

Newsletter

Number 12 Summer 2000

WeBS counts in 1998-99

The 1998-99 report is due to be published and distributed at about the same time as this Newsletter; if you have not already received it, you will do so shortly. Our apologies for the delay this year which has been the result of a number of different factors. The new recording forms introduced last winter should reduce the amount of time we spend processing the considerable amount of data we receive nowadays and one of our top priorities this coming year will be to produce the next report by April. For those of you who don't have the time (or perhaps the inclination?) to read the report in its entirety, a summary of the main findings and highlights from the 1998-99 report is provided below . . .

Although numbers of divers recorded by WeBS were not exceptional, dedicated counts of Great Northern Divers in Orkney, the UK's winter stronghold for this species, found internationally important numbers in Scapa Flow. An exceptional 781 birds in March was probably the biggest ever count in Europe. This figure is many times higher than previous surveys in the 1970s and 1980s, and clearly illustrates the importance of these islands for wintering divers. In Northern Ireland, Cormorant numbers reached their highest ever levels with an amazing 2,071 birds on Loughs Neagh & Beg, three times the figure present only five years previously. Little Egret numbers reached a new high with 785 birds present in September, and a cold spell in November in continental Europe coincided with the highest British WeBS count of Bittern to date in December. The rise in Mute Swan numbers continued unabated, both Britain and Northern Ireland holding record counts. Indices suggest an increase of around 75% since the mid 1980s. Both species of migratory swan fared poorly in Northern Ireland with Bewick's rapidly becoming a localised

and scarce winter visitor and Whoopers significantly declining over the last 10 years.

European White-fronted Geese recorded their lowest totals, with the exception of winter 1991-92, since the mid 1970s. The Greenland population

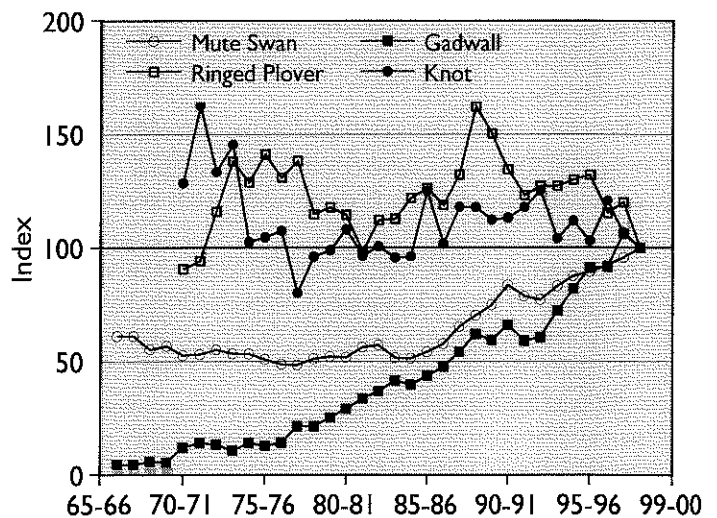


Figure 1. Annual indices for selected wildfowl (GB) and waders (UK)

continued on page 2

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).



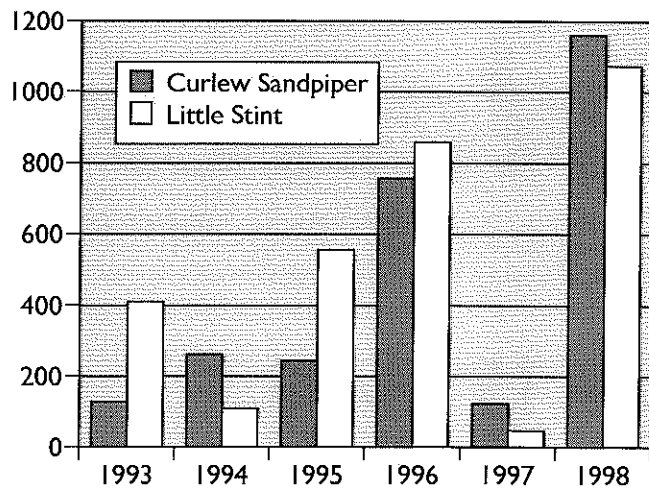


Figure 2. Peak autumn passage counts of Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint in the UK

reached it's highest ever levels, co-ordinated counts suggesting a total of more than 35,500 birds in Britain and Ireland. A promising, albeit small, rise in numbers of Icelandic Greylag Geese was the first since 1993–94. The first co-ordinated counts throughout Ireland found just under 2,000 birds.

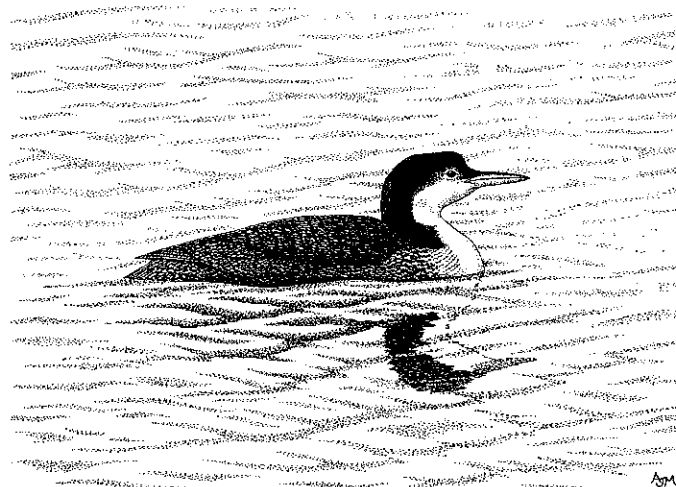
The Svalbard population of Barnacle Geese wintering predominantly on the Solway increased to new record levels with 26,000 birds counted in December. Continued poor breeding success saw the peak national total and index for Dark-bellied Brent Geese fall to the lowest level since the early 1980s, a situation of some concern given the magnitude of the recent decline (down 45% in the last seven years).

Winter 1998–99 was poor for Shelduck in Britain, the national total being the lowest for 10 years and the index the lowest for over 20. Interestingly the Mersey Estuary now seems to have become a key moult site for this species with over 10,000 birds present in August. The Ribble Estuary held just under 100,000 Wigeon, a figure exceeded only by two counts at the same site in 1994–95 and over 25% of the national total. Gadwall numbers in Britain surpassed 15,000 for the first time, an impressive figure for a species which only thirty years

previously was as numerous as Smew or Slavonian Grebes are today. After many years of steady decline, the British index for Mallard rose for the first time, albeit only slightly, whilst Pintail numbers increased on both sides of the Irish Sea. Counts of Scaup in Northern Ireland were the highest yet recorded by WeBS, albeit only marginally higher than in the mid 1990s, whilst high counts of Common Scoter from Dundrum Bay, infrequently detected by WeBS counts, saw provincial totals rise considerably. Numbers of Common Scoter wintering in Carmarthen Bay reassuringly returned to former levels following two years of low counts after the *Sea Empress* oil spillage. Despite a relatively mild winter, the one cold spell on the continent in November was sufficient to cause a significant influx of Smew, 351 birds in January being the second highest ever recorded by WeBS. Peak numbers of the skulking Water Rail (521 in Britain in December) were the highest to date, albeit only a fraction of the true population. Analysis of information on the count forms show that birds are almost twice as likely to be detected on counts when ice is present.

In Great Britain, peak Ringed Plover numbers fell by 17%, the UK index reaching its lowest level for almost 20 years. The relatively mild winter saw typical numbers of Golden Plover and Lapwing and no significant movements. Knot fared less well, with the British winter peak the second lowest in the last ten years and the UK population index at its lowest level for 15 years. A bumper autumn passage saw record numbers of Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff, the September peak surpassing 1,000 birds for all three species. The UK index for Black-tailed Godwit remained high following continued high counts in Britain. Spring passage of Whimbrel was notable and co-ordinated well with WeBS count dates, the total of 2,722 in April being the highest recorded by the scheme to date. Passage counts for Greenshank and Green Sandpiper were also high, and continued low counts of Turnstone saw the UK index remain at the lowest level since the early 1980s.

Mark Pollitt



The WeBS Riverine Pilot Survey: preliminary results of the counter questionnaire

In advance of a national survey of rivers in 2001–02, a pilot was conducted in January and February 2000 to test the proposed methods and to plan how to tackle the full survey. Although the majority of the data from the pilot have arrived at Slimbridge, it is too early to speculate on the findings; I shall provide these details in future editions of the newsletter as they become available. Many thanks to all the counters who have returned their forms, and I would be grateful if all those counters who have not sent their data already would do so as soon as possible.

In the meantime, I would like to take the opportunity to present the preliminary results of our counter questionnaire about the survey. The questionnaire asked each counter general questions on what they thought of the methods used and the structure of the form. We rely heavily on the suggestions of counters because many of you encounter problems that are impossible for us to foresee during the planning stage. These problems are always more evident during new surveys. The questionnaire is thus invaluable in helping us to improve the methods for the full survey.

The response to the questionnaires has been very good with over 60 completed forms received so far. Reassuringly, over 98% of counters indicated that they found the methods very easy or reasonably easy to follow. However, there was some confusion as to whether birds on waterbodies and fields nearby

should have been included in counts. Repeated flushing was also a problem for some counters. We are currently looking at ways to overcome these problems.

Just under 95% of respondents indicated that they had found the survey fun, rewarding or reasonable which was also very encouraging. Several counters added that the survey had taken them to interesting parts of their local area that they had not previously considered visiting. Further, many were surprised by the numbers and species of birds they encountered along certain stretches. A similar proportion indicated that they found 2.5 km a reasonable distance to walk in a single visit to a river.

All respondents said that the form was either easy or reasonably easy to complete. This was particularly pleasing since all WeBS survey forms are now designed in a standardised format.

In summary, it appears that the River Survey pilot was a success with most counters. We will address all the issues raised in the questionnaires and hope to make the full survey even more of a success. As expected, not everyone was happy, but we have written to those with particular complaints explaining why we chose to design the pilot the way we did. Finally, I must give a special mention to one of our counters in the Southwest, John Randall, who single-handedly covered the entire River Tamar in Devon — an immense effort!

James Robinson

WeBS Atlas of Count Boundaries and new Counter Handbook

As mentioned in previous newsletters, mapping the boundaries of each area counted for WeBS is of paramount importance in helping to interpret the data collected and use them for conservation. Over the past three years we have been updating our map records of all recently visited count units, and this autumn we will be distributing copies of all the site maps processed so far. Each Local Organiser will have a map of all sites within their area and counters will receive a copy of the count units they visit. The process is an ongoing one; we will send out questionnaires to counters of new sites and sites for which we have no map as we process your counts each year.

These maps and accompanying information will be the first in a series of information sheets which will form a new 'counter handbook'. We aim to produce loose-leaf sheets covering all aspects of WeBS, including the history of the scheme, the survey methodology and counting techniques, examples of completed recording forms, information on access to and use of WeBS data and much more — basically everything anyone could wish to know about WeBS. We hope that this information will help to answer many of the questions you may have about the scheme, and provide a useful and up to date reference for new and existing counters alike.

Mark Pollitt

Count dates and synchronisation

Priority count dates are set each month as guidance to counters for a number of reasons. The primary one is to avoid, as far as possible, birds being missed or counted twice; if counts at one site were made a week after those at an adjacent site, it is feasible that birds could have moved from one to the other in the intervening period. The synchronisation of counts is absolutely essential on large, complex sites as the above problems could be encountered even if birds only moved a short distance between adjacent count sectors.

Two methods have been used to set count dates: the Sunday nearest the middle (15th) of the month (used for the previous 'wildfowl counts'), or the date on which (ideally the spring) high tide occurs on a Sunday morning. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Using the Sunday nearest the middle of the month ensures that no two dates occur close together. However, with UK estuaries supporting a large number of birds, and the need for appropriate tidal conditions essential to a successful count at many, this method has taken precedence.

Nevertheless, the timing of tidal conditions varies considerably around the country, and a date appropriate for one site may not be suitable on the other side of the country. In these cases, Local Organisers are given leeway to choose a more appropriate date.

In the Republic of Ireland, this problem is largely overcome by I-WeBS having two priority count dates:

one for the west and south coasts, and another for inland sites, the east coast and Donegal.

Thus, we would be interested to know your views about adopting a similar system in the UK. Certainly, there would appear to be a case for considering this approach in Northern Ireland and co-ordinating counts with adjacent parts of the Republic.

The key is to ensure synchronisation at adjacent areas, more precisely those between which waterbirds move on a regular basis, to avoid double-counting or missing birds. Thus, we would be interested to hear if there are areas where counters feel that there is considerable movement between inland and coastal sites. If large numbers of birds move between an estuary and a reservoir just a few miles inland, but the tidal regime on that estuary means it is counted on a different date to the reservoir which is covered on the priority date, then clearly problems could occur.

As ever, we look to your local knowledge of waterbirds at your site to guide us. If you feel that we should be considering 'super-sites' for the purposes of synchronising counts, or have any general opinions on this issue, we would be grateful to hear from you.

Rest assured, even if there is a general feeling in favour of making a change, we would only implement any changes after careful consultation with all concerned.

Peter Cranswick

Timetable for additional surveys

With a seemingly ever increasing number of surveys of Britain's birds being conducted, one of the key functions of the WeBS partnership, consisting of four of the principal organisers and funders of volunteer-based surveys, is to co-ordinate the programme of waterbird surveys to avoid over-burdening counters.

The rolling programme of WeBS and related surveys is listed below both to provide as much advance warning as possible, but additionally to invite those who feel they have something extra to contribute to contact the WeBS partnership in advance.

We rely on the input of volunteer observers for all of these surveys. Thus we approach them hoping, rather than expecting, that you will be able and willing to participate. All WeBS surveys are planned carefully in advance by the WeBS partners, with a view to serving pressing conservation needs for waterbirds and wetlands. As WeBS counters, we rely on your local knowledge and expertise of these species and sites, and the surveys undoubtedly benefit from being able to use the same 'infrastructure' as WeBS (not least, we only too readily admit, because it means less work for us if

we can use the same contacts, mailing set up etc!). However, as mentioned, there is no obligation for anyone to participate in these surveys because they are involved in WeBS. We frequently enroll different Local Organisers for one-off surveys and they, in turn, enlist new counters or encourage existing counters to cover new or different sites.

For our part, the Secretariat has attempted to standardise data collection for site-based surveys. Thus, where the methods employed are similar to those of WeBS, we will use relevant elements from the WeBS Core Count recording form. Whilst special surveys will require a different form, we hope that you will be familiar with the majority of the methods and recognise sections of the recording form so that form filling and the more arduous aspects of surveys are no more tedious than necessary. As ever, we are grateful for feedback on how surveys may be improved, both from a scientific standpoint, but also to know how fun or rewarding you find them. Comments on the ease of fieldwork, to the ease of understanding the instructions or completing the form are always welcome.

The timetable for the next few years is as follows:

WeBS Dispersed Species

Pilot Survey winter 2000–01

Mute Swan Census spring 2001

WeBS Riverine Survey winter 2001–02

WeBS Dispersed Species Survey winter 2002–03

Articles about each of these surveys are to be found elsewhere in this Newsletter.

Finally, a big thank you to everyone who participated in the spate of recent surveys: WeBS Little Egret Roost Survey, the International Whooper and Bewick's Swan Census, the pilot WeBS Riverine Survey and the Naturalised Goose Survey. As ever, please return any outstanding recording forms to your Local Organiser as soon as possible. And, as ever, many thanks for your help.

Peter Cranswick

2000 WeBS Counters' Conference

The WeBS Counters' Conference for the year 2000 went ahead successfully on 25 March at WWT Martin Mere and was attended by about 100 counters and staff from the WeBS partner organisations. Pat Wisniewski, Centre Manager at WWT Martin Mere opened the conference and chaired the morning session, which included talks by Mark Rehfisch on introduced species, Nicola George on English Nature's uses of WeBS data and James Robinson on the African–Eurasian Waterbird Agreement. The afternoon session was chaired by Peter Cranswick, with talks by Carl Clee and Steve Cross on the work of the Liverpool Bay Wader Study Group, Tony Baker on RSPB Marshside reserve, Simon Gillings on inland Lapwings and Golden Plovers, and Frank Mawby on declines in breeding waders in Cumbria. Thanks to everyone who was involved with making the day a success.

Andy Musgrove & Steve Holloway



Outstanding services to WeBS

At the WeBS conference, Bob Treen, long-serving Local Organiser of WeBS counts on the Duddon Estuary in Cumbria, received a presentation on behalf of the WeBS partners to thank him for his outstanding services to the survey. Bob, whose completed forms are always the first to arrive at WWT, has been counting on the Duddon since the pilot Birds of Estuaries Enquiry survey in 1969 and has yet to miss a single count. What makes the tale even more unusual is that, to conduct his counts, Bob travelled on two different forms of public transport to get to his site; it's even harder to believe that public transport could deliver him successfully to and fro on each of over 360 occasions!

Bob's dedication certainly deserved special mention, and we would like to ask other counters to nominate individuals whose outstanding efforts, for whatever reason, deserve a special mention. Please drop a line to the WeBS Secretariat at WWT with your suggestions.

Mark Pollitt

A view from the outside

Dr David Hill

In the first of a series of articles on the uses of WeBS counts, Dr David Hill, Chief Executive of Ecoscope Applied Ecologists, explains how WeBS counts are used by ecological consultancies to evaluate commercial projects and proposals . . .

Ecoscope Applied Ecologists has been a regular user of WeBS data for approximately eight years. We have seen, within our company and the industry as a whole, a dramatic increase in the demand for services in ecology; in parallel the need for high quality information to deliver these services successfully has also grown. This essentially comes from two sources: either from bespoke studies for particular projects, or analyses of existing data. In this article I would like to describe how a professional consultancy, working usually with the commercial sector, relies on and uses WeBS data for the benefit of the environment, conservation and business.

As a first port of call, WeBS data are extremely useful and provide a mechanism for the collection of important information from a large number of sites. The fact that WeBS uses volunteers enables the system to be cost-effective and extensive; it would be impractical to collect the same level of data at the same spatial scale using professional staff. WeBS has particular value in enabling comparison between populations of individual species and communities across different sites and across different years. For example, it could be used to set up control sites in long term monitoring programmes, where the environmental impacts of, for example, a coastal development or provision of a new water recreation facility could be tested against trends operating on adjacent but unaffected sites.

It is also of value in that the convention of the "1% criterion" is now formally accepted as an ecological evaluation tool for assessing the importance of sites for waterbirds. First established by the Ramsar Convention, the criterion indicates that a site is identified as being of international or national importance if it holds 1% or more of the respective international or national population of waterbirds. WeBS data play a key role in assessing a site's importance for waterbirds.

However, amongst these values there are other considerations. It is important that access to data

be costed in a way which makes it attractive to users, since only through its use by as many users as possible will the importance of the dedicated ornithology behind the scheme be properly recognised. Secondly, WeBS data should continue to receive proper quality assurance and data control to ensure its accuracy and reliability.

The use of quality information becomes very important where legal challenge may be an issue. The Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations published in March 1999 for example, require applicants of development proposals to ensure the adequacy of information within an EIA. Where this

information can be shown to be deficient, the developer can often be asked to supply additional information in order to fulfil the legal requirement of the EIA Regulations, with the time delays to their programme which results. It is simply not acceptable for an applicant to have undertaken an inappropriate or badly timed

survey at a site, for example, which may be adjacent to an estuary of international importance. WeBS data, therefore, provide a vital initial evaluation or scoping of the site from which further studies, where necessary, can be planned.

Areas protected under international designations such as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are now a particular focus of attention. Appropriate Assessments are required for proposals which may affect these areas, supported by government guidance in Planning Policy Guidance No. 9 (PPG9) on Nature Conservation. Ecoscope has regularly used WeBS information to assess the ornithological significance of European sites in respect of potential development proposals adjacent to or within such sites. Examples might include analysis of the impacts of gravel extraction on existing sites close to SPAs or for an estuary which may provide the siting for a new power station.

One particular application of WeBS data, especially for complex sites such as gravel pits or large estuaries, is the ability to investigate the component waterbodies' contribution to the wider

“it would be impractical to collect the same level of data at the same spatial scale using professional staff”

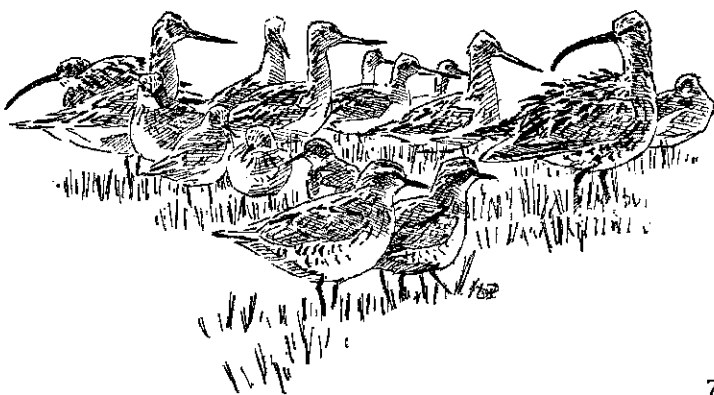
Conservation Update

waterbird population, of particular significance for SPAs. Some SPAs, for example, are comprised of a large number of individual waterbodies; in effect the SPA consists of a number of fragmented sites. WeBS data can be very useful in assimilating how cumulative populations operate at the level of the SPA, or for investigating the overall impacts of water-based recreation on individual waterbodies.

It may be useful to outline a number of case studies where we have used WeBS data for different purposes. A valley reservoir, also an SPA, required an Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Regulations in respect of plans to increase water abstraction. Sectoral information was used to model the change in distribution of birds with a change in water depths under different drawdown scenarios, and the effects tested against impacts on site integrity as according to PPG9. In a similar exercise undertaken for another reservoir in England, WeBS data were used to plan a 12 month study of the distribution of birds across the reservoir divided into 100 m grid cells to enable fine-tune modelling to be undertaken using a Geographic Information System (GIS). Such assessments help to ensure ecological interests are accommodated at all stages of such activities.

Professional consultancies such as Ecoscope use ecological data extensively for impact assessments, examination of long-term trends, testing designation criteria and testing the effects of developments on site integrity for European designated sites. Such information is also used to plan habitat creation and mitigation schemes or wetland compensation projects where there is a definite benefit to nature conservation. WeBS data plays a fundamental role in each of these. We work closely with non-governmental organisations, the statutory conservation agencies, developers and others, in delivering scientifically-based assessments, research and evaluations.

On a final personal note, we have very much enjoyed working with the WeBS staff and others within the partner organisations — we have always found them very helpful, knowledgeable, and able to meet the sometimes horrendous deadlines that consultants seem to create or have created for them! [well, we weren't taking that out! Ed.]



Strangford Lough and Cockling

Conservation organisations have expressed concern about the potential impact of commercial cockle farming at Strangford Lough in County Down. A loophole in Northern Ireland legislation allows the harvesting to continue unregulated despite designation as a Special Protection Area under the European Union's Birds Directive. The site supports internationally important numbers of five waterbird species during the winter months.

National Biodiversity Network

The National Biodiversity Network (NBN) received a £250,000 boost from the government earlier this year. The NBN aims to develop ways and means for environmental bodies to share biodiversity data, especially through the development of modern computer technology using common standards and protocols. A beta version of the new *Recorder 2000* software has been released, which, when finalised, is expected to become the UK standard for biological recording. The new WeBS database being developed this summer to store all our computerised count data has been designed to slot directly in to the NBN framework.

Erika oil spill

On 12 December 1999, the oil tanker *Erika* broke apart 40 miles off the Brittany coast, releasing 26,000 tonnes of oil. Over 60,000 birds were washed ashore; more than 90% of these were auks, though the remaining casualties included divers, grebes, scoters and waders. Based on assessments from other oil spills, the true figure for mortalities may be up to 10 times this figure, making it the worst ever European spill in terms of seabird mortality.

Sea Empress fine reduced

The record fine levied on the Milford Haven Port Authority following the *Sea Empress* disaster has been reduced after appeal. The original £4 million fine was revised to just £750,000 much to the dismay of the chairman of the Environment Agency, Sir John Harman, who reflected that the fine "in no way compares to the very serious impact that resulted from the *Sea Empress* incident". Many local counters assisted with monitoring during the period of the spill, whilst WeBS counts were subsequently used in analysis of the effects of the spill on local bird populations and distribution. The nationally important Common Scoter flock in Carmarthen Bay, which was seriously affected during the incident, has since recovered following initial declines in the two years after the incident, peaking at over 22,000 birds in winter 1999-2000.

Dutch study quantifies impact of fishing nets on birds

A study on behalf of the Dutch Ministry for Agriculture revealed that stationary nylon fishing nets in the IJsselmeer and Markermeer drown at least 50,000 waterfowl every year. For some species, these drownings account for over 20% of the local population. Those most affected are Pochard, Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye, Smew, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander, whilst other rarer species such as Red-necked Grebe and Red-throated Divers also become by-catch of the fishing industry. Every year the greater part of the IJsselmeer Goldeneye population are lost to these nets. For seven species, mortality through nylon nets in The Netherlands accounts for more than 1% of their international population, a situation which requires urgent action from the Dutch Government. Hopes for such action are high since the key areas, the IJsselmeer and Markermeer, are proposed for designation under the European Union Birds Directive.

Cardiff Bay Barrage update

The Cardiff Bay Barrage was officially completed on 4 November 1999 destroying the Cardiff Bay SSSI, an internationally important area for waterbirds. The Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) described it as a "sad day for conservation" as the rich mudflat feeding grounds were flooded. On a more positive note, the 375 hectare Gwent Wetlands reserve, designed to compensate for the lost mudflats, was officially opened in spring and WeBS counts will help to monitor the success of the ambitious new £10 million wetland.

Ythan to be Nitrate Vulnerable Zone

The government has announced that the catchment and estuary of the Ythan river will be designated a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone. Scientific research has linked enhanced levels of nitrates in the river with the agricultural use of inorganic fertilisers and animal manures. These high levels can lead to eutrophication, high nutrient levels promoting growth of algae and blanket weed which in turn may adversely affect the food sources of fish and waterbirds. The designation will ensure farmers are required to provide a general level of protection against nitrate pollution of surface and ground waters. Professor David Mackay of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency hopes the designation "will afford the river and its estuary the protection it deserves."

A national census of Mute Swans is scheduled to take place in spring/summer 2001, repeating the last conducted in 1990. Mute Swans are widespread during the breeding season on all manner of wetlands, including small lakes and particularly on rivers, habitats little visited by WeBS.

This census will be organised by WWT in conjunction with BTO, the Swan Study Group, Scottish Ornithologist's Club and various other bodies and individuals interested in this most popular of British wildfowl species. The exact methods have yet to be finalised, but are likely to be broadly similar to the previous census. Complete coverage will be attempted for the most densely populated regions, with options to assist organisers and counters in regions of low density or with few counters, e.g. the use of randomly selected areas/sites and the option to estimate totals based on previous knowledge. We plan to build on the strengths of the previous survey and the methods will be finalised by the end of the winter in consultation with the above groups and counters.

The extensive coverage for the survey will require large numbers of observers. We hope that, as in the past, the networks of volunteer counters, including WeBS, will want to participate. We will be contacting potential organisers for the survey in early/mid winter in the hope of enlisting their services as part of the large task of organising the network for this survey.

Peter Cranswick

WeBS Dispersed Species Survey

As you all know WeBS monitors a large proportion of the UK's waterbirds. The coverage of estuaries is almost complete, a significant proportion of inland still waters are counted and last winter's Pilot River Survey was the first step towards assessing the numbers of waterbirds wintering on rivers. There is one major remaining gap, and it is of considerable importance for a variety of species. We have little idea of how many waterbirds are present on small water bodies, streams, flooded fields, ditches and dykes, away from WeBS sites. These habitats may be of great importance for wintering Ruff, grassland plovers and snipe, and little is known about the

numbers of dabbling duck, Moorhen and Coot, Little Grebe, herons, etc. that they may hold. To address this, a Dispersed Species Survey will be carried out during winter 2002–03 and will aim to improve existing population estimates of these dispersed species. To test the proposed methodology, a Pilot survey will be conducted in 2000–01 winter.

The survey methodology that is being finalised will be based on counts carried out at two spatial scales. Each pre-selected count unit will be divided into two sections. In the larger section the objective will be to record the larger and more easily visible birds such as herons, ducks and grassland plovers. In some instances it should be possible to count much of this section by car with regular stops to scan the area. The smaller section will have to be covered more intensively as the data collected by this part of the survey will be used to estimate the number of the less visible species such as Moorhen, Little Grebes and, whenever possible, snipe.

We will be contacting WeBS Local Organisers and asking them to help us recruit volunteers for this exciting and challenging new survey. We thank you in advance for your help.

Steve Holloway & Mark Rehfisch

Naturalised Goose Survey Update

In 1991, during the last national survey of naturalised geese, nearly 61,000 Canada Geese and 19,000 re-introduced Greylags were recorded in Britain. By the time you read this, both the site-based and tetrad aspects of the 2000 survey will have taken place, and will help to provide new population estimates and an update on each species' distribution. Results of the survey will be included in a later edition of the WeBS newsletter.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have taken part in the survey and, if necessary, to remind you that all forms should be returned promptly to the relevant organiser. This is also the first time counts have been made in the Republic of Ireland, so a big thank you also goes to BirdWatch Ireland for co-ordinating coverage there.

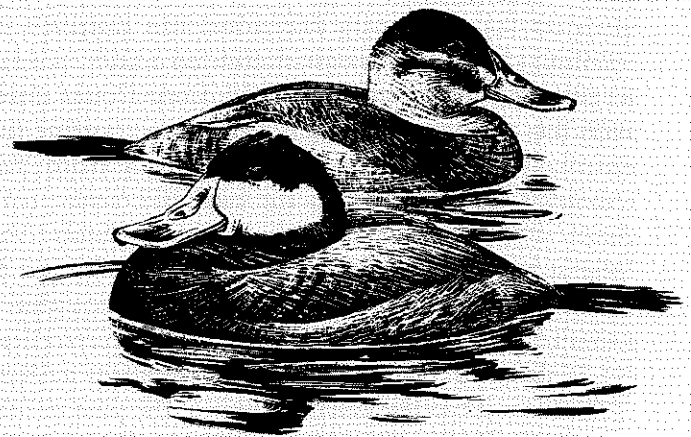
Any thoughts or comments you may have on the survey would be more than welcome. You can attach a note to your recording form or drop a line to the national organisers Steve Holloway at BTO (tetrad survey) or Colette Hall at WWT (site-based survey).

Colette Hall & Steve Holloway

Conservation Update

Ruddy Duck Research

The concern over the threat posed to the globally endangered White-headed Duck, through hybridisation and competition with the escaped Ruddy Duck from the UK, has been widely documented. Currently however, there is no method of assessing the risk of this alien species to the viability of White-headed Duck. A new PhD studentship initiated by the University of Newcastle and WWT aims to investigate the impacts of Ruddy Duck on the viability of the White-headed Duck population in Spain through a combined modelling and experimental approach, developing and validating individual-based models to simulate the spread of Ruddy Duck, both spatially and genetically, to quantify their impact on White-headed Duck in Spain. The work will also link to the government funded Ruddy Duck regional control trials currently being undertaken by the Central Science Laboratory. To date (June 2000), over 1,000 birds have been controlled. Conservation measures for White-headed Ducks in Spain continue to produce positive results, with the national survey recording over 2,400 birds in January 2000.



Neck collars on European White-fronted Geese

There is currently a new effort to mark European Whitefronts in an attempt to reassess the Western Palearctic flyways in the light of changes in wintering distribution that have occurred during the past 20 years. Counters are urged to look out for these birds, which are marked with black neck collars. Any observations should be reported to Richard Hearn at WWT Slimbridge.

Compiled by Mark Pollitt

Monitoring internationally important sites

Many thanks to those counters who assisted in the pilot studies examining WeBS monitoring of Special Protection Areas at selected sites. Using the information supplied by counters and Local Organisers we have now established a procedure for expanding the process to a national scale. The project will focus on two aspects: i) by looking at the importance of parts of SPAs and Ramsar sites not monitored during WeBS counts, we hope to be able to suggest, if necessary, how our monitoring of these areas might be improved, and ii) by looking at the distribution of

birds in non-designated areas, this will help us to consider how best to ensure these birds are protected.

During the next year we will be approaching Local Organisers and counters of sites designated for their internationally important waterbirds to ask for further, more detailed information on certain parts of their count areas; we hope you will take the time to help us with this important project. The UK is leading the way in monitoring wetland sites important to waterbirds, and we hope that, with your help, we can improve this still further.

Colette Hall & Mark Pollitt

WeBS Little Egret Roost Survey

The majority of the count forms for the 1999–2000 WeBS Little Egret Roost Survey have now been returned to the BTO, with results received from 18 sites so far. Counters recorded the number of roosting Little Egrets every month on a date as near as possible to the official WeBS Core Count date, with the aim of assessing how best to monitor the species. The summed peak counts from the estuaries reported on so far total 979 birds, with many sites recording their highest ever totals. The largest roost, as usual, was at Thorney Island in Chichester Harbour where Barry Collins counted a massive 271 egrets on 16 August 1999 (with 281 there on 24 August). Overall, fairly low numbers in April 1999 declined to the lowest levels of the year in May and June. Birds returned in good numbers in July leading up to the now expected peak in August and September. Although numbers declined sharply in October, the rate of decline subsequently slowed with about two-thirds of the birds counted in November still present in March, suggesting a fairly stable wintering population. The survey will be reported on completely once it has been possible to compare the roost counts with WeBS Core Counts for the same period.

Andy Musgrove

WeBS Low Tide Counts

During the winter of 1999–2000, WeBS Low Tide Counts were carried out at Belfast Lough, Breydon Water, Carmarthen Bay, Cromarty Firth, Inner Firth of Clyde, Mersey Estuary, Morecambe Bay (in part), Newtown Harbour, North Wirral Shore, Orwell Estuary, Pagham Harbour, Upper Severn Estuary, Solway Firth, Southampton Water, Stour Estuary, Strangford Lough and Thames Estuary (in part). Although most of the counts have been returned to the BTO we're still waiting for a few datasets so if you have any forms you've been meaning to send off, please stick them in the post now! Thanks again to all those who've taken part.

Work is progressing well on the WeBS Low Tide Count Atlas. The count sectors of all of the sites counted since the beginning of the scheme in 1992–93 have now been digitised and incorporated into our Geographic Information System (GIS). This computer software allows us to visualise the WeBS Low Tide Count data very clearly and enables us to calculate bird densities to a consistent and accurate standard. Analysis of the dataset is now underway and should enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the feeding distributions of waterbirds on the UK's estuaries and answer many of the questions that the scheme has thrown up.

Andy Musgrove



Bulletin Board

Single Visit Count Forms

A note to all observers who submit counts on orange single visit recording forms. When completing information on Activities and Birds of Prey, please circle (or circle and cross) the numbers or letters in the **unshaded box** on the right side of the form rather than on the shaded key. Thank you.

Reminder of priority count dates

Count dates for the coming year are as follows:

2000

23 July	22 October
20 August	19 November
17 September	17 December

2001

14 January	22 July
11 February	19 August
11 March	16 September
8 April	7 October
27 May	4 November
24 June	16 December

National Goose Census dates for autumn 2000:
7/8 October & 4/5 November

Priority dates for 2002 will be listed in the next winter newsletter.

2001 WeBS Counters' Conference

We will be heading well north of the border to Inverness for next year's counters' conference. We have earmarked Saturday 24 March as a possible date although this depends upon the availability of venues. Watch this space for further details!

Population Estimates

Work is currently underway on updating national population estimates for waterbirds in Great Britain. The revised estimates, when adopted, will provide new thresholds against which the importance of sites will be assessed. Population estimates and qualifying levels seem certain to increase for Little Grebe, Gadwall and Avocet, all species for which WeBS counted totals regularly surpass the current population

estimates, but other less obvious revisions may also occur. More details about the results of this work will be provided in future newsletters.

WSG conference, UEA

8-11 September

A reminder that the Wader Study Group annual conference will take place between Friday 8 and Monday, 11 September 2000 at the University of East Anglia. The theme of 'Counts and marking — past, present and future' should interest many a keen WeBS counter (see also WeBS newsletter No. 11 or April 2000 Wader Study Group Bulletin). More details on the conference can also be obtained from Mark Rehfish at the BTO.

Atlas of Wader Populations in Africa and Western Eurasia

Preparation is now well advanced on the publication of phase one of the Wader Study Group's *Atlas of Wader Populations in Africa and Western Eurasia*. The publication, which will cover 39 wader species occurring in the region, has been compiled to assist in the implementation of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement and aims to identify population limits and sizes as well as to identify key sites, helping to pull together a large amount of previously scattered data and information. David Stroud, Head Ornithologist at JNCC, is convinced that the Atlas "will be an outstanding production of major importance to guide conservation decisions related to these species and their habitats". The new population estimates have been proposed for adoption in the

third edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* compiled and published by Wetlands International and will form the basis for identification of internationally important sites in the UK monitored through the WeBS network. Publication is expected later this year, with a second volume covering the remaining 49 wader species regularly occurring in Africa and Western Eurasia to follow.

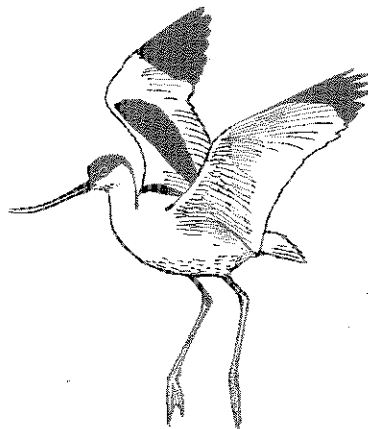
New recording forms

Summer 1999 saw the introduction of a new suite of recording forms and the introduction of counter codes for all WeBS counters. A huge thank you to all counters and Local Organisers for adapting to the changes so quickly and successfully. It is already helping us to process the data more quickly and should lead to further time savings in coming years.

To date we have received over 70 Supplementary count forms recording additional counts of birds which would otherwise go unrecorded. Remember that, if you count a site which holds important numbers of birds which are often not picked up during the Core counts (e.g. sea ducks or roosts of geese, swans, Cormorant, Goosander etc.), by carrying out a special visit to the site at an appropriate time (maybe dawn, dusk or simply when weather conditions are suitable) and recording counts of your 'target' species on the pink Supplementary recording form (available from your Local Organiser), your counts will help to plug these important gaps in our knowledge and help to recognise the importance of these sites.

I-WeBS report 1997-98

The 1997-98 annual report for the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS), WeBS's sister scheme in the Republic of Ireland, is now available. The report presents the results of the fourth successive season over which the I-WeBS scheme has been operating, and



continued on page 12



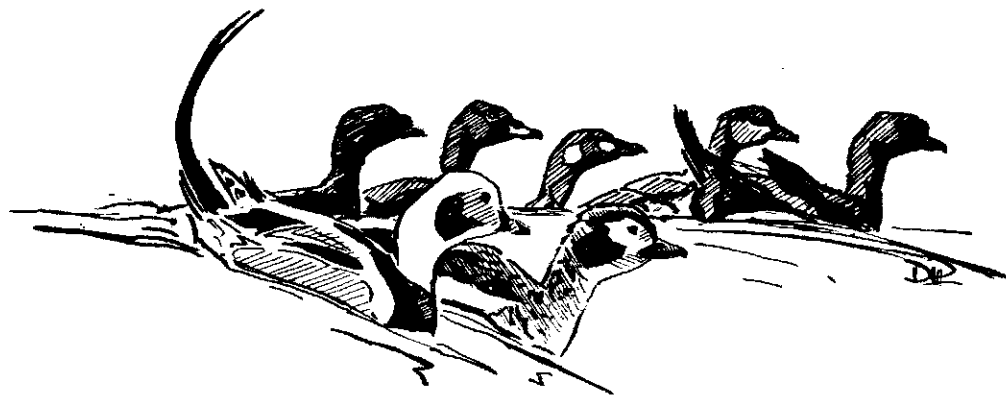
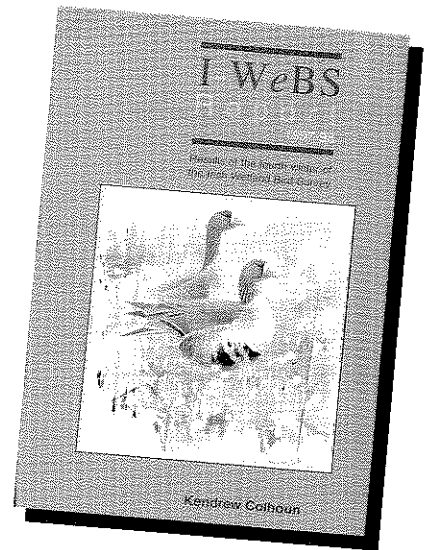
Bulletin Board

includes summary data for Northern Ireland provided by WeBS to complete an all-Ireland picture. Counts were received from 305 sites, with January totals recording some 565,000 waterbirds (excluding gulls and terns) in the Republic in addition to the 180,000 in Northern Ireland. Provisional analysis of trends in the first four years of the scheme suggest increases in numbers of Gadwall, Shoveler, Grey Plover, Curlew and Redshank. Declines were noted for Cormorant and Greylag Goose.

Kendrew Colhoun, I-WeBS National Organiser, is pleased with

the development of the scheme. "As ever, we are indebted to all the dedicated volunteers who have taken part in the scheme. We hope that further improvements in coverage in recent winters will see all-Ireland waterbird totals pass the 1,000,000 figure in the very near future."

Copies of the report are available from BirdWatch Ireland, Ruttledge House, 8 Longford Place, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, Republic of Ireland priced £IR 10.00 or e-mail iwebs@indigo.ie for further information.



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
Head of Secretariat	Peter Cranswick	01453 891900	01453	
Core Count Organiser	Mark Pollitt	ext 265	891931	Peter.Cranswick@wwt.org.uk
Assistant Organiser	Colette Hall	ext 255	891926	Mark.Pollitt@wwt.org.uk
	James Robinson	ext 261		Colette.Hall@wwt.org.uk
	Richard Hearn	ext 263		James.Robinson@wwt.org.uk
	Richard Hearn	ext 185		Richard.Hearn@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 Rehfish	01842 750050		Mark.Rehfish@bto.org
WWT		BTO		
Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT		The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU		
Fax 01453 891901		Fax 01842 750030		

Line drawings by Dan Powell, Mark Hulme and Andrew Mckay.

Compiled by Mark Pollitt.

Designed and typeset by Alcedo Publishing, Colorado Springs, USA • e-mail engli@ibm.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. © WWT & BTO 2000.