WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 17 Winter 2002–03

Human recreation and waterbirds — an analysis of WeBS data

*Waterbirds share their wetland habitats with a wide variety of other users and activities, many human-based and with potentially conflicting interests. **James Robinson** and **Mark Pollitt** report on the findings from an analyses of activities encountered during WeBS Core Counts . . .*

Wetlands and the waterbirds they support are under pressure from human activities such as land-claim, habitat destruction, pollution, hunting and recreation. Recreational disturbance can prevent waterbirds from gaining access to food supplies, roosting areas, and breeding sites either temporarily or for longer periods. In this respect, disturbance can be equated to habitat loss to waterbirds using a site. As such, recreational disturbance is a potential threat to waterbirds and its effects and impacts on populations need to be monitored effectively to help reduce potentially negative consequences.

Although there is a large body of research concerned with the extent and nature of disturbance at individual sites, our knowledge of the sources and distribution of disturbance to waterbirds on a nationwide scale was non-existent. Therefore, WWT undertook an analysis of those data collected on human activities by WeBS to investigate the national picture and examine how best to monitor human activities in the future.

Between 1995-96 and 1998-99, WeBS encouraged volunteer counters to record human activity and perceived waterbird disturbance at wetland sites throughout the UK. The majority of counters (c. 68%) recorded no disturbance at their site and only a small number (< 2%) indicated very high levels. The frequency of disturbance peaked during the late summer. Just over 26% of disturbance events were attributed to recreational activities.

The most perceived disturbance was caused by people using motor-driven machines and shooters (Fig. 1). Coastal waterbirds were more likely to be disturbed by walkers, shooters and large aircraft whereas those inland were more likely to be disturbed by motor-driven machines and unpowered boats.

It is important to differentiate between two recognised levels of response to disturbance: effects and impacts. An effect is a behavioural and/or distributional response by a bird to a given disturbance. In these circumstances, birds may be able to use alternative sites

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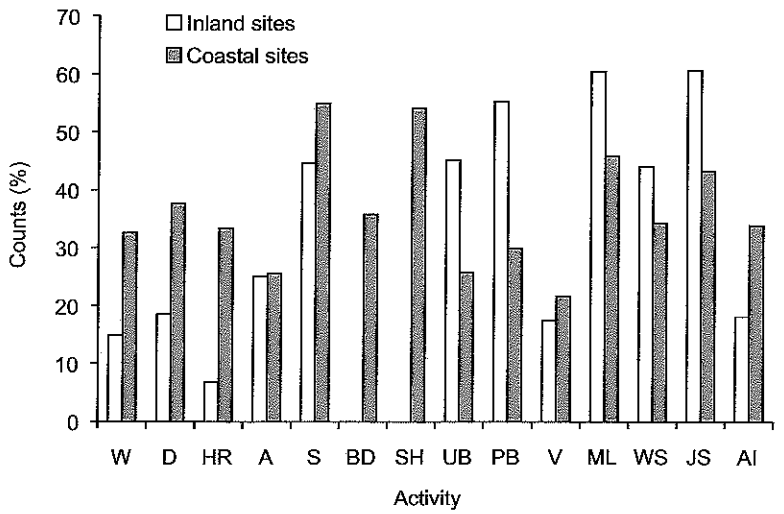

Figure 1. Percentages of recorded activities deemed to be causing disturbance to waterbirds during WeBS counts at inland and coastal sites, 1995/96-1998/99 (W - Walkers, D - Dogs, HR - Horse riders, A - Anglers, S - Shooters, BD - Bait-diggers, SH - Shellfishers, UB - Unpowered boats, PB - Powered boats, V - Vehicles, ML - Micro-lights, WS - Windsurfers, JS - Jet skis, AI - Aircraft).

Contents

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).

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Editorial

Changing times

It was with mixed emotions that I browsed through a copy of one of the landmark publications to result from the many years of waterbird counting in the UK. The first edition of *Wildfowl in Great Britain*, published in 1963, pulled together the wealth of information from the first 15 years of the National Wildfowl Counts. At the time, the collation of the counts provided a new insight into wildfowl numbers and distribution and a framework for the establishment and development of a network of wildfowl refuges. It also gave the opportunity to estimate, somewhat tentatively, trends between years and population sizes for each species. Since that time, numbers of some species, like Tufted Duck, have changed relatively little whilst others, such as Dark-bellied Brent Geese, have increased dramatically. For some, comparisons with numbers today are particularly interesting; to think that Gadwall numbers in the early 1960s were lower than those of Mandarin or Great Northern Diver today perhaps puts in perspective their sustained growth in numbers over the past three decades.

Reassuringly, the numbers of each species of wildfowl are, almost without exception, higher today than at that time. The success of the wildfowl refuge network and the conservation legislation that followed is reflected in such figures. That is not to say that the picture today is entirely rosy; threats to key sites, such as the recent proposals for airport developments at Cliffe Marshes, still remain. Thanks, however, to the work started over 50 years ago and the foresight and determination of those leading the development of waterbird monitoring, our knowledge today is infinitely greater and we have the ability to ensure that waterbird conservation is at least prominent in the minds of decision makers.

Shortly before writing this article, we learned with great sadness that one such pioneer, George Atkinson-Willes, had passed away. George organised the National Wildfowl Counts (one of the predecessor schemes to the Wetland Bird Survey), from 1952 to 1983, and was based at WWT Slimbridge from 1954. As Founder Chairman of the Duck Research Group of IWRB (now Wetlands International), he masterminded and organised the International Waterfowl Censuses from 1967. He edited the aforementioned first edition of *Wildfowl in Great Britain*, co-authored the second (1986) edition, and wrote numerous definitive papers on the numbers and distribution of palearctic waterbirds. It is tribute to the hard work of George and others that the scheme we inherit today continues to provide important knowledge of our waterbird numbers and trends. A full obituary will appear in the next issue of *WeBS News*.

Mark Pollitt

Roosting waders / Paul Marshall

Human recreation and waterbirds

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during periods of high disturbance at the original site without any major negative effects on their energy budgets and, ultimately, the survival of individuals. Impacts imply a reduction in body condition, productivity or survival and are therefore of primary conservation concern.

The effects of disturbance at individual sites can have conservation consequences at a more local scale, especially if birds stop using a site altogether, and have been measured successfully in a large number of studies. The measurement of the effects of disturbance require, however, investigations on a site-by-site basis involving rigorous hypothesis testing and manipulation of disturbance source. Needless to say, the measurement of the effects and impacts of recreational disturbance are beyond what could be achieved by WeBS.

Nevertheless, measuring the extent and distribution of human activities should remain a conservation priority, especially since the occurrence of some recreational activities may be increasing. The WWT work has indicated that the ability to monitor the distribution and occurrence of human activities can be of great value in highlighting potentially disturbing activities at sites, without measuring disturbance *per se*.

In light of the current success of WeBS in collecting these types of data, we suggest that the occurrence of various human activities at individual sites should be monitored by consulting counters and professionals who know the sites well. There is some evidence to suggest counters are reluctant to provide disturbance data on a regular basis; only 60% of WeBS counters currently provide information on human activities at their sites. Therefore, to avoid over-burdening counters, we suggest this type of review should be undertaken periodically using a counter consultation approach, e.g. by questionnaire. WWT is currently piloting such a scheme in the Republic of Ireland and hopes to implement a similar scheme in the UK in the near future. In the meantime, we have removed the human activities section from the Core Count forms to avoid collecting data which these analyses indicate to be of little value.

This consultation technique removes the inaccuracy of recording just those activities encountered during single 'snapshot' count visits and allows the recording of additional features, e.g. marinas or sailing clubhouses, which are indicative of potentially disturbing activities which may not be recorded on a specific count date but probably occur regularly. Furthermore, human activities, which occur during the summer months, when waterbird numbers are low and no counts are made, can also be recorded using this method.

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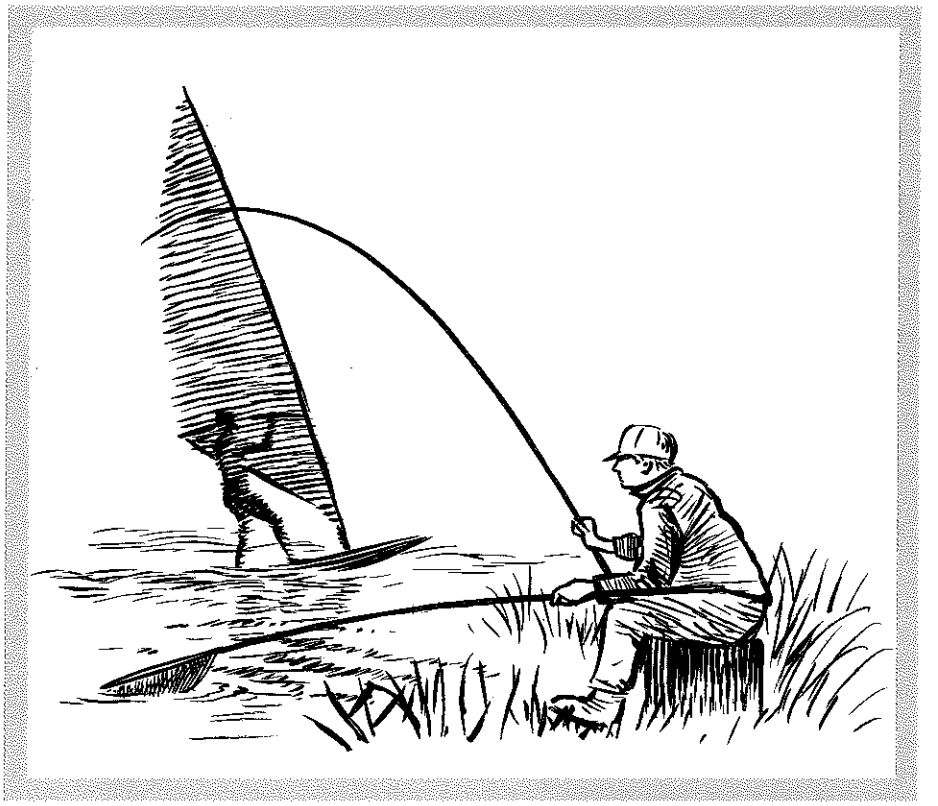


Finally, we would like to thank all those who have collected data on human activities for WeBS over the years. These data have allowed us to make the first ever assessment of the sources and extent of human disturbance to waterbirds in the UK whilst helping us to develop new methods to improve the monitoring of this important potential threat to waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

For more details, see Robinson, J.A. & Pollitt, M.S. 2002. Sources and extent of human disturbance to waterbirds in the UK: an analysis of Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) data, 1995/96-1998/99. Bird Study 49: 205-211.

James Robinson & Mark Pollitt

WeBS Low Tide Counts, winter 2002-03

By the time you receive this newsletter, the 11th winter of WeBS Low Tide Counts will be drawing to a close. We've been particularly busy this winter attempting to get as complete coverage as possible for the huge Severn Estuary and have collected a large amount of new information, especially for areas not well covered in previous winters such as the upper reaches between the Severn Bridge and Slimbridge and further south around Bridgwater Bay. Elsewhere, counters have been out and about on the Moray Firth, Duddon Estuary, Blackwater Estuary, Lavan Sands, Orwell Estuary, Pegwell Bay, Tamar Complex, Thames Estuary, Belfast Lough, Breydon Water, Lindisfarne, Pagham Harbour, Portsmouth Harbour, Stour Estuary and Strangford Lough. At Chichester Harbour, counters have been trialling a series of through-the-tidal-cycle counts to complement the extensive low tide count dataset already obtained for this site.

As usual, our thanks to all involved in this superb effort. The data provided by the WeBS Low Tide Count scheme are highly valued by conservation professionals for their input into the protection of estuarine waterbirds and their habitats, as a number of high-profile cases and numerous less well-known cases demonstrate.

Andy Musgrove and Steve Holloway

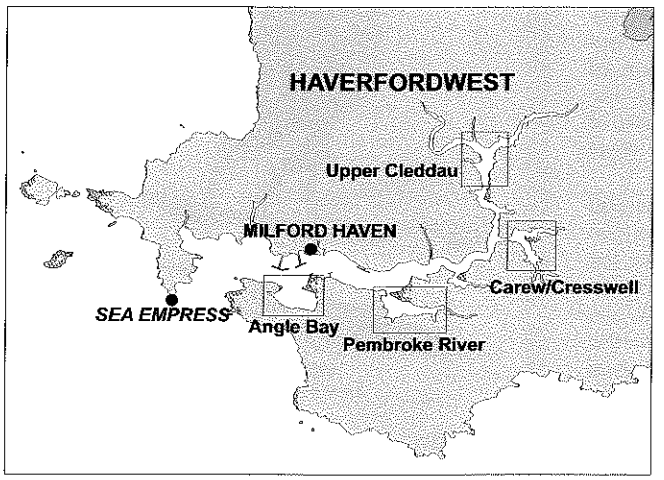
Oil spills and estuarine waterbirds

The devastating effects of an oil spill are all too apparent at the time, but what happens after the initial cleanup? ***Mike Armitage*** *reports on the effects and aftermath of the Sea Empress oil spill near Milford Haven . . .*

On 14 November 2002, the *Prestige* oil tanker, carrying 77,000 tonnes of fuel oil, was damaged during heavy storms in the Atlantic off the north west coast of Spain. The ship was towed out to sea away from the Spanish coast, but a breach in the hull allowed the release of several thousand tonnes of oil. A few days later, the ship sank to the seabed and there are fears that it will continue to release its toxic cargo into the Atlantic. Between 10,000 and 20,000 metric tons of oil are estimated to have escaped before the vessel went down. Much of this oil formed huge slicks that quickly reached the coastline of Galicia as attempts to contain it were hampered by continued bad weather.

Unfortunately, acute pollution incidents such as this are not particularly rare. Over the last 40 years or so, there have been several super-tanker spills, some of them in or close to British waters, and they appear to be increasing in frequency: The *Torrey Canyon* in 1967, the *Amoco Cadiz* in 1978, the *Atlantic Empress* in 1979, the *Exxon Valdez* in 1989, the *Haven* and the *ABT Summer* in 1991, the *Aegean Sea* in 1992, the *Braer* in 1993, the *Sea Empress* in 1996 and the *Erika* in 1999. Major oil spills can also be caused by ruptured pipelines, even deliberately so in the Persian Gulf during the Gulf War.

Oil spills have an immediate and often lethal effect on birds, those species most at risk being pelagic seabirds, divers, grebes, auks and seaducks, which spend much of their time at the sea surface. During the three weeks after the *Prestige* sank, over 500 dead oiled birds had been collected from Spanish beaches, including the rare Balearic Shearwater. Hundreds more were observed with oiled plumage. BirdLife International estimated between 10,000 and 15,000 seabirds may have been killed by the oil. Following the *Sea Empress* spill at the mouth of the Cleddau estuary near Milford Haven in south west Wales, some 7,000 oiled birds were washed ashore, the majority of which were Common Scoters, Guillemots and Razorbills. Thousands more would certainly have been killed and lost at sea.



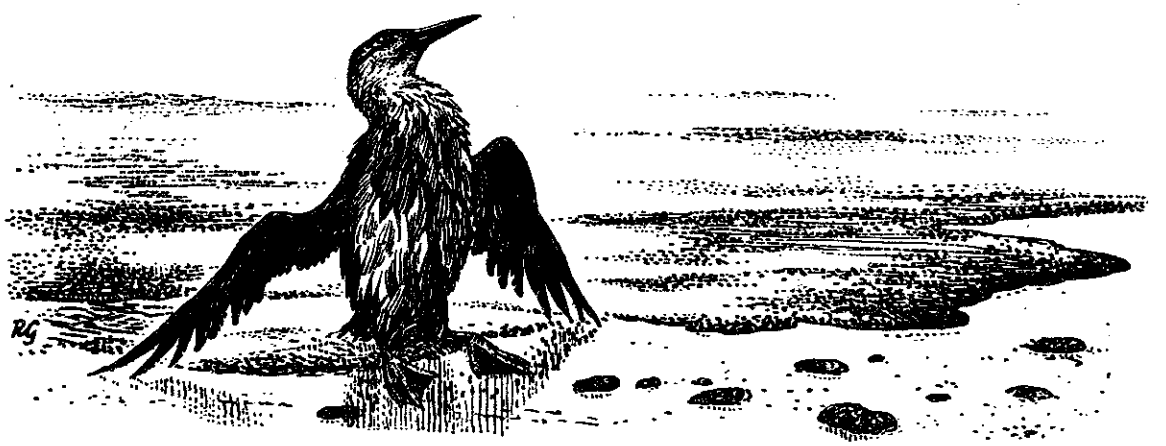
Location of study areas in Cleddau Estuary

Intertidal areas can be particularly susceptible to oil pollution. High tides carry oil slicks to the top of the shore and the oil is deposited on the sediment surface as the tide recedes. There, saltmarsh vegetation and many benthic invertebrates are smothered and poisoned. Depletion of these organisms can have an effect on the bird populations that rely on them for food, by increasing mortality rates, or forcing them into other areas to feed.

Following the *Sea Empress* incident in February 1996, the BTO was commissioned by Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to conduct a study into the effects of the spill on waterbirds using the Cleddau Estuary. This professional study involved analysis of WeBS data and three winters of intensive survey data from two heavily polluted sites near the mouth of the estuary (Angle Bay and Pembroke River) and two relatively unaffected sites further up-river (Carew/Cresswell and Upper Cleddau) - see map. Count data for the seven most abundant species - Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Dunlin and Redshank - were modelled in order to compare the populations of each species at each site over the three winters after the spill.

There were few bird deaths reported from within the estuary in the immediate aftermath of the incident, although local WeBS counters found that about 8% of the 11,400 birds observed during WeBS counts a few days after the spill had oiled plumage. The majority of these were gulls, but some waders and Shelduck were also affected. There was evidence that some birds moved away from the oiled sites, with declines observed in the numbers of Shelduck, Wigeon, Oystercatcher, Redshank and Curlew. Birds would normally have been moving away from the estuary at that time of year, but some had probably left earlier than usual.

In the winter after the spill, Shelduck and Redshank numbers were back up at Angle Bay. The recovery of Redshank may have been due to the recovery of their invertebrate prey, that of Shelduck due to the high abundance of a small opportunistic polychaete, *Chaetozone gibber*, in the bay. Wigeon, however, declined further, Oystercatcher showed no recovery and Curlew declined to their lowest recorded number. This was probably due to the decline in their main prey species: cockles *Cerastoderma edule* and the large predatory polychaete, *Nephtys hombergii*. In contrast, Teal numbers increased greatly and numbers stayed high until the end of the study, possibly due to increases in *Enteromorpha* algal growth (in the absence of grazing invertebrates) and numbers of small opportunistic invertebrates (in the absence of larger predatory invertebrates). At Pembroke River, Wigeon, Oystercatcher and Curlew numbers recovered, whilst Teal and Dunlin also increased. There was no recovery of Shelduck or Redshank at Pembroke River that winter.



The intensive surveys indicated that Oystercatcher and Curlew numbers recovered at both the oiled sites between winter 1996/97 and 1998/99 as the prey species recovered, whilst those at the unoiled sites mostly declined or remained unchanged. Redshank continued to recover and become more widely distributed at Angle Bay, but their numbers only increased at Pembroke River in 1998/99. Wigeon numbers recovered in 1997/98 but fell again the following winter. Shelduck numbers at Angle Bay declined in 1997/98, following their initial recovery the winter before and numbers stayed low in 1998/99, despite the recovery of *Hydrobia ulvae* populations. However, Shelduck recovered at Pembroke River in 1997/98.

The study thus indicated that the *Sea Empress* oil spill might have adversely affected the populations of five of the seven waterbird species considered in the parts of the Cleddau Estuary that it reached. The effects were mostly confined to the first two months after the spill, or the following winter and recoveries in all species had been noted by 1997/98. The abundance and distribution of waterbirds is closely linked to their food resources. Environmental disasters, such as oil spills, can diminish the availability of prey, forcing birds to locate other feeding areas. The negative impact of the *Sea Empress* spill on waterbirds on the Cleddau estuary appeared to be short-lived, with most species showing recoveries just three years after the incident.

The full impact of the latest oil spill on the wildlife of Spain's coastline will not be known for some time, but studies conducted after other incidents can give us some insight into the short- and long-term effects. Studies such as those carried out after the *Sea Empress* oil spill provide valuable contributions to our understanding of the dynamic ecology of our estuaries and their ability to recover from short-term pollutant damage. Long-term integrated monitoring, such as WeBS Core Counts and Low Tide Counts, further make this possible and demonstrate the importance of collecting local count data.

Mike Armitage

Results from the International Waterbird Census 1997, 1998 and 1999

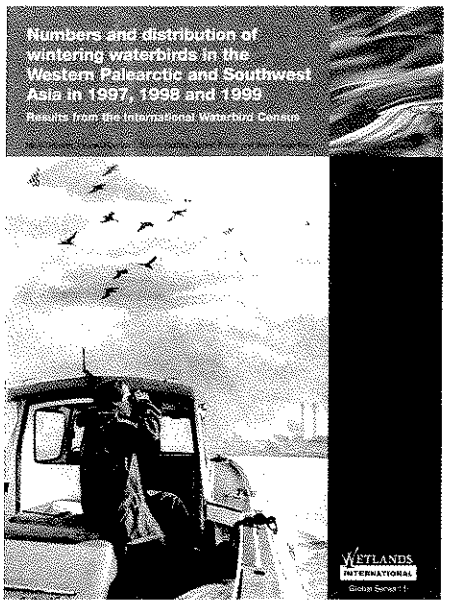
The International Waterbird Census (IWC) is a long-term monitoring scheme for waterbirds in the non-breeding season, a parallel to WeBS at an international level monitoring population sizes and trends. In the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia this census has been organised by Wetlands International since 1967. WeBS Core Counts in January feed into this census each winter, and results from the census in 1997, 1998 and 1999 have recently been published.

Counts from 47 countries across the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia are included within the report, the pooling together of which is a mammoth undertaking. Not only does the report present species totals (per country, per geographical area and for the whole region) but for the first time distribution maps are given for all species with suitable data. The total number of waterbirds counted each winter was in excess of 23 million birds, of which Northwest Europe accounts for more than half. Britain and Ireland contribute around 35-45% of this figure, with only the Netherlands regularly counting more waterbirds.

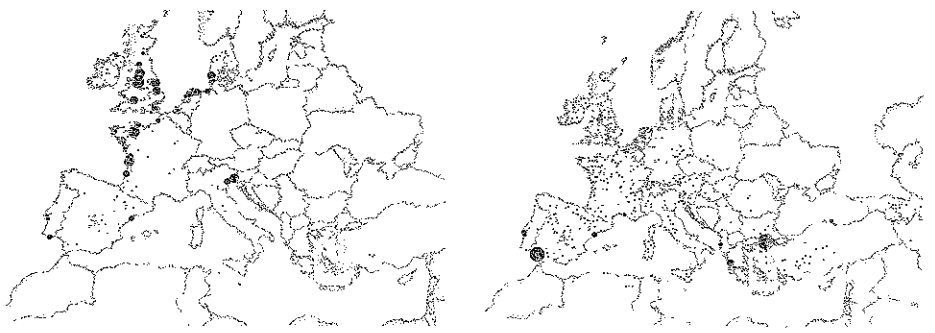
Several species were recorded in numbers exceeding one million birds, the most populous being Coot (2.9m), closely followed by Mallard (2.2m) and Wigeon (1.6m). Dunlin (1.3m) and Lapwing (1.2m) were the most abundant waders, whilst only one goose species (European white-fronted Goose, 1.3m) and one gull species (Black-headed Gull, 1.4m) surpassed this number.

Improved coverage and targeted special surveys also helped to improve significantly our knowledge of a number of species. Total counts of Pygmy Cormorants exceeded the previous population estimate, largely due to high numbers in Greece, an encouraging situation for a species of some conservation concern. Closer to home, Knot numbers increased significantly compared to previous years, thanks largely to record counts in the Netherlands in 1999. Dunlin numbers were also notably high, the counts almost equalling the current population estimate.

Undoubtedly some of the most enlightening aspects of the report are the species distribution maps, which enable the reader to clearly see the range and relative numbers of each species recorded by the survey. Despite variations in coverage between countries, the maps provide a fascinating insight into the distributions of waterbirds, not only those common to our shores but also to those which winter here in relatively small numbers. It also throws up some mouth-watering images of fantastic concentrations of waterbirds elsewhere: 67,000 Ruddy Shelduck at a site in Iran, 30,000 Red-crested Pochard in Kyrgyzstan and 14,000 Black-necked Grebes in Yugoslavia. Yet examination of the maps serves also to emphasise the importance of the UK for many species such as Bewick's Swan and Knot.



These results are of interest to professional and amateur birdwatchers alike, and are available to download from the Wetlands International web site at http://www.wetlands.org/pubs&/IWC_gs11_index.htm. A hard copy can be purchased from the Natural History Book Service (www.nhbs.com, ISBN 90 5882 011 4) priced £20.



Sample distribution maps of a) Dunlin and b) Pintail from latest IWC report

Reference:

Gilissen, N., Haanstra, L., Delany, S., Boere, G. and Hagemeijer, W. 2002. Numbers and distribution of wintering waterbirds in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia in 1997, 1998 and 1999. Results from the International Waterbird Census. *Wetlands International Global Series No. 11*, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

Mark Pollitt

'Estuarine Waterbirds at Low Tide' – the WeBS Low Tide Count Atlas

WeBS will shortly launch a new publication, summarising the results of the first seven winters of Low Tide Counts. ***Andy Musgrove*** *explains more . . .*

As all WeBS counters will be aware, the UK's estuaries are of key international importance for non-breeding waterbirds. Unfortunately, they are also some of the sites most threatened by issues such as development, pollution and sea-level rise. The recent proposals for dock expansion at Dibden Bay in Southampton Water and for an airport on Cliffe Marshes between the Thames and Medway Estuaries are prominent examples of the pressure on estuaries.

Whilst numbers of birds frequenting estuaries have been monitored by a team of experienced volunteers for many years, the UK has shown a further commitment to their conservation by the running of a national programme of Low Tide Counts (LTCs). This survey aims to investigate the within-site distribution of estuarine waterbirds at low tide in order to increase our understanding of site usage and thus to focus conservation efforts to greater effect. Counts are made by a dedicated team of experienced volunteer counters, ably co-ordinated by a network of local organisers.

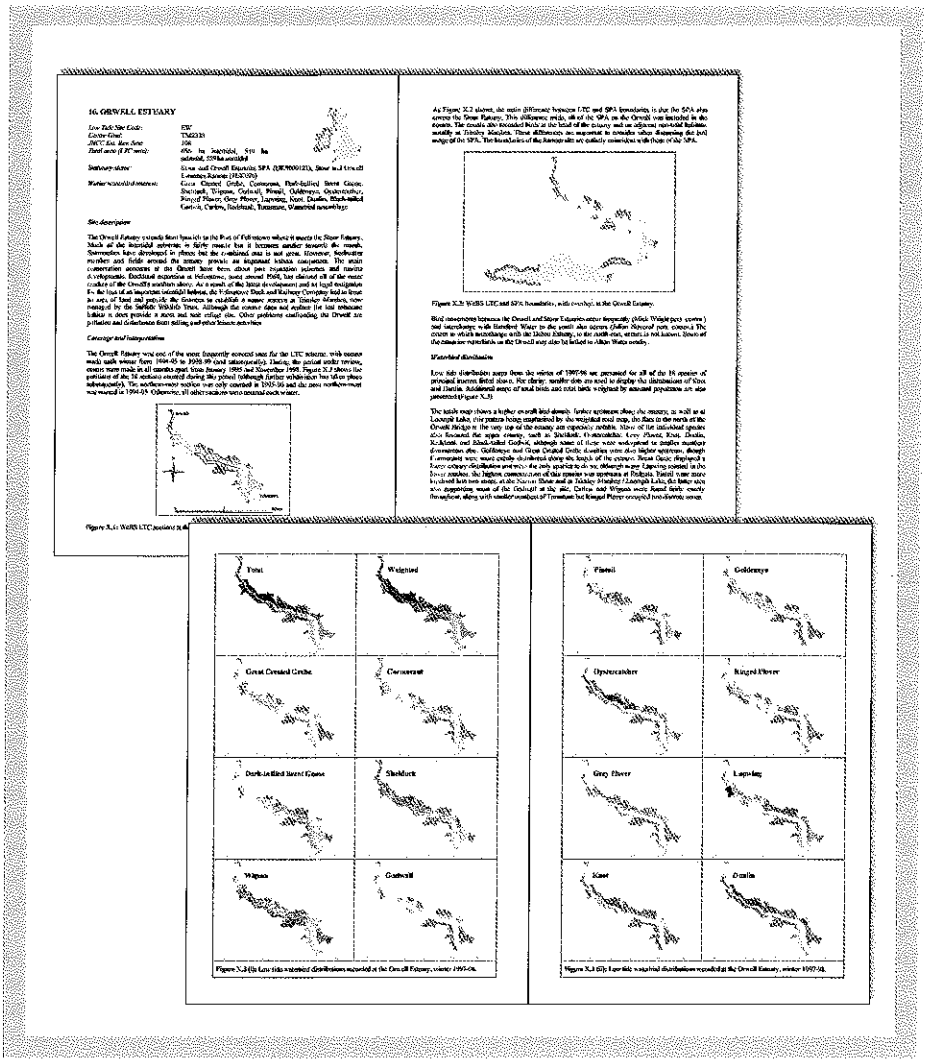
The LTCs are carried out on a rolling programme of each site being targeted once every six winters. By the end of the 1990s it was decided to produce a synthesis of what had been learnt so far and to make that information as widely available as possible and thus the production of a 'Low Tide Count Atlas' was initiated. The atlas, now entitled 'Estuarine Waterbirds at Low Tide' and covering the first seven winters of the scheme, is in its final proof-reading stage and publication will take place very shortly. It is hoped that the book will be of interest and use to those people involved in the conservation of estuarine wildlife and to counters involved in estuarine bird monitoring.

The book first sets out the rationale and methods behind the LTCs. During the seven winters 1992-93 to 1998-99, a total of 62 sites was surveyed at low tide (Figure 1), including the majority of the most important sites for waterbirds (with the notable exceptions of the Wash and Morecambe Bay). The bulk of the book is taken up with accounts for each of these sites. As well as a discussion of the characteristics of each site, distribution maps for all key species are presented, resulting in over 900 colour maps. Following this, the data collected by the scheme is considered on a species-by-species basis. The fullest treatment is given to 29 key estuarine species, with shorter accounts for a further 32 species. Overall, it has been found that Curlew and Redshank are the most widespread waterbird species in UK estuarine habitats, followed fairly closely by Oystercatcher.

The final sections of the book include a specially written review of the use of LTC information in conservation casework, contributed by Allan Drewitt of English Nature. This section contains a summary of the relevant legislation involved, recommendations of issues to consider when looking at a potential threat to estuarine birds and some case-studies which set out these issues in detail. The book concludes with a discussion of the issues to consider when interpreting low tide counts and also looks ahead to the continuation of the scheme.

As always, whilst the production of the atlas has involved a great deal of work by professional staff within the WeBS partnership organisations, none of it would have been possible without the hard work of so many volunteers and all LTC counters will receive a free copy of the book. I hope you will consider it a worthwhile return on your labours and that it will form a key publication to direct the conservation of estuarine waterbirds in the future.

Andy Musgrove



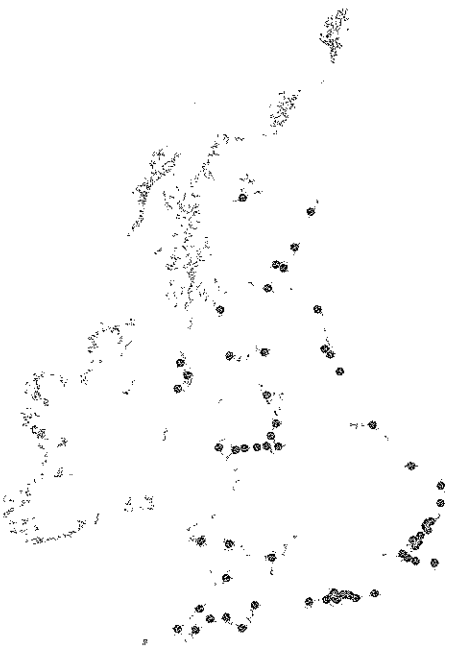


Figure 1. Location of sites surveyed at low tide 1992-93 to 1998-99

All-Ireland Light-bellied Brent Goose Censuses: October 2001 and January 2002

Almost the entire population of Light-bellied Brent Geese *Branta bernicla hrota* that breeds in the East Canadian High Arctic over-winters in Ireland, with only a few hundred making the journey further south to the Channel Islands, northern France and even as far as northern Spain. In the spring, these geese travel almost 7,000 km to their breeding grounds in the Queen Elizabeth Islands, undertaking hazardous sea-crossings and an incredible flight over the Greenland ice-cap.

Since 1996/97, co-ordinated annual censuses of this population have been organised by the Irish Brent Goose Research Group, in collaboration with I-WeBS and WeBS. The aim of the autumn census is to estimate the size of the total population at a time when it is concentrated at a few key sites; the mid-winter census aims to assess numbers and distribution after birds have dispersed from autumn staging areas. Observers are asked to count flocks and collect information on productivity, brood sizes and habitat use.

A total of 22,787 birds was counted in October 2001, the highest census total yet recorded. By far the largest flock, comprising over 19,580 geese, was recorded at Strangford Lough. At this time, large flocks feed on the vast swards of eel-grass on the mudflats of the lough. Around 1,800 were recorded at Lough Foyle, another key staging site for this population in the autumn. Elsewhere, large concentrations were at Tralee Bay, Lough Gill and Akeragh Lough (689) and Sligo Harbour (278). Only these four sites had numbers that exceeded the international threshold level of 200 birds.

Although the census total was high, productivity, measured as the proportion of juveniles in flocks, was less than 2% (aged sample 7,891). There was an average of 2.2 juveniles in family groups.

During the January 2002 count, 20,381 birds were recorded. As usual, flocks were recorded at many more sites than during the October census. Numbers at 19 sites exceeded the 200-threshold level. The highest totals came from Strangford Lough (3,474), Dublin Bay (3,429), Rogerstown Estuary (2,759), Tralee Bay, Lough Gill and Akeragh Lough (1,998) and Wexford Harbour & Slobs (1,300).

The January census total is always lower than the October total because many birds leave the large estuarine sites during mid winter, dispersing very thinly along rocky coastlines. Currently, census coverage of this habitat is poor. The Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) estimated that around 3,000 Light-bellied Brent Geese probably occur in this habitat from mid winter to early spring. This estimate accounts for the number of birds generally missed during the midwinter census.

Very many thanks to all who participated in the censuses.

James Robinson

Pan European Waterbird Monitoring

The European Commission and the Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage (ONCFS – the French agency responsible for hunting and wildlife management) recently organised a two day workshop in Brussels to discuss requirements for Waterbird Monitoring in Europe. Top of the agenda were the need for improved co-ordination, better use of existing data and information, and the identification of gaps in our knowledge, and particularly how this impacted upon monitoring of Special Protection Areas. Over 50 experts attended from the EC member states, including strong representation from the WeBS partners: Peter Cranswick (WWT), Rowena Langston (RSPB representing BirdLife) and David Stroud (JNCC).

An overview of the existing situation throughout Europe was provided, including a presentation on waterbird monitoring in the UK, often considered a model scheme in terms of the organisation and level of coverage achieved. Key gaps were apparent, varying from simple lack of counts (not just of sites in eastern Europe, but using the appropriate methods, applied at the correct time of year at relevant sites, even in the UK) to the general absence of information on productivity and survival which were highlighted as key monitoring needs, and which, more worryingly, were not being addressed systematically in any country.

The need for harmonisation of the various schemes was recognised, as was the crucial role of Wetlands International's Specialist Groups (which meet regularly to exchange knowledge and develop ideas for co-ordinated international effort). Many potential threats to wetlands and waterbirds, whether from development, through disturbance from recreation or hunting, or agricultural intensification or aquaculture, were continuing. The need for robust data, and the ability to pool and use these at the international level, are essential to monitor flyway populations and will become increasingly important both for assessing the combined effects of perhaps seemingly small local or national developments and activities and for defending wetlands, particularly SPAs, and their waterbirds against such threats.

Peter Cranswick

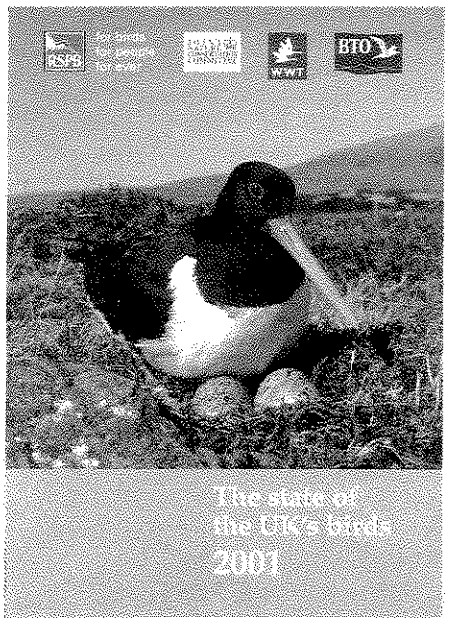
'Waterbirds Around the World' conference

Edinburgh will stage a major international waterbird conference on 3-8 April 2004. The conference, to be hosted jointly by UK and Netherlands governments, will focus on all major themes and developments related to the global conservation of flyways of waterbirds during their full annual cycle: breeding areas, stop-over sites and wintering areas. It will address achievements of the last 40 years and identify gaps and needs for initiatives to stimulate future conservation of the worlds flyways and the species and habitats involved. The conference is intended for all who are active in the conservation of migratory waterbirds and seabirds. Further details are available from Dr Gerard Boere at Wetlands International in the Netherlands (boere@wetlands.agro.nl).

Mark Pollitt

The state of the UK's birds

'The state of the UK's birds' is an annual report which summarises the fortunes of the UK bird population, with a special emphasis on species of conservation priority. This report, the third in the series, draws on data from the last 30 years to examine trends in breeding and wintering birds, and the effects of climate change. In particular, it focuses on the Government's 'Quality of Life' indicators, and teases out trends of woodland and farmland birds. It also focuses on individual UK Biodiversity Action Plan species, examining trends in relation to targets and current conservation management. The effects of climate change on birds are discussed



with reference to egg laying dates and winter distributions. This is a collaborative report produced by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, British Trust for Ornithology, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and JNCC, and is available, along with previous reports, on the RSPB website at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/scisurv/staffpub/stateuk.asp.

Mark Pollitt

Managed realignment (or managed retreat) at the Wash

The last land to be 'reclaimed' from the Wash for agriculture is being returned to the sea as part of the £1.2 million Wash Banks flood defence scheme in eastern England. Sea level rise, probably as a result of climate change, is leading to coastal erosion and loss of intertidal habitats as sea defences prevent landward migration of this habitat. The problem is accentuated around the Wash following centuries of land-claim of low-lying areas for agriculture and the consequent truncation of saltmarsh habitat.

Three breaches (cuts of approximately 50 m wide) have been made in the outer seawall, no longer considered to be sustainable, to enable managed realignment of an area of 78 ha. With the aid of aerial photographs, the former creek system has been excavated, enabling tidal incursion, and land drains have been blocked. As saltmarsh accretes, it will dissipate the wave energy and so reduce the erosion of the inner, strengthened and realigned sea defences, thereby combining recreation of valuable intertidal habitat and cost effective flood defence. The scheme at Freiston foreshore has been managed by the Environment Agency in partnership with the RSPB, HM Prison North Sea Camp (open prison for resettlement of offenders) and English Nature. The scheme is the subject of a wide-ranging monitoring programme, part-funded by the UK government (DEFRA), the results of which will assist with the design of further, similar schemes. For further information please email john.badley@rspb.org.uk.

Rowena Langston

...continued on next page

Conservation Update

In Brief . . .

Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention

The eighth Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) to the Ramsar Convention was held from 18-26 November at the Prince Felipe Science Museum in Valencia, Spain. The theme of the COP was 'Wetlands: Water, Life and Culture.' More than 1000 officials representing 119 Contracting Parties attended the session, as well as a number of observer states, UN agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. DEFRA led the UK delegation with scientific support from JNCC.

Delegates considered and adopted more than 40 resolutions addressing a broad range of matters, including wetlands and agriculture, climate change, cultural issues, water allocation and management and the Report of the World Commission on Dams. They also approved the Convention's Work Plan and budget for 2003–2005 and its Strategic Plan for 2003-2008.

The UK sponsored a resolution on waterbird population estimates which welcomed the publication of the third edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* which includes an increased number of biogeographic populations for which population estimates and 1% thresholds are now available. The resolution urges Contracting Parties to use the appropriate 1% thresholds when designating Ramsar sites during the 2003-2005 triennium and to select sites for globally threatened waterbirds, as well as nationally or regionally threatened waterbirds.

WWF presented the UK with their Gold Duck Award in recognition of outstanding achievement in wetlands conservation and management. Only two other Contracting Parties were given the same award, Algeria and Bolivia, and much of the credit is due to the large network of people contributing to wetland conservation throughout the UK.

For more information about COP8 look on the Ramsar Bureau website at http://ramsar.org. The national report submitted by the UK can be downloaded from http://www.ramsar.org/cop8_nr_natl_rpt_index.htm.

Elizabeth Moore

Waterbird Population Estimates – Third Edition

The new, third edition of Waterbird Population Estimates (WPE3) was launched at the 8th Ramsar Conference in Valencia, Spain, in November 2002. A major improvement on the first and second editions (1994 and 1997), the publication provides information on some 2,271 biogeographical populations of 868 species, and provides estimates of the numerical abundance of 76% of these populations. It also sets revised 1% levels for identification of wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. More information about WPE3 will follow in the summer newsletter.

Mark Pollitt

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Ribble and Alt protection

Nature Protection Minister Elliot Morley announced an extension to the Ribble and Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site. The area, which supports almost half the UK population of the endangered natterjack toad and internationally important populations of several species of waterbirds. The extension will increase the SPA area to 12,412 ha and the Ramsar site to 13,488 ha. (12/02)

Cuckmere Estuary restoration project

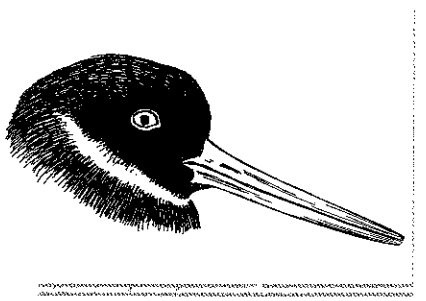
The public is being invited to have its say on the ambitious Cuckmere Estuary Restoration Project. The project, which aims to bring back the natural landscape to the Cuckmere Estuary by allowing natural flooding of part of the Cuckmere Valley, will attract wildlife and help prevent flooding in populated areas upstream. After a very successful 'roadshow' in September, the partners in the project (The Environment Agency, English Nature, the National Trust and local organisations) are inviting people to comment on the plans and to express their ideas. (09/02)

Essex coastal realignment

This autumn saw the opening of the largest coastal realignment project ever undertaken in Europe with the breaching of the sea wall at Abbotts Hall Farm in Essex. This will convert over 200 acres (84 hectares) of arable farmland into saltmarsh and grassland as part of a nationwide initiative to restore the UK's rapidly declining coastal wetlands. The farm is situated on the Blackwater Estuary, an internationally important area for wildlife, protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds. (11/02)

Oldest known wader in the British Isles

Members of the Wash Wader Ringing Group recently caught the oldest known wader in the British Isles. On Saturday 7 September 2002 a catch of 26 Oystercatchers was made at Wainfleet, Lincolnshire which included one bird which was ringed at Snettisham, Norfolk on 13 August 1967! At 35 years old, this bird sets a new Oystercatcher longevity record for Britain and Ireland. A group photo was taken of the Oystercatcher along with all the team members present at the catch who were younger than the bird! This can be viewed at http://www.bto.org/news/news_2002/sep-oct/oystercatcher.htm. (10/02)



English lakes to regain former glory

English Nature is investing £1.3 million over the next two years in a flagship scheme aimed at ensuring that some of the 400 lake-based Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England retain their full range of native plants and animals for future generations to enjoy. This will include projects on the Norfolk Broads and the West Midland Meres. Project manager Allan Stewart said, "The importance of maintaining or restoring the biodiversity of lakes is now recognised and throughout the country efforts are being made to address this." (11/02)

Oil affects East Anglia coast

An oil slick affected birds along the Norfolk and Suffolk coast in mid November. More than 250 birds were taken to rescue centres, including auks, grebes and divers. The incident is thought to have been caused by illegal flushing of tankers' holds at sea. (11/02)

Otley Gravel Pits boost

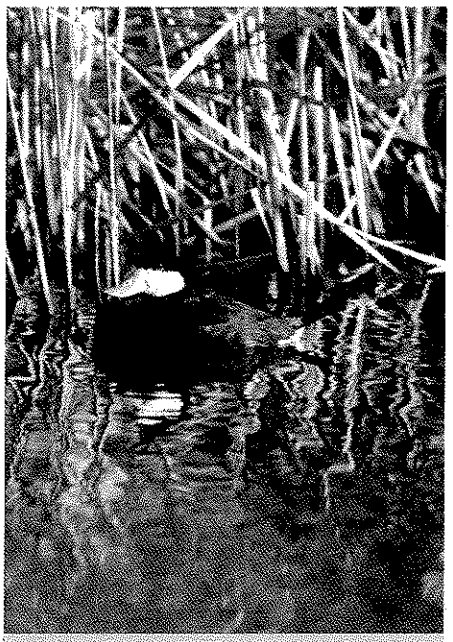
Part of the former Gravel workings at Otley Gravel Pits, West Yorkshire, will be managed as a nature reserve under a new agreement signed recently. The land will be leased and managed by a trust for the benefit of wildlife on the site. (07/02)

Escaped bullfrogs threaten wildlife

Escaped North American bullfrogs pose a potential threat to native fish, mammals and birds. A number have escaped from captivity and are breeding successfully. People are being alerted to look out for the amphibians which grow up to 20 cm in length and may eat common frogs, small mammals, fish and small birds. The frogs and have a range of distinctive calls, including a cattle-like moo, a high-pitched squeak and a low-pitched foghorn sound. (07/02)

Ruddy Duck Control Trial

The report on the Ruddy Duck control trials carried out in Anglesey, Fife and the West Midlands suggests that reducing the UK ruddy duck population to fewer than 175 individuals (5% of the 1999 population) will take between four and six years, if access



Ruddy Duck / John and Karen Hollingsworth (USFWS)

is available to the principal wintering sites. The exercise is likely to cost up to £5.4 million. Ministers will now consider the research results and consult with devolved administrations, scientific advisers and others, before deciding the way ahead. A further announcement of this decision will be made in due course. More information is available from the DEFRA website at http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2002/020717c.htm (07/02)

New national park

The opening of Scotland's first national park was carried out by the Princess Royal on 23 July 2002. The second largest in the UK, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park covers 720 square miles of some the most spectacular landscape in the British Isles. Stretching from Crianlarich, Stirlingshire in the north to Balloch near Glasgow in the south, the new national park includes 57 sites designated for their special conservation value. At its centre is Loch Lomond, the biggest freshwater lake in Britain and an area rich in flora and fauna. (07/02)

Greenpeace promotes renewable energy

According to a feasibility study commissioned by Greenpeace, 40 wind farms off the East Anglia coastline could provide a quarter of Britain's electricity needs by 2020, subject to a number of assumptions being realised. The farms — stretching between the Thames Estuary and the Humber — could be sited away from shipping lanes and important wildlife sites and would be "hardly visible" from the coast. A spokesperson said, "If implemented this plan would massively decrease energy pollution in the UK and make East Anglia a powerhouse of the global renewable energy industry." (07/02)

Offshore windfarm receives go-ahead

The UK's largest offshore wind farm off the north Wales coast has been given the go ahead. The consent was given on by Minister for Energy Brian Wilson. North Hoyle — which will be made up of 30 wind turbines — is to be located 7.5 km from Prestatyn and Rhyl in Denbighshire. It will provide electricity for 50,000 homes. Work on the development is due for completion by autumn next year. (08/02)

New Gloucestershire wetland

A new project to develop an area of wetland at Hempsted, Gloucestershire was launched in September. Over 18 ha of arable land will be turned back into wetland grassland to encourage breeding waders and other migratory birds to nest. The work, funded through the Countryside Stewardship scheme, will involve recreating a number of traditional wet meadows, a small field pasture, improving the field ditches and using traditional hedgerow management skills to maintain the boundaries. (09/02)

Estuary management plan reviewed

The latest review of the Kingsbridge-Salcombe Estuary Management Plan proposals went public for a one-month consultation process in September. The plans are designed to act as a blueprint for the way visitors and local people treat the estuary and its wildlife. Proposals included 'quiet' or 'wildlife priority' areas where the speed limit for boats would be reduced and voluntary no-go zones for sailors along some of the quiet creeks. (09/02)

River Dee pollution incident

Almost a quarter-of-a-million gallons of industrial effluent was discharged into the River Dee at Cefn Mawr. An Environment Agency spokesman said the incident was "very serious" but early indications suggested a major disaster had been averted. (09/02)

Compiled by Mark Pollitt & Colette Hall

Information for the **'In Brief . . .'** *section is collated primarily from national and local newspapers, press releases and internet news sites (dates of publication follow articles where appropriate) and does not necessarily reflect the views of WeBS staff or partner organisations.*

Conservation Update

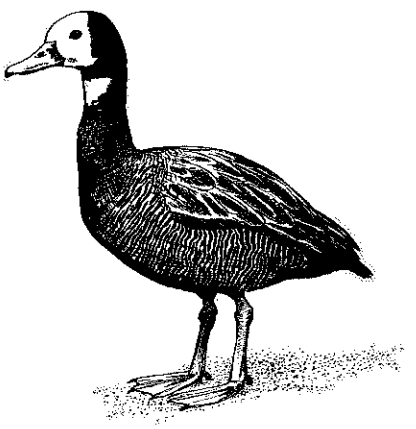
A new wetland and waterbird monitoring scheme for Eastern Africa

Earlier this year, WWT was awarded £174k by the UK Government's Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as part of the government's *Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species*. WWT's Darwin project, *Monitoring Biodiversity for Site Management Planning in Eastern African Wetlands*, will establish a new wetland and waterbird monitoring scheme for the entire eastern African region and a database to hold the information it generates. The project will also provide training within key organisations on how to use data from the monitoring scheme for biodiversity conservation and the development of site management plans. The project will draw upon the knowledge and experience of WWT's waterbird monitoring staff including those working on WeBS.

A partnership between WWT, Wetlands International and organisations from nine Eastern African countries (Kenya, Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda) has been established to deliver the project. The three year programme is now under way, and Oliver Nasirwa, a Kenyan citizen with considerable experience and expertise in monitoring African wetlands, has been appointed as WWT's Darwin Project Officer. Since July 2002, he has been based at WWT Slimbridge, where he is developing the database for the new scheme. Oliver will also produce material for a series of training courses that he and other WWT staff will deliver at the Naivasha Training Institute in Kenya during 2003.

The focus of conservation efforts within this African region has so far been on rangeland and mammal conservation. It is now recognised internationally and by African governments that there is an urgent need to develop similar conservation programmes to protect their wetlands and associated biodiversity. WWT's Darwin project will enable these countries to monitor biodiversity over long periods of time using an established monitoring scheme. This will lead to more effective wetland site management and better use of natural resources, enhancing quality of life for local communities. For further information please contact Dr Mark O'Connell (Head of Research) at WWT Slimbridge.

Mark O'Connell



Mute Swan Census Update

The 2002 National Mute Swan Census was undertaken in May and June, organised by WWT, the Swan Study Group (SSG) and Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC). The basic methodology involved simply locating and counting all Mute Swans, using a 10-km square as the basic recording unit in a sample of 1100 such squares (see previous *WeBS News*).

With over 80% of completed recording forms now received, the next stage of data input is intended to commence in January 2003. Please return any outstanding census recording forms as soon as possible to the relevant local organiser to enable their inclusion in the analysis.

Coverage for the Mute Swan Census has been an impressive achievement by the volunteer counter network given in particular the increased number of surveys trying to catch up ground lost during the outbreak of Foot & Mouth Disease in 2001. At the time of writing coverage is expected for all but 16 of the 560 10-km squares (97.1%) selected for surveying across England and Wales, with similar success reported from Scotland's organizers Allan & Lyndesay Brown.

Thanks to the commitment of the many volunteer WeBS local organisers and counters across Britain, the 2002 Mute Swan Census has been an outstanding success as it's hoped the eagerly awaited outcome will be from the swans perspective! If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Peter Cranswick at WWT, Slimbridge.

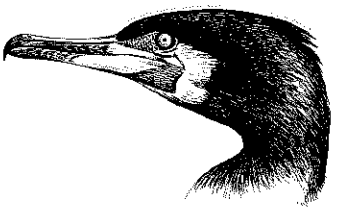
Robin Ward

Dispersed Waterbirds Survey

The WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey aims to improve upon current population estimates of waterbirds, particularly those species (e.g. Heron, Moorhen, Mallard, Teal, Lapwing, Golden Plover and perhaps Snipe) often found in dispersed habitats, such as ditches, ponds and flooded fields. It should also provide baseline data against which future survey data could be compared. Fieldwork for the survey took place during December and January this winter. Volunteers were asked to survey intensively 1-km OS grid squares during a single visit, recording numbers of waterbirds and gulls encountered in different broad-scale habitats. We hope that a representative sample of habitats in lowland Great Britain has been covered.

I would like to say a big thank you to everyone who participated in the Dispersed Waterbirds Survey, particularly the Local Organisers who coordinated volunteers in each region. We should be able to provide some results in the next issue of WeBS News.

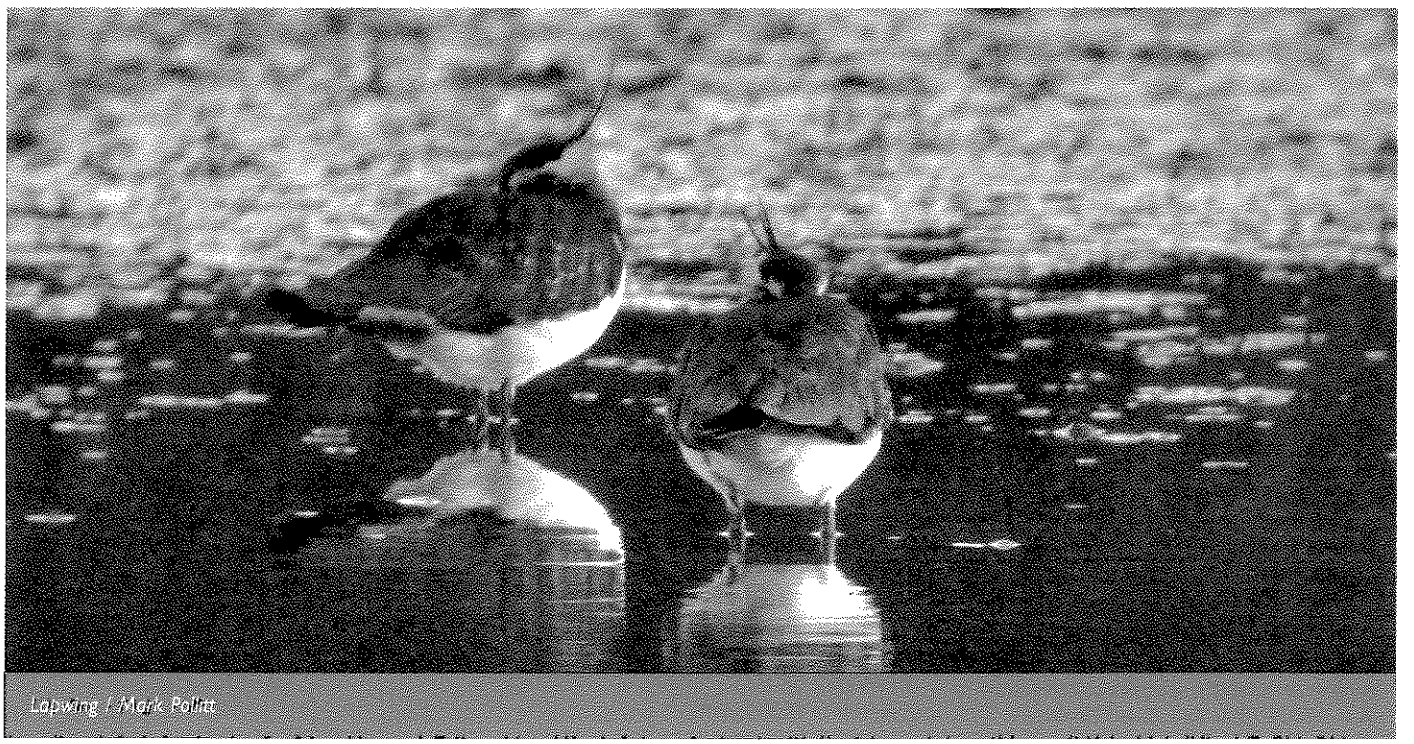
Mike Armitage



European census of wintering Great Cormorants

At the time of writing, coverage of Cormorant roosts is being arranged for a European-wide census, the first of its kind, by Wetlands International. WWT is organising the survey in the UK. By the time you read this, the survey will have been completed and forms will already be dropping on our desks. Whilst the late announcement of this survey gave relatively little preparation time, the response from those counters we approached to help (Christmas Week Cormorant Survey counters and many additional WeBS counters) has been fantastic, particularly given the short notice, and we hope to achieve coverage of most major roosts. I would like to thank all those counters who took part in the survey and would ask that recording forms are returned promptly to me at WWT (unless Local Organisers have specifically asked otherwise). We will provide feedback on the results of the survey to all who took part as soon as possible.

Colette Hall



Lapwing / Mark Pollitt

Bulletin Board

WeBS data and *Wildfowl & Wader Counts*

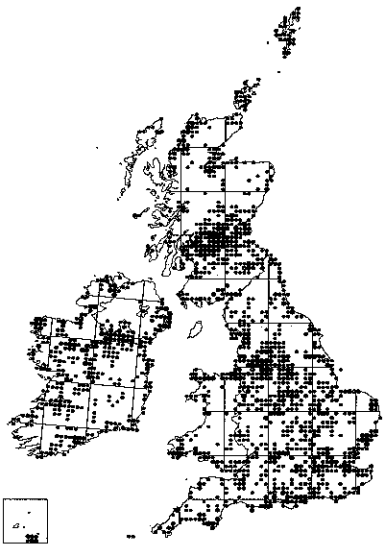
Work on the new database that will house WeBS data (for the first time combining the wildfowl and wader data that, until now, have been held separately at WWT and BTO) continues. The complexities involved in creating a single database have proved taxing and the scale of the task has been much bigger than first envisaged. A revised development plan has been produced in the light of these issues and funding has been agreed. This should see a new database established in early summer 2003. At this point, life will become much simpler; for example, providing data requests to the country agencies will be done at the touch of a few buttons, rather than requiring different requests of two (or more) separate (and very different) databases.

In the meantime, these day-to-day tasks have become more complicated and lengthy (the addition of 2001 data posing new problems) and this has meant delays to various parts of WeBS. Though now well behind schedule, work on *Wildfowl & Wader Counts 2000-01* is well underway and it should reach you shortly after this Newsletter. Work on the 2001-02 report will begin immediately after the new database is up and running, and we hope this will be available in early winter of this year. Our sincere apologies for the delays and we hope that you will bear with us in the meantime.

Peter Cranswick

Corrections to 1999-2000 annual report

It was brought to our attention that during the final printing stage the dots on the coverage map in the 1999-2000 annual report had become slightly displaced (as noted in *WeBS News 15)*. For completeness, the corrected map is reproduced here.



Count dates for 2003-04

The priority count dates for WeBS Core Counts are as follows

2003

5 January	20 July
16 February	17 August
23 March	14 September
20 April	12 October
18 May	16 November
15 June	14 December

2004

25 January	18 July
22 February	22 August
21 March	19 September
25 April	17 October
23 May	14 November
20 June	12 December

A flier with the dates on should also be included with this newsletter.

Goose monitoring newsletter

To provide improved feedback to all contributors to WWT's Goose Monitoring Programme, a new newsletter, *Goose News*, has been launched this autumn. Copies will be sent to all who take part in the goose censuses co-ordinated by WWT and to those who submit sightings of colour-marked birds. Please contact Richard Hearn at WWT if you wish to obtain a copy.

Richard Hearn

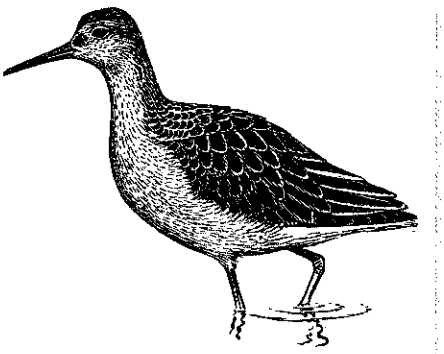
The BTO's Winter Gull Roost Survey

Pilot work is being undertaken this winter prior to a full Winter Gull Roost Survey planned for 2003/04. The work, being undertaken by BTO fieldworkers, will help to determine the proportions of birds arriving at roosts after dark and how much of the coast needs to be covered by the full survey to provide accurate population estimates.

The full survey will cover all known major gull roosts in the UK and use a stratified sampling approach to determine numbers elsewhere in the country. Using this approach, the full survey will aim to provide accurate population estimates (with confidence limits) in the autumn, winter and spring of the numbers of Black-headed, Common, Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls in the UK. These figures will be used to calculate new 1% threshold values that can be used to identify sites worthy of statutory protection.

The Full Winter Gull Roost Survey will involve three counts, planned for September 2003 and January and March 2004. We will be contacting volunteers for assistance in due course.

Niall Burton & Andy Musgrove



Reviewing the status of the UK's waterbirds

The UK's leading governmental and non-governmental conservation organisations have recently reviewed the population status of the birds in the UK, updating earlier assessments published in 1996. A total of 247 species have been assessed, and each has been placed onto one of three lists – red, amber and green. Forty species have been red-listed, 121 amber-listed and 86 green-listed.

Red list species are of greatest conservation concern given that they are globally threatened, and/or have declined rapidly in range or population size in recent years, and/or have declined historically and not shown a substantial recent recovery. Amber list species are those with an unfavourable conservation status in Europe, and/or those whose population or range has declined moderately in recent years, and/or those whose population has declined historically but made a substantial recent recovery; and/or rare breeders, and/or those with internationally important or localised populations. Green list species, of least conservation concern, are those for which we have information enabling regular review of their status but which fulfil none of these criteria.

These lists are vitally important, helping prioritise conservation action between 2002 and 2007. For example, JNCC, the UK Government's adviser on wildlife issues, will use this objective review as an element of its on-going Species Status Assessment Programme, which will in turn inform the revision of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

For non-breeding waterbirds, the assessments were based on data collected by WeBS and the WWT/JNCC goose monitoring schemes. These assessments were only possible because of the enthusiasm and dedication of the several thousand volunteer ornithologists who participate in these schemes. This is something of which counters can be particularly proud of.

Nine wetland birds are on the red list: Bittern, Common Scoter, Black-tailed Godwit, Red-necked Phalarope, Roseate Tern, Savi's Warbler, Aquatic Warbler, Marsh Warbler and Reed Bunting, and many others are partly dependent on wetland habitats. Over 60 species of wetland birds appear on the amber list. Most of these species have been listed, in part, because the UK supports more than 20% of the flyway populations of these birds and because more than 50% occur at ten or fewer sites. Given the numbers that occur here, the UK has an international commitment to conserve these species.

A full explanation of the process and its use can be found on the web sites of each of the WeBS partners and in Gregory, R.D., Wilkinson, N.I., Noble, D.G., Robinson, J.A., Brown A.F., Hughes, J., Proctor, D.A., Gibbons, D.W. & Galbraith, C.A. 2002. The population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man: an analysis of conservation concern 2002-2007. British Birds 95: 410-450.

James Robinson

Roosting Teal © Paul Marshall

WeBS Counters Conference 2003

This spring the WeBS Counters' Conference will be held at the Lee Valley Park Information Centre, Essex, on Saturday 12 April 2003. The wetland habitats along the Lee Valley in north London are familiar to many birdwatchers, not least as one of the best places to watch Bitterns in the winter.

The full programme of speakers is currently being finalised, but as usual there will be a mix of talks by local amateur counters and WeBS partnership staff. The topics of the talks are likely to include Cormorants, gulls and the Low Tide Count Atlas, while it is just possible that the proposed airport on Cliffe Marshes might get a mention! There will also be plenty of time to meet the WeBS staff and discuss any burning issues you might have.

All WeBS counters and organisers are welcome to attend the conference, but we have only included booking forms with copies of this Newsletter for distribution within the southeast. However, if you would like to attend the conference, but have no booking form, then please contact Heidi Mellan at the BTO. There is no charge for attendance but places at the conference are limited and will be allocated on 'first come, first served' basis.

Andy Musgrove

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.