



International Swan Census (ISC) Background

ISC Background

Whooper and Bewick's Swan numbers in the UK and Republic of Ireland are monitored annually through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) and the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS), respectively. Although these schemes provide good coverage of a high proportion of wintering sites used by Whooper Swans, a number of non-wetland or temporally flooded areas are not surveyed, hence a more comprehensive census, that focuses specifically on these species, is required to fully assess the size of the population; such a survey is undertaken every five years (now every six years).

Aim and methods

The main aim of the ISC is to estimate the size and distribution of each population, as well as identify important wintering sites. Age assessments are also made during the surveys, providing a coordinated estimation of breeding success. In addition counters are asked to record the type of habitat used by the swans during the census. These data are analysed to assess whether there has been any major shift in habitat use over time.

When

The ISC involves one co-ordinated site-based survey timed to coincide with the International Waterbird Census. The census takes place in January, with the dates coinciding with WeBS Core Count dates (17–18th January 2026). This also coordinates with the International Waterbird Census dates. The survey can be carried out within a week either side of this weekend if necessary, however we encourage the count to be carried out on the 17th/18th January 2026 if possible.

While most sites can be counted at any time of the day, both Whooper and Bewick's Swans will often roost on waterbodies but then depart these sites very early in the morning to head to arable land, often some way from where they roost, to spend the day feeding and then return at dusk. If the ISC site you will be counting is known to hold roosting swans, these sites should be

counted either at first light before the swans leave or at dusk to count birds coming into roost, though birds may arrive after dark so morning would be preferable. If your site is used at different times of day you can submit both a roost count (for overall numbers) and a daytime count (for habitat and age information of those staying on site) either in GSMP Online, or via WeBS Online (using the casual/roost counts data entry option for a visit solely to count roosting swans).

If you come across swans feeding in fields, these can be recorded in GSMP Online and on your submission please note if you know where these birds roost to allow us to account for potential double counting.

Sites

The census covers all wetland sites in Britain and Ireland that are monitored through WeBS, as well as any additional sites where wintering Whooper Swans and/or Bewick's Swans are currently known to have/have been known to utilise: the latter includes e.g. agricultural land, flooded fields. The sites available to count are on the vacant site map: <https://app.bto.org/gsmppublic/vacant-isc.jsp> which will be open to view August 1. If you see any Bewick's or Whooper Swans on adjacent fields/areas which are not sites on the vacant sites map, you can enter this in the data entry form by clicking on the Globe icon labelled 'Map' next to 'Site'.

Getting Involved

To participate in the International Swan Census, an observer needs to be confident that they can identify Bewick's and Whooper Swans and also have some experience of counting birds. The census is undertaken at five-yearly intervals (now every six years) and each survey requires one count on the weekend of 17–18th January 2026. The census covers sites throughout Britain and Ireland. Log in to GSMP Online and click on the 'ISC Vacant Site map' to find a vacant site near you: <https://app.bto.org/gsmppublic/vacant-isc.jsp>

