WeBS

Newsletter

Number 14 Summer 2001

Foot & Mouth Disease and the resumption of WeBS counts

When the FMD outbreak first hit the news, I doubt few of us realised that the disease would have such wide ranging effects. The impact on bird monitoring was brought into sharp focus within a matter of days, and many national schemes were suspended as a result. This, we felt, was the only proper and responsible course of action under the circumstances.

Even then, during a few frenetic days of consultation and meetings, when it became clear that the summer's fieldwork was to be severely affected, none of us gave much thought to the idea that FMD would pose problems for the following winter. As the summer draws to a close, however, it is clear that, while there has been a rapid die-off as predicted, the 'tail' of new infections has continued far longer than expected. Consequently, we have been deliberating carefully if and how to resume waterbird monitoring in the face of continuing outbreaks and restrictions in several regions.

WeBS partners decided at a meeting on 12 July (just prior to this newsletter going to press) that we should aim to resume WeBS counts from September where possible, i.e. where it is reasonable to assume that there is no risk of spreading FMD and where land owners are happy to permit access. This assumes that the situation does not worsen before then; we are, naturally, keeping a close eye on the situation.

Based on the situation in mid July, we hope that access to many sites will be possible in September 2001. However, we are acutely aware that access to many sites, particularly through farmland, is dependent upon the continuing good relationship between landowner and counter. Thus, we feel it is ultimately best left to your discretion as to whether you resume counting at your site. If, for example, you feel that even approaching a farmer to enquire about access may jeopardise your relationship and future visits, then, of course, it would be better to wait until tensions have eased.

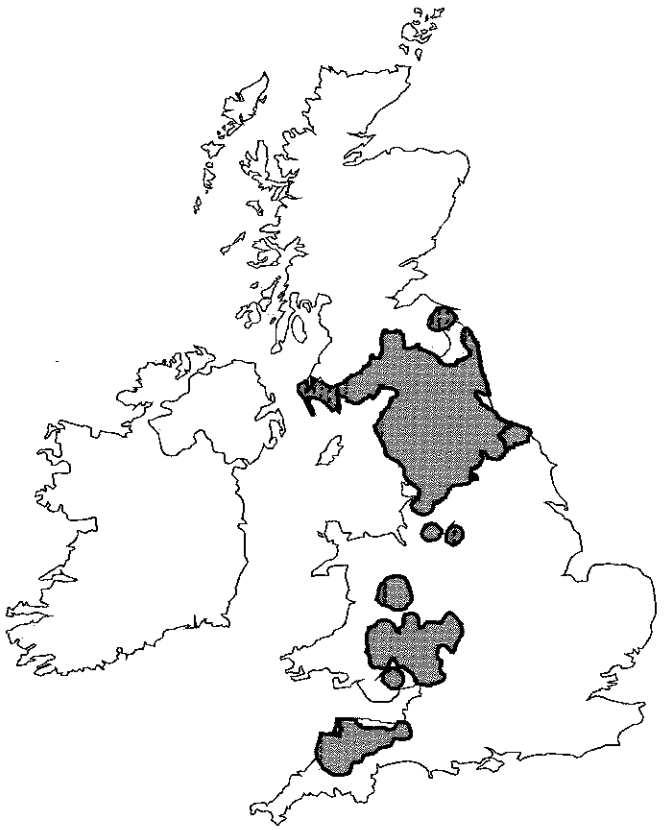
We feel you are best placed to make the judgment for your sites, but are happy to offer advice should you wish — please simply contact the Secretariat. We have enclosed some general guidelines for survey work incorporating current Government regulations and codes of conduct which you may find of help. This is also designed as a 'letter of introduction' which might prove useful to show landowners if appropriate; at least, we feel it shows the farming community and others that we are taking a sensitive and responsible approach.

The country is currently divided into three main area types for FMD: Provisionally Free Areas (those that have not had cases); At Risk Areas (those that have had outbreaks but which have since cleared); and Infected Areas (those where cases continue or have been recent). The map shows that, in mid July, Infected Areas cover much of northern England and southern Scotland, parts of Wales and north Devon (see www.maff.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/fmd for regular updates). We hope that many counts will

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data collected are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution, and identify and monitor important sites for waterbirds. A programme of research underpins these objectives. Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. WeBS is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environment & Heritage Service in Northern Ireland).

British Trust for Ornithology · WWT · RSPB · JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

be able to resume in Provisionally Free and At Risk Areas, though some access restrictions may remain in place (e.g. at the time of writing, all footpaths in Lincolnshire remain closed) and, clearly, we would advocate the cautious approach outlined above where individual landowners remain nervous about access. In Infected Areas, we suspect that access to most sites will not be possible, though you may have a much clearer idea of the local situation, and, for example, it is possible that urban and suburban sites within these areas may be visited without any problems.



Infected Areas, 11 July 2001

We are aware that many counters have continued to collect data during the summer where local conditions have allowed. We would be very grateful to receive completed count forms for these for, whilst the national picture will be limited this summer, the data will be valuable for other uses. It is also encouraging to note that during the limited survey work that has been undertaken this summer, for WeBS and other schemes, we know of no problems between landowners and counters. Our thanks to all for the sensitive approach that you have taken.

We will keep a close eye on the situation every month. There is the possibility that cases will increase in the autumn (the virus is sensitive to high temperature and UV light) and the monthly reviews are designed to enable us to revise the guidance at short notice if necessary. Similarly, we will track (we hope) the reduction in the Infected Areas and will contact LOs in areas as they become 'freed up' in case people do not have easy access to the web. We will provide updates on our web sites also.

The outbreak has meant a slight reshuffling of special surveys. We felt that it was unwise to undertake any special surveys this winter, given the risk of possible disruption, but we hope that the Mute Swan census will go ahead in Spring 2002. A revised timetable for special surveys is given later in this Newsletter.

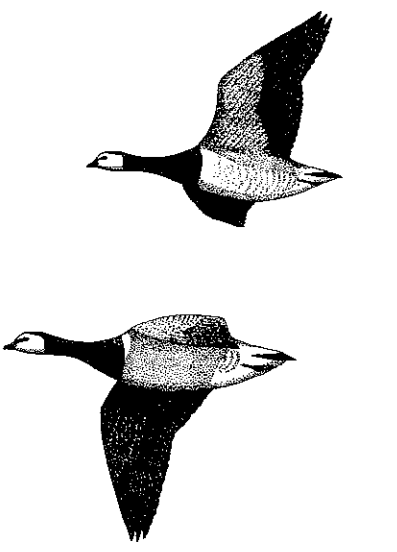
WeBS Low Tide Counts, due to start again in November 2001, should be treated in precisely the same manner as Core Counts. Please contact Andy Musgrove or Steve Holloway at BTO if you have any queries.

We hope that the national goose census in October and November 2001 can also proceed along the same lines as for WeBS. The enclosed guidelines should be applicable, but please exercise the same caution where necessary; this may mean that it is simply not possible to cover some sites.

It is also worth knowing that, at the start of the outbreak, the issue of whether migratory geese could spread disease was assessed. A report by a Government veterinary team, posted on the MAFF web site, concluded that the risk of geese spreading the FMD virus was very low, primarily because of the birds' natural behaviour: in particular, the majority of the populations concerned did not occur in Infected Areas, the birds clean themselves regularly, and the high probability that most geese will not come into contact with susceptible livestock.

So, our advice is that we should 'proceed with caution'. Whilst we hope that things will be back to normal before long, it is entirely possible that FMD will rumble on throughout the winter in some areas and it is perhaps worth being prepared for continuing inconvenience and frustration for all concerned. Many thanks to all for your patience and help during this period. And, obviously, please get in touch should you have any queries.

Peter Cranswick



New estimates of waterbirds wintering in Great Britain

The UK is of outstanding importance for wintering waterbirds and as a result there are both national and international obligations to conserve these birds and the sites that they utilise. Information on the numbers of individuals in a population represents some of the most basic data that are needed to conserve populations effectively and is fundamental to conservation planning and action. For example, sites that support 1% of the international population of one species or subspecies of waterbird qualify as internationally important under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. This 1% criterion has also been adopted by the EU Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds for identifying Special Protection Areas, and sites that hold 1% of the national population of a species or sub-species potentially qualify as Sites of Special Scientific Interest under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Application of the 1% criterion for identifying important wetlands requires information on the total population size for each species and sub-species. It is also important to review population sizes regularly since many waterbird populations have undergone rapid changes in numbers and distribution over the past decades. To ensure that sites are assessed using contemporary data on waterbird numbers an international timetable has been established such that international population estimates are revised every three years and the 1% thresholds derived from these estimates every nine years. A similar timetable has been adopted for the production of national population estimates in the UK. The previous estimates for Great Britain were published in 1995 and used data from the five-year period 1987/88 to 1991/92 for the assessment. A review of population sizes for waterbirds wintering in Great Britain was undertaken in 2000 with a separate assessment for all-Ireland currently underway.

The assessment for divers, grebes, Cormorant, wildfowl, Moorhen and Coot was undertaken by WWT using WeBS data from the five-year period 1994-95 to 1998-99, plus other data sources for species where WeBS data are not suitable, e.g. seaducks. New methods were used to produce these estimates and these have resulted in more accurate estimates of the numbers of birds wintering in Great Britain. The resulting winter estimates for Great Britain and the national 1% levels derived from these are due to be published shortly. New estimates of wintering wader populations are currently being produced by the BTO.

A combination of methodological differences and real population increases means that estimates for the majority of species are greater than previously. The only populations where the new estimates are lower are European White-fronted Goose (-5%), Dark-bellied Brent Goose (-5%), Mallard (-30%), Eider (-6%) and Long-tailed Duck (-32%). In contrast, the new estimate for Great Crested Grebe is 136% higher than the previous estimate, Gadwall is 106% higher, Scottish Greylag Goose 83% higher, Common Scoter 83% higher and Goosander 81% higher.

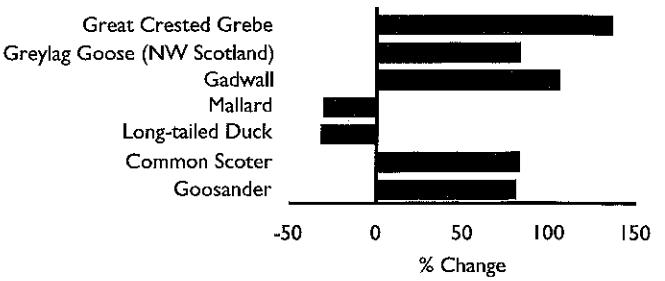


Figure 1. Changes in population estimates for selected wildfowl

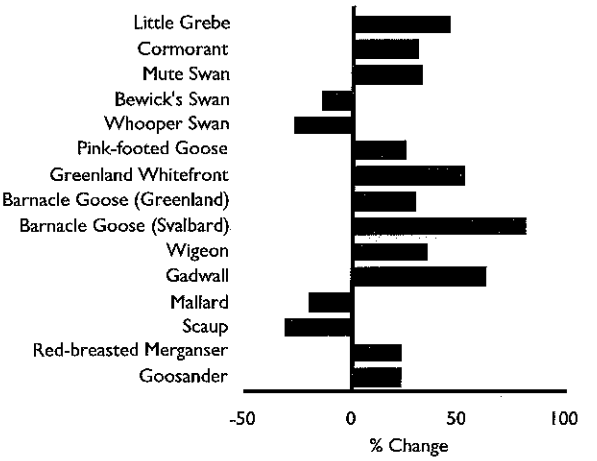


Figure 2. Biological changes in numbers of selected wildfowl

However, these changes do not reflect real biological changes in the numbers of birds wintering in Great Britain due to the adoption of new methods for calculating the population sizes. So, to look at the 'biological' changes in population size since the previous assessment, we calculated what the new estimates would have been if we had used the old methods. This identifies a number of species which appear to have experienced a decline in wintering numbers over the past years. These include Bewick's and Whooper Swans, European White-fronted Goose, Icelandic Greylag Goose, Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Mallard and Pintail. The decline in Dark-bellied Brent Goose numbers is probably a result of poor breeding success during the last few years, compared to several good years during the period of the last assessment. For species like the European White-fronted Goose, the declines in Great Britain do not reflect changes at the European level and may be indicative of a milder winter climate such that birds are able to remain on the continent. However, the decline in the number of Mallard in Great Britain is not fully understood and more work is needed on this species. Species which appear to have undergone a real increase in numbers since the last assessment include Cormorant, Mute Swan, Greenland White-fronted Goose, Svalbard Barnacle Goose, Wigeon and Gadwall.

Details on changes to wader populations and a full list of new population estimates and 1% levels for all waterbirds will be included in the winter newsletter and in *Wildfowl & Wader Counts 2000-01*.

Melanie Kershaw

The UK Special Protection Area network

The term Special Protection Area (SPA) should now be familiar to all WeBS counters: SPAs are sites designated under the EC Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) to create a Europe-wide network for the protection of certain vulnerable species and migrants. Member States of the EU are obligated under the Directive not only to designate their most important bird sites as SPAs, but also to manage them in a way that maintains the populations within them.

The Directive has been with us since 1979 and the first SPA to be designated (classified) in the UK was Rhum in 1982. SPA designations have progressed since then and the area now protected is substantial, approaching 1.5 million hectares. But, while extensive public consultation has been undertaken and information on classified sites is readily available to all, it has not been easy to see whether a true network has been created, or to gain an understanding of just how extensive the protection given at the species level really is. For this reason the UK Government requested that the JNCC, acting on behalf of the Country Agencies, conduct a review of the UK SPA network. This review is now complete and for the first time all of the classified SPAs, and those currently proposed for classification, within the UK SPA network at present are fully described in one document, *The UK SPA network: its scope and content*. It is the most comprehensive of any done in Europe to date.

The review is in three volumes and describes the approach taken in selecting SPAs in the UK, the suite of SPAs for each species, and details of each site and the species that it supports. Clear summary analyses give an indication of species representation at both UK and international levels within the network, in other words the proportion of these populations using the SPA network. In general, where the UK supports a large proportion of the international population of a species, that species is well represented in the UK SPA network. The network currently comprises 243 sites (Figure 1) and covers 103 qualifying species. In addition to those sites selected for one or more individual species, some have been selected for their assemblages of non-breeding waterbirds and breeding seabirds where these exceed 20,000 individuals.

In summer the network supports around 5 million breeding seabirds, and 41 SPAs have assemblages of over 20,000 individuals. The global distribution of some species is mainly within the UK, such as the Manx Shearwater and Gannet, and the SPA network supports over 75% of the international populations of both these species.

In winter the network supports over 2 million non-breeding waterbirds in 118 SPAs, of which 57 have assemblages of over 20,000 individuals. Again, non-breeding waterbirds for which the UK is particularly important occur in high proportions within the network. For example, substantially of the Svalbard population of Barnacle Geese receives protection through the network and over 70% of the international population of *islandica* Knot uses the UK SPA network. For several species, the proportion of the British population using the network is very high, but because the UK supports a smaller proportion of the international population, the proportion of the latter is subsequently smaller. These include European White-fronted Goose, Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Pintail, Avocet, Grey Plover, Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit. For example, nearly 80% of British Wigeon use the network but this represents only 20% of the international population. For species like these, the Europe-wide network, known as *Natura 2000*, will be especially important.

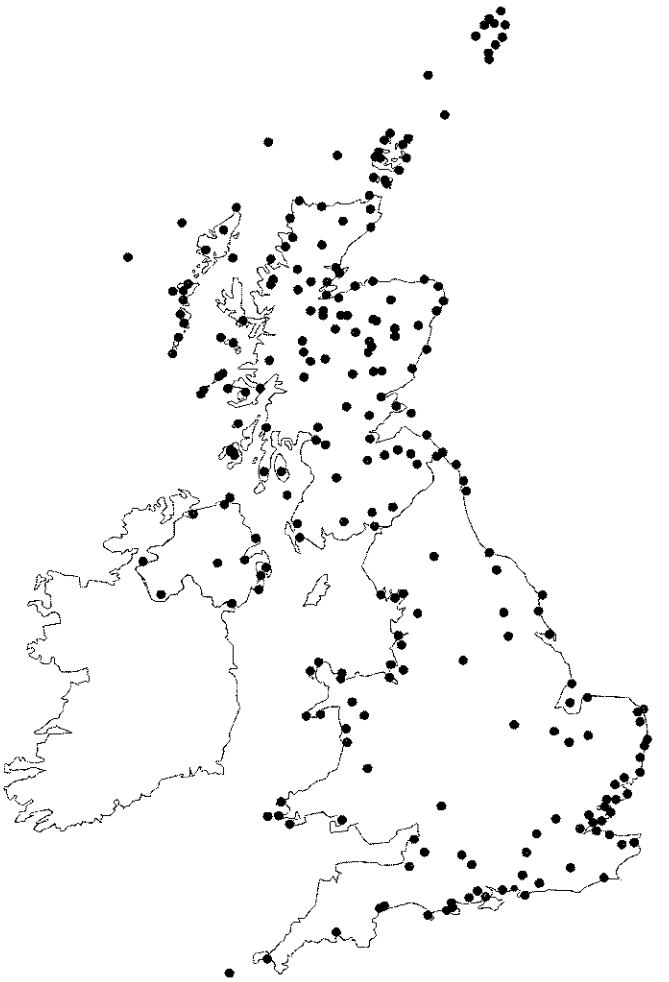


Figure 1: Location of UK SPAs

For several of the UK's non-breeding waterbirds numbers and proportions within the network are relatively small due to their dispersed distribution, examples include grebes, Mallard, Tufted Duck, sawbills, Coot, Lapwing, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone. Wider countryside measures may be a better approach to conserving such species.

Not only are the facts and figures of the UK SPA network impressive, so is the protection afforded by the Birds Directive. In particular, development in or adjacent to important sites can be prevented if the impact is likely to be significant, and this is especially important in

industrial landscapes where the pressures on valuable habitats remain high. One example of this is Barksore Marshes in Kent, part of the Medway Estuary and Marshes SPA. Dredging activity to maintain shipping channels in the Medway required dumping areas for dredged mud, and plans to use part of the SPA were put forward. The outcome of a Public Inquiry was that the impact on the SPA was unacceptable and that an alternative solution for disposal of dredged mud, even if more expensive, would have to be found. This is just one of many cases here in the UK that show the effectiveness of SPA protection. Difficult cases can be referred to the European Court of Justice for judgement, and several cases in other Member States have gone through this process with favourable outcomes for the birds.

In addition to protection against damaging development, the majority of SPAs are also designated Sites or Areas of Special Scientific Interest. This allows close consultation with land managers over changes in land use, and where appropriate the development of positive management schemes.

While work continues on the development of the UK SPA network, especially in the marine environment, gauging the conservation success of existing designations and their management is crucial. This can be done only through monitoring of populations within the network. WeBS has played a major role in aiding the identification and designation of sites for non-breeding waterbirds. Its role as a monitor of these species has been and will continue to be an invaluable conservation tool.

Helen Baker, JNCC

Low Tide Counts

During the winter of 2000-2001, WeBS counters carried out low tide counts at Belfast Lough, Breydon Water, Stour and Orwell Estuaries, Lindisfarne, Loch Fleet and Dornoch Sands, Southampton Water Solway Firth and Strangford Lough, with further mid-tide counts made at Morecambe Bay. If you have any low tide count data still to return for last winter then please stick it in an envelope now! Unlike the majority of other bird surveys recently, low tide counts were fortunately affected very little by the FMD outbreak, since closure of most footpaths took effect during the last weekend of February. We all hope, as discussed elsewhere in this newsletter, that the situation will have resolved itself by the time we start again in November. Access permitting, sites we would like to target during 2001-02 are Dornoch Firth, Eden Estuary, Lindisfarne, Humber Estuary (outer south), Alde Complex, Dengie Flats, Swale Estuary, Camel Estuary, Dyfi Estuary, Wigtown Bay and Carlingford Lough. We shall be contacting potential Local Organisers shortly.

Work on the forthcoming Low Tide Count Atlas has continued to progress. Tables of site and sector densities for all sites counted by the scheme have been prepared and are being converted into draft species accounts, and site accounts have also been started. Analysis has also been undertaken to look at the comparability of low tide counts between years at a site.

Finally, an expanded section about the WeBS Low Tide Count scheme can now be seen on the BTO website (www.bto.org), including an interactive coverage map, example datasets and a downloadable data request form.

Thanks as always to everyone who takes part in the low tide counts, which continue to be widely used for the conservation of the UK's estuaries and their birds.

Andy Musgrove and Steve Holloway

Conservation Update

Something to CRoW about!

Last winter saw the passage of the first major piece of national conservation legislation since the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, or CRoW Act as it has come to be known, significantly strengthens the protection of important wildlife sites and will open up access to large areas of open countryside. The Act is in five main parts:

- Part I deals with the statutory right of access on foot - the controversial 'right to roam';
- Part II of the CRoW Act deals with Rights of Way;
- Part III deals with wildlife measures, in particular Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and other designations, species enforcement and biodiversity;
- Part IV deals with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs);
- Part V covers a mixture of topics, including countryside management agreements.

This article covers aspects of Part I and the resulting guidance relating to birds. CRoW extends rights of access on foot (including walking, birdwatching and climbing) to certain specified categories of land, namely mountain, moor, heath and down, and to registered common land, in England and Wales. The last category comprises examples of many different habitats, including wetland and coastal types. The Act makes allowance for statutory restrictions or closures to be made to safeguard nature conservation interests. Additionally, landowners may "dedicate" land for access. Landowners will be able to restrict or stop access for up to 28 days each year, excluding public and bank holidays and most weekends, but will need special permission to extend this. At a later date, the provisions of the Act may be extended to include all coastal habitats, but presently the only changes that WeBS counters might observe will be where the wetlands or coastal sites that they visit are common land or where land they cross to reach their counting sites is covered by the Act.

It is possible that some sites may have sensitive features but are likely to be insufficiently visited to justify restrictions. Others may be less sensitive but likely to see a substantial increase in access which may be detrimental to the nature conservation interests, such that restrictions are justified. Accordingly, guidance has been prepared for the statutory conservation agencies to assist them in identifying when to consider restrictions. The nature and stringency of the action required, whether management measures (e.g. siting of car parks and access points or the construction of paths) or statutory restrictions (including statutory closure), can be determined only at the site level. Any measures applied should be the least stringent necessary to protect the nature conservation interest of the site.

The principle points of the guidance that may apply to WeBS counters are as follows:

- Management measures or time-limited statutory restrictions/exclusions may be applied in areas supporting nationally or internationally important concentrations of vulnerable breeding, feeding or roosting birds on wet grassland, saltmarsh, sandflats, mudflats, offshore islands, shingle or sand dunes, and where access is likely to increase substantially. Such measures are not envisaged as being necessary

... continued overleaf

in the case of enclosed water bodies and lagoons, unless there are exceptional local circumstances.
- Severe weather events may prompt further management measures or statutory restrictions/ exclusions.
- Dogs will be required to be kept on short, fixed leads from March to July on access land and additional controls or exclusions may be applied in some circumstances.

Consultations, decisions and the implementation of any new management measures or restrictions will take a while — access land has to be mapped first and this work is in its early stages. We will try to update WeBS counters, via the newsletter, as information comes forward. Similar legislation to CRoW may be brought forward in Scotland. Further information on CRoW can be found in two leaflets available from The Countryside Agency:

- New rights, new responsibilities: What the new countryside access arrangements will mean to you
- Drawing the boundaries: Mapping and consultation for new countryside access rights (The Countryside Agency, John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 3RA; www.countryside.gov.uk).

The full text of the CRoW Act can be found at www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2000

The effects of other sections of the Act, which, amongst other things, strengthens the protection given to SSSIs, will be the focus of an article in the winter 2001-02 newsletter. Those of you who wish to investigate the implications of the new legislation before then are directed to a good article on this aspect by Matt Phillips and Duncan Huggett published in *British Wildlife* Vol. 12, no. 4, April 2001.

Rowena Langston, RSPB

Irish Light-bellied Brent Goose Research Programme

In the previous newsletter it was announced that WWT and the Irish Brent Goose Research Group were initiating a research programme on the Irish Light-bellied Brent Goose. Since then, almost 100 Light-bellied Brent Geese have been colour-marked by Dúchas (The Heritage Service in Ireland) and the Icelandic Natural History Museum. If you see a Light-bellied Brent Goose marked with yellow leg rings this winter, please record the date, location (with grid reference), and the letters engraved on each of the leg rings and send the information to Lynne Tinkler (Re-sightings co-ordinator), School of Biology and Biochemistry, Queens University Belfast, 97 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT7 1NN. This information will allow us to understand more about the life histories, movements and habitat requirements of these geese. Finders will receive details of the geese that they record.

A new project for 2001 will be the production of an international monitoring review for this population of Light-bellied Brent Geese. This review will comprise a brief overview of the population, its ecology, trends in

... continued on p. 7

More plovers visit the seaside

Over the years WeBS has provided scientists and conservationists with an invaluable tool to monitor wildfowl and wader populations. It has charted the changing fortunes of many waterbirds, yet there are a small number of species that are counted by WeBS but receive little attention because they are scarce or primarily use non-wetland habitats.

Lapwings and Golden Plovers are two prime examples. They are widespread on farmland throughout lowland Britain but only a fraction of their populations occurs on coastal WeBS sites. As a result their trends are not given in the annual reports. As part of a joint University of East Anglia and BTO study, I began investigating WeBS counts of Lapwings and Golden Plovers. This was aimed at investigating cold weather movements so I was surprised to find that numbers of both species wintering on the British coast had increased markedly since the 1970s (Figure 1). Moreover, increases have been most pronounced on the east coast, whereas populations on northern and southern coasts have declined.

What might be the causes of these increases? For most wader species we can have confidence in our counts because birds are largely restricted to a relatively small number of well-known roosts and birds missed by one counter are likely to be recorded by his or her neighbour. Lapwings and Golden Plovers are not limited in the same way by roost sites and may move towards or away from the coast as well as along it. In these circumstances it is more difficult to say what changes in numbers mean without local knowledge.

A real change, through a breeding population increase, seems unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, most countries from which our wintering plovers originate report declining or stable breeding populations. Secondly, one would be surprised to find breeding population trends so tightly matched for two species that breed in geographically distinct areas (e.g. Iceland and Germany) and in different habitats (e.g. bogs and farmland).

Alternatively, plovers could have shifted their distribution to the coast. For instance, changing land-use could have made farmland a less profitable feeding environment, causing birds to 'top-up' on the coast. But how often does one see plovers feeding on estuaries? Often they seem to be loafing on the mud at low tide, apparently ignoring the food under their feet.

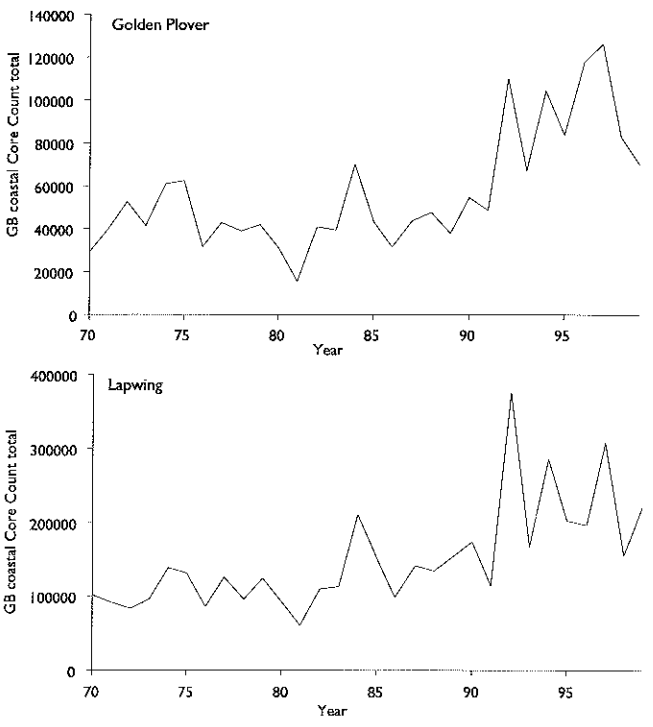


Figure 1. Changes in the number of Lapwings and Golden Plovers on coastal WeBS sites between winters 1970-71 and 1999-2000.

I am very keen to hear from anyone who has noticed particular changes in the status or behaviour of either Lapwings or Golden Plovers on their count sections. Likewise, if a change in count route, habitat or land-use could have caused a change in plover use of your site I would like to know. One thing that is severely lacking is long-term counts of inland areas, and if anyone can offer insights into trends on farmland I would be very keen to discuss these or any other aspects of plover ecology.

Simon Gillings
Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Conservation, School of Biological Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ

How many Little Egrets are there?

The Little Egret has undergone a spectacular increase in Britain over the last decade or so, from rare vagrant in 1988 to a commonplace sighting on southern coasts of England and Wales at the present time. Figure 1 shows the total number recorded by WeBS each month between July 1993 and March 2000. The pattern of occurrence is that of a post-breeding influx in late summer and early autumn, declining through the winter and with a small but noticeable spring influx before most birds leave during the breeding season. The recent establishment of some British breeding colonies, however, may remove this summer lull in future.

As has been discussed previously, although WeBS Core Counts and Low Tide Counts monitor Little Egrets, they are both prone to undercounting. Although the species is a large, white bird, it can be surprisingly easy to overlook as it fishes along creeks and within saltmarshes. At many sites, the most suitable way to monitor numbers is by counting birds entering or leaving nocturnal roost sites.

Between April 1999 and March 2000, volunteers monitored roosts at most of the important sites for Little Egrets. WeBS Core Count data suggested that the peak count during that time was in September 1999, when 1,074 birds were recorded. However, a closer investigation using roost counts and additional information (mostly from county bird reports) suggests that an extraordinary total of over 1,600 Little Egrets were actually present during September 1999. Indeed, some of the site counts were still suspected to be underestimates. A total of ten sites held over 50 birds: Chichester Harbour (260), Poole Harbour (140), Portsmouth Harbour (*c.*100), Tamar Complex (95), Burry Inlet (86), Taw-Torridge Estuary (77), Medway Estuary (71), Exe Estuary (58), Camel Estuary (55) and Kingsbridge Estuary (55).

The survey has shown that regular counts of nocturnal roosts can be an important method of monitoring egret numbers at many, but not all, sites. Significantly, investigation of the counts from all sources suggest that some of the largest increases during the 1999 autumn were around the northern extremities of the UK range (e.g. Burry Inlet, Medway Estuary) which suggests that further increases are to be expected over the coming years.

Andy Musgrove

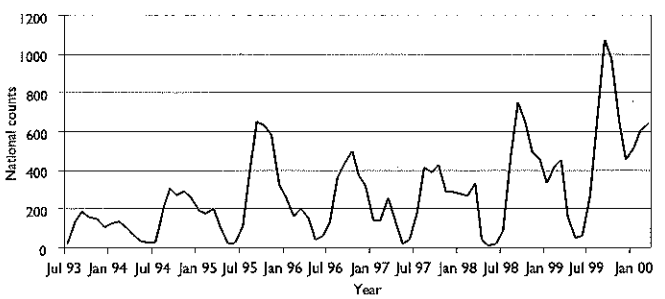


Figure 1. WeBS Core Counts of Little Egrets: July 1993 to March 2000

Conservation Update

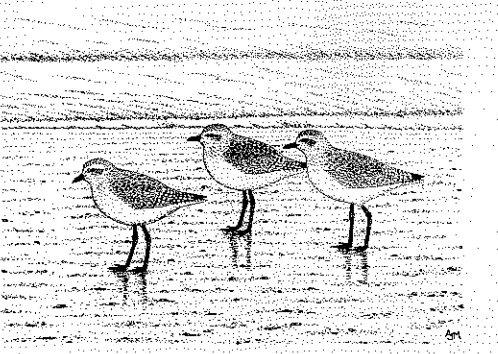
numbers, etc. There will be brief accounts for each of the major sites used by this population outlining status (primarily numbers and trends), site safeguard, threats etc. with county and regional summaries where appropriate. The review will draw extensively from the WeBS dataset and will form the backbone of the International Flyway Management Plan for this population, identifying those sites which require special protection for this population of geese. This type of review is yet another way in which your counts contribute to the conservation of waterbirds at an international scale.

James Robinson

Impacts of man-made landscape features on estuarine waterbirds at low tide

Research has recently been undertaken into the potential impact of human disturbance on wintering waterbirds using intertidal mudflats at low tide, by relating their numbers to the presence of nearby footpaths, roads, railways and towns. Data were obtained for six estuaries in southern England from the WeBS Low Tide Count scheme (Chichester, Langstone, Kingsbridge, Exe, Stour and Orwell). A Geographical Information System (GIS) was used to map count sections and the positions of each of the man-made landscape features. Statistical models were then used to determine whether the numbers of birds on each section varied according to the estuary, month, area, whether or not the section bordered the low water mark and the proportion of each section within a specified distance of each landscape feature. In addition, the proximity of sections to the nearest access point along a footpath was considered. The numbers of six of nine species – Shelduck, Knot, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew and Redshank - were significantly lower where a footpath was close to a count section, whilst those of Brent Goose were greater. Shelduck, Grey Plover, Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit numbers were also reduced in the vicinity of railways and those of Ringed Plover, Grey Plover and Curlew close to roads. Ringed Plover numbers were greater close to towns. The relative distances to which species were affected by footpaths corresponded to published information concerning their flight distances in response to human disturbance. The study thus provided evidence that sustained disturbance associated with the use of footpaths, roads and railways reduced local habitat quality for waterbirds and the carrying capacity of estuaries.

Niall Burton



Special Surveys . . . Special Surveys . . . Special Surveys

The predictions are that cases of Foot & Mouth Disease will continue in some parts of the country for the immediate future and perhaps throughout the winter. Consequently, given the risk of disruption to Special Surveys, we feel that it is best to postpone those planned for this winter. We are hopeful that the Mute Swan Census can be carried out in spring 2002 as planned, but that, also, remains subject to the extent of FMD at that time. We will keep a close eye on the situation and provide updates should the situation change.

The revised timetable for special surveys in the next few years is as follows:

2002	Mute Swan Census (April and May)
2002-03	National Dispersed Species Survey
2003-04	National Riverine Survey

A brief update on progress with special surveys is given below

Pilot Riverine Survey

Data from the five additional rivers surveyed last winter have been input. Many thanks to all who provided these counts. Analysis will begin in earnest this autumn and we will begin to relate the counts to River Habitat Survey and other data held by the Environment Agency. This, in turn, will help us devise a strategy for the full survey. Due to the postponement as a result of FMD, we have two further winters before the full survey. Thus, there is the opportunity to gather pilot data for other rivers, either of different types or in new regions. The analysis of existing pilot data will help identify these potential gaps. Alternatively, it may be useful to undertake repeat counts of the same rivers to investigate variability of the counts. This latter approach is a luxury rather than a necessity, but we may be in touch to see if anyone is interested . . .

James Robinson

Mute Swan Census

The plan (FMD permitting) is to undertake this survey in April and May 2002. Many Local Organisers already have the necessary recording forms and instructions, sent out last year in anticipation of fieldwork in spring 2001. However, we will contact all Local Organisers who agreed to take part to ensure that they are still happy to organise the survey in spring 2002 and that they (still) have all relevant information and details to hand. We will contact LOs towards the end of 2001, which will also allow time to view the extent of any resurgence in FMD and assess whether a survey in 2002 is still realistic.

Peter Cranswick

Naturalised Goose Survey

All indications to date are that this has been a successful survey, with good coverage of most areas. Many thanks to all who participated. Whilst input and validating are proceeding, we still need to find the money for the full analysis of these data. We hope to secure funding this autumn and turn around updates of the population estimates for these species soon after that.

Colette Hall

Pilot Dispersed Species Survey

A total of 234 tetrads were sent out to Local WeBS Organisers, and 127 completed forms were returned for visits between November 2000 and February 2001. Many thanks to all of you who either organised coverage of the tetrads, or made the actual visits. These have now all been input, and we are ready to begin the analyses. These data will be used to assess the suitability of the methods for detecting the populations of several species of wildfowl and waders currently not fully monitored by WeBS. Any future full-scale survey would aim to concentrate on those species best detected by the methods.

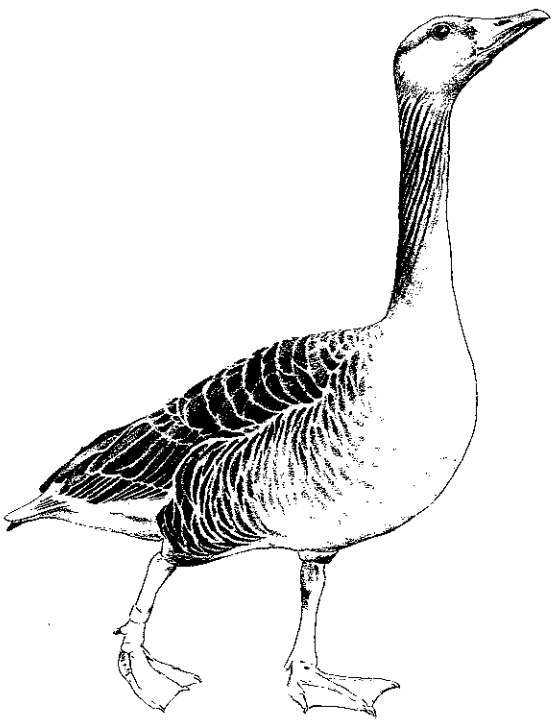
We included a short questionnaire about the survey and the methods and received 95 returns. We are pleased to report that over 60% of participants thought that the methods were generally easy to follow, and more than 70% though that intensively covering a 1-km square was reasonable. The only down side was that some counters found the survey rather "boring", mostly due to a lack of birds to record. Unfortunately, that really is out of our hands (!), but the old adage of "negative records are just as important" springs to mind. However, we will take note of the valuable feedback we have received when we come to plan the full survey.

Steve Holloway and Mike Armitage

Summering Greylag Geese in Scotland and northern England

Three populations of Greylag Goose are currently found in the UK: the wintering birds from Iceland, the native birds of north-west Scotland and the widespread re-established/naturalised birds. All of these are represented in Scotland and northern England during the winter where recent changes in their numbers and distribution have resulted in increasing uncertainty over the status of Greylags in a number of different areas.

The Icelandic-breeding population is the most numerous with *c.*75,000-80,000 individuals that arrive in Britain during October and winter mainly in north and east Scotland. A decline in this population, largely attributed to unsustainable levels of hunting in Iceland, has been noted since the early 1990s. The north-west Scotland population, remnants of a population that used to be widespread over Britain, currently numbers *c.*10,000 and is restricted to north and west Scotland, with strongholds in Caithness/Sutherland, the Uists and Coll & Tiree. Smaller numbers of birds exist on other western islands and the population and range are thought to be expanding. The re-established population originates from birds and eggs taken from the range of native Scottish Greylags that were released between the 1930s and 1960s in a number of different regions. The number in Scotland and northern England is still relatively small, although it is believed to have increased considerably in recent years. The last comprehensive survey for which data are available was conducted in 1991, when *c.*3,000 were counted. However, results from the national census of naturalised geese undertaken in 2000 will soon provide a more up-to-date population estimate.



The problem of delimiting these different Greylag populations in Scotland and northern England occurs primarily during winter and particularly during the National Grey Goose Census. This census aims to estimate the number of Icelandic-breeding Greylag (and Pink-footed) Geese by counting them at roost sites each October and November. In order to be able to continue to conserve and manage these populations effectively, it is essential that we can continue to delimit them. This requires accurate monitoring of their numbers, distribution, survival, reproductive success and movements. Detailed monitoring of population size and annual reproductive success in Icelandic Greylag Geese has been undertaken for over 40 years and there was an intensive period of ringing from 1992-2000. However, monitoring of native and re-established Greylags has been sparse by comparison and somewhat *ad hoc*, with good data from some areas and relatively few from others.

As part of a programme of new initiatives to clarify Greylag Goose status, WWT is developing annual monitoring of Greylags summering in areas within the range of population overlap from 2002 onwards. This will help to determine the status of birds counted there during the winter, e.g. counts of Greylags prior to the arrival of Icelandic migrants will be deducted from those obtained during the Grey Goose Census to estimate the number of Icelandic Greylags at each site. This census will also provide an excellent opportunity to monitor productivity in summering Greylag populations extensively for the first time.

The key areas for which counts will be required are: Orkney, Caithness & Sutherland, Loch Fleet to Moray Basin, Speyside, Dumfries & Galloway (in particular Stranraer Lochs), Kintyre Peninsula and associated islands (primarily Islay and Bute), Lothians and Northumberland. Counts from Shetland, the Outer Hebrides, Coll & Tiree, Aberdeenshire, Perth & Kinross, Fife, Lanarkshire, Borders, Cumbria, Yorkshire and Northern Ireland would also be of great value.

Using the results from the 2000 Naturalised Goose Census, a preliminary census conducted this year and a questionnaire recently sent to potential counters, it is hoped to start the first full census next summer. This year's pilot survey will clearly be hampered by the restrictions still in place in some areas due to outbreaks of Foot & Mouth Disease (FMD). However, if you are not in an area covered by FMD restrictions and feel you are able to undertake counts for years, please contact me for further information. More information regarding the latest FMD advice can be found elsewhere in this newsletter. I would be grateful to hear from other counters that would like to participate in the first full census next year so that I can forward count forms and background information nearer the time.

Richard Hearn

International Whooper and Bewick's Swan Census 2000

Every five years, Wetlands International organises a census of all migratory swans throughout their European wintering grounds. WWT co-ordinates coverage of the Icelandic Whooper Swan population on their behalf, which means a joint effort between organisations and volunteers in Iceland, Ireland and the UK (notably WWT, BirdWatch Ireland, the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group, Icelandic Institute of Natural History and Icelandic Museum). Provisional results of the fourth international census, in January 2001, are provided below. The full results will appear in a special edition of *Waterbirds* which contains papers from the last Wetlands International Swan Symposium held in Airlie, Virginia in February 2001.

Excellent coverage was achieved throughout the range in January 2000, including considerable input from the UK-WeBS and I-WeBS networks and the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group. Coverage of WeBS sites was considerably enhanced with visits to additional wetlands and many non-wetland sites used by swans for feeding, and by aerial surveys in parts of Iceland and Ireland.

The total of over 20,600 Whooper Swans was the largest ever for this population. Numbers generally increased from the 13-14,000 recorded in earlier surveys and estimates to 18,000 in 1991, but then fell to just 15,800 in 1995. The increase since 1995 was largely restricted to sites in Ireland and England. There were more flocks and flocks were generally widespread throughout Ireland. In England, however, birds appear to have become concentrated in traditional flocks, and particularly at the two principal sites of the Ouse Washes and Martin Mere.

The 30% increase in numbers between 1995 and 2001 is difficult to explain easily, though it is not thought to be a result of differences in count effort; coverage in both years is believed to have been excellent with few birds missed. It is known, from sightings of marked individuals, that immigration of birds from the NW European Continental population into Britain and Ireland does occur, but there is little evidence to suggest that the relative numbers involved explain the increase. Annual estimates of productivity since 1995 have ranged of between 16% and 18% young. This would suggest an average mortality of 13.6% per year over the period, compared with an estimate of 20% for the period 1991 to 1995. Intensive studies of this population by the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group and WWT continue, particularly involving marked birds, and it is hoped that this will improve our understanding of the fluctuating dynamics of this population.

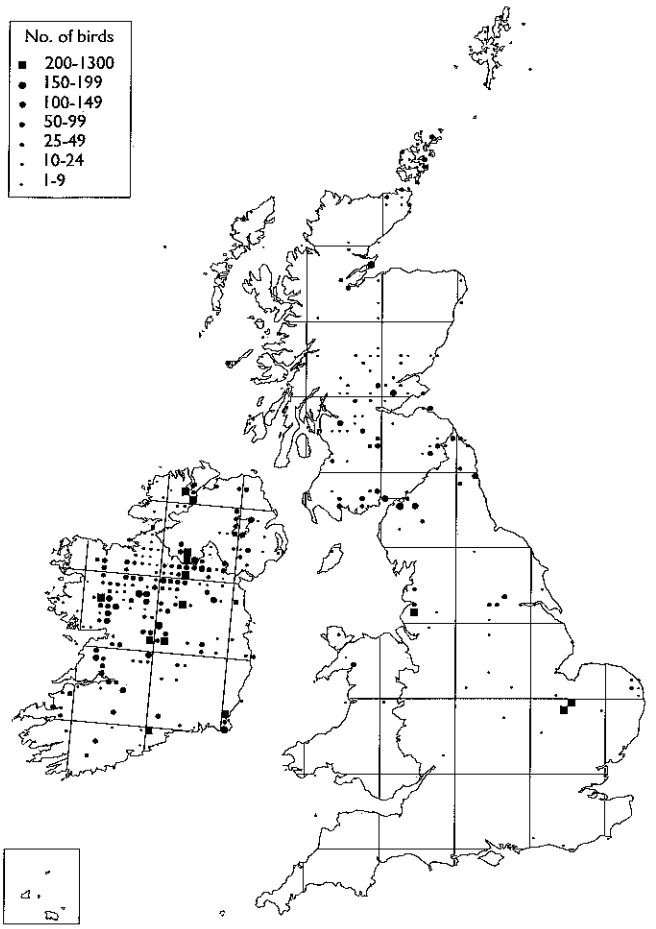


Figure 1. The distribution of Whooper Swans in Britain and Ireland in January 2000

Table 1. Total numbers of swans in January 2000

	Whooper	Bewick's
Iceland	1200	0
Northern Ireland	3663	58
Republic of Ireland	9067	103
Scotland	2650	19
Isle of Man	14	0
Wales	112	0
England	3939	7182
Total	20,645	7362

The count of Bewick's Swans was similar to the 1995 total of 7563, though it was lower than the 8745 recorded in 1991. The number of birds in Britain and Ireland is partly dependent on the severity of the winter, which influences the number of birds moving out of The Netherlands. The data from Britain and Ireland will be pooled with counts from the continent to provide an estimate for the whole population in 2000.

The international population of Bewick's Swans increased markedly between 1984 and 1995, from just 16,000 to almost 30,000. It is notable that a high proportion remains further east, with numbers in The Netherlands rising from 9000 to almost 20,000 over the same period.

Peter Cranswick, Graham McElwaine and Kendrew Colhoun

Bulletin Board

Send in your counts

Although WeBS counts have been officially suspended since March due to the Foot & Mouth Disease outbreak, it is clear from our contacts with Local Organisers and counters that counts have continued at some sites not affected by access restrictions. Please include these counts on your recording forms since, although our national coverage will remain incomplete, this will ensure that all available information will be accessible for any future site-based work, e.g. site designation, environmental assessments etc.

Priority Dates for winter 2001

Pending restrictions due to Foot & Mouth Disease, priority Core Count dates for 2001-02 are:

2001

19 August
16 September
7 October
4 November
16 December

2002

13 January	14 July
10 February	11 August
3 March	8 September
14 April	6 October
12 May	17 November
9 June	8 December

The dates for the co-ordinated National Grey Goose Census are

13-14 October
17-18 November

IWC megacensus

Plans for a comprehensive census of all major wetland sites in Europe and SW Asia (an extension of Wetland International's International Waterbird Census) continue to take shape. A provisional assessment suggests that coverage of the key sites alone (those that have only been infrequently covered in the past) will add several million waterbirds to the total counted in recent years. However, for a number of reasons, the census will not now happen before January 2004.

Wetlands International are currently developing a bid to the Global Environment Facility for an $8-12 million project that will deliver many of the actions identified under the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). One of the projects is to "define a network of critical wetland areas for migratory waterbirds". In essence, much of the activity will focus upon identifying and designating Ramsar sites throughout the region, but also collating much additional information key to protecting and managing these sites and ensuring that this is readily available to relevant parties. Peter Cranswick attended a workshop in June to help refine the proposal. It is clear that the megacensus will be a key aspect of this project in helping to identify the critical network of sites.

We will continue to keep you informed of progress with the megacensus as and when more information becomes available.

The Migration Atlas

WeBS counters are perhaps more aware than other birdwatchers of the sheer scale of movements made by many bird species throughout the course of the year. The dramatic changes in waterbird numbers on stretches of estuary provide a vivid portrait of how migrating birds use sites within Britain & Ireland for stopovers or for wintering.

Consequently, it may be of interest to learn that the much-awaited Migration Atlas is now nearing completion. This companion volume to the two BTO Breeding Atlases promises to be an invaluable resource for those interested in bird movements, using ring-recovery data from the National Ringing Scheme to examine the patterns of movement for 188 species. These accounts have been written by acknowledged experts on the species concerned, and each is supported by a series of maps highlighting the main points of interest. The main accounts are coupled with 73 additional species texts, chapters exploring how and why birds migrate, information on conservation issues and tables highlighting differences between populations from different regions or between age and sex classes. Collectively, the presentation of such information is bound to provide readers with much of interest.

You are likely to hear much more about the Migration Atlas over the coming months as publication looms. So if you have ever wondered where the birds using your site come from, take a look at the Atlas and discover a wealth of information.

Mike Toms, BTO

1999-2000 Annual Report

The annual report for 1999-2000 is currently being finalised and will be mailed to local organisers and counters at the end of August or early September. Our apologies that delays in the production timetable did not allow us to complete the report in time to be combined with the mailing of this newsletter.

Counters' Conference 2002

The annual WeBS counters' conference will return to England again in 2002. Whilst dates and venues are still to be finalised, it is likely to take place on Saturday 9, 16 or 23 March, and possible venues include Rutland Water and the Wetland Centre in London. Full details will be available in the winter newsletter.

Letters

Contributions and observations are always welcome, and a letter from a Suffolk counter on his observations during a recent WeBS count certainly merits a wider audience. Perhaps other waders could be asked to co-operate in a similar way to make counting easier . . .

Surely not a passerine?

On Sunday 15th October 2000, in company with a colleague, I was participating in the WeBS count on the River Deben in Suffolk. As the count is conducted at high tide, all the waders are on roosts on the river's bank and, in our section of the river, these are mainly on the east bank away from the busy Woodbridge side.

Having moved down from Wilford Bridge, counting from the Woodbridge side, we passed the end of Dock Lane and headed towards the sewage works. At high tide the river is very wide at this point and waders are to be found on the few high mudbanks on the river's edge. We noticed many Redshank amongst the waders and wildfowl here, with all of them seeking a suitable spot to roost on the few areas available. They were very restless, making counting more difficult than usual, with large numbers packed together in small areas at some distance from our vantage point. This particular roost contained in excess of 250 Redshank. But having scanned through the length of the roost which occupied a small mudbank, we noticed something that made us stop and look again very carefully. Were we to believe our eyes? Checking through our 'scopes again - yes we were right the first time. There in a row of several small trees, each about 10 feet tall and lacking any foliage at all, were Redshank. That's right, Redshank roosting in trees. Forty in the first tree, 35 in the second and more attempting to perch in a third tree. An amazing sight - long-legged waders perching on a branch in a tree! Some were clearly having difficulty and were a little unsteady, but those which had arrived first seemed quite settled. This was a phenomenon neither I nor my colleague had ever seen before, but it made counting an awful lot easier. In 12 years of WeBS counting I have never seen similar Redshank behaviour.

Has anyone else seen Redshank roosting in trees? Is there an explanation to this unusual behaviour? I would be very interested to know.

Derek Rothery,
Deben Estuary WeBS counter

Some members of staff here at Slimbridge have noted observations of waders perching in trees abroad, particularly in mangrove swamps where suitable perches are few and far between. During the breeding season Redshank will freely perch on posts and fences, even insubstantial wire fences, though no-one here, however, can recall seeing birds roosting in trees in this country. Ed.

Many thanks for all your help

The great strength of WeBS, arguably the biggest count scheme of its kind in the world and the envy of many other countries, lies in the tremendous volunteer input from you, the counters. We hope that you will continue to support WeBS, and through it, the conservation of waterbirds and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

Contact Details

		Automated system	Direct dial	e-mail
		01453 891900	01453	
Head of Secretariat	Peter Cranswick	ext 265	891931	Peter.Cranswick@wwt.org.uk
Core Count Organiser	Mark Pollitt	ext 255	891926	Mark.Pollitt@wwt.org.uk
Assistant Organiser	Colette Hall	ext 261		Colette.Hall@wwt.org.uk
	James Robinson	ext 263		James.Robinson@wwt.org.uk
	Richard Hearn	ext 185		Richard.Hearn@wwt.org.uk
	Melanie Kershaw	ext 264		Melanie.Kershaw@wwt.org.uk
(If you experience problems, dial 01453 890333 to speak to the WWT Receptionist)				
Low Tide Count Organiser	Andy Musgrove	01842 750050		Andy.Musgrove@bto.org
Assistant Low Tide Count Organiser	Steve Holloway	01842 750050		Steve.Holloway@bto.org
	Mark Rehfisch	01842 750050		Mark.Rehfisch@bto.org
	Simon Gillings			s.gillings@uea.ac.uk

WWT
Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT
Fax 01453 891901

BTO
The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU
Fax 01842 750030

Line drawings by Mark Hulme, Andrew Mackay and Thelma Sykes.
Compiled by Mark Pollitt, Peter Cranswick, Andy Musgrove, Steve Holloway and Colette Hall.
Designed and typeset by Alcedo Publishing, Colorado Springs, USA • e-mail engli@qwest.net
Printed by Crowes of Norwich, UK • (01603) 403349 • e-mail graphics@crowes.co.uk
Printed on Barbican Laser Matt paper in Cheltenham ITC BT and M Gill Sans fonts
Published by BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC.