

# WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey  
Issue no. 19 Winter 2004

## Are the world's waders in decline?

*The recent Wader Study Group conference considered how the world's wader populations are currently faring. David Stroud, Rowena Langston and Robin Ward reflect on the conference's findings...*

**T**he International Wader Study Group (WSG) — a specialist group of Wetlands International and IUCN — has just held a technical workshop and conference in Cadiz, Spain that brought together 132 specialists from 20 countries to review the population and conservation status of waders around the world.

The Conference noted the target established in 2002 by world leaders at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, of 'a significant reduction in the current rate of loss of biological diversity' by 2010. It also noted the target set in 2001 by European Union Heads of State in Göteborg 'that biodiversity decline should be halted with the aim of reaching this objective by 2010.' These provided an interesting context when examining the evidence of how wader populations are currently faring.

The status of waders in all regions of the world was assessed using best available data and information and by undertaking further analysis of the data in Wetlands International's Waterbird Population Estimates 3, which was presented to the 8th meeting of the Ramsar Conference of the Parties last year. It also drew on a major WSG review of the status of waders in Africa and Western Eurasia that has just been completed which has collated extensive

new data across these areas. The Conference concluded that the majority of populations of waders with known population trends are in decline all around the world — a matter of international conservation concern. The reasons for these declines are diverse and poorly understood. Of populations with known trends, 48% are declining, in contrast to just 16% which are increasing, meaning three times as many populations are in decline as are increasing (see Table 1)

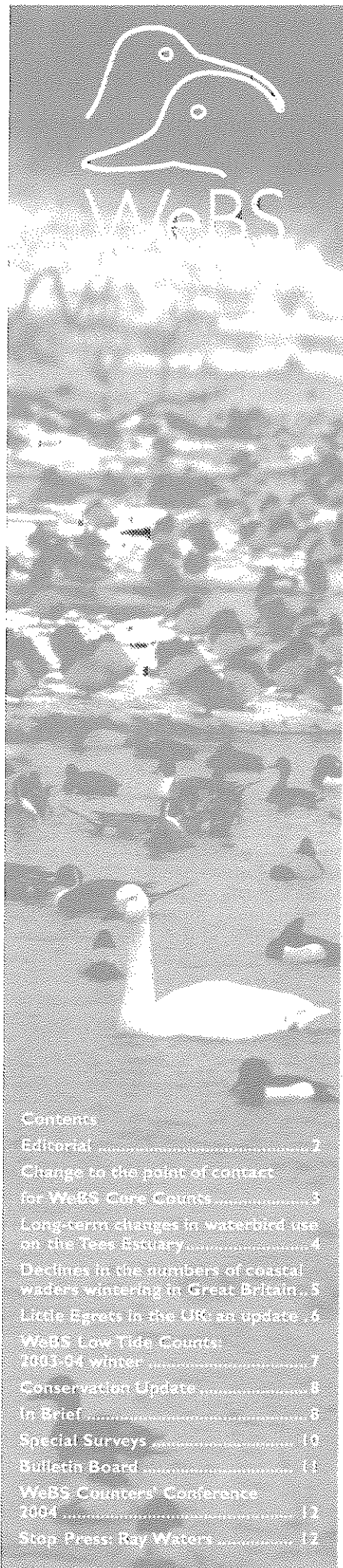
The conference also heard of major conservation issues facing three coastal wetlands of critical importance to migratory waders.

- The completion of the 33 km seawall at Saemangeum in South Korea will destroy 40,100 ha of tidal-flat and shallows — an estuarine system which on present knowledge is the most important shorebird site in the whole of the Yellow Sea, supporting internationally important numbers of at least 17 species of waders (including several globally threatened species). The Yellow Sea is itself by far the most important staging area on the East Asian Australasian Flyway, hosting at least 2 million waders of 36 species during northward migration. At least 25,000

Table 1. Trends in populations of the world's waders

Region	No. of wader populations	% populations with known trends	Trend (where known)		
			% Decreasing	% Stable	% Increasing
Africa	202	45	44	40	16
Europe	98	71	43	40	17
Asia	198	28	57	30	13
Oceania	79	27	44	28	28
Neotropics	109	48	49	43	8
North America	86	67	54	35	11
Global totals	511	41%	48%	36%	16%

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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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It is now more than ten years since the National Waterfowl Counts and the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry were formally merged and WeBS was launched in 1993. Five years later, WeBS underwent its first review, examining the successes of the first few years and the opportunities and challenges that the next six years would bring. As we approach the end of this second period and the WeBS partners sit down once again to discuss plans for the future, it seems timely to look at just some of the recent achievements and the challenges the survey faces in the coming years.

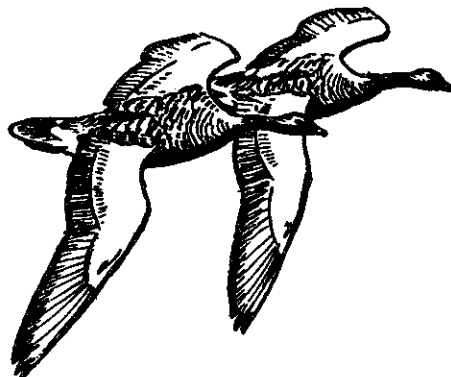
In conservation terms, we can confidently say that the data that you collect have never been used more widely. In the past six years or so, well over 600 requests to access WeBS data, both Core Counts and Low Tide Counts, have been processed. These have been for a wide variety of projects, from the hugely important environmental assessments of controversial developments such as the proposed port extensions at Dibden Bay and Harwich and the proposed new airport on Cliffe Marshes to small-scale local projects such as providing information for a leaflet about a local nature reserve. The counts have also been used to review the network of protected sites and around 90 new Special Protection Areas have been classified since 1998, many of which have used WeBS counts as the primary source of information. WeBS data have also been used to support the implementation of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement, and are now being used for the review of the UK's Ramsar sites. A major task during the last few years has been to bring together all the current and historical counts into one unified computer database, enabling more efficient management of your counts and quicker and easier ways to access them. At the same time, we have put considerable effort into improving the standard of the publications that we produce, in particular the annual report and this newsletter — I hope that you agree that these efforts have been worthwhile.

So what of the next few years? One primary area of development will undoubtedly be the internet. Whilst we presently have some information about WeBS on the WWT and BTO websites we plan to embrace the technology more fully

and very soon establish a dedicated website with lots more information available and begin to investigate other opportunities such as offering counters the opportunity to submit counts online. A primary benefit of the long-term monitoring that WeBS provides is the ability to detect changes and trends. Much recent research has gone into developing novel methods for alerting us when these changes go beyond the typical fluctuations that happen in any population, and we hope soon to be able to report on these alerts routinely to help focus further research and conservation action. It is likely that we will also face other more difficult challenges. We know that recruiting new counters to take part in surveys is not easy, and that a good number of the people reading this are long-standing counters who have been participating for many years. To continue with the achievements of the last 55 years of monitoring it is vitally important that we continue to recruit new volunteers to fill gaps as people move on; making other birdwatchers aware of the survey and its importance, and giving them the confidence to take part, is key to this.

As well as it being just over ten years since WeBS was launched, it is similarly ten years since I joined WWT as the assistant organiser of the WeBS Core Counts. During this time I have gained much experience and knowledge from the talented people I have worked with at WWT and the other WeBS partner organisations. I have spoken to, and met, hundreds of counters and organisers who contribute their time freely to the scheme, and have marvelled at their commitment, local knowledge and understanding of their sites. In doing so I cannot help but feel I now have friends in every corner of the country. It is, therefore, with very mixed feelings that I have decided to leave WeBS behind for a new role working on environmental recording in Dumfries and Galloway. Whilst the challenges of the new post are exciting, I shall greatly miss the regular contact with organisers and counters and of course the annual privilege of being the first person to examine the results of the counts and find out which species have fared well or poorly! I'm sure my successor will gain as much from the role as I have, and know that I'm already being lined up as a new counter on the Solway Estuary...

Mark Pollitt



## Are the world's waders in decline?

...continued from page 1

people also depend economically on this wetland system, for fishing and shell-fishing.

- Delaware Bay is a critically important spring staging area in eastern North America. Over-exploitation by humans of food resources used by waders may now be affecting the ability of waders using this site to reach their arctic breeding areas and to breed there successfully. This appears to be leading to drastic population declines in some of the species, especially Red Knot *Calidris canutus rufa*.
- In the Dutch part of the Wadden Sea, there is now compelling scientific evidence to indicate that unsustainably high levels of industrial shellfishing have led to redistribution of birds from the high quality feeding areas. Declines of the biogeographic populations of long-distance migrant waders heavily dependant on the Wadden Sea have occurred and are continuing.

Whilst much conservation attention has been focused on the needs of migratory species, two-thirds of globally threatened wader species are sedentary. The status of these species is much more poorly known and they have a significantly worse conservation status than migrants. Evaluation of their current status suggests these species should receive urgent priority conservation attention, especially the absence of international structures to promote their conservation.

It was also recognised that there is urgent need for more, and better, population monitoring, particularly the establishment of adequately funded national monitoring programmes. The International Waterbird Census co-ordinated by Wetlands International, to which WeBS counts are a significant contributor, offers an effective framework within which such monitoring can be organised.

The declines reported from all over the world suggest that, for waders at least, it will be extremely challenging to achieve the aforementioned targets. World leaders also noted that achievement of these targets 'will require the provision of new and additional financial and technical resources to developing countries'. The WSG Conference concurred that significantly greater investment is urgently needed by governments, of developed and developing countries alike, in order to establish and maintain national monitoring schemes and improve understanding of the causes of population declines to provide targeted conservation responses.

The full text of the concluding statement from the Conference can be found on WSG's web-site at [www.waderstudygroup.org](http://www.waderstudygroup.org).

## Change to the point of contact for WeBS Core Counts

WeBS is of the highest conservation significance, forming the cornerstone of efforts to conserve waterbird populations and their habitats in the UK. It is, however, necessary to review the scheme periodically, especially since the national and international framework for waterbird conservation, and consequently the requirements of those who use the data, are constantly changing.

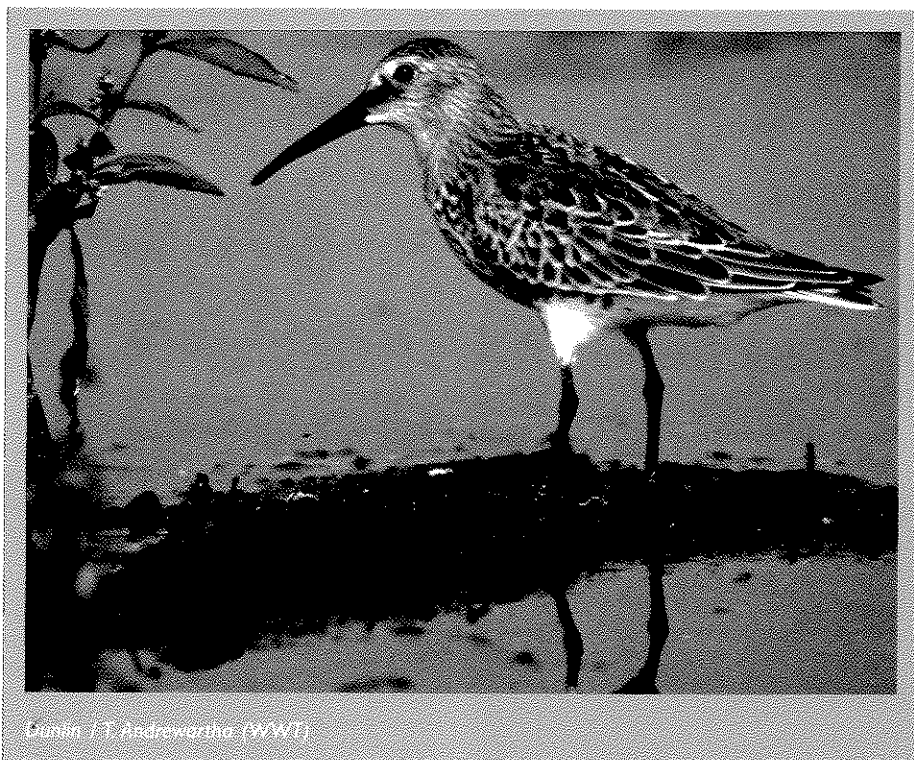
As the current six-year period of the partnership draws to a close, the four partner organisations have been reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of past and current activities and planning ways in which the future operation might be improved. This has been a highly productive exercise and has allowed the partners to consolidate their joint vision for the scheme and to identify ways of enhancing the organisation of WeBS.

One of the aims of this review has been to ensure that any changes we make to the operation of the scheme do not impact upon the volunteer network on whom the success of WeBS depends and is built; and where possible, that we enhance the support for counters. At this stage, the only change that will affect you directly will be that the BTO is taking over responsibility for the day-to-day organisation of Core Counts. WWT will take sole responsibility for reporting the results of the scheme, for example through the production of *WeBS News* and *Wildfowl & Wader Counts* and will maintain a new web site. This change in roles is designed to help the scheme run more efficiently in the future and will provide you with a single point of contact for all WeBS survey work. A fuller article providing details of new developments will be given in the next edition of *WeBS News*.

As a consequence, from 1 April 2004, counters should direct all correspondence and questions regarding the day-to-day running of Core Counts and Low Tide Counts to:

WeBS Office, BTO, The Nunnery,  
Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU  
01842 750050  
[webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)

Core Count Local Organisers should note that all completed count forms should be returned to the BTO after 1 April 2004. We hope this change does not cause you any inconvenience and we will be happy to answer any queries you may have. The strength of WeBS depends upon your efforts and we hope you will continue to support the scheme, and through it, waterbird conservation in the UK and internationally



Cushin / J. Andrawantha (WWT)

# Long-term changes in waterbird use on the Tees Estuary

WWT's Robin Ward and Mark O'Connell report on research into spatial and temporal changes in waterbird usage of a key estuarine site in northeast England ...

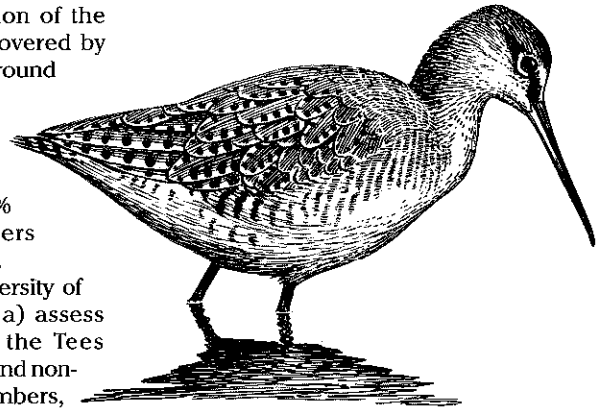
In recent years, ecological research has benefited from a range of tools and methods for tracking population trajectories based on count data, and this information has been widely used to underpin a range of conservation action. Models have also been developed to investigate the population consequences of habitat loss. At a site level, however, changes in waterbird numbers might be a function of a range of biological and non-biological factors, and habitats may change in quality, distribution and patchiness, not just gross area.

The Teesmouth & Cleveland Coast Special Protection Area and Ramsar site encompasses a range of coastal habitats which provide feeding and roosting opportunities for internationally important numbers of waterbirds both in the winter and passage periods. The estuary regularly supports over 20,000 waterbirds including nationally important numbers of Shelduck, Knot, Sanderling and Redshank. The Tees is, however, one of the most heavily industrialised estuarine sites in Europe. Only 15% of the 2500 ha of intertidal areas present at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century remained by 1971. In that year, 60% of the main feeding area for waterbirds on the estuary (Seal Sands) was enclosed by a porous slag wall, through which the tide ebbed and flowed some two hours behind the tidal cycle. This enclosed area was slowly filled with dredging pumped from the river so that only 140 ha remained by

1994. Since 1990, the proportion of the intertidal area of Seal Sands covered by algal mats has increased from around 10% to 55%. During the same period Seal Sands has also seen a significant reduction in the intertidal availability of key invertebrate species, e.g. a 92% reduction in Ragworm numbers between autumn 1995 and 2001.

In 2002, WWT and the University of Durham undertook a study to a) assess changes in waterbird use of the Tees Estuary, b) assess the role of site and non-site factors in changes in bird numbers, and c) make recommendations for future research and management on the site. A total of 16 waterbird species was included in the analyses which explored data from long-term bird and invertebrate studies at the site undertaken by the University of Durham, Environment Agency, English Nature and WeBS.

The analyses showed major differences in the long-term responses of different species to the site level changes. Generalist feeders (e.g. Redshank) were able to exploit new resources and so exhibited a change in distribution rather than numbers. Some specialists (e.g. Grey Plover) were also able to adapt to the changes, probably as a result of their ability to exploit prey at lower densities. The results also suggested that the proliferation of algal mats on Seal Sands was not the main factor behind either the decline in waterbird numbers or their



re-distribution since 1990: indeed, several areas with no or little algae underwent changes in invertebrate and bird abundance. Whereas algae may have modified prey availability on some mudflats by directly inhibiting access to food items, the consolidation of fine soft mud was found to be the primary factor in influencing the numbers of invertebrates, and hence waterbirds. Statistical comparisons with regional and national waterbird numbers showed that the long-term changes on the Tees between 1975 and 2001 were largely a function of site-based influences. From the mid 1970s onwards, most waterbird populations at Teesmouth were responding to effects resulting from the major land claim at the site. The estuary's sediments remained in dynamic flux into the 1990s, when responses by the waterbirds were further modified by other processes that may also have resulted in the proliferation of algal mats and rapid changes in invertebrate prey communities. Increased human disturbance from bait digging was also a significant factor in influencing waterbird use of the estuary. In the future, changes in local climate are expected to introduce yet another layer of environmental modification to which the birds and their prey will need to respond.

This study illustrates the importance of site and national level monitoring data and how it can be used to underpin conservation action. Data from the very long-term monitoring of factors on the Tees estuary provided an understanding of the factors influencing changes in bird numbers and distribution, and allowed a series of management, monitoring and research recommendations to be produced for local stakeholder groups and those responsible for maintaining the conservation status of the site.



Shelduck (Jonathan Leach, WWT)

# Declines in the numbers of coastal waders wintering in Great Britain

Following on from the updated wildfowl population estimates in the summer issue of *WeBS News*, Mark Rehfish, Graham Austin and Andy Musgrove explain how coastal wader populations in Great Britain are faring ...

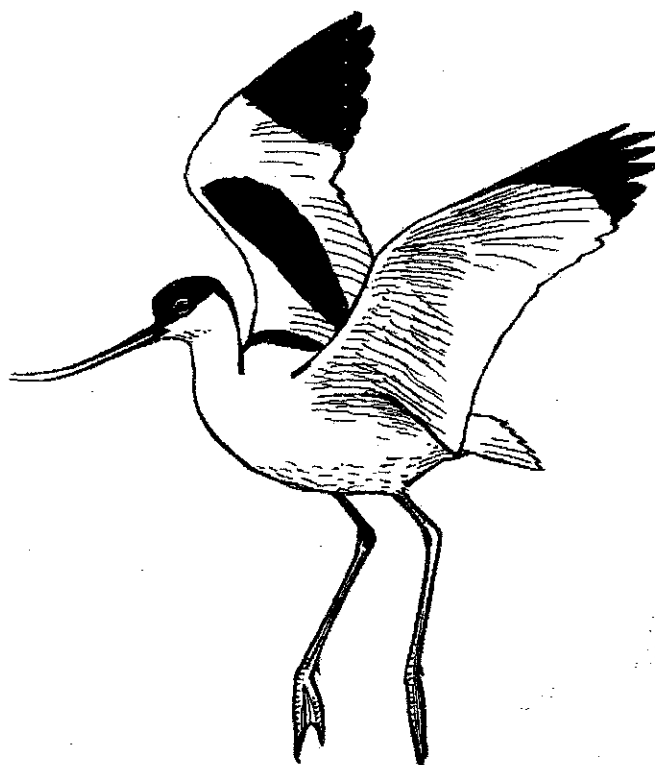
The East Atlantic Flyway — the Atlantic seaboard of Europe and Africa — is the wintering ground for millions of waders. These birds originate from breeding areas in Siberia, northern Europe and Russia, Iceland, Greenland and NE Canada, and are attracted in such large numbers by a combination of relatively mild winters and large tidal ranges that ensure that extensive areas of intertidal mudflats are exposed at low tide. British estuaries and non-estuarine coasts are not only important as wintering areas, but also as moult sites and as staging posts during onward migration to wintering grounds such as Morocco and the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania. The total number of individual waders that make use of British coasts throughout the year is unknown but it is clearly far greater than the winter numbers as a result of the turnover of passage birds. Three previous population estimates have been made for Britain's wintering coastal waders, based on data collected during the periods 1969-75, 1981-85 and 1987-92.

WeBS Core Counts, combined with the WeBS 1997/98 Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird Survey (NEWS), have been used to update the population estimates of waders wintering in Britain. WeBS data for Northern Ireland feed into the All-Ireland population estimates. Peter Cranswick and Melanie Kershaw reported back on the equivalent updated wildfowl population estimates in *WeBS News 18*. The new wader population estimates consider the period between the winters of 1994-95 and 1998-99 and involve data from 121 estuaries and 4,836 km (38%) of Britain's non-estuarine coastline. The estimates cover 15 species of predominantly coastal waders (Table 1), therefore excluding Golden Plover, Lapwing, Ruff, Jack Snipe, Snipe, Green Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper.

The combined total of the 15 key coastal waders present on Britain's estuaries between 1994/95-1998/99 was estimated at 1,364,700. Dunlin was the most numerous species, with 528,200 representing about 40% of the flyway population. During 1997-98, NEWS estimated that there were 295,700 waders of these 15 species on non-estuarine coasts of which the most numerous was Oystercatcher (68,080). Overall, less than 1% of the remaining British numbers of these wader species is thought to winter inland. The international importance of Britain to waders is clearly demonstrated by the large proportions of the flyway populations that winter here, including over 50% of the Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and Turnstone (Table 1).

Table 1. Population estimates, population change and the percentage of the East Atlantic Flyway (EAF) populations of waders wintering in Great Britain

	Revised British estimate	% change since 1987-92 estimate	% EAF population wintering in GB
Oystercatcher	315,200	-13	31
Avocet	3,395	+122	5
Ringed Plover	32,450	-15	44
Grey Plover	52,750	+14	21
Knot	283,600	-8	63
Sanderling	20,540	-16	17
Purple Sandpiper	17,530	-18	11
Dunlin	555,800	-6	42
Black-tailed Godwit	15,390	+50	44
Bar-tailed Godwit	61,590	-12	51
Curlew	147,100	+19	35
Spotted Redshank	136	+35	0
Redshank	116,100	+2	26
Greenshank	597	+55	0
Turnstone	49,550	-24	50



...continued on page 7

# Little Egrets in the UK: an update

A few years ago, the BTO looked in detail at the explosion in non-breeding numbers of Little Egrets occurring in the UK. This research, involving counts of nocturnal communal roosts by many volunteers, along with data from other sources, was reported upon in *WeBS News 14* and published in full in *British Birds* (vol. 95, pp 62-80). In summary, within the course of roughly a decade, the Little Egret had gone from being a rare spring vagrant to being a locally numerous species, especially in southern estuaries from south Wales around to the Thames. By the end of the 1990s, Little Egrets were resident year round in the UK, although numbers peaked in the late summer and early autumn, following post-breeding dispersal from French breeding colonies. By September 1999, an estimated 1,650 Little Egrets were present in the UK. In addition, substantial numbers were now remaining throughout the winter, with about 800-900 birds in January 2000. Also, the northwards expansion of breeding colonies in France finally resulted in the first documented UK breeding pair at Brownsea Island in Dorset in 1996.

In 2003, the Special Protection Area Scientific Working Group (SPASWG) asked BTO for an update on the status of the Little Egret in the UK, to ensure that satisfactory provision was being made for this species within the conservation framework afforded by the 'Birds Directive' (EC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (79/409/EEC)). Data were reviewed for both non-breeding and breeding Little Egrets for the period up to the end of 2001, mostly derived from WeBS Core Counts, county bird reports and information contributed by individual observers.

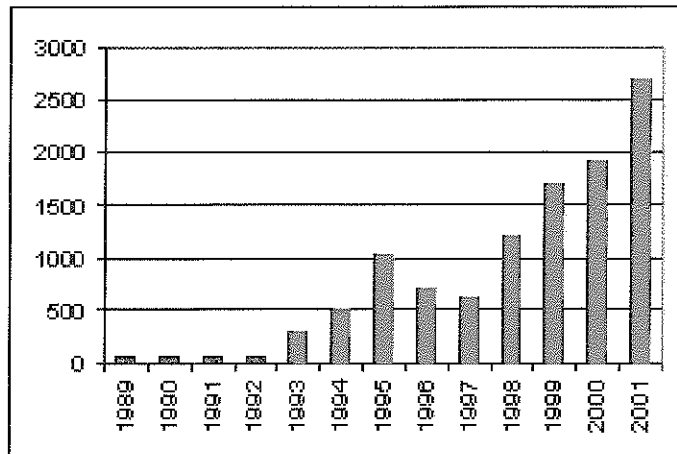


Figure 1. Estimated autumn peak numbers of Little Egrets in Britain: 1989-2001

It was found that numbers of non-breeding Little Egrets have continued to increase, with an autumn 2001 peak total of the order of 2700 birds. Moreover, the data already available suggest that continued increases have occurred in 2002 and 2003, especially notable around the periphery of the range (e.g. in north Wales and in Norfolk).

Over the five years 1997 to 2001, a total of 12 sites supported mean peak numbers in excess of 50 birds, and a further 12 supported over 50 Little Egrets on at least one occasion up to 2001 (and at least three more sites have done so since). The majority of these sites are already designated as SPAs (although mostly not specifically for Little Egrets) and most of the remainder are designated as SSSIs.

As a new breeding species, there is still a degree of confidentiality to be maintained with regard to Little Egret nesting sites. However, much information has been generously donated by individual observers, both directly and through various recording schemes and confirms that the population has increased rapidly since colonisation. The number of confirmed colonies rose from one in 1996 to 16 in 2001, while the overall number of pairs has risen from one in 1996 to at least 116 in 2001.

Interestingly, although the original site of colonisation at Brownsea Island was, in 2001, the most important, with 45 pairs, numbers appear to have levelled out there. At least five other colonies have held in excess of 10 pairs, including Northward Hill in Kent and Fort Elson in

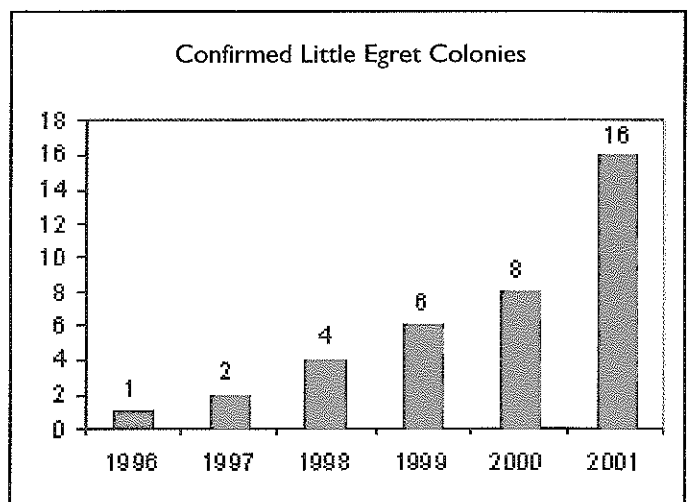
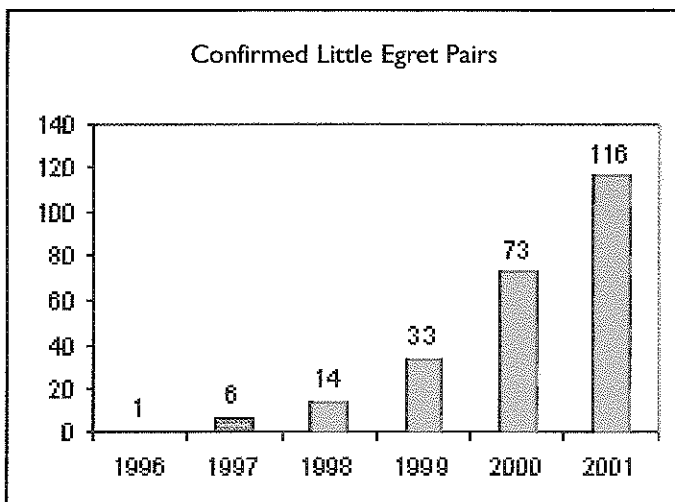


Figure 2. Numbers of confirmed Little Egret pairs and colonies in Great Britain

Hampshire, while the breeding range has reached as far north as Cheshire.

It is intended that the Little Egret population will be kept under review for the time being. Observers are encouraged to continue to submit their observations to county bird recorders, as well as continuing to support such schemes as WeBS, the BTO Heronries Census and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel. Coordinated counts of nocturnal roosts are particularly valuable, as is information on regular flight lines between feeding and roosting areas. If you have any observations of interest concerning Little Egrets, or have any

questions about the species, please contact Andy Musgrove by e-mailing [egrets@bto.org](mailto:egrets@bto.org).

I would particularly like to thank the many observers who have contributed data, by whatever route, to enable us to keep an eye on this fascinating colonisation. I would also like to thank John Marchant and Malcolm Ogilvie for providing information from the Heronries Census and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, respectively, and to JNCC for funding this work.

Andy Musgrove

## Declines in the numbers of coastal waders ...

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Between 1987-1992 and 1994-1999 the total number of these waders on British coasts decreased by 5%, driven largely by declines in Oystercatcher, Dunlin and Knot. The four largest declines relative to their population sizes were, however, recorded for the non-estuarine specialists Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone. Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit continued their strong population increases of recent years. Previously, between 1981-1985 and 1987-1992, 11 species of wader increased and only Bar-tailed Godwit decreased. Therefore, it appears that the new estimates presented here provide evidence that the historical increases in the number of these coastal waders may be coming to an end.

The reasons for these declines are not fully understood. Clearly, populations of waders are affected by factors operating on the (largely far-northern) breeding grounds, on migratory staging sites and on the wintering grounds. Changes at one or more of these are likely to have an effect on the population size. One possibility, however, is that observed declines in numbers of waders along British coasts may be due to a wider re-distribution of birds, as milder winters allow previously unsuitable areas on the continent to be occupied all winter. Work is ongoing within the WeBS partnership, in conjunction with waterbird monitoring schemes elsewhere in Europe, to investigate this possibility.

In spite of these declines, Great Britain's coasts remain of considerable international importance for overwintering waders. This highlights the necessity to maintain the long-term monitoring by WeBS. The continued development and loss of intertidal areas reinforces the need for up to date information on the distribution and number of waterbirds to help drive conservation actions. We are deeply indebted to the thousands of dedicated WeBS counters and Local Organisers who make WeBS possible.

For further details on wader population estimates in Great Britain refer to the following papers:

Rehfish, MM, Austin, GE, Armitage, M, Atkinson, P, Holloway, SJ, Musgrove, AJ & Pollitt, MS. 2003. Numbers of wintering waterbirds in Great Britain and the Isle of Man (1994/95-1998/99): II. Coastal waders (Charadrii). *Biological Conservation* 112: 329-341.

Rehfish, MM, Holloway, SJ & Austin, GE. 2003. Population estimates of waders on the United Kingdom's and the Isle of Man's non-estuarine coasts in 1997-98. *Bird Study* 50: 22-32.

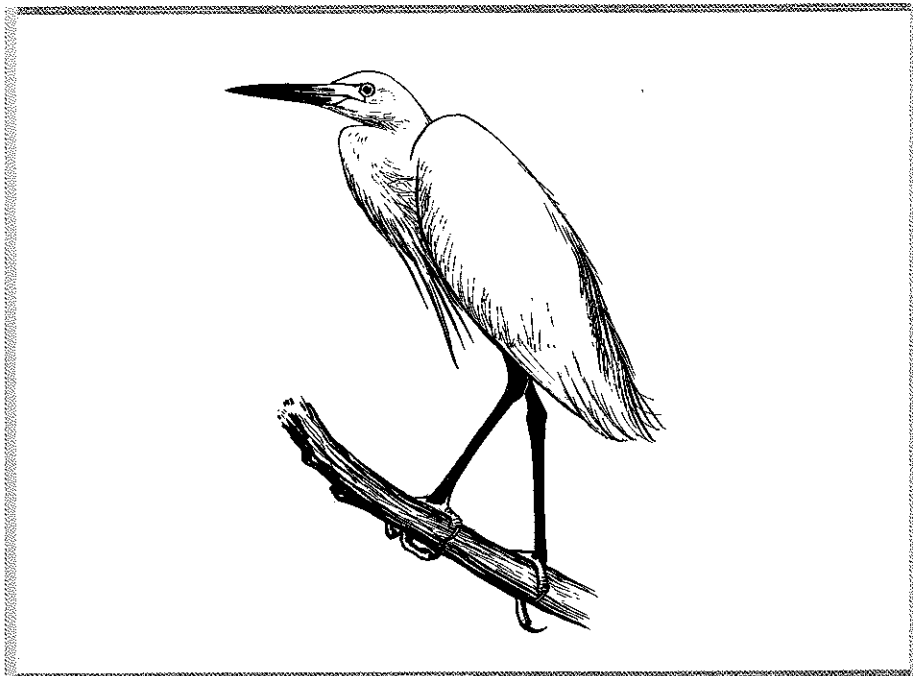
## WeBS Low Tide Counts: 2003-04 winter

The 12<sup>th</sup> winter of WeBS Low Tide Counts has seen counters out and about on 15 estuaries around the UK. New sites targeted this winter have been Swansea Bay, Auchencairn Bay and Rough Firth. More extensive undertakings are repeat counts at the Firth of Forth (last counted during the first winter of the LTCs in 1992-93) and the Humber Estuary, the latter as part of an English Nature initiative to gain year-round LTCs (at most sites, the scheme is restricted to November — February). Other sites where LTCs have been taking place are the Burry Inlet, Tees Estuary, Duddon Estuary, Langstone Harbour, Breydon Water, Dyfi Estuary, Lindsfame, Stour and Orwell Estuaries and those stalwarts of the scheme, Belfast and Strangford Loughs (entering their 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive winters of counts, respectively).

The other news of this winter has been the final delivery of the long-awaited atlas, *Estuarine Waterbirds at Low Tide*. Copies should have been distributed to all counters who contributed to the relevant winters (1992-93 to 1998-99) of the LTC scheme — please let us know if you have been overlooked. Other copies are available for purchase via the Natural History Book Service. Additionally, we do plan to work towards an online version of the book in the future.

As usual, our thanks to all involved in the WeBS Low Tide Counts. The scheme provides one of the most highly valued datasets for bird conservation in the UK and is constantly providing information which feeds into site protection.

Andy Musgrove & Steve Holloway



#### UK to host major waterbird conference

In April, the UK will be the focus of global attention with a series of international meetings on waterbird ecology and conservation science. Edinburgh will host a major conference – *Waterbirds around the world* – an event being organised jointly by Wetlands International and the UK and Dutch governments.

Major international meetings related to waterbird conservation have been convened at roughly ten-year intervals since the first was held in 1963 at St Andrews, Scotland. That meeting was the first major international gathering of waterbird biologists and established a process that led to the agreement of the Convention on Wetlands at Ramsar, Iran in 1971. Next year is not only 40 years after the St Andrews' conference, but is also the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bonn Convention on Migratory Species and the fifth anniversary of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

It is anticipated that about 500 people will attend the conference. These will be mainly active scientists, with expertise in waterbird ecology and conservation. The conference will not be a formal, inter-governmental meeting but will aim for a full technical review of information on a broad range of relevant subjects. Full details of the programme and registration details can be found on Wetlands International's web-site [www.wetlands.org](http://www.wetlands.org).

The event will be a major milestone for waterbird ecology and conservation (as was the last conference which was held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1992, hosted by the French government), and offers an excellent opportunity to demonstrate UK conservation practice in action.

There has already been significant media coverage of plans for the Conference, and we anticipate the conference will attract considerable press interest in waterbird conservation and monitoring. Many of the presentations will draw on WeBS counts past and present, and we anticipate that UK waterbird monitoring will be centre-stage!

#### Swan satellite tracking

Wildlife experts are this winter tracking the migration of Russian Whooper and Bewick's Swans for the first time thanks to a ground breaking study by the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust and the BBC's Natural History Unit Radio. WWT scientists travelled to Arctic Russia in August this year to find the swans and fitted tiny transmitters weighing just 45 g to feathers on the backs of five Bewick's and one Whooper Swan. Each transmitter sends a unique identification code which is picked

...continued on next page

#### Port development on Humber

Britain's biggest port operator has fended off opposition to a new £55m development plan on the Humber by buying up two tracts of land for wildlife habitat. The purchase by Associated British Ports (ABP) followed a legal agreement that required ABP to provide safe roosting and feeding areas for the birds affected by the development; as a result conservation bodies withdraw their opposition for the development. The acquired 57 hectares of mudflats and six hectares of grasslands at two sites, Barton-upon-Humber and Welwick Saltmarsh in Holderness will compensate for the loss of mudflats that will occur as a result of two port development projects. (08/03, 09/03)

#### Humber wetlands improved

New species of birds are already living at a Humber reserve, which is creating wetland habitats for wildlife. No sooner had the earth moving equipment left Blacktoft Sands RSPB reserve than an observer witnessed bearded tits, snipe and marsh harriers among the species using the new facilities. The work is part of a Humber-wide effort to establish the area as a stronghold for Bitterns. (09/03)

#### Illegal nets seized in estuary

An illegal attempt to catch fish in a Cornish estuary has been foiled by the Environment Agency. A net used near Restronguet Creek was seized in a joint operation with Truro harbour staff. A member of the public who alerted the harbour office in Truro spotted the illegal net. This latest incident comes only a few weeks after a series of reports of illegal fishing on the Fal estuary.

#### Tern-ing up trumps at Coquet

A tiny Northumberland island is becoming an increasingly important haven for one species of rare breeding bird thanks to some human help. A large proportion of the British population of Roseate Terns (at least 67 pairs) is thought to be nesting on Coquet Island, Northumberland. Numbers of the birds nesting have at least doubled in the last 5 years. RSPB wardens are delighted with the continuation in increase this year with many of the birds using man-made boxes to nest in. (08/03)

#### Keeping track of geese

Scientists from the Central Science Laboratory at Sand Hutton near York are investigating how long geese are being exposed to pesticides while feeding on arable farms in North Yorkshire.

Distinctive neck collars have been fitted to a number of birds, enabling individuals to be identified and observed. The neck collars also have radio transmitters attached and the birds can be tracked as soon as they land, but search time can be greatly reduced if a bird is spotted wearing a coloured collar with black numbers. Members of the public can help by reporting any sightings of geese with neck collars in the Vale of York and Wensleydale area to the laboratory on 01904 462750, stating the location of the bird. (08/03)

#### Beauty spot to be sacrificed to the sea

Scientists have predicted that the Naze peninsula will disappear into the sea in the next 20-30 years. Much time and money has been spent reinforcing sea defences in a vain battle to save the beauty spot that attracts rare birds and



Estuary / Jonathan Leach (WWT)



wildlife attracting thousands of visitors every year. Tendring council is expected to make the unpopular decision to let the Naze be claimed by the sea. (09/03)

**Wetland reserve plan unveiled**

Plans to create a wetland wildlife reserve on the Norfolk & Suffolk border have been unveiled. Frenze Beck floodplain wildlife area, near Diss, Norfolk will protect 4.5 hectares of land including reedbeds and ponds. Michael Bentley, countryside manager at the council said 'This project is so exciting, it will transform an ecologically poor site into a haven for many species that are currently under threat.' (09/03)

**Flying the nest leaves birds on top**

It's better to dump than to be dumped. That's the message from recent research at the University of Bern, Switzerland which found that Oystercatchers that initiate a split (usually females) end up higher in the bird pecking order. They are more like to land superior nesting spots nearer the mudflats and bear 20% more chicks. However, abandoned partners often end up in shoddy nesting sites where they have to fly to the mudflats leaving their nests available to predators and new mates open to infidelity. The research supports the theory that birds divorce to increase their reproductive success. (09/03)

**£1m partnership to restore wetlands**

WWF-UK and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust will spend £1m to restore and expand Potteric Nature Reserve, a wetland 5km from the centre of Doncaster. The area is home to more than 70 species of birds breeding including Reed and Sedge Warblers, Tufted Duck, Shoveler and Gadwall, and a wide variety of other wildlife including water voles, bank voles, hares, badgers and bats. The reserve has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by English Nature for the many rare water plants the wetland supports. (09/03)

**Reed bed boost for birds**

Warwickshire wildlife trust is enhancing its wetland habitat for birds at its nature reserve on the outskirts of Coventry. The charity is creating a huge reed bed at the Brandon Marsh Reserve. The reserve, which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, is already one of the regions top bird watching sites. (09/03)

**River access under review**

Canoeists, anglers and wildlife could live in harmony on the River Dee. A group has been established to look at the issue of managing canoe access on the river, their

challenge being to agree the principles and a framework for canoe access that will not interfere with anglers or put at risk the wildlife and the other special features of the Dee. The issues to be discussed will include timing and zoning of canoeing and a possible membership scheme. (09/03)

**Wildlife Trust opposes rail revival plan**

Driving a railway line through a wildlife rich reedbed was dubbed 'utterly inconceivable', a conservation group claimed as it condemned a plan to revive a former railway. Suffolk Wildlife Trust said that a £6.5m project for a narrow gauge railway between Halesworth and Southwold was not compatible with the aims of conservation. Its main area of concern is the Hen Reedbeds, created three years ago and now supporting the rare Bittern, Hen Harriers, Bearded Tits and other uncommon species of wildlife. (09/03)

**More work needed to protect rivers from pollution**

Scientists have found some of the most important rivers in England and Wales need more protection from pollution. The warning comes from the Environment Agency, which says that in England and Wales nearly 20% of rivers designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are failing to meet top water quality classifications. Only an estimated 80% of the length of England and Wales's 77 SSSI rivers are considered to be in 'good' or 'very good' chemical condition. Many SSSI rivers have been affected by pollution over a wide area — such as high phosphate and nitrate levels from land-based activities such as farming or discharges from sewage treatment works — and these in turn pose problems for fisheries and other river life. (10/03)

**Red-necked Grebes breed in Scotland for the first time**

The Red-necked Grebe has bred for the first time in the UK at a location in Scotland. Dr Malcolm Ogilvie, secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, said that Red-necked Grebes had been watched trying to breed for the last 17 years but had failed. However a pair unexpectedly appeared at a different locality and successfully reared one young. (10/03)

**Tax changes will help our wildlife**

Wildlife habitats are to benefit from a change in Government tax regime. The Landfill Tax Credit Scheme has been revised to introduce a new category. This will offer more choice for community and environmental projects by expanding the options to include biodiversity projects. The

up by receivers mounted in satellites orbiting 400 miles above the Earth. The signal is relayed back to a ground station where the position of the bird is calculated. Satellite telemetry remains the single most effective way of accurately monitoring and timing a bird's journey, giving detailed information, via satellite, of their location every day.

The project is also set to reveal specific locations at which the swans rest and refuel. The primary aim is to confirm the migration route and to identify unknown stop off sites used by swans on their migration so they can be protected and conserved. Bewick's Swans are estimated to fly only 1500 km before needing to replenish their body reserves; this means they must stop at least twice to feed on their migration. The birds congregate in large numbers at just a few sites, making them vulnerable to any changes. Virtually nothing is known of the migration routes of Whooper Swans in Russia, no one knows exactly where they winter and this study will help to provide this vital information.

Knowing where they feed is vital in creating pan-nation protected flight paths for these migrant birds. Tony Richardson, former WWT Director, explained: 'Detail is very important when designing conservation strategies for migrant swans. Knowing that they put down in Estonia isn't enough. We need to know what lakes they use to feed en route. Something like the size of a lake we can conserve and manage, not something the size of a country.'

Results of the tracking can be seen online at [www.wwt.org.uk/swan](http://www.wwt.org.uk/swan).

**Eleventh hour court ruling halts reclamation**

With 90 percent of the seawall that would have destroyed the internationally important Saemangeum wetlands already built, a Korean court has ruled that work must stop immediately. Saemangeum is the most important site for shorebirds and migratory waterbirds in East Asia. Its 30,000 hectares of tidal flats and shallows support around 30 species of waterbird in internationally important numbers. These include at least eight globally threatened birds, among them Black-faced Spoonbill *Platylea minor*, Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*, Saunders's Gull *Larus saundersi*, Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* and 10 percent of the global population of Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*.

A further hearing in October added very little to the arguments that had already been set out and a final decision about the project seems likely to be deferred until some time in 2004. Despite this promising legal development it is vital that protests continue, to ensure that the South Korean government honours its international obligations to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention on wetlands. For more information on the development visit [www.wbkenvironment.com/saemiref.asp](http://www.wbkenvironment.com/saemiref.asp).

introduced changes will mean approximately £47m a year for local community environmental projects. (10/03)

### **Call of the wild**

A poll has revealed that 2% of Britons now count birdwatching as one of their favourite leisure activities. This equates approximately one million people around the country. This growth of interest has been put down to the amount of conservation projects up and down the country. (11/03). *We have about 3,000 birdwatchers taking part in WeBS — plenty of scope for us all to recruit more counters then! Ed.*

### **Terns under threat**

Dorset's only colony of Little Terns could be under threat because of poor breeding. The site at Chesil, Portland saw its breeding pairs drop by a third to just 40 in 2003, with just four fledglings being produced. The Chesil Bank and Nature Reserve hopes to produce some answers when it holds a special meeting in December. (11/03)

### **Fight to save nature reserve**

The Cors Goch wetland and nature reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and home to rare orchids, plants and many protected species. North Wales Wildlife Trust is opposing a plan to extend a quarry at Rhuddlan Bach, Brynteg up to the border of the reserve. The trust says that it fears that a deep excavation so close to the reserve that it would disrupt the water table, causing water to drain away from parts of the reserve. (11/03)

### **Bittern numbers boom**

In 1997 the Bittern was near extinction, but new figures from RSPB and English Nature now suggest that the population is making a dramatic comeback. Bittern numbers declined partly due to loss of their reed bed habitat, but efforts to create new beds or preserve existing ones have led to the population of this extremely rare species reaching at least 42 males; four times the level recorded six years ago.

In a separate development, Bitterns could soon be thriving in their Norfolk stronghold if ambitious plans take off to create a special wetland haven for the endangered species. The Broads Authority has unveiled an exciting scheme to turn 40 hectares of grazing marsh at How Hill Nature Reserve in Ludham, into a refuge for the bird and other rare species such as the swallowtail butterfly. (08/03, 09/03)

### **Cormorant conflicts**

The conflict between angling and cormorants persists as birds continue to

raid fish stocks at inland angling sites. Whilst some fishermen are calling for a cull, conservation groups fear this may threaten the birds conservation status. A seminar held by DEFRA on 8 September 2003 looked at balancing the demands of all groups concerned. One of the topics of discussion was the use of fish refuges as an alternative method of protecting fish stocks from predators, as early trials have proved successful. (09/03)

### **Come back for Corncrakes**

Corncrakes have been virtually wiped out in England with modern farming techniques the primary cause. New attempts are now underway to re-establish the species in suitable areas, and 55 captive-bred Corncrake chicks have been released at the RSPB's Nene Washes reserve in Cambridgeshire. Project leaders hope that the birds will migrate to Africa for the winter and return to breed in spring, and if this year's release is successful hope to release 100 birds a year for the next five years. (08/03)

### **Better prospects for Stone Curlew protection**

The Breckland farmland Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) supports almost half of the breeding Stone Curlews in Great Britain. One of the 84 landowners on the 13,000-hectare site challenged the decision of English Nature's council in July 2001 to confirm the notification of the SSSI. In July 2003, the judgment ruled in agreement with English Nature's decision and confirmed that it did not contravene the European Convention on Human Rights. It has now been recommended that the Government classify the site as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds, underlining its importance at the European level. (08/03)

### **Egg thieves prosecuted**

On 28 August 2003 two egg thieves were convicted and fined £1,200 and £1,500 for possessing 21 wild bird eggs, stolen near

Inverness. Nine of the eggs belonged to the Little Tern of which there are only 2,000 breeding pairs in the UK. Sheriff Alexander Pollock was praised for imposing the high fines and said that new laws mean that offenders face up to six months in jail if caught. (08/03)

### **Herring Gulls take a plunge**

The Seabird 2000 Survey has discovered that the number of Herring Gulls in Ireland has decreased by 75% in the past 20 years. There were almost 40,000 pairs in 1985, now estimates are between 10,000 and 6,000. The trend is more apparent on the east coast of Ireland, thought to be due to the location of a greater number of landfill sites. A condition called botulism, where bacteria in refuse bags produce toxins that poison and paralyse the gulls, is thought to be a significant factor in the decline. (07/03)

### **Shipping in the Minch debate**

A ship carrying a 3,300-tonne cargo of zinc sulphide ran aground off the west Highlands, near the entrance to Loch Broom on 29 June 2003. Action was taken to assess the situation and minimize any risk to the environment, which although is not designated as a protection area, is an important location for fish, shellfish and seabirds. John Farquhar Munro, local MSP, said, 'This incident strengthens the argument for the Government to rethink the guidelines for ships with hazardous cargoes and their passage past Scotland's coastline, especially through the Minch.' (07/03)

*Compiled by Nancy Robb, Donna Hawkins & Mark Pollitt*

*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.*

## ... *Special Surveys* ...

### **WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey**

We have finished inputting the 700 forms from last winter's WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey and are now finalising the number-crunching which should enable us to see what we have been able to learn from this ground-breaking survey about the numbers of waterbirds in the

wider countryside, away from our key WeBS Core Count sites. Many thanks to all who participated in this important survey; we hope to be able to report on the results in the summer 2004 edition of *WeBS News*.

*Sarah Jackson*



# Bulletin Board

## Welcome to new staff

The BTO's work on the various aspects of WeBS is carried out within the Wetland & Coastal Ecology Unit. We are pleased to welcome two new faces to the team, who will be spending part of their time working on WeBS projects. Alex Banks has carried out research on navigation in homing pigeons at Oxford University, followed by work on leaf-cutter ants in Panama, before working for six months as Breeding Waders Project Officer with WWT and moving on to the BTO in December 2002. Sarah Jackson has just completed a doctorate at Sheffield University making use of WeBS data to examine how protected areas such as SPAs are selected. Sarah is now working on the WeBS Dispersed Waterbirds Survey and also looking into the issue of effective methods for monitoring snipe.

## The 2003/04-2005/06 BTO Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS)

The BTO has organised surveys of winter gull roosts each decade since 1953. The last survey took place in January 1993, during which over 2.5 million gulls were counted in Great Britain. A further 19,000 gulls were also counted in Northern Ireland, 3,850 in the Isle of Man and 8,500 in the Channel Islands.

The present Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS) covers the winters of 2003/04 to 2005/06. The main part of the survey took place this January with counts at Key Inland and Coastal Sites across the UK. Over the next two years further counts are planned of a random sample of tetrads and over 1,000 short (1-2 km) stretches of coastline around the UK. Combining the results from the three parts of the survey will enable us to produce the first total population estimates for the five main species that winter in the UK: Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull.

If you have taken part in this winter's counts, please remember to return your forms to your BTO Regional Representative or to the BTO's Wetland & Coastal Ecology Unit at The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU. Although



the January counts are the most important, we are also interested in understanding how numbers of gulls using roosts change between months and would welcome any further counts undertaken between autumn 2003 and spring 2004.

If you are interested in taking part in the counts in 2004/05 and 2005/06, please contact the BTO Regional Representative for your area or for more details, John Calladine at BTO Scotland (email: john.calladine@bto.org).

*John Calladine & Niall Burton*

## WeBS Core Count priority dates for 2004 and 2005

The priority count dates for WeBS Core Counts in 2004 and 2005 are listed below. Please make every effort to count on, or as near as possible to, these dates to aid co-ordination of the counts nationally. If you are unable to count at this time, please select the nearest suitable alternative date in that month.

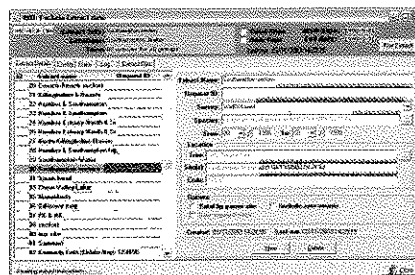
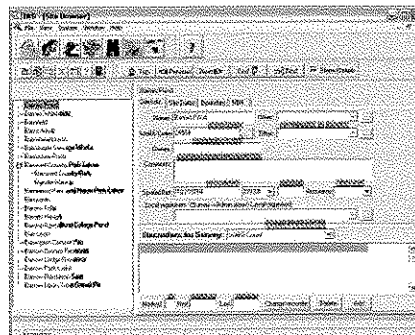
Where tidal conditions at coastal sites are unfavourable on these dates, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates. Ideally, these should be separated by at least three weeks from counts in the preceding and following months. Counts on different count units within complex sites should be co-ordinated to avoid the possibility of double counting.

<b>2004</b>	
25 January	18 July
22 February	22 August
21 March	19 September
25 April	17 October
23 May	14 November
20 June	12 December
<b>2005</b>	
16 January	24 July
13 February	21 August
13 March	18 September
10 April	16 October
8 May	6 November
26 June	4 December

## Progress on the Integrated Waterbird Database

Work on the new database to store all data from WeBS and the predecessor recording schemes (Birds of Estuaries Enquiry and National Wildfowl Counts) in one efficient system has progressed significantly during the past year. We are now close to having a fully working system, though we still have a few items to resolve before we can consider the major part of the development complete. Early tests of the new system are very promising and we hope it will considerably simplify the management and extraction of data. The task has taken longer than we had foreseen, and as a result production of the 2001-02 and 2002-03 annual reports has unfortunately been delayed – and for which we offer our sincere apologies. We will, however, put our efforts into publishing the results from these years as soon as we possibly can.

*Mark Pollitt*



# WeBS Counters' Conference 2004

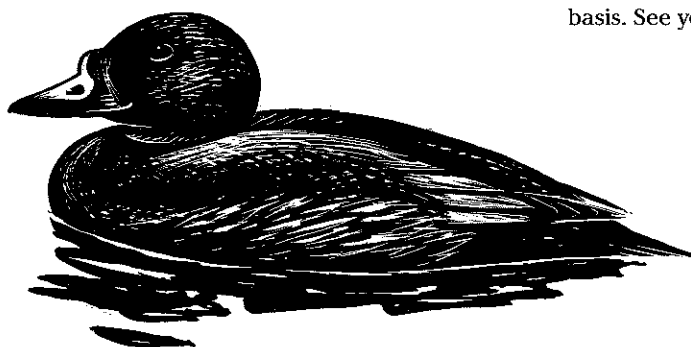
This spring's annual WeBS Counters' Conference will be held at the Split Willow Hotel at Llanfairfechan, North Wales, on Saturday 20 March 2004. The Welsh coastline between the Great Orme and Bangor is well known amongst waterbird aficionados, due to the large concentrations of divers, grebes and wildfowl that winter offshore. Indeed, Llanfairfechan itself has come to the fore in recent years, as a drake American Black Scoter has returned with the regular wintering flock of Common Scoter to test the eyes (and honesty!) of birdwatchers.

A full programme of talks with both a local and national flavour should keep us entertained throughout the day. Some of the topics to be covered include wader studies on the Mersey (based on previous experiences of the Liverpool Bay Wader Study Group, this is likely to be a multi-media extravaganza, and definitely not one to miss!), food for wintering waders on Welsh SPAs, recent declines in wintering waders in Wales, aerial surveys of wintering scoters in Welsh waters, and the natural history of the nearby Conwy RSPB Reserve. There will also be a short session pertaining

to WeBS matters, with one of the issues to be discussed being the online submission of WeBS data. As always, there should be plenty of time to meet WeBS staff during the course of the day.

All WeBS counters and local organisers are welcome to attend the conference, but we have only included booking forms with copies of this Newsletter for distribution within the immediate region. If you would like to attend the conference, but have no booking form, then please contact Heidi Mellan at the BTO. Places at the conference are limited and will be allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis. See you there!

*Steve Holloway*



Counters / Joe Blossom (WWT)

## STOP PRESS

### Ray Waters

Just before going to press with this newsletter, we learnt the very sad news that Ray Waters recently died after a long battle with cancer. Many WeBS counters will have known Ray from his days at the BTO organising the BoEE and WeBS counts. A more complete obituary will follow in the summer newsletter. Our sympathies go to his partner Chris and their two young children.

### 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.