194 may indeed be representative of the true overwintering population of Avocets here in recent years.

If so, this would imply that Avocet numbers in the Tamar Complex have fallen somewhat over the last 10 to 15 years. The synchronised January counts from 2008 and 2011 were each about 65 birds higher than we found last January and the WeBS counts back then were also consistently higher than the data set shown in the table above. Some WeBS monthly totals in the early 2000s exceeded 500 birds. We never get close to that now.

Future WeBS counting will continue to add to our knowledge and maybe we should attempt another synchronised Avocet count in the coming years but even on the figures available, we do seem to be dealing with a genuine fall in overwintering numbers, perhaps of the order of 25% from a peak in about the year 2000.

One other thing stands out about our recent synchronised count and it relates to where the Avocets were located. Up until about 2015, there had been almost no WeBS records of Avocets in St John's Lake, yet there were 41 on 15 January 2023 following a gradual increase recorded by WeBS counts over the last few years. Millbrook too now often has a dozen or so, whereas it used to have none. And last winter our longstanding counter for Sector 7 at the top of the Lynher has been seeing double figures of Avocets there for the first time ever, although during our synchronised count they were absent.

Distribution has clearly changed, therefore, since the days when the middle of the Tamar estuary was overwhelmingly the prime site. Have the habitats and/or the availability of food items changed to cause this? Is disturbance a factor or is the recent wider spread around the complex just happenchance? We cannot know on the basis of current information, but might whatever it is that has caused this redistribution in the Tamar Complex (of which we can be completely certain) also be associated with the likely fall in Avocet numbers?





# A Busman's Holiday with Winter Duck 2023

By Gill Birtles, WeBS Counter Network Organiser

In January 2023, I had the pleasure of joining the RAF Ornithological Society (RAFOS) on their annual expedition to the remotest parts of northern Scotland to carry out counts at the most under-surveyed WeBS sectors. This expedition is code named 'Winter Duck' and since 1999, RAFOS have completed this expedition on a yearly basis, not missing a single year. On average, 200 WeBS sectors are surveyed in a week, in very challenging habitats such as estuaries, open sea lochs and mountainous lochans.

RAFOS have been supported by the WeBS office each year through providing paper forms and maps and since I joined the WeBS team in 2019, I have always enjoyed this job, doing my small part for the expedition and enjoying the photos and tales afterwards from afar. Even before joining BTO, I vividly remember their presentation given at the WeBS 70th Anniversary Conference in 2017. So when I was invited to join the crew of Winter Duck 2023, I needed no persuasion!

Unsurprisingly, with the majority of the expedition crew being serving and retired military personnel, the organisation of the trip was like a military operation, so I felt very prepared. We were all travelling up from different parts of the UK, so I met up with the 'East Coast Minibus' in Cambridgeshire and we drove the long journey up to Scotland. We met with the rest of the expedition crew for an overnight stay at Newtonmore, where we enjoyed the

comforts of the Newtonmore Diner (macaroni and chips anyone?). There were 10 of us in total and the plan was to split into three teams to cover the week's work. Team 1 would be based at Dundonnell, while Team 2 would work from Horse Sound to Kenmore and Team 3 would start at Duncansby Head and move along the northern coast.

The WeBS sectors that RAFOS cover are in very remote areas that are difficult to access and with few people living locally, it is challenging to find counters who can count them monthly. Therefore, receiving these annual single-visit counts allows us to continue to monitor these important local areas and see how the bird populations change over the years and decades. In the WeBS calendar, January is the most important month of the year as the data collected feeds into the International Waterbird Census, making these counts vital for collecting data for species such as Barnacle Geese and Black-throated Divers.

So we were up early and as I was with Team 1, we headed by minibus to our main base of the MOD Adventure Training Centre in Dundonnell, via Inverness for breakfast at Morrisons and a final supply run. We covered some inland WeBS sectors on the way across and the week got off to a flying start as the first bird we spotted was a Golden Eagle on the side of a ridge – the first of many lifers for me!

The training centre was located at the mouth of Little Loch Broom with views from the bedrooms of Curlew, Oystercatchers and Hooded Crows. You could hear the wind howling around the building but inside was very comfortable and warm and I felt in the lap of luxury compared to some of the hostels that Teams 2 and 3 were due to stay in. Having said that, there were some challenges over the week, such as the fridge breaking and Scottish Water inadvertently switching off the water supply, none of which fazed the regular expeditioners!

For the first full day of surveying we covered Loch Ewe, starting at the western tip at Rubha nan Sasan, where we were accompanied by signs commemorating the history of the Arctic Convoys of World War II and utilised the old look out posts to shelter from the driving wind and rain. It was a long day, stopping all around Loch Ewe, ending at a (closed for the winter) perfume studio on the eastern tip. But our survey work didn't stop there as after our communal meal, the evening was spent double-checking and inputting the data.

In addition to WeBS, BirdTrack is also on the expedition's list of duties, with all bird species seen uploaded against 10 km squares. So there was a lot to keep track of, with all of us taking on the job of either keeping look out, making notes or driving the minibus. Again, military organisation and communication was the key here!

Each day consisted of this routine, getting up, driving to site, surveying and data inputting. We were treated to some



Loch Torridon

stunning views, with my particular favourites being Gruinard Bay and Loch Torridon. Many lifers were ticked off for me including Great Northern Diver and Iceland Gull and as well as the birds, we were nearly constantly in the company of seals, Otters and Harbour Porpoises. The weather was of course challenging – we had lots of driving wind and rain and cold temperatures, but compared to stories of previous years of the expedition being snowed in, stuck in blizzards or sliding off the road and waiting hours for rescue, I felt we got lucky. Needless to say, we treated ourselves to sweet treats when we could, stopping in cafes at Ullapool and Upper Loch Torridon, where we were recognised by locals as the bird folk who appear once a year. I also had to call an emergency stop at a camping shop in Ullapool for waterproof socks as, disastrously, my wellies got a hole in them after just a couple of days!

Great Northern Divers are a particular feature of RAFOS counts on the west coast of Scotland



## RAFOS SITES MAP

The RAFOS teams cover over 250 WeBS sites around the north-west coast of Scotland, in some unforgiving terrain and weather, quite an impressive undertaking!





The Final Supper at Dundonnell

On the final night, all three teams converged at Dundonnell for the final supper, where we exchanged tales of our travels and the wildlife seen. It was a great opportunity to laugh, catch up and enjoy a dram or two of whiskey, but also to address any details of how the expedition can improve and how the WeBS team can further support the expedition. Then the next day we made the long journey back south in the East Coast Minibus (of course stopping at the Inverness Morrisons for breakfast!).

I feel very privileged to have joined the 2023 expedition of Winter Duck and came away from the expedition with a profound sense of the hard work and great feat of coordination that goes into the organising of the expedition – in total, 253 sectors were counted in the week! I'm looking forward to doing my part from the office for future expeditions with a new sense of understanding of what is being accomplished for us. My thanks go out to all of RAFOS and the crew of Winter Duck 2023 for taking me under their wing and making me feel welcome among the ranks.



Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2023–2024 season...

2023...

15 October

19 November

17 December

2024...

14 January

11 February

10 March

7 April

12 May

9 June

21 July

18 August

22 September

20 October

17 November

15 December

Where tidal conditions at coastal sites are unfavourable on these dates, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates. Ideally, these should be separated by at least three weeks from counts in the preceding and following months. Counts on different count units within complex sites should be coordinated to avoid the possibility of double counting.

Keep up-to-date with count dates and add them to your electronic calendar at: [www.bto.org/webs/coredates](http://www.bto.org/webs/coredates)

# Low Tide Counts update

By Neil Calbrade, WeBS Low Tide Organiser

Despite involving only a relatively small number of sites, estuaries collectively represent the most important habitat for wintering waterbirds in the UK.

They are also inherently different from the thousands of inland sites counted for WeBS. The influence of the tide means that the birds have to be much more mobile, both within and between sites. WeBS Core Counts on estuaries have, in general, been based around high tide roosts. Although important in themselves, roost sites are usually secondary in importance to the manner in which waterbirds make use of a site for feeding. Therefore, information gathered about these sites at high tide will only provide part of the picture. The WeBS Low Tide Counts scheme, which was initiated in the winter of 1992/93, aims to monitor, assess and regularly update information on the relative importance of intertidal feeding areas of UK estuaries for wintering waterbirds and thus to complement the information gathered by WeBS Core Counts on estuaries.

WeBS Low Tide Counts provide the crucial information needed to assess the potential effects on waterbird populations of a variety of human activities which affect the extent or value of intertidal habitats, such as dock developments, proposals for recreational activities, tidal power barrages, marinas and housing schemes.

The data gathered contribute greatly to the conservation of waterbirds by providing supporting information for the establishment and management of the UK network of Ramsar sites and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), other site designations and whole estuary conservation plans. In addition, WeBS Low Tide Counts enhance our knowledge of the low water distribution of waterbirds and provide the data that highlight regional variations in habitat use.

In particular, WeBS Low Tide Counts should help us to understand, predict and possibly plan for compensation for

the effects of sea-level rise on the UK's internationally important estuarine waterbird populations.

## COVERAGE

The counts for the 2023/24 winter will soon be underway on Morecambe Bay, Firth of Forth, the Duddon Estuary, Exe Estuary, the Mersey Estuary and Wigtown Bay, among other sites being counted under the six-yearly programme.

The winter of 2022/23 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 18 estuaries around the UK, including the Alt, Cleddau and Medina Estuaries.

## TAKING PART

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme, so please contact the WeBS office ([lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org)) if you are able to organise a team or be able to count a whole site yourself and would like to take part. The counts are carried out, ideally, once a month between November and February and will allow comparisons of distributions and densities of species across a site with previous years.

**Waterbirds in the UK: 21/22**

**WeBS Report Online**

Location: Dee Estuary (Low T...)

Low Tide Count year: 21/22

Species	Mth peak	Mth avg	Avr dens
Brent Goose (Dark-bellied - bernicla)	13	4	<0.1
Brent Goose (Light-bellied - hrota)	640	394	0.1
Canada Goose	8579	3444	0.8
Greylag Goose	417	205	0.1
Pink-footed Goose	19550	7762	2.8
Mute Swan	91	39	0.2
Whooper Swan	85	28	0.0
Egyptian Goose	11	3	0.0
Shelduck	3470	1632	0.1
Ruddy Shelduck	2	1	0.0
Shoveller	344	208	0.0
Godswail	104	68	0.1
Wigeon	12687	6588	0.9
Mallard	892	514	0.0
Pintail	7250	2178	0.3
Teal	4968	2554	0.3
Tufted Duck	85	51	0.2
Common Scoter	1182	345	0.2
Goldeneye	3	1	<0.1
Goosander	9	3	<0.1
Red-breasted Merganser	40	18	0.0
Water Rail	2	<1	<0.1
Moorhen	91	60	0.0
Coot	102	69	0.1
Little Grebe	38	17	0.0
Great Crested Grebe	50	13	0.0
Oystercatcher	61388	38107	3.2
Avocet	3	2	0.0
Lapwing	13543	7304	1.4
Golden Plover	229	120	0.4
Grey Plover	612	315	0.0
Ringed Plover	205	77	0.0

Legend: Intertidal (red), Subtidal (blue), Non-tidal (green), Not covered (yellow)

Further information about WeBS Low Tide Counts are available online via [www.bto.org/websreporting-lowtide](http://www.bto.org/websreporting-lowtide) including data summaries and dot density distribution maps for different estuaries and species. Dot density maps are available for all species and years, including the facility to show any combination of site, species and years side by side for comparison.

# End of an era!

In July this year, we said a fond farewell to Graham Austin from the Wetland and Marine Research Team, who retired from the BTO after just short of 30 years. Graham provided the analytical brains behind the whole WeBS operation, ensuring all the databases and programs ran smoothly, along with being the BTO oracle for all our GIS work. He was also responsible for the production of the WeBS Alerts Report, writing the data request programs, generating the species population trends for the annual report and developing sector plot analyses. A mine of statistical and ornithological knowledge and with a star role in many of BTO's most amusing anecdotes, he will be sorely missed.

After a PhD on Buzzards and some interim jobs, Graham started work at BTO in the Habitats Advisory Unit working on a range of fieldwork and analytical projects primarily on waterbirds. Many will know Graham as a keen bird ringer, running two Constant Effort Sites and a number of species-focused studies in the Brecks and Norfolk Fens, as well as in Wales and Shropshire, and through wader ringing on the Wash and in Delaware in the States. Graham has also been pivotal in the development of Demography Online, bringing together his expertise and experience of bird ringing and knowledge of databases and coding. It seems likely that we will continue to benefit from his volunteer ringing efforts and we wish him, and his exuberant Samoyed, Millie, all the best and look forward to keeping in touch.



On a recent team away day to Havergate Island



Graham supervising swallow ringing



Passing on his data programming wisdom

# Core, Supplementary and Casual/Roost Counts – What, Why and How?

The WeBS team is often asked, what is the difference between, Core, Supplementary and Casual/Roost counts? What are they used for? Why should we bother submitting them? Because it may not always be clear when a count is a Core Count, a Supplementary Count or a Casual/Roost Count, we thought we would take this opportunity to explain them further and how we use the data.

## PRIORITY CORE COUNTS

Priority Core Counts are carried out on a regular monthly basis at the same sectors on the predetermined Priority Core Count date (the Sunday dates that we publish every WeBS year (see pg.13)). Data from Core Counts feeds directly into the three main objectives of WeBS: i) to assess the size of non-breeding waterbird populations in the UK, ii) to assess trends in their numbers and distribution, and iii) to assess the importance of individual sites for waterbirds. These data are reported in a variety of ways such as through the annual *Waterbirds in the UK* report, in the WeBS Report Online, and used extensively by the WeBS partners for conservation, research and policy formulation. The data are also combined with those from other countries in the International Waterbirds Census (IWC) to report on waterbird populations and trends at an international scale (undertaken by Wetlands International).

This degree of consistency over many years distinguishes Priority Core Counts from Supplementary and Casual/Roost Counts and ultimately allows the monitoring of changes in waterbird numbers and distribution with the added confidence of knowing that these reflect true changes rather than simply different areas being counted.

## SUPPLEMENTARY CORE COUNTS

Supplementary Core Counts are additional full counts that are carried out at a WeBS sector using the Priority Core Count methodology. Reasons why additional Supplementary Core Counts could be submitted can include for example, the allocated counter visits the sector more regularly than once a month and would like to submit their data into WeBS Online, or the month's visit was carried out outside of the two week window that we allow to fit in the Priority Core Count visit.

Supplementary Core Counts do not feed into the species or site trends, but can be downloaded through WeBS Online

by anyone with access to the site/s and viewed in the WeBS Report Online when specified.

Supplementary Core Counts are entered using the Core Count Entry form in WeBS Online, and if a Priority Core Count has already been submitted for the month, a prompt will appear to mark the additional count/s as Supplementary.

## CASUAL/ROOST COUNT

Casual/Roost Counts have their own entry form in WeBS Online and are intended for incomplete counts at a WeBS sector, when some species have been counted, but not necessarily all. Examples could be roost counts of Goosander, geese, swans, Cormorants or gulls that are absent from the sector when the Priority Core Counts are made, or additional counts of seaducks carried out under more suitable weather/sea conditions.

Species	Present	Count	Species	Present	Count
Goosander (GO)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	33		<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	

This information also doesn't feed into the species and site trends but is of great use in supplementing the Priority Core Counts.

When submitting Casual/Roost Counts, there are only two differences compared to the submission of Core and Supplementary counts. Firstly, you are asked to specify whether you are entering a casual daytime count, or a specifically targeted roost count (either dawn or dusk – enter the count times for us to know which). Secondly, you will see no pre-selected species names, but instead need to select any individual species concerned from the dropdown box.

All of these counts are very valuable to us so please submit any and all data that you have been able to collect at your WeBS sites!

# Local Organiser News

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Maria Antonova (Kent - East); Anthony Bentley (Breydon Water (Norfolk)); Allan Brown (Lothian (inland) and Fife (inland)); David Hawker (Fleet Bay (Dumfries and Galloway)); Paul Harvey (Shetland); Sarah Money (Orkney); Jim Morgan (East Yorkshire & Scarborough); and John Walker (Humber Estuary - Outer South (Lincolnshire)) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter.

We would also like to welcome the following new Local Organisers: Ian Bainbridge (Fleet Bay (Dumfries and Galloway)); Owen Beaumont (Humber Estuary - Outer South (Lincolnshire)); Paul Blackburn (Tay and Esden Estuaries (Fife)); Alan Burnham (East Yorkshire & Scarborough); Patrick Cook & Lynne McKenzie (Aberdeenshire); Claire Hassan (Londonderry (other sites)); Mike Hill (Nottinghamshire); Heather Mathieson (Kent - East); Neil Stratton (Scottish Borders); Shawn Waddoups (Lothian (inland)); Rory Tallack (Shetland); and Tom Wells (Orkney).

## Desperately seeking organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Badenoch and Strathspey; Buckinghamshire - South; Clwyd (coastal); Clwyd (inland); Cotswold Water Park (Wiltshire/Gloucestershire); Fife (inland); Forth Estuary - North; Greater London (excl. Thames Estuary); Harrogate and Yorkshire Dales (Yorkshire); Hertfordshire (excl. Lee Valley); Huddersfield/ Halifax area (Yorkshire); Isle of Cumbrae; Jersey (inland); Kent - West; Montgomeryshire; Northamptonshire (excl. Nene Valley); Staffordshire; Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin); West Midlands. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)

## Bob Howells (1928–2023)

In April this year, we received the sad news of Bob Howells' passing at the age of 95. Bob first joined the BTO in 1959 and was one of the first organisers of the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry (BoEE) in 1968 and continued his work when WeBS was formed. Such was his standing within the BoEE community that he was invited to speak on behalf of counters at the WeBS launch in Westminster in 1993 and he contributed to WeBS ever since, collecting a vast amount of data for Burry Inlet and Swansea Bay. In 1974 Bob also took on the role of Regional Rep. for West Glamorgan, a role he held for 37 years until he stepped down in 2011.

As well as his commitment to WeBS and the BTO, Bob was one of the founder members of the Gower Ornithological Society sixty years ago, and held various posts within the organisation, including President for some years. He was also responsible for the annual summaries of waterbirds in the Burry Inlet and Swansea Bay SSSIs and regularly recorded the arrival of Mediterranean Gulls and sent more than 300 ring-sightings over the years.

Bob's enthusiasm and commitment to WeBS and the BTO has long been admired and in 2008 he was awarded the Jubilee Medal for his outstanding and committed devotion to BTO and in 2012 he was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Jubilee Birthday Honours "for services to Ornithology in Swansea and West Glamorgan".

Bob was a real stalwart of the ornithology community and his enthusiasm and expertise will be greatly missed. Our condolences go out to his family and friends.

The 2023 Local Organiser meeting will take place on Zoom on Tuesday 6 November. If you have anything that you would like to feedback and comments and queries to the WeBS team, please get in touch with your Local Organiser.



# A Spotlight on the WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC)

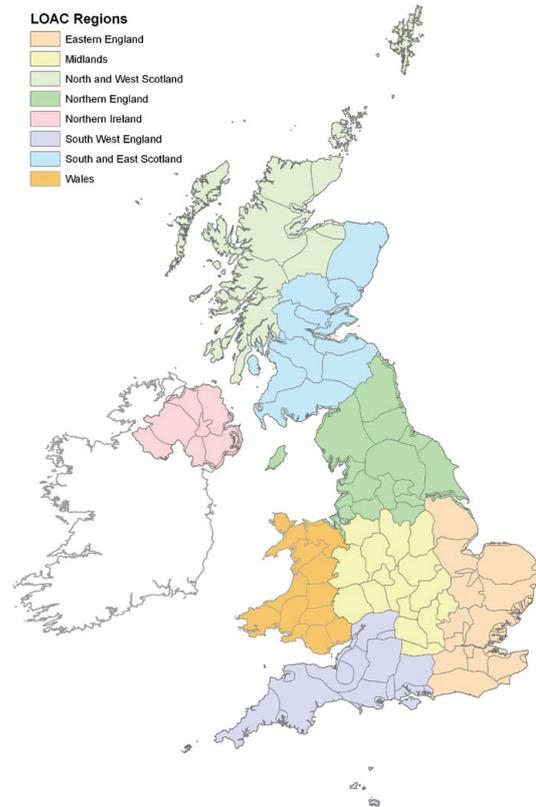
The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) is a committee made up of eight Local Organisers (LOs) who represent their peers within wider LOAC regions. Although LOAC has no remit to make decisions, such as funding and spending issues (which is the role of the WeBS Steering Group), the role of LOAC is to provide an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff by providing ideas, feedback and advice.

So how does this work in practice? Well, once a year, the WeBS team and at least one representative from each of the partner organisations meet with LOAC where we discuss upcoming WeBS developments and any comments, issues or queries that LOs may have brought to them.

The WeBS team finds this invaluable as we can discuss how a development will affect LOs and we often change/tweak decisions based on LOAC's feedback. Several decisions have been made through discussions with LOAC, including the introduction of a Local Organiser application process, which includes a review stage by LOAC. Through this we are able to tap into the LOAC's first hand expertise of what skills are required in an LO, ensuring that we are appointing the best people to these roles.

At the virtual LOAC meeting in June 2023, there were updates from the RSPB and the WeBS team gave updates on Avian Flu across the UK, the Low Tide Counts, GSMP, WeBS News and the WeBS Online developments that we are currently working on. As well as this, we heard from the LOAC members with reports from their regions and any queries that were raised ahead of the meeting. Meeting agendas and minutes are always available for anyone to view on the WeBS page of the BTO website.

We hope that through meeting with LOAC in the spring and then the LO-wide meeting in the autumn, we are able to touch base frequently, making sure that LO and counters' voices are central to all that we do.



We would like to thank Allan Brown for his time and commitment to LOAC, as he has stepped down from the position since the last newsletter. Additionally, we would like to welcome Phil Hampson, Dan Jenkins-Jones and Andy Riches who have joined the committee within the last year.

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS which you would like to bring to the attention of LOAC, please get in touch with your LO or LOAC representative listed below.

## WeBS LOAC Representatives

### Eastern England

Chris Gunn  
[donandchris@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:donandchris@hotmail.co.uk)

### Midlands

Brian Moore  
[b\\_moore@ntlworld.com](mailto:b_moore@ntlworld.com)

### Northern England

Phil Hampson  
[pjhampers@me.com](mailto:pjhampers@me.com)

### Wales

Dan Jenkins-Jones  
[eastglamwebs@gmail.com](mailto:eastglamwebs@gmail.com)

### South and East Scotland

Andy Riches  
[slioch69@aol.com](mailto:slioch69@aol.com)

### South West England

Eve Tigwell  
[eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk](mailto:eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk)

### North and West Scotland

Bob Swann  
[bobswann14@gmail.com](mailto:bobswann14@gmail.com)

### Northern Ireland

Kerry Mackie  
[kerrymackie9@gmail.com](mailto:kerrymackie9@gmail.com)

Many people may not be aware of LOAC and who is their LOAC representative so we thought we would take this opportunity to highlight some of our LOAC members and the great work that they do!



**EVE TIGWELL**

**Where are your Local Organiser and LOAC regions?**

LO for Somerset and Somerset (Levels & Moors); South West region.

**How long have you been a member of LOAC?**

Since 2017.

**What attracted you to join LOAC?**

There was a vacancy and it's good to keep these communication structures working properly.

**How do you feel you serve the LOs in your LOAC region?**

It's important that there's someone a bit more 'local' for LOs to contact; not everyone wants to go to the WeBS team with their (potentially) minor queries. Once a meeting has been arranged, I email all the LOs in my region to check if they have queries; after the meeting, I send them all a résumé. And, of course, handle any queries or comments that come up between meetings.

**Lastly, which is your favourite WeBS species and why?**

Very difficult! It would have to be between Lapwing and Curlew; both species are wonderfully evocative of their habitats and need to be monitored so that their declines can be halted.



**DANIEL JENKINS-JONES**

**Where are your Local Organiser and LOAC regions?**

I live in Cardiff and I'm the Local Organiser for 'East Glamorgan'. The years have flown by and I must have been in the role for about 10 years which, hopefully, shows how enjoyable being a LO really is.

**How long have you been a member of LOAC and what attracted you to join?**

I'm a LOAC newbie, having only recently joined as the representative for Wales. Wales is a great country – of course! – and it's just the right size to enable the creation of connections amongst birders across its length and breadth. I'd say that this is reflected in the strong BTO community here with good links amongst the WeBS LOs and the Regional Network of Representatives and Ambassadors, the BTO's volunteer leaders on the ground, across the various Welsh counties. In many areas, these LOs and Reps have close links with the local bird clubs and societies – vital sources of volunteers for all manner of BTO surveys and monitoring work.

**How do you feel you serve the LOs in your LOAC region?**

As someone who's both an LO and a member of the BTO's Regional Network, in my LOAC role, I hope I can make the most of those connections to promote WeBS across Wales. The LOs in Wales are very experienced and I also hope I can harness their knowledge and opinions as necessary to feed back into the LOAC meetings, to provide a Welsh perspective to any future developments to WeBS. We do have two or three LO vacancies in Wales and I'd certainly be delighted to offer support for new LOs, should they need it.

**Lastly, which is your favourite WeBS species and why?**

There's no doubt in my mind as to which is my favourite WeBS species. It has to be Coot. There's never a dull moment with them. I love how belligerent, quarrelsome and cantankerous they are, picking fights with each other or any waterbirds that stray into their patch. And, speaking from a WeBS counter's perspective, they're also usually easy to pick out and count on any wetland, which is always a bonus.



**BRIAN MOORE**

**Where are your Local Organiser and LOAC regions?**

LO region is Leicestershire and Rutland (excluding Rutland Water). LOAC is Midlands.

**How do you feel you serve the LOs in your LOAC region?**

I think I could be in contact with them more though when I have, everything was fine and I was not needed!

**How long have you been a member of LOAC and what attracted you to join?**

I have been a LOAC member since 2014, (nine years)! Seemed like a good idea...to be in contact with other LO's and be involved with the development of the WeBS online.

**Lastly, which is your favourite WeBS species and why?**

Impossible to answer! Anything new for the site though they will have probably moved on by the next count. Always pleased to see Great Crested Grebe especially if they have bred.



# Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) Update

The GSMP is a suite of species-specific surveys which monitors the different populations of geese and migrant swans throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, to provide data for the conservation of their populations.

## GSMP survey dates for 2023/24

### ICELANDIC-BREEDING GOOSE CENSUS (IGC)

**Pink-footed Goose:** 14–15 October 2023 and 18–19 November 2023

**Greylag Goose:** 18–19 November 2023

Ideally all sites supporting Pink-footed Geese should be covered during the October and November counts, whilst those holding Icelandic Greylag Geese should be covered in November.

We would like to encourage all counters at sites within the wintering range of Icelandic Greylag Geese to also carry out a count during September if the site also supports British Greylag Geese. September counts are not strictly coordinated but ideally should be carried out during the middle of that month, although any counts made during September will be of value.

If you are unable to count on the above dates, please contact either your GSMP Local Organiser or the GSMP Office so that we may try to arrange cover of your site by another counter.

### GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE CENSUS

The census is organised by the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study (<https://greenlandwhitefront.org>).

Please contact the organiser Tony Fox ([tfo@bios.au.dk](mailto:tfo@bios.au.dk)) for further details about the census.

#### Count dates for the 2023/24 census are as follows:

Autumn and spring coordinated censuses:

**16–20 December 2023 and 9–13 March 2024.**

We very much welcome counts from other dates and times but for the monthly counts, we especially appreciate counts in the following periods:

**18–22 November 2023, 13–17 January 2024 and 17–21 February 2024.**

### IGC LOCAL ORGANISERS NEEDED

We are looking for Local Organisers to coordinate the Icelandic-breeding Goose Counts in Moray Firth, Speyside, Northern Ireland, Aberdeenshire, Angus (excluding Montrose Basin) and Clyde regions.

If you are interested in taking on a region, please contact Neil Calbrade: [gsmpp@bto.org](mailto:gsmpp@bto.org)

### GOOSE AND SWAN PHOTOGRAPHS SOUGHT

To aid in the carrying out of age assessments, we are looking to produce some guidance on ageing the different migratory goose and swan species. If you have any good photographs of first-winter Brent, White-fronted, Pink-footed, Barnacle or Bean Geese and Whooper and Bewick's Swans, and also mixed aged flocks, we would love to hear from you. Any photos should include the month they were taken to show how young birds moult through their first winter.

Details about all the GSMP surveys, including how to get involved can be found on the GSMP website at: [www.bto.org/gsmpp](http://www.bto.org/gsmpp)

# IGC in GSMP Online

When we first launched GSMP Online in autumn 2022, we only had time to build the basic data entry elements. This meant that any counter could add counts for any site, which potentially could lead to duplicated efforts and made it difficult for Local Organisers to check potential coverage of sites. Local Organisers could also not see what counts had been submitted for organising purposes or for data validation.

In future, in order to count and enter IGC data for a site, you will need to be allocated to it. This summer, we have built in some new features for Local Organisers to allocate sites to counters, along with the ability to review and validate IGC submissions made in their region. Another feature we have built, is a Vacant Sites page, to make it easier for counters to find and request a vacant IGC site.

## Vacant IGC Sites

The easiest way for prospective counters to find and request to count a vacant IGC site is via the IGC Site Map page. The link to this appears on the top bar of GSMP Online and also on the 'Taking Part' section of the GSMP website.

On the map on the homepage, are markers for the IGC sites. These are colour coded:

- Dark blue – Vacant Key Site
- Light Blue – Vacant Site
- Grey – Non Vacant Site



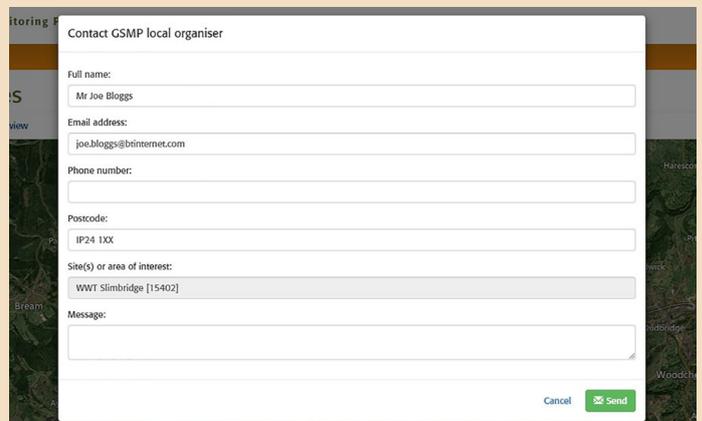
This will bring up a form, and you simply fill in this form with your contact details so that the Local Organiser can get in touch with you. You can include a message for the Local Organiser if you wish to explain why you would like to count the site, and press 'Send'.

An email will be sent to both the Local Organiser for that site and copied to the GSMP Team.



You can zoom in to an area using your mouse to see the locations of the sites or if you know the name of the site already, you can find them using the List View. You can also search for sites by grid reference, postcode or region using the collapsible control panel on the right of the screen, which can be accessed by clicking the  icon.

To request a site, simply click on the marker, and then press the  icon.



## AGE ASSESSMENTS

Field-based age assessments were initiated in the 1940s, initially for European White-fronted Geese. This was extended to most other populations between the 1960s and 1980s and currently the two migratory swan species and 11 goose populations native to the UK are all assessed.

The aims of the age assessments are to determine the annual reproductive success of each goose or swan population and are mostly carried out at wintering and autumn stop-over sites. Age assessments of geese and swans comprise two measures of annual reproductive success (or productivity): the proportion of young (first-winter) birds in non-breeding flocks and the average brood size.

Due to differences in plumage characteristics, swans and geese in their first winter are usually easily separated from adult birds, at least for part of the non-breeding season.

In many swans and geese, young birds remain in family units with their parents throughout their first winter, and thus it is also possible to measure the number of young produced by successful breeding pairs. Counters, therefore, record the number of young birds present in a flock and also identify family groups making a note of the number of young within each family.

The timing of migration and post-juvenile moult differs between species, meaning that the time period in which data can be collected also varies between species (see below). Plumage differences also vary between species and are more subtle for some species than others, meaning that the level of experience required by the observer is greater.

If you are interested in helping with age assessments, please contact the GSMP team: [gsmp@bto.org](mailto:gsmp@bto.org)

### Survey periods for age assessments:

**Bewick's Swan:** November–February (focus on December and mid-January)

**Whooper Swan:** October–January (focus on mid-January)

**Taiga Bean Goose:** October–mid November

**Pink-footed Goose:** mid September–mid November

**European White-fronted Goose:** October–January (focus on January)

**Greenland White-fronted Goose:** October–January (focus on December)

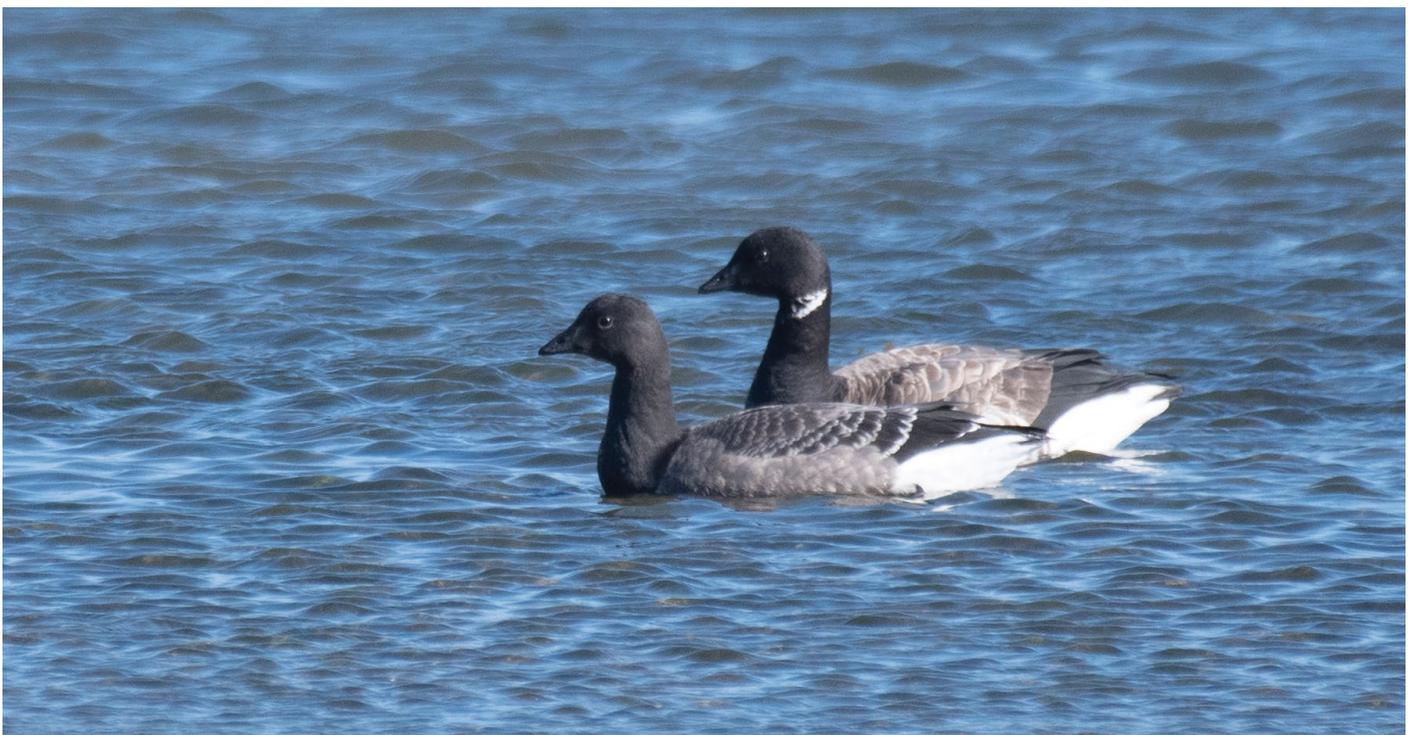
**Icelandic Greylag Goose:** October–mid November (care needed with age identification)

**British Greylag Goose:** August–September

**Barnacle Goose (both populations):** October–December

**Dark-bellied Brent Goose:** September–March (focus on October and November)

**Light-bellied Brent Goose (both populations):** September–March (focus on October and November)

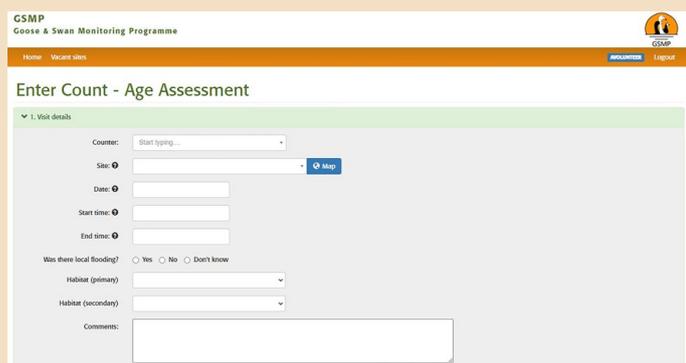


As with IGC Counts, age assessments can also be entered into GSMP Online. You will need to register to use the system at <https://app.bto.org/gsmponline>, but this will use the same username and password if you currently use for WeBS Online.

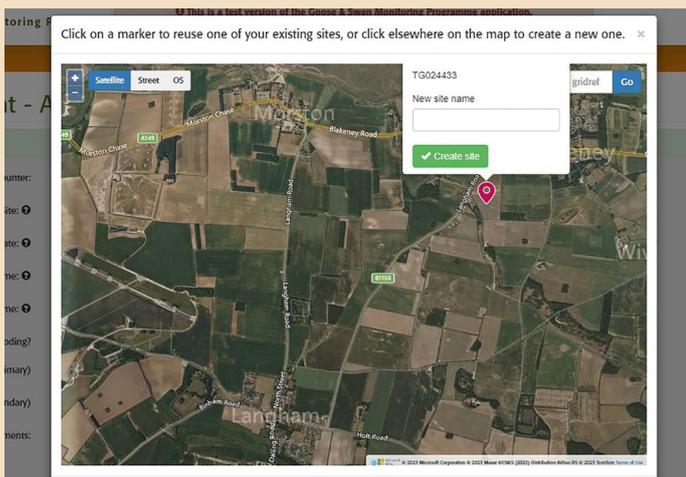
You can enter both totals of young within flocks and also the number of each brood size in a flock.

## Submitting Age Assessments

From GSMP Data Home, under 'Your Options', click on 'Age Assessment'.



First you will be asked to specify the site, which if this is a site where you have previously done Age Assessments, you can find using the dropdown list. If it is a new site, you can create this by clicking the 'Map' button and zooming in and clicking on the map at the relevant point. You can add a site name to help you find the site in future and then click 'Create site'.



The date of the count must also be recorded and, ideally, the approximate start and end time, as well as whether there was any local flooding and the habitat the birds were using. There is also a facility to record extra details (e.g. additional counters, disturbance, etc).

Forms for age assessments can be downloaded from the GSMP website or requested from the GSMP Office by emailing [gsmponline@bto.org](mailto:gsmponline@bto.org) and submitted to your Local Organiser or the GSMP office.

Note that age assessments are not organised in the same way as the IGC and can still be entered for any site.

Once you have completed this page, please scroll down to '2. Counts'.



You can add counts of any swan or goose species that you want to do age assessments for. If there are not enough rows to cover all the species present, then click on the '+ Add row' icon at the bottom. Alternatively, if you wish to clear a species added by mistake, click on the corresponding red bin button to the left of the species name.

To enter counts, enter the overall flock size and then the number of adult, young and indeterminate aged birds within the flock.

To add brood sizes, click on the 'Broods' icon to the right of the flock size fields. In the relevant fields enter the number of broods of each size, and if there are any broods larger than 4, these can be added in the Custom brood sizes box. Then click 'Ok'.

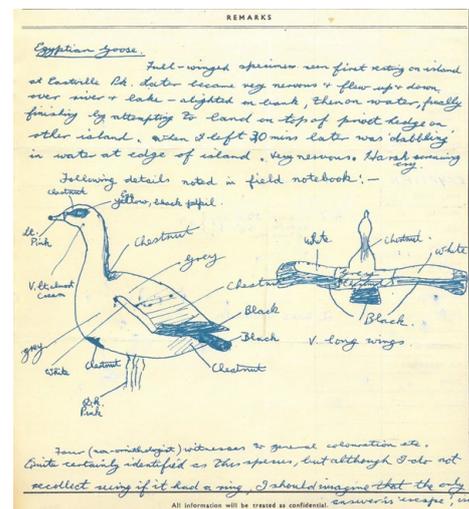


Once you've finished entering all the counts, click on 'Save'.

# Backchat...

## Historical inputting

The ongoing work of digitising our historic paper forms has unearthed some gems from WeBS counts of old. Here you can see a field sketch of an Egyptian Goose from the 20th March 1955 at Eastville Park, Bristol. At this time, Egyptian Geese were not as common to see as they are now; they were introduced to the UK as part of private collections in the 17th century and slowly spread into the wild, only being added to the British Bird List in 1971. So you can understand why this counter had to be sure they were correct with their ID!



## Did you know...?

The *Guinness Book of Records*' origin was based on a waterbird? On 10 November 1951, Sir Hugh Beaver, then the managing director of the Guinness Breweries, was hunting gamebirds in the North Slob, County Wexford, Ireland. After missing a shot at a Golden Plover, he became involved in an argument over which was the fastest gamebird in Europe, the Golden Plover or the Red Grouse (it is the plover). He couldn't find a reference book that answered the question - so in 1954 he created his own. Thus, the *Guinness Book of Records* was born.

### The WeBS and GSMP team & contacts

Although the first port of call for counters should be their Local Organiser, many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS and GSMP team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help...

#### Gill Birtles

WeBS Counter Network Organiser  
Counter and Local Organiser database management, WeBS Online  
[gillian.birtles@bto.org](mailto:gillian.birtles@bto.org)

#### Neil Calbrade

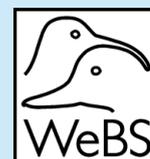
WeBS Low Tide Count Organiser,  
GSMP Organiser, WeBS Data Requests,  
Waterbird News Editor  
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#### Teresa Frost

Management of WeBS, Annual Report, software development, statistical analyses  
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#### Ian Woodward

WeBS Alerts, statistical analyses  
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#### The WeBS and GSMP Office

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