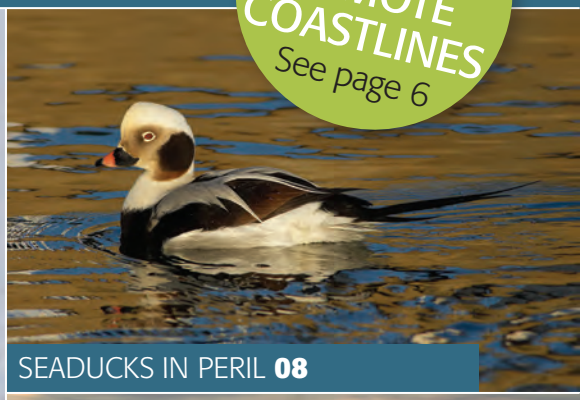
WeBSnews

The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

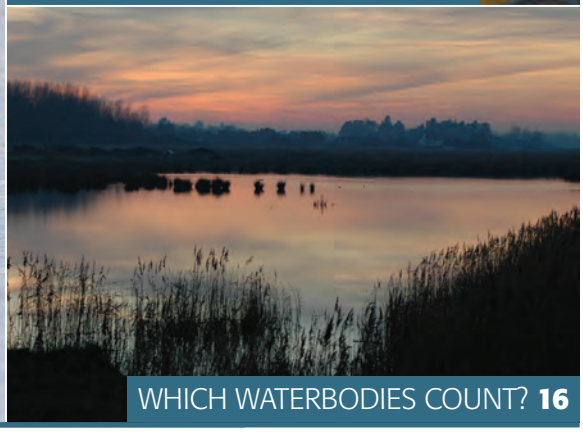
THE CHANGING FACE OF BRITISH ESTUARIES **14**

SURVEYING REMOTE COASTLINES

See page 6



SEADUCKS IN PERIL **08**



WHICH WATERBODIES COUNT? **16**

ISSUE 28 • SPRING 2012

ALSO INSIDE

BTO RSPB JNCC Joint Nature Conservation Committee IN ASSOCIATION WITH WWT

A new approach to WeBS Reporting

Feedback of results from WeBS has long been the key to its success but in order to provide better local results, changes to the way these are presented are afoot...

WeBS has been running in one form or another since 1947. The main channel for feedback has been the annual report, *Waterbirds in the UK*. This has served its purpose well over the years and remains popular with both counters and conservation staff, as evidenced by the findings of the recent WeBS Questionnaire.

However, despite being very detailed in some respects, the report is also quite inflexible in what can be shown. In particular, counts are presented annually for key sites for each species. These tend to be the largest estuaries and reservoirs, whereas the majority of counters actually cover smaller sites that are seldom mentioned, if ever. Moreover, as devolution within the UK has progressed it is becoming increasingly important to be able to report at the individual country level. A Scottish WeBS report, for example, has often been suggested and would be widely welcomed.

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News. Thankfully the past winter has been a lot milder than in recent years. Although temperatures did fall to as low as -17°c in many areas, these cold spells were not as prolonged as in previous winters. Such cold weather can force normally secretive birds like Water Rail out into the open, and it is only at these times when WeBS counters are able to get a better picture of the numbers of birds present on their site. Another way that has been suggested is through the use of tape lures which we are considering trialling next winter (p 5).

Last November I visited Orkney and found a small bay where a dozen stunning drake Long-tailed Ducks were present. Being a calm day, their evocative yodelling echoed and it is sad to think that these birds along with many other seaducks are in serious decline (pp 8–9). Many WeBS counts under-record these birds due to the sea state, so in these instances we would welcome additional supplementary counts when more accurate assessments of numbers can be made.

Neil Calbrade

Neil Calbrade Editor & WeBS National Organiser

The WeBS team & contacts

Graham Austin
WeBS Database Manager, WeBS Alerts, Statistical analyses
graham.austin@bto.org

Neil Calbrade
WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts), Low Tide Counts, Data Requests, WeBS News Editor
neil.calbrade@bto.org

Iain Downie
Web Software Developer, WeBS Online
iain.downie@bto.org

Chas Holt
WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts), Core Counts, Annual Report
chas.holt@bto.org

Heidi Mellan
WeBS Counter Network Organiser Counter and Local Organiser database management, WeBS Online
heidi.mellan@bto.org

Andy Musgrove
Head of Monitoring, Management of WeBS
andy.musgrove@bto.org

The WeBS Office

BTO
The Nunnery
Thetford
Norfolk
IP24 2PU
Tel: (01842) 750050
Email: **webs@bto.org**
WeBS website: **www.bto.org/webs**

WeBS NEWS

People and organisations responsible for WeBS News.

WEBS NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

Helen Boland Research Ecologist I-WeBS *hboland@birdwatchireland.ie*
Andre Farrar Protected Area Campaigner, RSPB *andre.farrar@rspb.org.uk*
Robin Harvey WeBS Counter
Richard Hearn Head of Species Monitoring, WWT *richard.hearn@wwt.org.uk*
Veronica Mendez PhD student, University of East Anglia *v.mendez@uea.ac.uk*
Andy Musgrove Head of Monitoring, BTO *andy.musgrove@bto.org*
Viola Ross-Smith Research Ecologist, BTO *viola.ross-smith@bto.org*
Judith Smith WeBS Counter
John Wells RAFOS Team leader

Photography Cover: Toni Cross, John Harding and Glyn Sellors. Inside: Eleanor Bentall (RSPB-Images), Neil Calbrade Graham Catley, John Harding, Nick Moran, Jill Pakenham, Rob Robinson and Glyn Sellors

Artwork Ben Green.

NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION

Design Neil Calbrade
Printing Swallowtail Print, Norwich

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

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

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

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

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

CONTINUED FROM COVER

It is clear that many people (both counters and conservation staff) would find a locally-focussed report of more interest to them.

Another important factor is that we also want to update many of the computer programs that sit behind the scenes and underpin the WeBS data analyses. Most of these were created in the mid-1990s and, whilst they still work well, there have been enormous changes in computing technology in the intervening years. It is clear that a modernisation of approach would be hugely beneficial if tackled in one go.

Of course, it can't be denied that the current economic situation is also a factor. WeBS reporting is disproportionately expensive when compared to other monitoring schemes. A great deal of time is spent writing text and formatting and producing the report. Moreover, the report is large and bulky, leading to relatively high printing and postage costs. We are also aware that the format of the report is beginning to look a little dated and we are keen to bring this up to date, but this has been difficult within the existing format.

Any savings in publication costs would of course allow more effective use of available funds. However, we are keen to use this situation to create improvements to WeBS reporting, not to cut the outputs.

For all of these reasons, we have decided that it is now the time to take the plunge and update the way we report on WeBS. Throughout, the primary focus will be on making sure that counters are given feedback that is relevant, timely and informative.

We therefore plan the following:

- Summer 2012 – publication of *Waterbirds in the UK 2010–11*, which will be the last paper report produced in the current format.
- Spring 2013 – launch of a new web-based reporting system that will allow counters to see WeBS results for any region, either UK as at present, or for a given country (England/Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland), or for a given county. Many details remain to be finalised, but we would envisage that counters will be able to select the region, time period and species of interest and gain instant access to tailored results.
- Summer 2013 – publication of *Waterbirds in the UK 2011–12*, which will be the first paper report in a new slimmed down format. This will still be distributed free to all counters. The format is still to be decided but it is likely to be a slimmer, colourful A4 report more akin to the annual report of the Breeding Bird Survey (see **www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs/bbs-publications/bbs-reports** for example). We hope that the new style paper report will give us the opportunity to be able to write in more depth about issues surrounding waterbirds, wetlands and their conservation.

We hope that WeBS counters will approve of the changes we are making. If you do have any comments about these plans, and have particular things you would like to see included in the new reports (either online or paper) then we would be very keen to hear from you.

Andy Musgrove

WeBS SNIPPETS

WeBS at Rutland

We will not be having a WeBS stand at the Rutland Bird Fair this year. Instead, we hope to be on the main BTO stand where you will still be able to come and collect your report and have a chat with WeBS staff. Keep an eye on the Facebook page or the website for more information which we will announce nearer the time...

A request...

This year we have had a large number of counts where forms have been returned to us and the data have also been entered online. We are happy to receive your forms but please write "INPUT ONLINE" at the top so that we do not send them off to be processed.

We need help!

We have recently acquired some old National Wildfowl Count data from WWT in the form of ledgers and forms which we would like to get input into the WeBS Online database. These counts are from as far back as the 1940s and will give us an even better perspective on changes in waterbird numbers over time. If you have time to spare and would be willing to help with the inputting, please contact Heidi at **webs@bto.org** for more information.

Moving On...

We said goodbye to Marcia Sayer this year as she moved on from WeBS in October. We are sure you will join us in thanking her for all her help with WeBS and we wish her well for the future.

WeBS Training

During the winter, we carried out two WeBS Training events. As with those held in 2010/11, they were aimed at beginners to WeBS. We plan to hold a more advanced course on The Wash next winter, so keep an eye on the website **www.bto.org/webs/training** for more information or contact the WeBS Office if you are interested.

WEBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT

Loch Creran

A sea loch on the west coast of Scotland may not be home to huge flocks of waterbirds but there can't be many more scenic places to do a monthly WeBS Count...

Robin Harvey WeBS Counter

Loch Creran, 10 km to the north of Oban, is a tidal sea loch which drains into Loch Linnhe through a narrow entrance. The road to Fort William crosses a second constriction at Creagan, separating the loch neatly into two basins. The larger lower basin is subject to a good deal of human disturbance, with oyster layings, mussel and salmon farms, a small marina, private yacht moorings and ferry traffic to a nearby 'superquarry'. In contrast, the upper basin, now by-passed, is a quiet haven, where the only in-water disturbance is from SCUBA divers using one short length of shore. With around 30 km of shoreline, the loch is potentially demanding to count. Fortunately, road access is good, especially along the east side, and with a telescope it is possible to identify most of the larger species on the far side of the loch. Inevitably, any count can only be a minimum, especially given the variable terrain. The best expanses of muddy sand (up to 200 m from high to low water) are found in the lower parts of the loch and only cover a few hectares; elsewhere, the shores are of rock, weed-covered boulders or gravel. At the head of the loch, the River Creran flows through a wide delta of gravel, boulders and muddy sand, above which the magnificent Beinn Sgulaird rises 932 metres.

Previous WeBS counts ran from 1981–91, with 2 missing years; then from 1998–99. I took up the challenge in the winter of 2008. Using 10 vantage points, mostly roadside ones, my count takes around 3 hours. Since I started, the species count has gone up from 23 to 38 and I include gulls on most occasions.

ROBIN HARVEY

The varied habitats throughout the loch provide food for a good range of species. Common waders include Oystercatcher, GreyHeron, Curlew, Ringed Plover and Redshank, with occasional Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Greenshank. Eider is the most abundant diving species, benefiting from the presence of several mussel farms where they can pick off the smaller mussels. The buoys that support the mussel ropes provide convenient roosts for 30 or more Shags on occasion. Other diving birds in descending order of maximum abundance include Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser, Little Grebe and Goosander. In winter these are supplemented by Goldeneye and, rarely, Red-throated or Great Northern Diver. Dabbling ducks such as Mallard have to compete with Teal, Wigeon and the odd Shelduck in winter. Fields around the loch provide grazing for geese, with Canada and Greylag occurring year-round. A flock of around 70 Greenland White-fronts arrives in November and stays until March.

Eradication of mink has allowed some colonies of gulls and terns to breed successfully again. Two old rafts in Loch Creran have been adopted as nest sites by Common Terns. These have been customised by Dr Clive Craik and helpers, with wire mesh fences to keep mink out and prevent young chicks from falling into the loch. Clive tells me that in 2011, 300 pairs of terns used the rafts and reared 400 chicks — a great success!

As I drive the eight miles home from the goose fields, I think how fortunate I am to be a WeBS counter in such a beautiful area. OK, I don't see hundreds of wheeling waders, but my birds are easier to count and very varied!

Low Tide Update

For the past twenty winters, counters have braved the elements to carry out Low Tide Counts on estuaries across the UK, allowing us to map the distributions of waterbirds...

Neil Calbrade WeBS Low Tide Count Organiser

Each winter, approximately twenty estuaries around the UK are counted at low tide. These counts complement the Core Counts, which generally provide the best estimate of total numbers through counts of birds present at high tide roosts by helping to identify important feeding areas. Unlike the Core Counts which are cundertaken annually, most Low Tide sites are counted on a six-yearly cycle which gives us a snapshot of changes in feeding distributions of birds. This can be especially useful when investigating environmental changes or assessing a proposed development such as dock developments, recreational activities, tidal power barrages, marinas and housing schemes and the resulting impacts.

The winter of 2011/12 has again been a very busy time for Low Tide Counters, with some large sites such as the Humber, Blackwater and Swale Estuaries and the Cromarty Firth being counted, and the Drigg Coast (Cumbria) and the Glaslyn Estuary (Merioneth) being counted for the first time.

JILL PAKENHAM

▲ **Avocets are one of the most distinctive waders found on our estuaries.**

◀ **Distribution of Avocets at Breydon Water in 2009/10 .**

Low Tide Maps

One of the key features of the WeBS Low Tide Counts is the ability to plot the results as dot density maps, such as the example opposite. A process is currently underway to put all the distribution maps on the website for all sites going back to 1992/93. This is quite a large project , but to date, the 2009/10 and 2008/09 species maps are available with further being added regularly **www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/latest-results/low-tide-results**. Once completed, this will be a fantastic resource allowing comparisons of species between years.

Looking forward

We will soon begin the process of organising counts for 2012/13 with sites such as the Ribble and Mersey being a priority, though we would welcome counts from any estuary, especially those that have not yet been counted under the scheme.

Please contact the WeBS office (email: **lowtide@bto.org**) for more information or if you have time to count one or more sectors once a month between November and February and would like to take part.

Flying the flag

For over 10 years, the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) have coordinated surveys of under-surveyed and often inaccessible areas of the north and northwestern Scottish coastline, providing invaluable counts of poorly monitored species.

Flight Sergeant John Wells RAFOS Joint team leader

WeBS STAT...

1,370

The number of miles covered annually by the RAFOS team.

NEIL CALBRADE

It all started for the RAF team back in 1998 by the RAFOS - Field Activities Liaison Officer; Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) Martin Godfrey when looking for study work we could undertake. We pride ourselves as a Society by volunteering our assistance to national ornithological projects. Martin had made friends and some contact with The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) Slimbridge team. It was agreed Martin and a small team of RAF fieldworkers could provide assistance to the WWT after a meeting with the then Head of WeBS Secretariat: Peter Cranswick. Peter suggested that the RAFOS teams assist with looking for overwintering divers, grebes, geese and wildfowl from land-based counts at coastal stretches and open sea lochs and river estuaries. Peter suggested the RAF could assist in particular on WeBS around stretches of rugged coastline of Scotland during the winter months where little had been surveyed and where there were very few local observers. The only WeBS visits to the northwest were pilot studies by a small group of WWT/BTO counters to Loch Ewe, Loch Gruinard and other likely coastline areas with the intention of sampling their potential. The WWT/BTO had a requirement to broaden the survey with Core Counts Single Visits (CCSVs) looking to enhance the WeBS Database in a coordinated way, over say a week or so to get a bigger picture of divers/grebes from Greenland/Scandinavia using sheltered bays and sea lochs but also counts of WeBS wildfowl species such as Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck, Scoters and other grey geese; Greylag and Pink-footed Geese. There was also potential to look for groups of Barnacle Geese using the coast and adjacent fields and hence overwintering in the NW of Scotland. The initial few years proved valuable and as we have drawn in more interest within the society we have expanded the survey region(s). Alongside WeBS we also report birds with rings/wing tags that have also been encountered to the BTO Ringing Unit such as Golden Eagles and White-tailed Eagles with wing tags, and Barnacle Geese with leg rings.

The first survey was therefore mounted in 1999, and based at Mellon Charles a Royal Naval depot near Aultbea, Wester Ross. This site was used up to 2006, after that time we moved 'base camp' to Joint Service Mountain Training Centre (JSMTC) Dundonnell in Jan 2007. The team survey from: Loch Carron to Balchrick [on the north-western coast of Wester Ross] and Duncansby Head (John O'Groats) to Cape Wrath [On the northernmost coast of Sutherland].

"No site is too small and even a pair of Goldeneye on a remote lochan help improve data for WeBS"

Covering approximately 1,370 survey miles each year as the team split-up into three smaller survey teams from a rendezvous at Inverness, coverage has increased as our team size(s) has increased and we have also expanded our original coverage which was originally the NW but now includes the entire northern coastline between John-O'-Groats to Cape Wrath. This extra effort tied in with the original areas benefits the whole WeBS work nationally.

Accommodation and vehicles

The RAF Ornithological Society are required to obtain sponsorship to offset costs such as; vehicle hire, accommodation, food and fuel costs

and these have risen considerably over the 10 years! The RAF is indebted to three kind sponsors who have donated money towards our conservation efforts in support of WeBS. The three prime sponsors are Air BP International (Air BP), Aircraft Services International Group (ASIG), and the RAFOS membership (of approx 180 retired and serving personnel) who as a Society itself provide funds towards the activity. A single week's visit can cost the Society/ sponsors approx. £2,500. The serving personnel (mostly RAF) observers themselves use their own personal annual leave to undertake the work and are not officially 'on duty' when volunteering as surveyors. The other team members consist of ex-RAF, one dependant, a Civil Servant, one ex-Army, and civilian members of The Society including a volunteer from Scottish Seabirds and a businessman from Airfield Wildlife Management Ltd. The Society has our own indemnity insurance to cover all eventualities. Accommodation is a mix of Joint Service Mountain Training Centres and Range / Air Traffic Control facility at Faraid Head, Nr Cape Wrath courtesy of MOD Defence Estates Tain. The teams also use a mix of civilian self-catering rented establishments. These various accommodation 'bases' help to obtain maximum coverage during the weeks work. The weather in NW Scotland during January and February has been particularly difficult over the ten years as you can imagine. Many survey areas have been impassable and without the local infrastructure of council road clearing and snow plough operations we would not be able to cover such a large area.

WeBS diver statistics

One of the most important aspects of our work from a WeBS perspective are the counts of divers, in particular Great Northern and Black-throated. These data would otherwise not be recorded in WeBS, but are now forming sound, continued and thus reliable data from sites in NW Scotland.

Great Northern Diver

As space is tight and to give you a feel for another important species; Great Northern Diver totals with respective; three years' worth of data (2009–2011) our latest three years are produced below.

YEAR	COUNT
2009	291
2010	295
2011	155

Black-throated Diver

The table below shows the importance of locating Black-throated Divers in the region. It also helps build a picture and fill in some gaps of over-wintering UK populations. Many other sites have single figure counts, but the table below covers a large percentage of the most productive sites.

Summary of other species of note

Additional to the WeBS Core Counts, we have had one or two successes of rarer species such as Glaucous Gull, as well as Iceland Gull including an occasional Kumlien's Gull in good 'white-winged gull years'. During the 10 years we have located a single Red-necked Grebe [a good northern Scottish record], and single figure counts of Black-necked Grebe along with a very northerly Barn Owl at Kyle of Tongue in 2009. We also have seen a leucistic Great Northern Diver who frequents the Loch Ewe / Mellon Charles area. Fondly named 'snowflake' by the team, he/she has been seen on three occasions between 1999 and 2009 adding credence to site dependency/favourability as well as bird longevity. Potential for a separate paper maybe!

WeBS

The valuable work in support of WeBS, undertaken over the harsh winter is proving invaluable in determining trends of over-wintering divers and grebes from northern breeding areas. It also builds data on wildfowl on inland lochans and has provided sites where Barnacle Geese move to from their roosting area at Balnakeil farm near Durness. No site is too small and even a pair of Goldeneye on a remote lochan help improve data for WeBS. The team aim to continue our support in 2012 as long as we can muster the funding to allow us to travel and survey in Scotland. This major undertaking forms a major part of the Society's programme in support of Ornithological Study and our Committee see this work as a top priority. Long may it continue?

Counts of Black-throated Divers between 1997/98 and 2010/11

SITE	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Gruinard Bay	-	5	14	11	1	9	6	8	4	(13)	2
Applecross-Sand	-	40	-	0	5	14	4	(13)	6	17	-
Loch Ewe	8	7	36	11	0	3	40	(11)	(11)	33	34
Red Pt to Port Henderson	29	3	9	11	0	13	8	(1)	6	0	4
Loch Gairloch	-	4	5	23	28	6	14	(14)	11	12	13
Little Loch Broom	-	4	1	17	3	(10)	13	(16)	5	0	0
Polbain	-	9	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	3
Applecross Inner Bay					4	14	2	13	9	7	-
Kyle of Durness	-	-	-	4	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Loch Eriboll	-	-	-	6	0	0	0	5	2	12	0
Callakile	-	-	-	-	-	6	0	6	0	9	-
Slaggan Bay	-	-	-	-	0	0	21	-	-	-	

Worrying signs for many of Europe's seaducks

In recent months, it has become apparent that something could be going badly wrong for several of Europe's seaduck species, with urgent action needed.

Richard Hearn Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust / Duck Specialist Group

GLYN SELLORS

At the end of 2011, the results were released of an important survey of the Baltic Sea, carried out in 2007–2009. The *Status of wintering waterbird populations in the Baltic Sea* (SOWBAS) project found that many species had apparently undergone alarming declines since the previous coordinated survey in 1992–93. The number of Long-tailed Duck was down by a staggering 65%, which equates to an equally staggering 1.8 million birds, and similar declines were also noted for Steller's Eider and Velvet Scoter. Large declines of 42–51% were also found for Common Eider, Common Scoter and Red-breasted Merganser. As a result of these declines Long-tailed Duck have been listed as vulnerable and Velvet Scoter have been listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List (Steller's Eider is already classed as Vulnerable); a quite amazing and saddening situation.

These worrying findings require us to think more seriously about the declines being recorded for seaducks wintering around Britain, in particular Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter which have both also declined considerably in UK waters as well as the Baltic Sea. At the Moray Firth, the key site for both species, the number of Velvet Scoter counted for WeBS has plummeted in less than a decade from several thousand birds to fewer than 100 in the past three winters. Long-tailed Ducks have also declined dramatically from a peak of

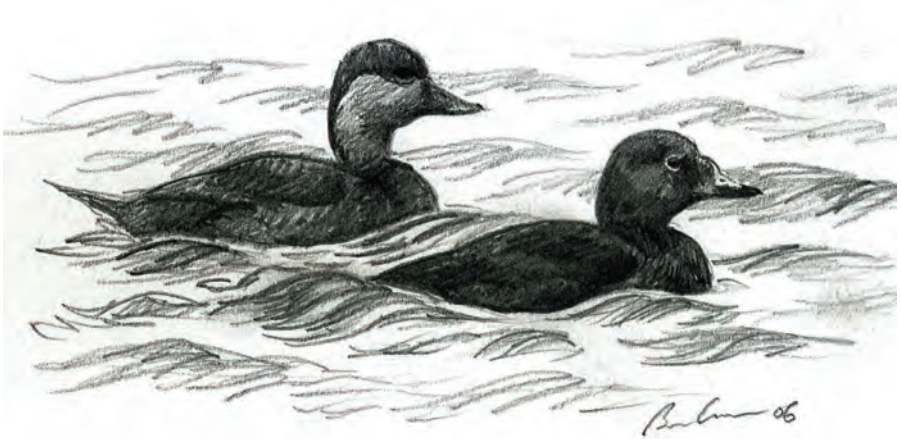
>10,000 to fewer than 1,000 in recent winters. Velvet Scoter have also almost disappeared from St Andrews Bay in Fife, another former stronghold, and numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers are down nationally by 34% over the past decade.

Until the SOWBAS report was released, it was largely assumed that most of these missing seaducks were wintering elsewhere; short-stopping in areas closer to their breeding grounds, as we know other migratory waterbirds, such as European White-fronted Geese, are doing. However, the declines in the Baltic Sea now make this seem much less likely, and it would appear that the declines noted in Britain are representative of what is going on for the whole population. It should be noted that some species do appear to be short-stopping; Goldeneye has decreased in Britain by 41% in the past decade, whereas in the Baltic Sea it has increased by, coincidentally, 41%. Whilst there is a lack of strong evidence to confirm that these trends are related to each other, cause and effect in other words, it seems highly likely that this is the case.

The causes of these declines are unclear, although a number have been suggested, such as climate change effects, oil pollution, incidental by-catch in gill nets, over-harvesting (some seaducks are legal quarry elsewhere in Europe), changes in levels of eutrophication, predation, and various industrial developments. However, there is insufficient knowledge about how they may impact seaduck numbers, so much more research is needed before we can clearly understand what is driving the declines now being recorded.

In response to this, seaduck experts will gather in the Czech Republic in April to discuss the current situation and the best way forward. This will result in a comprehensive and cohesive European Seaduck Conservation Plan that will help to guide future monitoring, research and conservation needs, and also raise the profile of this important issue. Seaduck data collected by WeBS counters over many decades will be an important part of this, as it is essential that a comprehensive overview of trends in abundance is compiled for all countries supporting these species. Looking forwards, it is also essential that seaduck counts in the UK are continued, and ideally enhanced, so if you are lucky enough to have them please do continue to make the best count possible of seaducks in your area. Often this is not possible during a standard WeBS core count due to unsuitable sea conditions on the preselected date, in which case an additional seaduck count under better conditions is extremely valuable. If you are in a position to undertake such counts please consider doing so. Plans are also currently being developed for ways in which this and other seaduck monitoring can be better supported and enhanced, and these will be outlined in a future issue of the WeBS newsletter.

For more information, check out the duck specialist group website at **www.wetlands.org/Aboutus/Networkspartnersanddonors/Networkofspecialists/DuckSpecialistGroup/tabid/189/Default.aspx**



BEN GREEN

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2012–13 season...

2012...

8 April
20 May
24 June
22 July
19 August
16 September
14 October
18 November
16 December

2013...

13 January
10 February
10 March
14 April
12 May
23 June
21 July
25 August
22 September
13 October
10 November
15 December

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

Introducing I-WeBS

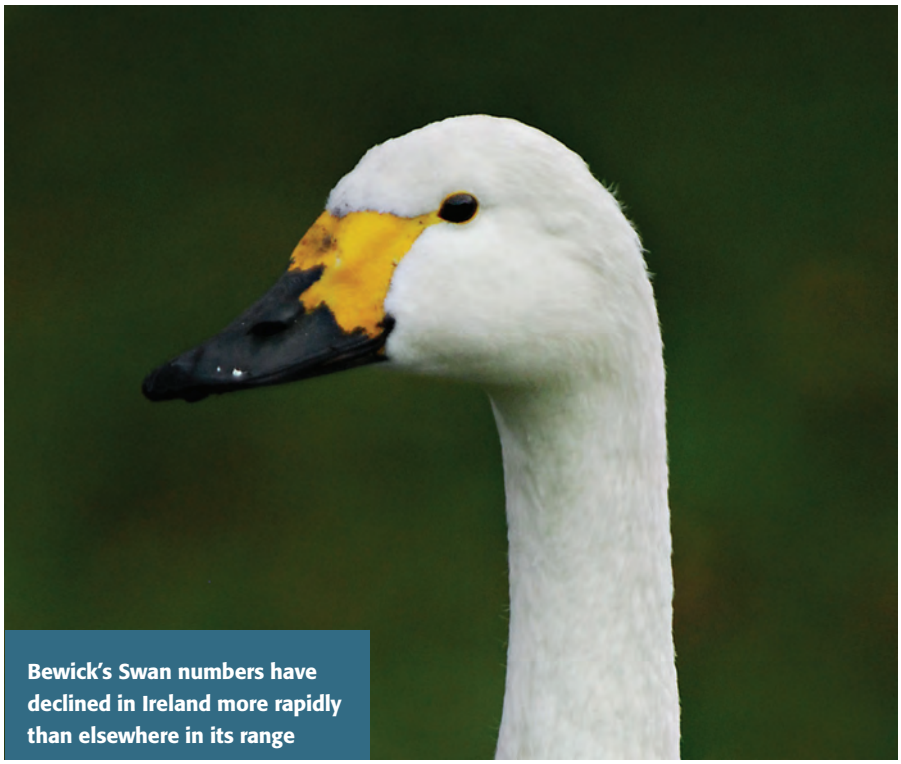
Just across the Irish Sea from the UK, a more or less identical scheme to WeBS is in operation.

Helen Boland I-WeBS National Organiser

I-WeBS began in Ireland in the 1994/95 winter, the year after WeBS started in the UK, with fantastic support given by the WeBS Office at the time in kick-starting the scheme here, which we are incredibly grateful for. We currently have 320 counters participating throughout the Republic of Ireland (RoI). I-WeBS is modelled on WeBS and has the very same objectives:

- to determine the size of waterbird populations
- to assess trends in their numbers and distribution
- to identify the importance of individual sites for waterbirds

The methodology is the same, with co-ordinated counts taking place usually on recommended weekends, and ideally on a rising or high tide for coastal sites. We are in contact with the WeBS team at the BTO on a regular basis for many reasons. For starters, the six counties of Northern Ireland (NI) are covered by WeBS, with the I-WeBS Office co-ordinating counts in the other 26 counties on the island (RoI). This naturally means that in order for us to derive 'All-Ireland' waterbird population estimates and trends for the island as a whole (birds do not recognise such borders, you see!) that we must incorporate the NI WeBS data to our I-WeBS database whenever this work is required. And on a more regular basis we exchange data for the two 'cross-border' sites, which we incorporate into our annual analyses. Carlingford Lough has one side in County Louth (RoI), and the other side in County Down (NI), and Lough Foyle straddles County Donegal (RoI) and County Derry (NI). As you can imagine, there has been much communication about coverage and data in this situation.



Bewick's Swan numbers have declined in Ireland more rapidly than elsewhere in its range

NEIL CALBRADE

Of course, the islands of Britain and Ireland are side by side, located along the flyway of many of the same arctic-nesting species, and we have a joint responsibility for several species in particular. For example, the Icelandic-breeding Whooper Swan population winters almost exclusively in Britain and Ireland, with the population divided somewhat equally between the two jurisdictions. Just under 15,000 Whooper Swans were recorded during the January 2010 international census in NI and RoI combined. Greenland White-fronted Goose is another species of which we share custody in winter, the population of which also exclusively winters in Britain and Ireland. In Spring 2011, from a total of 25,756 birds recorded during an annual census, 12,510 occurred on the island of Ireland, and 13,246 occurred in Britain (Fox *et al* 2011). Such shared responsibility for entire populations of species such as these emphasises the importance of monitoring and of the sharing of information.

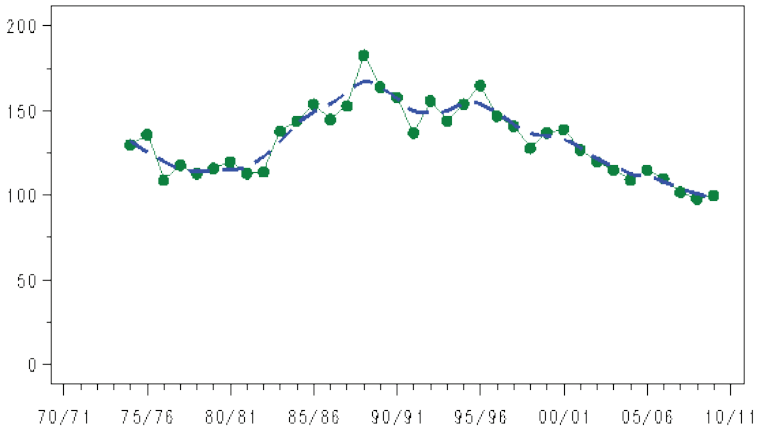
Mixed fortunes

It is interesting to compare the species trends generated by WeBS and I-WeBS. In many cases they are similar, like the aforementioned Whooper Swan which is showing an increasing trend in both Britain and Ireland, whilst the Greenland White-fronted Goose is exhibiting a

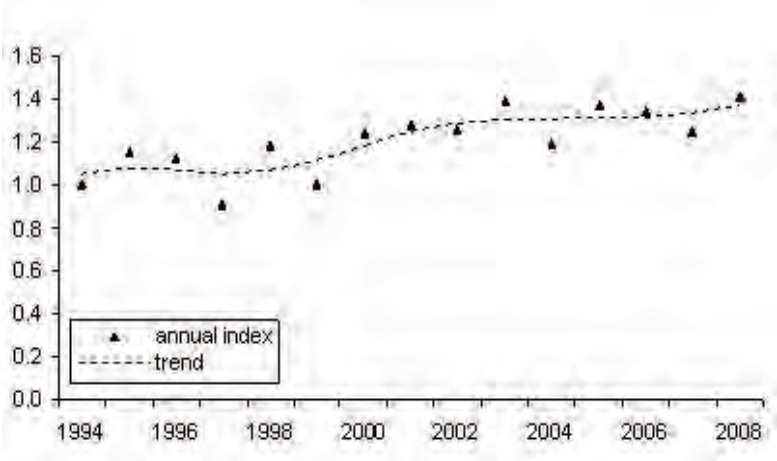
downward trend in both. There are other species where the trend is going in the same direction but where the magnitudes of it differs substantially, for example the Bewick's Swan. The flyway population of the Bewick's Swan that breeds in arctic Russia and winters in north west Europe is in overall decline, but there has been a much larger decline in Ireland compared with elsewhere in its wintering range. The ongoing decline in numbers in both NI and the RoI in recent decades has seen numbers decrease from 1,224 birds in 1984, down to 224 birds in 2005, to just 80 in 2010, whereas numbers were stable in the UK between 2005 and 2010 (Holt *et al* 2011; Boland *et al.* 2010). The overall downward trend is more than likely related to milder winters and the resultant contraction of the species wintering range due to birds being able to winter closer to their breeding grounds. Ireland's location on the westernmost edge of this population's wintering range, that bit further west than Britain, may well be why there have been greater rates of decline here than elsewhere.

Ringing in the changes

Then we have the curious case of the Ringed Plover. Whilst compiling our forthcoming I-WeBS species report the trend generated for Ringed Plover showed a clear increase in RoI, both in the short term and over the long term. However, we were puzzled to find, when consulting the 2009/10 WeBS report (Holt *et al* 2011), that this species has been in steady decline for over twenty years in both Britain and NI, probably linked with climate change and range contraction. As far as we know, the majority of Ringed Plovers that overwinter in Ireland are from the same population that overwinters in Britain and which breed in western Europe and Scandinavia. Given the apparent increases in RoI, and again considering its position along the flyway, there may be many more birds from the Canadian and/or Greenlandic breeding population overwintering in Ireland than there is currently evidence for.



▲ **Ringed Plover numbers have declined in the UK whilst over the same period have shown a steady increase in ireland** ▼



Considering all of this, the ease with which information is shared between the two schemes is important, and communication has always been good. In relation to the ground work carried out that enables the trends to be generated, I still find it amazing the amount of data that are amassed each winter by the counters, the majority of whom are volunteers, and the amount of time given by them which must amount to hundreds of thousands of hours of counting waterbirds each winter. They are incredible datasets that now exist, generated by both WeBS and I-WeBS counters.

The Irish Wetland Bird Survey is a joint scheme of BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and is funded by NPWS

References

Boland, H., J. G. McElwaine, G. Henderson, C. Hall, A. Walsh and Crowe, O. 2010. Whooper Cygnus cygnus and Bewick's C. columbianus bewickii Swans in Ireland: results of the international census, January 2010. *Irish Birds* 9, 1-10.

Fox, T., Francis, I. & Walsh, A. Report of the 2010/2011 International Census of Greenland White-fronted Geese. Unpublished report. 2011.

Holt, C.A., Austin, G.E., Calbrade, N.A., Mellan, H.J., Mitchell, C., Stroud, D.A., Wotton, S.R. & Musgrove, A.J. 2011. *Waterbirds in the UK 2009/10: The Wetland Bird Survey*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC, Thetford.

The web of life

The epic journeys of migrating birds have long had the power to inspire us, and in recent decades the fragility of migration routes that link our planet has become all too apparent.

Andre Farrar RSPB Protected Area Campaigner

For wildfowl and wading birds one of the most profound threats is the loss of crucial staging posts and wintering grounds – often coastal wetlands. There are of course other profound threats including hunting and climate change, but saving the special places that form migratory flyways is a vital starting point.

To conservationists and campaigners, the report produced annually by the WeBS 'Waterbirds in the UK' is an essential companion and would be near the top of the list of essential tools for conservation. The genesis of the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, one of the forerunners to WeBS, was driven by the crushing realisation that there simply weren't the objective data to mount an effective case against the proposed airport on Maplin Sands off the Essex coast in the late 1960s. Over 40 years on and the role of WeBS has never been more important, as our natural world – and especially our coastal wetlands – comes under ever increasing pressure. Moreover, WeBS counts are likely to become increasingly important to conservation campaigners in the years ahead as yet more new developments are proposed, such as for airports in the Thames on the Isle of Grain and in the form of an island in the middle of the estuary.

Counting waterfowl remains a fundamental cornerstone of designating and protecting sites for conservation based on evidence; perhaps there can be no greater tribute to the tireless contribution WeBS counters have made over many years. It is therefore essential that good WeBS coverage of the UK's main estuaries is maintained for many years to come.

ELEANOR BENTALL (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Estuaries such as the Thames are constantly under pressure from developments ▲

GRAHAM CATLEY

▲ Internationally important numbers of Dark-bellied Brent Geese may be under threat on the Thames

Exposing the squealers

Water Rails are notoriously secretive and therefore under-recorded by WeBS, but using modern technology could help us gain a better idea of their numbers...

Judith Smith WeBS Counter

The Wigan Flashes LNR and part SSSI is a 260 hectare wetland consisting of subsidence flashes and gravel pits being managed for Bittern, with management work therefore directed towards increasing *phragmites* reedbed areas. It is counted for WeBS by a team of three from September to March, each covering a different area, and it is possible to walk round some of the flashes, though not all.

Since 2008 I have carried out tape response work at this site in April using the guidelines in 'Bird Monitoring Methods' by Gilbert *et al* (1998) to assess the numbers of breeding Water Rails for the Rare Breeding Birds Panel and was amazed by the readiness of this secretive species to respond to a recording, revealing far larger numbers present than would otherwise have been known – some birds ran out at my feet! Having read in an article by Musgrove *et al* in *British Birds*, July 2011 that 'at present it is simply not possible to derive a defensible estimate of wintering Water Rails in Britain' I wondered if playing recordings as we carried out our WeBS counts, at suitable points, would elicit the same level of responses that I had found in spring. Hitherto, our monthly WeBS counts over the period 2008–11 had recorded totals of 0–6 calling birds, heard by chance, but usually only 2–4.

In December 2011, two of us trialled this idea with excellent results, finding 12 birds, and for the January 2012 count, having managed to get a tape for our third counter, all the flashes were able to be surveyed, again with gratifying success, despite icy conditions which may have displaced some birds out of reach of the recordings. A total of 20 calling birds was found, compared with a maximum of 4 during the September — November counts. It appears that the population has recovered well from the two very cold winters in 2010 — numbers found in the breeding surveys April 2010 and April 2011 were well down on 2008 and 2009.

JOHN HARDING

These figures are likely to be a minimum count, as some reedbeds are too far away for the recordings to be heard. I normally play my 90 second tape through twice, then pause, waiting for a response.

Some patience is necessary, though, as I have found that some birds which hear the tape whilst some distance away, make their way silently towards the source – the 'intruder' – before erupting into calls, and this may take them a minute or so! If I am in an area where I am fairly certain birds are present, from previous experience, I will try a further 90 seconds. Gilbert recommends a 60-second playback, a 60-second break and listen, then a 30-second further playback.

It would not be ethical (or even necessary) to carry out playbacks on every WeBS visit and during periods of prolonged freeze, but one way forward might be to choose one month — perhaps January when all wintering birds will have arrived — and ask those WeBS counters with suitable Water Rail habitat to participate in a more widespread trial so that a better estimate of wintering birds can be gained. My feeling is that there are probably many more than we realise.

If you would be interested in trialling this playback on your WeBS site, contact the WeBS Office for more information and guidelines. Excellent quality MP3 files can be downloaded from **www.xeno-canto.org/26925** onto an MP3 player or mobile phone.

Wader diversity across British estuaries

Research is being carried out into how wader assemblages are changing on British estuaries.

Veronica Mendez PhD Student, UEA

ROB ROBINSON

Waders inhabit coastal environments outside the breeding season, feeding in the inter-tidal zone at low tide and roosting above the high water mark at high tide. Thanks to the efforts of thousands of WeBS counters, wintering waders have been monitored around our coasts, facilitating the estimation of their abundance and distribution, and resulting in a remarkable long-term dataset. Recent trends have shown that many wintering wader populations are changing, with species such as Avocet doing well and increasing substantially across British estuaries, while others such as Dunlin are declining markedly. Much effort is put into identifying the possible factors underlying these changes. However, analysis has typically been done on a species by species basis and our understanding of how such changes might be influencing the wintering wader community as a whole has been limited. Starting in 2009, the University of East Anglia (UEA) and BTO have been carrying out research using WeBS data in an effort to fill this gap in knowledge. The first results of this research reveal intriguing evidence of gradual changes in the ecological

Ringed Plover numbers have declined over the past twenty years. British estuaries are of considerable importance for both wintering birds and as passage sites for long-distance migrants.

JILL PAKENHAM

structure of wader communities across UK estuaries. However, these changes only become apparent from taking a closer look at the diversity of ecological roles of wader species, rather than focusing simply on numbers of species. Such changes in community composition, through the arrival of new species or the loss of others may have important implications for the ecological functioning of estuary ecosystems.

Waders display a remarkable range of morphological, behavioural and ecological traits that reflect their adaptations to resources consumed and environmental conditions. Common wader prey items include worms, crustaceans and molluscs, not all of which are equally important to all waders. Certain species such as Bar-tailed Godwit feed predominantly on worms, whilst others such as Oystercatcher feed mainly on bivalves. Wader enthusiasts are aware that prey detection and capture are closely linked to species' morphology. Better known examples include plovers which, having the shortest bills of all waders, tend to locate prey by sight and feed by pecking on the surface, whereas godwits, with long fine sensitive bills, are able to probe deep in the sand or mud for deep-burrowing prey like lugworms and ragworms. Information on such ecological traits related to the resource use of individual wader species was used in this study to compute an overall community measure known as functional diversity.

Functional diversity estimates the range of species traits within a community, allowing us to assess how ecologically similar or dissimilar species are relative to communities elsewhere. In addition, it is widely considered to provide an indication of the underlying characteristics and health of the ecosystem that supports any given community. For example, if two communities have the same number of species, but the functional diversity of one community is lower than the other, its species are more similar to one another in their resource use, suggesting there is relatively greater functional redundancy within this community. Conversely, the community with greater functional diversity has species that are relatively dissimilar to each other, suggesting there is low functional redundancy. The knowledge on which ecological roles species perform and the level of redundancy within the community is important when assessing the influence of species gained or lost in the community over time.

We calculated functional diversity for over 100 wintering wader communities across Britain, for each year since 1980/81. Increases in functional diversity through time were observed across the majority of the estuaries, and in the south-west of the country in particular. While some of this increase is due simply to increases in numbers of species wintering at a site, a detectable portion of the increase is found to be due to the combinations of species present becoming more dissimilar to each other over time through changes in the composition of communities. Preliminary results suggest that geographical expansion of Avocet, Spotted Redshank and Greenshank may be contributing to these observed changes in functional diversity. Overall, it is apparent that wader communities are changing across Britain and our results provides evidence that there is relatively low redundancy among species. Thus, the replacement, loss or gain of species through colonization or local extinctions strongly influences the functional diversity. Using this community level approach provides an opportunity to gain an overview of how population trends across wader species combine to produce community level patterns of change, and to start to understand the relative roles of species interactions and environmental change in driving these changes. The aim of the next stage of the research is to understand how these changes in functional diversity over time can be explained by environmental factors including changing physical conditions of estuaries.

If you would like any more information about the research we are conducting please contact me at **v.mendez@uea.ac.uk**.

Working out which waterbodies count

Our army of WeBS volunteers does an invaluable job of gathering vital information on waterbird populations nationwide. However, a key question that remains is how best to account for birds on the large number of waterbodies that are not surveyed?

Viola Ross-Smith BTO Research Ecologist

DETAILED DATA...
1,124,960 water features in England, Scotland and Wales were classified according to waterbody type.

Readers of this newsletter will be keenly aware of the value of data collected through WeBS and its forerunners, and the impact that the information gathered has had on waterbird conservation over a number of decades. However, there are lots of waterbodies in the country where no counts are carried out, and various species, for example Mallard and Moorhen, that are likely to be widely dispersed across such sites and therefore difficult to survey reliably through WeBS. Since we always strive to produce the most accurate population estimates and trends possible, we have embarked on an ambitious project to address these gaps.

The first step in this project was lengthy, computer-intensive and involved a number of BTO staff and volunteers. Digital maps of all the waterbodies in Great Britain were obtained from Ordnance Survey and processed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software. These waterbodies were then manually checked for errors (it was amazing how many "rivers" turned out to be roads, for example). Each one was then classified using a system based on the movement of water, and thus the likely waterbird habitat present. We therefore split all water features into rivers (including fast moving streams), lakes, drains, canals and tidal areas. This whole process was carried out for more than a million water features, which was no mean feat, and the results can be seen in Fig 1. A brief glance at this map starkly illustrates the substantial geographic differences in waterbody type across Great Britain, with a large concentration of drains

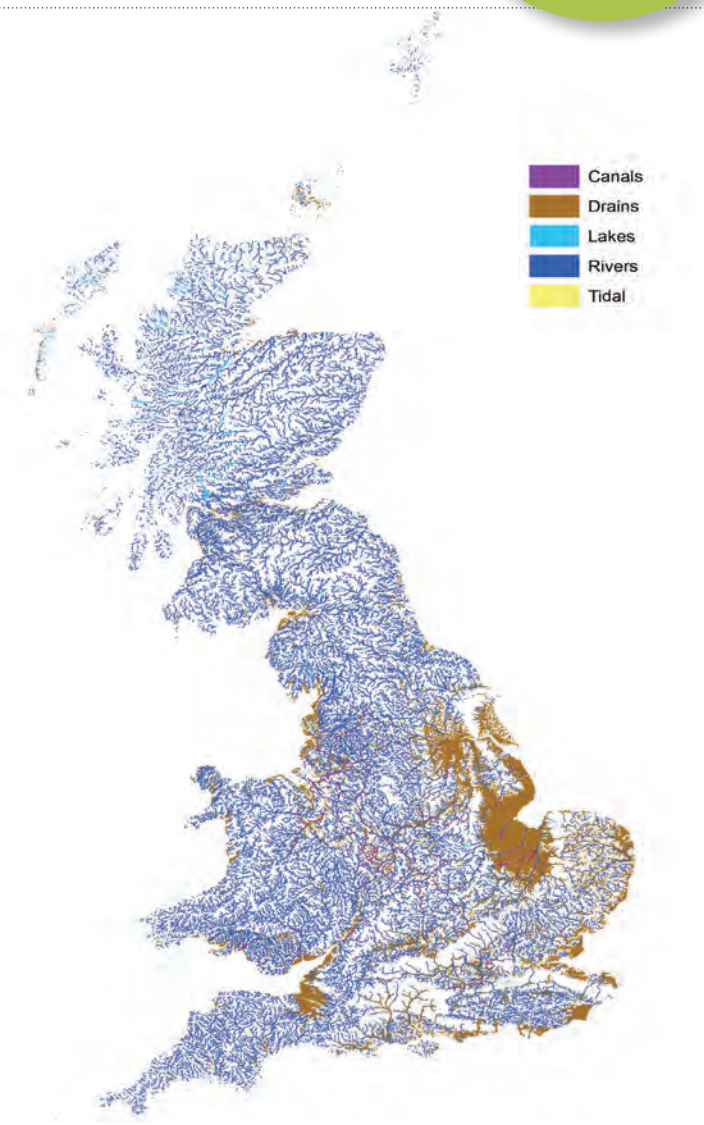


Figure 1. A map showing more than a million water features in Great Britain classified according to type.

but few rivers and lakes around The Wash, the Humber Estuary and the Somerset Levels, but the opposite pattern in upland areas, including much of Scotland, northern England and Wales (Fig 2).

Our next step was to extract key information from this new dataset at a variety of spatial scales, including those commonly used in BTO surveys (for example, tetrads). At each spatial resolution, we generated a database containing several variables, such as the total area and perimeter of lakes within each square. These databases can now be extended to incorporate

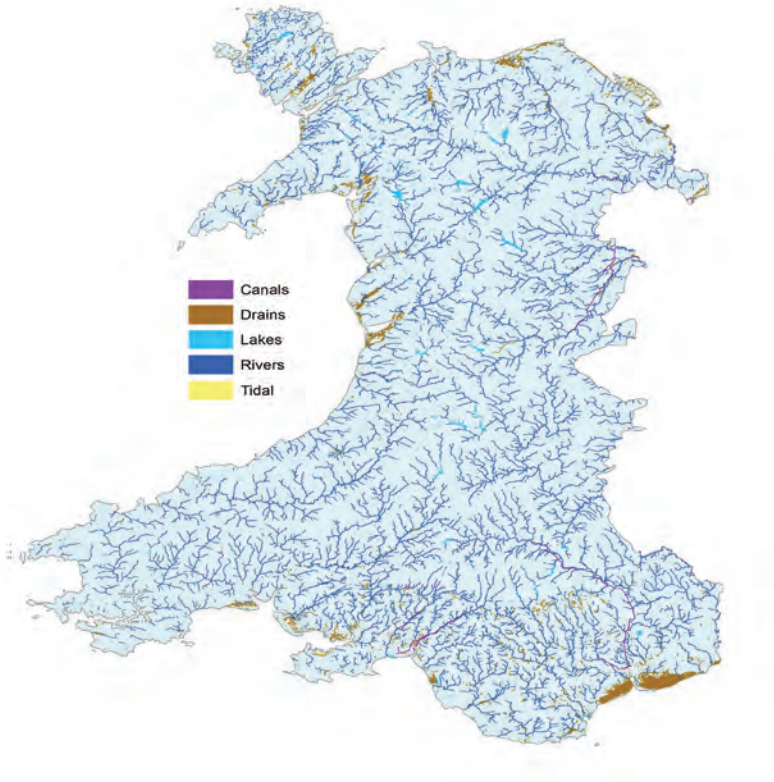


Figure 2. A map showing Wales in more detail classified according to waterbody type.

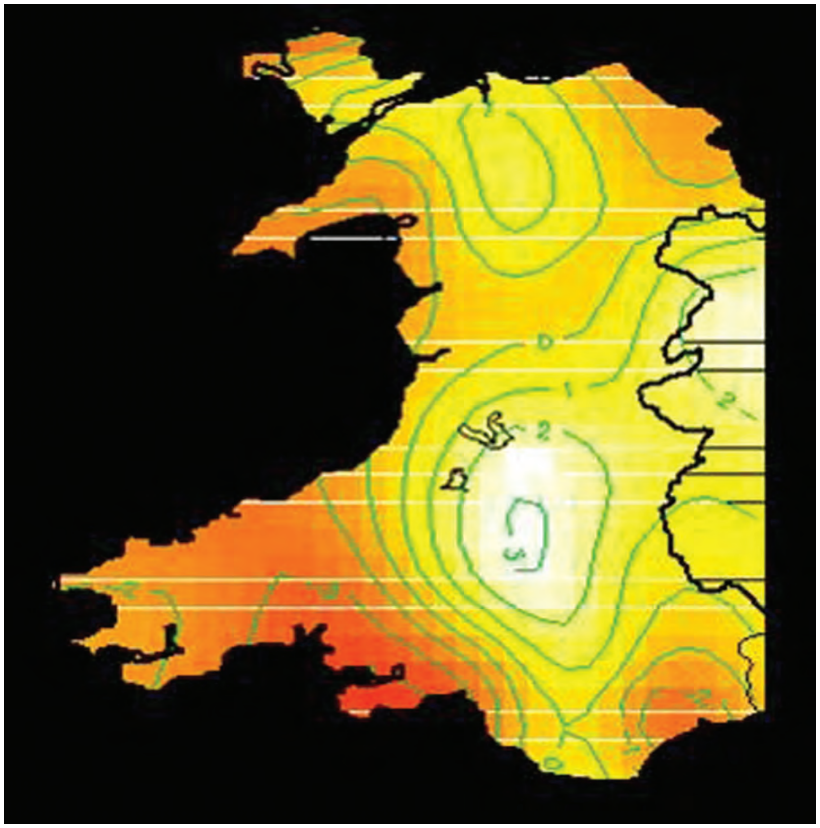


Figure 3. A map showing the results of a preliminary model of Teal distribution in Wales. The darker the colour, the higher the number of Teal.

information on other factors that could potentially influence waterbird distributions, for instance land use, temperature, soil acidity and altitude.

We are still working on expanding these databases to include as much relevant information as possible, but preliminary statistical analyses based on what we have so far have already produced some interesting results. For example, data from WeBS counts were combined with those on waterbody characteristics and altitude at a 10 km square spatial scale to produce a statistical model of Teal distribution in Wales. Teal was chosen because it is another species that is not best served by WeBS, as this small duck frequently inhabits minor waterbodies such as small pools and ditches that are not traditionally counted. The results of the model (see Fig 3) show a highly significant effect of altitude on Teal numbers, with fewer Teal predicted in more upland areas. This figure also corresponds nicely to maps of Teal distribution derived from quite different data that will be found in the forthcoming Atlas.

Such work is only a start, but it shows the promise of this project. We now plan to build on this approach and model all waterbird species for the whole of Great Britain, using information from across a range of spatial scales. This should vastly improve our understanding of where additional survey effort and volunteer recruitment should be focussed, and ultimately aid in informing the best possible decisions about waterbird conservation in Great Britain and beyond.

JOHN HARDING

Teal are often found on small waterbodies not traditionally counted by WeBS.

IN THE NEWS...

Local Organiser News

By Heidi Mellan WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Ilya Maclean (Cornwall), Mike Douglas (Irt/Mite/Esk Estuary), Steve Birch (Merseyside (inland)), Julie Roper (Northumberland coast), Harold Lilley (Poole Harbour), Nick Tomlinson (Radipole and Lodmoor), Keith Fox (Somerset (other sites) & South Avon (inland)) and Bob Howells (West Glamorgan), for all their hard work as Local Organisers and whom have retired from the scheme within the last year. We were greatly saddened to hear that Graeme Taylor, the Local Organiser for Buckinghamshire, passed away in September as did Gordon Allison, LO for North Kent Estuaries. Our condolences go out to their families, they will be greatly missed.
We would also like to thank Simon Taylor who has taken over as LO for Cornwall, Peter Jones for taking on Irt/Mite/Esk Estuary, Chris Gunn, the new LO for North Lincolnshire (inland), Roger Warren who is the new LO for Buckinghamshire, Paul Morton who has taken over as LO for Poole Harbour, Dan Turner who has taken over the Northumberland coast, Nick Lewis who has joined us as the new LO for the West Midlands, Alastair Flannagan for taking over in West Glamorgan and Toby Branston who has taken on Radipole and Lodmoor.

Welcome to you all.

Desperately seeking Organisers...
We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Cheshire North; Clwyd; Derbyshire; Durham; Essex; West and North Kent; East Lancashire and Fylde; the Mersey area; several areas in Yorkshire; several areas in the Scottish Highlands and several regions in Northern Ireland. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office **webs@bto.org**.

WeBS OBITUARIES

Gordon Allison 1961-2012

Gordon Allison, the WeBS Local Organiser for North Kent, died in the early hours of 6th of February 2012. Born in America, but raised in Kent and Glasgow, he expressed a keen interest in natural history from a young age, keeping spiders in matchboxes, collecting bones and feathers and keeping notes of the things he saw. At the age of five he knew the names all the dinosaurs. Gordon developed his interest in natural history at the University of Glasgow, where he studied Botany. University also provided an opportunity to develop his love of music, which was usually loud and alternative. After university, Gordon wanted to work with wildlife and pursued a career in conservation. Having volunteered in various places, he got his break working for the National Trust on the Farne Islands in 1990, protecting and monitoring seabirds and seals. Gordon's career with the RSPB began in 1992 and he worked at a number of reserves across the country, and in 2008, Gordon became the Warden for RSPB Elmley Marshes, a reserve that he was particularly fond of. Gordon was a renowned birder and a rare source of knowledge on the distribution and movements of birds in Kent. He was an active member of the Kent Ornithological Society, chairing the Conservation & Surveys Committee. Gordon took over as the WeBS Local Organiser for North Kent Estuaries in 2010 and covered several of the sectors himself. He was also heavily involved in organising the 2011/2012 Swale Low Tide Counts.
Gordon was marvellous company. He was a gentle soul with a dry sense of humour. He was more than happy to share his wildlife knowledge with others and he will be fondly remembered by those that knew him well, to those that met him out on the reserve, listened to his talks or read his articles and bird updates. His dedication to conserving and managing the North Kent Marshes as well as his dedication to WeBS will provide a lasting legacy for someone who had so much more to offer the area and enriched the lives of many.
Alan Johnson (RSPB Area Manager - Kent)

Graeme Taylor 1939-2011

Sadly Graeme Taylor, the WeBS Local Organiser for Buckinghamshire, died on 1st Sept 2011. A WeBS counter for many years, Graeme became one of our most dedicated WeBS Organisers when he took over in Buckinghamshire in 2002. As an Organiser he continued to cover several sites himself and it is thanks to his tireless efforts that, over the years, many new volunteers have been recruited and all the priority sites within the region have been covered every year. Graeme will be greatly missed.
WeBS Team

RESEARCH

WeBS Indices explained

By Chas Holt WeBS Research Ecologist

Within WeBS, we regularly refer to 'indices' and the associated species' trends. Indeed, much of the interpretation in the annual report is based on these values – so, what are indices, what do they show, and how are they calculated?

Essentially, an index value for a species in a given WeBS-year relates to the number present at WeBS sites relative to other years. The most recent year is given a value of 100, and the values in the preceding years therefore indicate positive or negative changes relative to this. The period of months used to derive annual index values (indices) vary between species groups, eg September–March is used for most wildfowl, and November–March is used for most waders. Only sites with good overall coverage (at least 50% of possible visits undertaken) are used, with an assumption that the pattern of change in numbers across those sites is representative of that across the country. Statistical models are then used to fit a smoothed trend to the data; a best-fit line that runs through the annual indices (shown here for Knot; Fig 1). WeBS adopts a level of smoothing that captures aspects of the trends that may be important, but removes temporary fluctuations that are unlikely to be representative of long-term trends. We also present monthly indices for each species, which are compared to the average value for the previous five years. For each species, monthly indices provide an indication of migratory patterns and responses to cold weather as in Fig 2 where the marked drop in December 2009 was probably associated with the onset of cold weather at the time and a presumed exodus to milder areas.

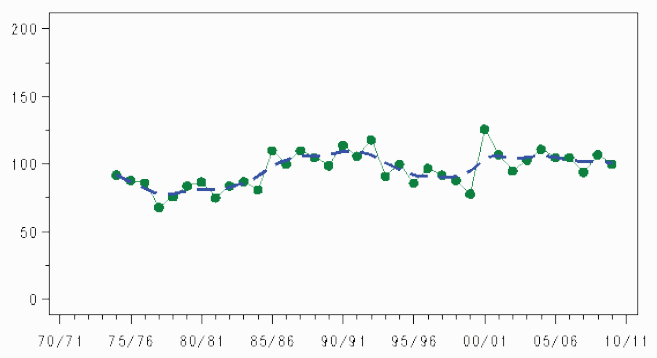


Figure 1. An example of WeBS annual indices (green dots) and trend (dashed blue line) – for Knot in Britain. Knot numbers can fluctuate between years, but the underlying trend is relatively stable.

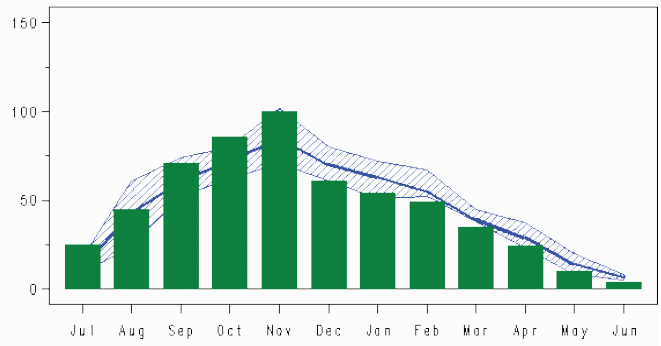


Figure 2. Monthly indices for Knot in Britain – the green bars (for 2009/10) illustrate the typical build-up of this species in Britain during autumn to a peak in early winter (characterised for the previous five years by blue line).

LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to communicate directly with WeBS staff regarding the running of the scheme, through advice, ideas and feedback.

A couple of interesting issues were raised at the last meeting; Firstly why are Dippers not counted and should they be? Secondly, would it be possible for counters to mark roost sites on their site maps. The first issue was taken to the WeBS Steering Group where the possibility of counting Dippers was thoroughly discussed. It was decided that as a resident species, they are already better monitored by breeding-season surveys and so we won't be adding this to our list of WeBS species. The idea of adding a feature that allows counters to map roost sites has been added to our list of future online developments and is due to be worked on in 2013.

The minutes from previous meetings are available via the website at **www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/about-webs/webs-local-advisory-committee-loac**.

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

We are always looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future. If you would like to know more about what is involved, please contact **webs@bto.org** for more information.

WeBS LOAC Representatives

Southwest England
Gladys Grant
gladysgrant@talktalk.net
Eastern England
Nick Mason
nick.mason4@btinternet.com
Midlands
Ian Lees
ianlees@me.com
Northern England
Dave Shackleton
dave.shack@care4free.net
Wales
Andrew King
andrew.king53@virgin.net
South and East Scotland
Neil Bielby
n.bielby@sky.com
North and West Scotland
John Armitage
jsa@ornquest.plus.com
Northern Ireland
Shane Wolsey
shane.wolsey@btinternet.com

BACKCHAT

Word of mouth...

Plan for census of breeding and wintering Cormorants

The IUCN-SSC/Wetlands International Cormorant Specialist Group is collaborating with the new EC project 'CorMan' in order to assess the number and distribution of Great Cormorants in Europe during breeding and winter. The aim of the joint Cormorant count project *Cormorant Counts in the western Palearctic* is to organise a pan-European census of breeding colonies in 2012 and a census of winter roosts in January 2013.

We now have counters for most inland tree-nesting colonies. However, if your WeBS site has breeding Cormorants this year and you are able to make a nest count between mid-April and mid-May, we would be very interested in receiving these (please forward directly to Dr Stuart Newson **stuart.newson@bto.org**).

The winter roost count is planned for the 15 January 2013 (+/- a week). We are currently considering how WeBS might contribute to the count, which would involve a single count at a known night roost in the late afternoon, starting a few hours before dusk and counting all incoming birds. If you know that your WeBS site has a Cormorant night roost and you would be happy to provide a count, please get in touch with Stuart.

Goose feeding distribution

The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) are collating and analysing data on goose feeding distributions, particularly around key sites such as those designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). This will help in planning enquiries, especially those related to wind turbines, and also hopefully lead to a better understanding of the spatial distribution of feeding geese, and the location of the most important feeding areas, around important roost sites. WeBS counters are in an ideal position to collate information about the feeding distribution of geese (and any other waterbirds using farmland habitats) near their WeBS site and thus usefully contribute to the project. Counts of feeding geese, including the location, date and number of geese can be uploaded to **www.birdtrack.net**, but please remember to indicate that the record is of feeding or roosting birds, and not flying over. Alternatively, information can be sent to WWT at **monitoring@wwt.org.uk**

Historic Newsletters Online

We have recently added all the WeBS Newsletters going all the way back to the very first one in 1993 to the WeBS website **www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/publications/webs-news**. The only copy we are currently missing is number 7 (1997). If you have a copy of this, we would love to hear from you to complete our set.

Snap shot

NICK MORAN

Digi-Scauped!
This female Scaup was an unusual visitor to the BTO's Nunnery Lakes reserve in January, constituting only the second ever record here and even timed its appearance on the reserve to coincide with the monthly WeBS Count.

Getting Started with WeBS Online is Easy!

Been thinking about entering your WeBS data online? Getting started is easier than you think. All you need to do is register; let us know what your username and site is and we will do the rest. The complete 'Guide to WeBS Online' can be found on the website at **www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/taking-part/counter-resources**

Recording uncounted birds

As you know we ask you to record only the birds that you see using your site. However, there are times when you know certain species are present as you've heard them but you haven't actually seen them. You can still record these birds by either ticking the present box next to the species name in WeBS Online or writing 'NC' on your forms.

Population estimates revision

A revision of the estimated numbers of waterbirds wintering in Britain was published last summer (Musgrove *et al.* 2011, *British Birds* 104: 364–397). The associated 1% national thresholds are now used for listing sites in the annual WeBS report. WeBS data played an important part in enabling the generation of these population estimates; an excellent example of the invaluable contribution made by your WeBS counts! An abstract of the paper is on the British Birds website at **www.britishbirds.co.uk/articles/overwinter-population-estimates-of-british-waterbirds**