

WeBS



British Trust for Ornithology



THE WILDFOWL & WETLANDS TRUST



RSPB



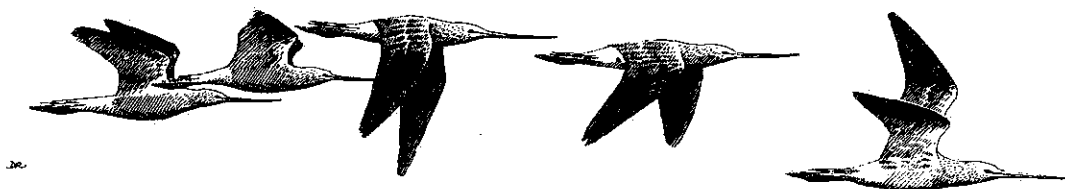
JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

Newsletter

No. 3 Winter 1994-95

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

Many of you might be surprised to receive a WeBS Newsletter whilst you are in the midst of your winter counts. On occasions, however, we will produce a winter issue if any urgent items arise. In September we held the first Counters' Conference in Hull. This is reported fully inside and we have also enclosed a questionnaire to discover your preferences on conferences. Also featured is an article on the vital issue of count boundaries, something we shall be addressing in the near future. Peter and Ray are currently involved with analysis of the first set of WeBS data and are suitably impressed by how well the recording forms have been completed. Keep it up and Happy New Year!



Submission of WeBS Forms

As from now the WeBS Annual Report will include data from April to March inclusive. Thus we require **all counts up to and including March to be submitted as soon after March as possible** so that the Annual Report can be produced reasonably quickly after the preceding winter. We ask that all organisers **submit all data to Slimbridge by 30 June at the very latest**. We cannot guarantee that data received after this date will be included in the report. If counters have made a significant number of counts during April to September, we prefer to receive these separate forms soon after the September count so we can begin processing and checking these data before the bulk of the winter data arrive. Similarly those organisers of estuarine sites with completed forms that are ready to send in January are encouraged to send these at this time. In order that organisers can send in count forms by the required date **we urge counters to forward counts to their organiser in plenty of time** to collate the results. Many thanks.

WeBS Count Boundaries

It is becoming increasingly important for WeBS partners to know exactly which areas have been counted during WeBS counts. In particular, this is vitally important for designating SSSIs, Special Protection Areas and Ramsar Sites to ensure that all important areas for waterfowl are included. This information is also of importance for research and other conservation issues.

Maps of WeBS sites are already held by BTO and WWT for all estuaries and many of the main inland sites. However, WeBS partners are now embarking on a project that will produce an atlas of all WeBS sites. This will allow us to provide a map to all those who use the data. These maps could also be provided to counters and, if for any reason the count boundary changed, it would be relatively easy to annotate the change on the map and return it with the count forms. Such maps would also help ensure that a new counter used the same boundary as their predecessor. You will be hearing more of this project in the near future.

Colour-ringed Canada Geese

WWT has been colour-ringing Canada and Greylag Geese in London with blue plastic leg-rings inscribed with three white letters as part of an ongoing project to monitor distribution and movements in the Southeast. This links with other projects investigating their population dynamics in Britain. We would be very grateful for any sightings of these birds, recording DATE; TIME; SPECIES; SITE NAME; and GRID REFERENCE. Please send these to Mark Underhill at WWT or telephone (01453) 890333. All records will be acknowledged.

Counting Young Birds

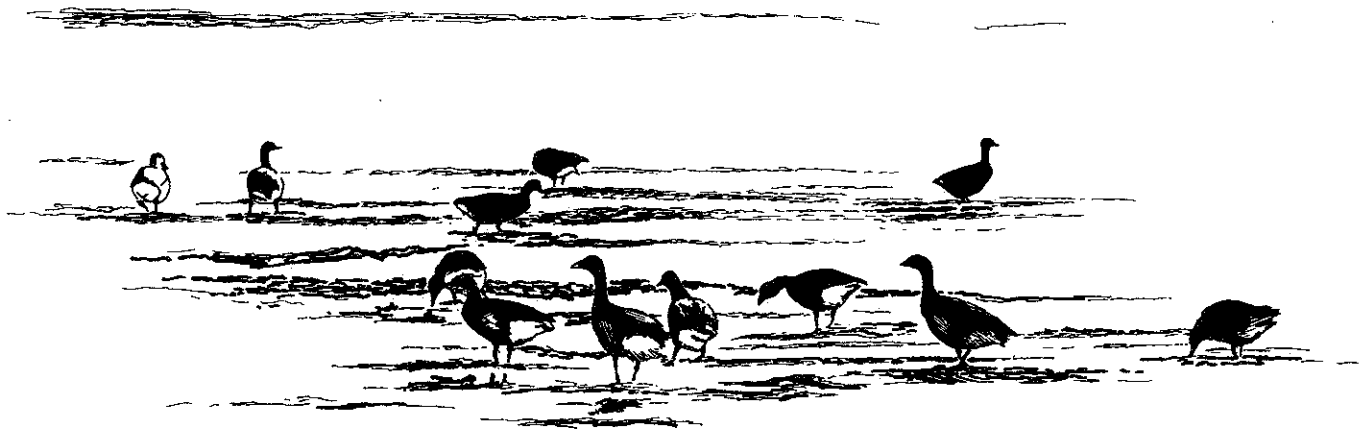
We have received several queries from counters as to whether or not young birds should be recorded. As a non-breeding survey with specific objectives (see the first WeBS Newsletter), WeBS does not seek to determine breeding success of waterfowl in the UK and thus we do not require counts of ducklings and chicks. Although we acknowledge that this information is important, WeBS methodology cannot supply the necessary data to accurately assess this.

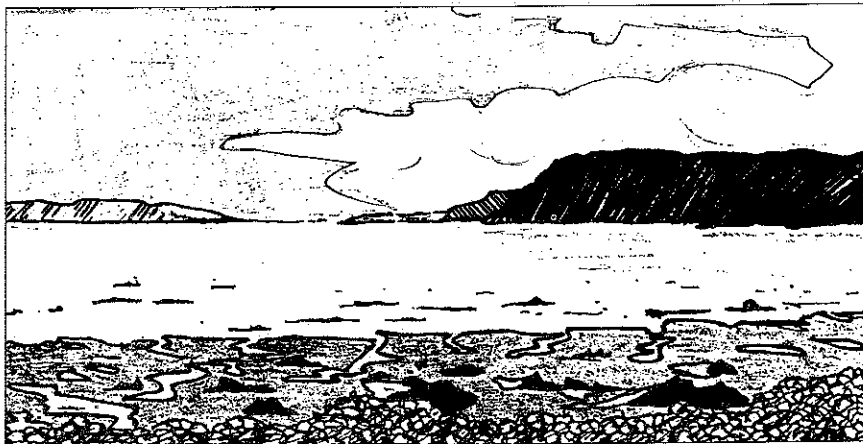
Please only record "adult or independent immature birds". For example young Mallard more than three-quarters fully grown and unaccompanied by a parent should be included; half grown young should not. However, young migrant geese or swans (e.g. Pinkfeet or Whoopers), that may be in family parties attended by parents, should be included. Please do not give counts separately for independent

immatures and adults. There should be only one count for each species/race present on the count form. Please contact Peter or Ray if you have any queries.

Waterfowl Monitoring in Ireland

As many of you will know, there have long been plans to establish a regular, comprehensive waterfowl monitoring scheme in the Republic of Ireland to complement WeBS. We are pleased to announce that the Irish Wetland Bird Survey, or I-WeBS for short, began in earnest in November 1994. The scheme is a partnership between the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (IWC), the Office of Public Works (OPW; the Irish Government's conservation agency) and WWT. The scheme will work closely alongside WeBS with BTO, RSPB, JNCC and DoE(NI) having been involved in discussions leading to its formation. Simon Delany was appointed as the I-WeBS National Organiser in November, and will be based at IWC headquarters in Dublin. Simon will be familiar to many of you as having organised WWT Special Surveys of breeding wildfowl in recent years. His wealth of experience will be of great benefit in setting I-WeBS firmly on its feet. Although there is much work yet to be done, not least in expanding the relatively small network of keen counters, we are confident that it will soon be possible to obtain comprehensive data on sites and their waterfowl throughout the whole of Britain and Ireland. This will be invaluable in ensuring their proper conservation.





Low Tide Counts

The Low Tide Counts scheme continues unabated this year, with a total of 13 estuaries involved: Alt, Belfast Lough, Blackwater, Burry, Clwyd, Colne, Duddon, Lavan Sands, Orwell, Pegwell Bay, Southampton Water, Strangford Lough and Taw/Torridge. Four of these, Strangford Lough, Belfast Lough, the Duddon and the Clwyd, have now been counted for at least three years in succession. In the case of Belfast Lough and the Duddon, the counts were already taking place prior to the start of the WeBS Low Tide Counts scheme. The Department of Environment (Northern Ireland) has been conducting counts on Belfast Lough since 1988, the data from which have been used in management plans, assessment of development proposals and site designation work. On the Duddon, the local counters responded to the threat of a barrage across the estuary by starting the counts. Since then, these data have also been used in assessing the impact of building a gas pipeline across the estuary.

The inclusion of the Low Tide Counts scheme within WeBS encourages close co-operation with the other WeBS partners. On Lavan Sands, for example, the Low Tide Counts are being used as part of a project commissioned by Countryside Council for Wales to assess the impact of commercial suction dredging for cockles on the bird populations. The Low Tide Counts scheme is also running alongside two RSPB projects. A three-year project on the Burry is investigating the effect of cockling on Oystercatchers. On the opposite side of the country, another three-year project is looking at the effect of disturbance on waders on East Anglian estuaries. This project in particular will be making full use of the data provided by the Low Tide Counts scheme.

Severe Weather Conditions

Periods of severe weather can result in significant stress for wintering wildfowl and waders. Although the winters of recent years have been generally mild, a cold spell in February 1991 resulted in high mortality especially of Redshank on the Wash. Last winter an unseasonal cold snap in November resulted in The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) calling Scottish wildfowlers to show voluntary restraint, although the weather warmed up before a full shooting ban was needed.

In periods of severe cold, we would greatly appreciate feedback from you on ground conditions. This would assist country agencies, JNCC, BASC and others to assess weather patterns and their effect on waterfowl populations. You are able to play a valuable role by reporting unusually large numbers of dead birds. Any such observations should be sent to Ray or Peter who are in close daily contact with JNCC who use this information.

In such periods it is, of course, particularly important not to cause any unnecessary disturbance to waterfowl as this results in the wasteful use of critical body reserves. At a local level, any steps that can be taken to reduce incidental disturbance to waterfowl during major freeze-ups would be most useful.

Long-serving Counters

In our recent article on long-serving counters, we inadvertently omitted Eric Hardy. Eric is currently WeBS Local Organiser for inland sites in Merseyside, a position he has held since the scheme began in 1947, and has been counting ducks since the 1920s! Our apologies to Eric for having missed him from the list and, once again, our thanks to him and all long-serving counters for their tremendous input over the years.

WeBS Counters' Conference 1994

The first WeBS Counters' Conference was held on 17 September 1994. Although only a small gathering of people, it was a very lively event and the general feeling was of an enjoyable day. In addition to the various presentations, one of the key parts of the conference was a series of workshops when small groups discussed a variety of issues. There was general consensus on most points.

Service and Feedback to Counters

- The Annual Report was considered to be getting better, but would benefit from more graphical presentations, should give more emphasis to non-estuarine sites and should reach counters before the New Year.
- It was felt that the Newsletter could be more lively and appear more frequently.
- The Local Organisers should be given greater guidance, perhaps in an "Organiser's Pack".
- National Organisers were felt to be "quite good (we had to get that one in!) and accessible", but should have more contact with local groups.
- Presenting more data for a local area in a national context would be greatly appreciated.
- Counters should be made to feel involved.

Recording Count Conditions and Ancillary Information

- A few counters still found the new form rather daunting to fill in although it was a lot easier to use than many others.
- Counting gulls should remain optional.
- If counters were encouraged to enter data for each count directly after the count was made, rather than waiting until March it was felt that this would help Local Organisers to send in the counts on time. (This would also reduce the chance of errors creeping in).
- A map showing the count boundary would be highly beneficial to counters, Local and National Organisers alike.

Conflict Species, Habitat "Development" and Wildfowling

This workshop discussed whether data should be provided to both sides in Public Inquiries regarding the destruction of wildlife sites, used to "condemn" or control species (e.g. Canada Geese) or provided to what may be perceived by some as non-conservation organisations.

- In general it was felt desirable that both so-called "pro" and "anti" conservation groups were in possession of the full facts otherwise informed discussion was not feasible. The benefits include ensuring any debate was based on the same data.
- There should be good liaison between counters and WeBS staff to ensure counters are aware of how and why WeBS data are used.
- It should be recognised that some counters have genuine concerns that their data may be made available for these issues and they may consequently choose not to count.

Additional Surveys and Volunteer Recruitment

- Prioritisation of the many additional surveys would be welcomed by counters.
- One national survey each summer was not generally thought to be a problem.
- There should be more rapid feedback, so counters can see the value of their work.
- Concern was expressed about the exploitation of counters for commercially initiated surveys.
- There should be an opportunity for training of counters.
- Personal contact (largely through Local Organisers) and a sense of belonging or "ownership of a site" is hugely beneficial and a big impetus to count.
- There was a shortage of young counters, with rare birds and identification often proving to be more appealing.

Low Tide Counts

- These were felt to be a good idea in principle.
- Counter recruitment can be difficult, local bird clubs were suggested as a possible source of new counters.
- The principles and methodologies involved should be clearly explained including the differences from the standard WeBS counts.

Comments about the conference as a whole included the need to attract more counters and fewer professionals, that talks should have a definite local bias, and that more notice should be given. However, only a small fraction of WeBS counters were present and we would welcome hearing what the rest of you think. A "Conference Questionnaire" is provided with this Newsletter and your replies should help us to plan any future events.

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 waterfowl and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

WeBS NATIONAL ORGANISERS

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