

# WeBSnews

The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey



VALIDATING  
WeBS DATA  
See page 10



NEWS COUNT EXPEDITION TO SKYE 8



WINTER WETLAND BIRD BLITZ 16



SEVERN HEAVEN 12

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**PLUS** WeBS WHO'S WHO, CORE COUNT DATES & NEWS

## WeBS goes platinum!

This year marks the 70th anniversary of waterbird recording in the UK.

Starting its life in 1947 as the National Wildfowl Counts (NWC) on a few waterbodies, waterbird monitoring in the UK has gone from strength to strength over the past 70 years.

Fast forward to the present day, and approximately 3,000 sites, from tiny lochans and stretches of river to large estuaries such as The Wash, are counted every year by nearly 3,000 enthusiastic volunteers.

It is this network of volunteers that makes WeBS possible. Without

their dedicated time and support, we would not have the quality or quantity of data that we have today. Importantly, it is these data that enable conservationists and others to conserve and protect waterbirds in the UK and subsequently throughout their flyways.

These counts provide data to identify population sizes, determine trends in numbers and distribution, and identify important sites for waterbirds, which are the principal aims of WeBS. ▶



## FROM THE EDITOR

## Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News.

As you will have noticed from the front cover, this year WeBS (well, waterbird monitoring in the UK) celebrates its 70th anniversary. To celebrate this landmark, we recently held a conference at WWT Martin Mere (pgs 4–5), which was well attended, with a range of interesting talks and it was great to meet many WeBS Counters, including several long-standing ones.

The NEWS counts in 2015/16 were a huge success, with up-to-date data on the distribution of a variety of otherwise under-recorded species. The Rye Meads Ringing Group undertook a NEWS expedition to the Isle of Skye, and the trials and tribulations of such an expedition are brilliantly brought to life (pg 8).

With constant threats to the environment from climate change to development, the data collected by counters over the past 70 years have been vital and will continue to be so in the future. Here's to the next 70 years....



**Neil Calbrade** Editor & WeBS Low Tide Organiser



## WeBS NEWS

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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 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the statutory nature conservation bodies: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.

## The WeBS team &amp; contacts

Although the first port of call for counters should be their Local Organiser, many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help...

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CONTINUED FROM COVER

In many ways, it is remarkable how little has changed since the origins of WeBS. From the beginning the “look-see” survey methodology has been used and local organisers responsible for ensuring good coverage of wetlands in their area. The very first NWC report for 1947–52 by George Atkinson-Willes exhorted counters to make an estimate of numbers rather than use terms like “a few”. Today we still request all WeBS counters to studiously avoid using “present” rather than estimating a number for species such as Mallard or gulls – because as Atkinson-Willes pointed out, “it is likely to be much more accurate than the guess made by the person working out the figures, as the counter has the advantage of having seen the birds”. These days the “person working out the figures” would be a computer algorithm, but the point still stands!

The scheme has grown and developed, and not just in terms of the number of sites. The coverage of estuaries, firstly with the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry (BoEE) and then Low Tide Counts, has significantly helped conserve estuarine habitats which have often been threatened by development. From the early focus on ducks, geese and swans the list

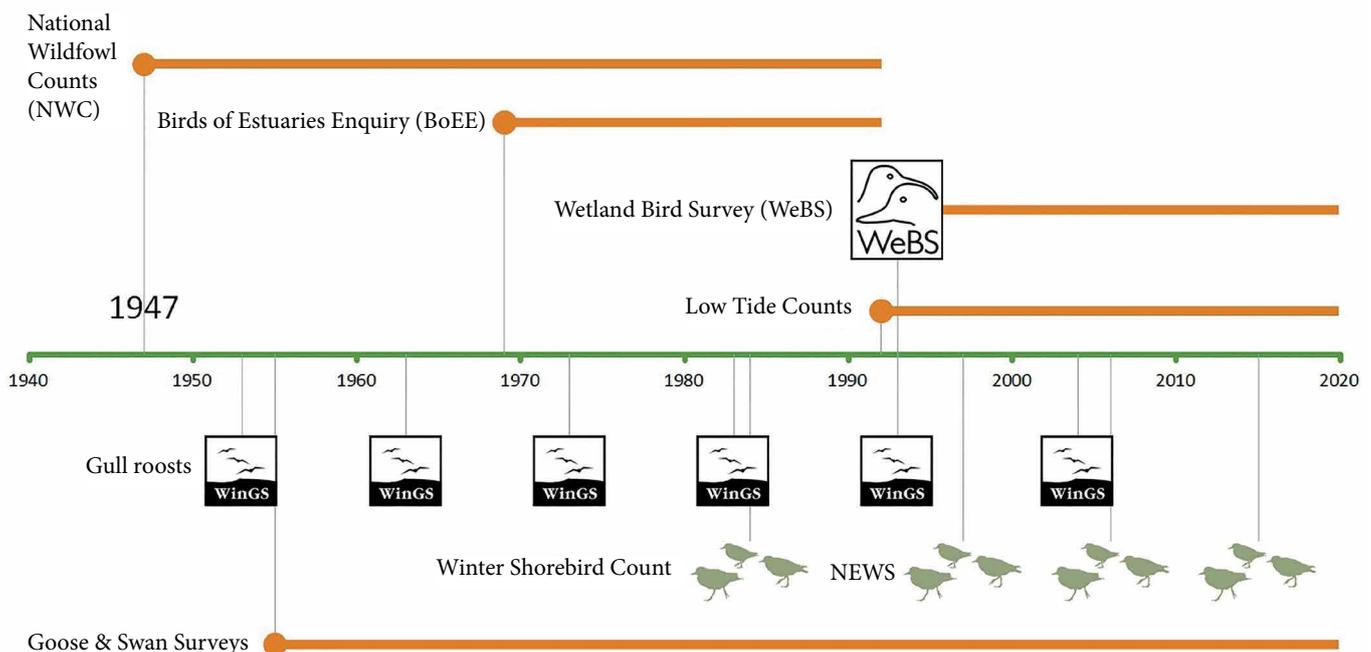
of waterbirds included has grown, so that today WeBS can produce non-wintering trends for over 100 waterbird species or races and typically a further 100 species are recorded in small numbers each year.

Sister surveys have been carried out that better suit waterbirds from other habitats or that feed in the wider countryside, including targeted geese, swan and gull roost surveys, grassland plover surveys and surveys of the waterbirds of the non-estuarine coast. The analysis methods and data applications have continuously developed, and today we can produce

WeBS alerts for sites and species, country-level trends and undertake risk analyses for the spread of avian influenza. The wintering waterbirds indicator brings together many species trends to give an overall measure of the health of wetlands for policy makers. We can even combine UK data with that from other countries in the International Waterbird Census, to model large-scale distribution changes across continents and flyways. The usefulness of waterbird monitoring is more indisputable than ever and every WeBS counter past and present should feel proud of their contribution.



George Atkinson-Willes, NWC Organiser in the 1950s and 1960s, using a counting machine to tally NWC counts.



Timeline of major non-breeding waterbird surveys.

# WeBS 70th Anniversary Conference



The first WeBS Conference in many years took place recently to celebrate the 70th anniversary of waterbird counting in the UK.

**Teresa Frost** WeBS National Organiser

Nearly 100 WeBS counters, local organisers and Partners gathered at Martin Mere WWT Centre in Lancashire on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017 to celebrate 70 years since the first national wildfowl counts began, and to reflect on how far we've come.

Those who were listening to the *Today Programme* on BBC Radio 4 on their way to Martin Mere were delighted to hear a piece on what is now Attenborough Nature Reserve in Nottinghamshire. Designated a SSSI for its nationally important numbers of Shoveler, the local counter made sure to emphasise how crucial WeBS counting is – and he was pleased to report the highest numbers since the 1980s at the most recent count.

The first speaker, JNCC Senior Ornithologist David Stroud, has sat on the WeBS steering committee since the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry and National Waterbird Counts became WeBS in 1993. He took us right back before 1947 to the concerns regarding the impacts of hunting pressure and development on wildfowl that prompted the setting up of national monitoring scheme. One of the main driving forces for the first systematic counts, was Phyllis Barclay-Smith, reputedly a “human dynamo” and the first woman to receive an MBE for services to nature conservation. George Atkinson-Willes picked up what she and Christopher Dalgety had started and ran with it, getting an astonishing 500 sites covered within four years and organising the counts with the help of regional organisers during the 1950s and 1960s.



NEIL CALERADE

**There was a good turnout of WeBS counters, local organisers and staff from the partner organisations.**

David also highlighted the importance of the counts for many policy and conservation uses, from the removal of Brent Geese from the quarry list to the designation of many sites as SSSIs and later SPAs. His response to the question of whether WeBS and related schemes had made a difference? They have been “totally fundamental”.

After this informative overview, we were treated to a series of excellent talks covering data gathering and data use, together at the heart of the scheme's success. Tom Clare, WWT's Martin Mere reserve warden astounded us with the thought of the original Martin Mere, a lake ten times the size of Windermere which was drained for agriculture. Revising the current

site management plan, he explained how he uses both the local and national trends and research from WeBS data to decide whether site habitat management for a declining species is appropriate. Counts from across the country are as essential to his planning as counting at Martin Mere itself.

Keith Cowieson from the RAF Ornithological Society (RAFOS) wowed us with photos of their annual expeditions to the very north of mainland Scotland, covering sites that otherwise we would know little about. Efficient military operation of three teams enable coverage of over 220 WeBS count sectors in just over a week. Sometimes a lake may turn out to be more of a pristine skating rink than full of birds, but

they always see something interesting - whether it is unusual species or familiar birds that are noticeably site faithful (see *WeBS News 26* for more on the RAFOS expeditions).

Stella Baylis of Natural England urged us to stay calm and keep counting – WeBS data are very important for Natural England's work, not least because the majority of the almost 1,000 non-breeding bird features on 560 SSSIs are waterbirds. Evidence from WeBS, both quantitative, and qualitative from counters' local knowledge, is crucial for decision making and mitigation, with the most recent example being planning the England coastal path on the Severn Estuary sensitively to roost sites. We were intrigued as to how successful the new "Great Bird Screen of Brean" will be!

Following a delicious lunch, WeBS Low Tide Organiser Neil Calbrade explained the many uses of estuarine Low Tide Count data which complement WeBS Core Counts by monitoring species' distribution within estuaries. A total of 86 estuaries have now been covered at least once since the first counts in 1992/93. The methodology is adapted to the vagaries of each site, with The Wash for example only being possible to sample using linear transects. Repeating the survey, ideally every six years, allows changes in distribution to be seen, often related to geographic changes in the positions of sandbanks and substrates.

WeBS Dee Estuary Local Organiser Colin Wells regaled us with what Low Tide counting can be like at a large estuary. With perfect weather and tide conditions, he could cover a substantial part of the Dee with a single 16km transect – when he was younger! It is "an amazing experience to walk down the middle of the estuary with no one else around" and he has been training the next generation. We hope they are not put off by the time when he was caught out by a tidal surge from a weather system and had to swim back unclothed!



BEUNDA DARGIE

The WeBS team hold up the celebratory cake, with BTO, WWT, JNCC and RSPB staff and conference attendees looking on.

Teresa Frost, WeBS National Organiser, looked back at seven decades of WeBS data. Perhaps some in the audience were surprised by which species had the highest overall count total (Dunlin with 193 million) and which had been seen most frequently (Mallard on over 820,000 WeBS counts), with waders dominating the top ten of the former and wildfowl and other waterbirds the latter. We were reminded that the success of the schemes was thanks to the people involved – counters, local organisers and the national organisers and funding partners, and also what counters themselves get back from counting for WeBS.

*“Carrying out the WeBS counts over the years has given me some of the most rewarding times I have ever had whilst bird-watching and has allowed me to make a very small contribution to the BTO’s efforts to learn more about birds in Britain. Thank you, BTO.”*

Robin Harris, December 2016  
WeBS counter 1976 – 2009, 2015 – present

After we had eaten some celebration cake, Nicholas Watts reflected on the changes he has seen at Holbeach Marsh, a count sector

on The Wash, since his first count in 1969 – which he remembers as being a beautiful day until he got down to the sea wall and being enveloped in fog! One of the big changes has been the huge increase in the extent of the salt marsh, making counting more difficult. This has benefited the Brent Geese, a species which can feed safely nocturnally without moonlight thanks to their habit of feeding in close proximity to each other. Annual Wigeon numbers are closely related to fluctuations in the fruiting of Sea Purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*) – a reminder of the many variables which affect WeBS counts from year to year.

James Pearce-Higgins, BTO Director of Science, wrapped up the conference with a whistle-stop tour of just some of the research that has used WeBS counts over the years. This has ranged from the impact of cockle fishing on local Oystercatcher numbers, to predictions that though species distributions may shift in response to climate change, currently designated Special Protection Areas are forecast to remain important to waterbirds in the future.

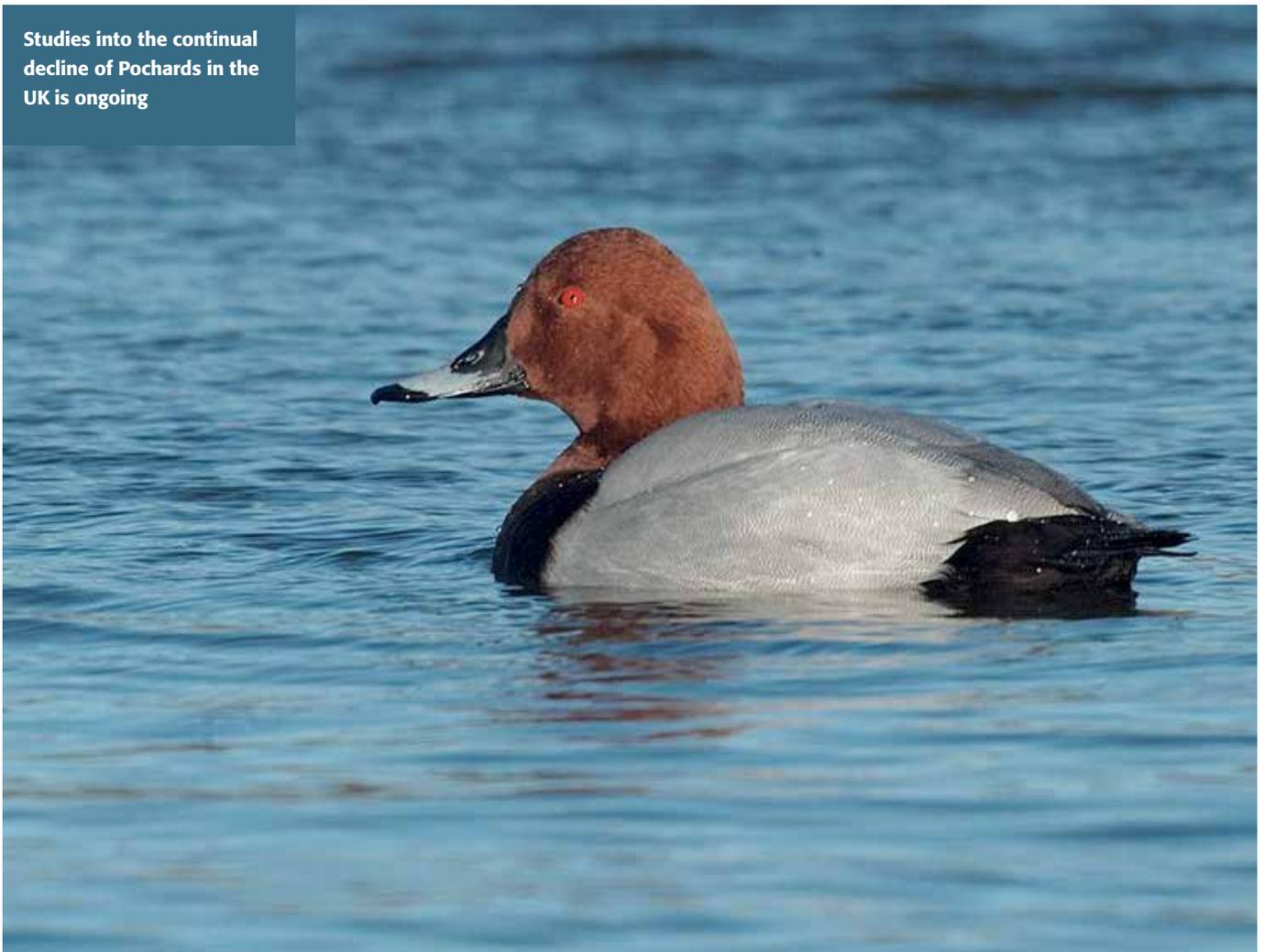
Many thanks from the WeBS team to all the speakers, attendees and staff at Martin Mere for a memorable day.

# Results of the Pochard sex ratio assessment

Pochard numbers in the UK in winter have declined by 67% in the past 25 years. The ratio of sexes within wintering flocks may hold the key as a recent assessment revealed interesting results...

**Kane Brides** Monitoring Assistant, WWT

Studies into the continual decline of Pochards in the UK is ongoing



NORTHEASTWILDLIFE.CO.UK

In an earlier edition of WeBS News we asked counters to help with the collection of sex ratio counts of Pochard at their WeBS locations in January 2016. We were overwhelmed with the response from many waterbird counters and birders across Europe and North Africa who got involved, so a big thank you to all of you! In the UK, many WeBS counters kindly helped to collect sex ratio data

and in total over 500 UK counters and birders participated.

We provided an update on the assessment in *WeBS News No.32* and we are now pleased to report that we have completed the analysis.

To compare the 2016 results with a previous survey carried out in January 1989 and 1990, data from thirteen countries were used in our assessment. This comprised a total of

106,288 individual Pochard that were sexed in 834 flocks. This indicated that the proportion of males in the total European and North African population has increased from 61% in 1989–90 to 70% in 2016. Overall, eight of the thirteen countries showed greater male bias in 2016. This suggests that factors that adversely affect female survival (and cause the normal preponderance of males) may have

worsened and caused a further decrease in female survival (relative to that of males). This may partly explain the overall decline in Pochard abundance.

There are several potential direct and indirect factors which may explain this apparent decrease in female survival. The two most likely are thought to be changes in levels of direct and indirect hunting mortality and predation. Firstly, Pochard is widely hunted, being legal quarry in at least 26 countries throughout Europe. Waterbird hunting pressure within Europe is widely recognised as being greatest in southern Europe where the largest proportion of female Pochard overwinter. Spatial differences in hunting pressure may also influence female survival indirectly through mortality of the birds ingesting spent lead gunshot. The prevalence of lead gunshot ingestion by waterbirds varies considerably among European countries but tends to be higher in southern Europe. Pochard have also been shown to be more susceptible to lead ingestion than many other European waterbirds.

Increased female mortality from predation is another possible cause; a recent review of the decline in Pochard suggested that predation by a range of species, including non-native mammals, could be a major threat to breeding birds. Female Pochard spend more time on the breeding grounds, incubating eggs and raising ducklings, than do males, leading to an increased level of predation particularly during the incubation period. The rapid spread of some non-native mammals may be exacerbating this.

Whilst this study provides some very useful indications of what might be contributing to the decline of Pochard, overall we still lack adequate knowledge to explain the demographic causes and underlying drivers of the observed decrease in the proportion of females. Given the widespread and ongoing decline of this species throughout most of Europe and North Africa, further information on demographic drivers of change is urgently required to help facilitate the development of targeted conservation and management actions for this declining duck species.

We would like to extend huge appreciation to the many WeBS counters who collected data for this assessment. The study highlighted the value of monitoring sex ratios and as a result we are keen to reinvigorate this. We are exploring ways of doing this, but in the meantime you can still enter any sex ratio counts (for all duck species) via the online form on the Duck Specialist Group website - <http://www.ducksg.org/projects/compoch/common-pochard-sex-ratio-data-submissions/>. Furthermore, if you have historical sex ratio data we would very much like to hear from you as this could enhance our understanding of long-term changes in population structure.

The paper will be available to read in November 2017 in *Wildfowl* <http://www.wwt.org.uk/conservation/saving-wetlands-and-wildlife/publications/wildfowl/>

**Brides, K., Wood, K.A., Hearn, R.D. & Fijen, TPM.** In press. Changes in the sex ratio of Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* in Europe and North Africa. *Wildfowl* 67.

## A call for help!

Help is needed with age assessments of Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Whooper Swans.

**Colette Hall** Monitoring Officer, WWT

Each year, a network of Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP)\* volunteers undertake age assessments of wintering goose and swan populations in the UK. Age assessments provide an indication of breeding success, an important demographic factor that affects the status of a population and is vital for understanding population changes.

Our GSMP counter network does a great job of covering many of the key areas, but inevitably, gaps in coverage appear from time to time. Therefore, in order for this important work to continue, WWT would like to expand the counter network. In particular, we are looking for help monitoring Dark-bellied Brent Geese at estuaries in southern and eastern England, and Whooper Swans at sites in Scotland and northern England.

To carry out age assessments, counters need to be confident in their ability to age the species in question



If you see Dark-bellied Brent Geese or Whooper Swans this winter, you can help

and understand how to collect data from a flock of birds. For those of you who are beginners, information on how to age birds is available on request, as are details of the survey methodology.

If you are interested in contributing to the survey it would be great to hear from you. Please get in touch by emailing [monitoring@wwt.org.uk](mailto:monitoring@wwt.org.uk) for further information.

Results from all GSMP age assessments can be found on WWT's Waterbird Monitoring website at <https://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/our-work/goose-swan-monitoring-programme/species-accounts/>.

\*The GSMP is organised by WWT in partnership with JNCC and SNH.

# High in the Skye

As part of the 2015/16 NEWS Counts, an 'expedition team' from Rye Meads Ringing Group surveyed some of the coastline on the Isle of Skye. Alan Harris recalls the trip...

**Alan Harris** WeBS Counter and NEWS Surveyor

Three inches of snow on the car at 4:30 am didn't bode well for the long drive north. Who had spent the night hours of 16<sup>th</sup> January 2016 scraping up the quarter inch of snow in the surrounds and piling it up on our car God only knows.

Two hundred miles on and the fog was thickening and I remembered my Dad's observation many years ago... 'It's grim up North'. I think he was talking more Cambridge, but the sentiment fitted. And there was more lying snow; I anticipated the Pennine crossing with some trepidation as we approached Scotch Corner (famous as home of the inventor of Sellotape, and where pigs used to lay eggs\*). As we gained height up the A66 we burst through the fog and into a bright early morning winter wonderland. Stunning sunny snowscapes accompanied us for the remainder of the day; destination a frozen Fort William.

My wife Sally and I planned to spend a day birding around the foothills of Ben Nevis. Great plans thwarted by freezing fog. We skidded along the icy foreshore for a practice run at surveying and I surprised myself by finding a Greenshank and an Iceland Gull. My wife Sally undertook a comprehensive survey of all the waterfront eateries, complete with extensive commentary on the various menus. At the pier head I capitulated and we had a cuppa and an all-day breakfast in Morrisons. From the tone of her silence I could tell it wasn't quite what she was thinking of...

The rest of the day's expedition target was the Black Grouse - we had more chance of seeing bigfoot. Three



SALLY HARRIS

hours in a cloud mass conifer forest (for a Wren, a Coal Tit, a Hooded Crow, and yes, a probable bigfoot) didn't float her boat. The four hours in Wetherspoon's was much more up her street.

Next morning was an early start to get up to Skye for a rendezvous with the rest of the team - Sarah, Rob and Matt. High up overlooking Glen Garry an annoying tailgater turned out to be the rest of our unit, with Sarah at the wheel. Crossing the Skye Bridge we stopped and, after a catch up (they'd been in eastern Scotland ringing Crested Tits and Dippers!) Sarah, our leader, led us south down the Sleat peninsula for our first Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS). En route my wife, Sally, pointed out all the hostelrys and outlined possible food and beverage combinations.

This first survey was a 'gentle introduction, a nice easy section, mostly from a track above the shore'.

Wrong; this was a proper hike up and down interminable boggy ravines, some mild rock scrambling and a delicate rocky traverse round a wave-swept undercliff. Exhausting, in fact. Brilliant birds though, more Great Northern Divers than most of us had seen in our lifetimes, a surprising number of Woodcock considering the treeless nature of the terrain, and a just reward, our first distant White-tailed Eagles. Matt got wet feet.

As I trailed into the car park two hundred yards behind everyone else, waterproofs chaffing in places I had long forgotten the names of, I realised I was probably past my peak by some margin, and wondered at the prospect of keeping up in the days to come.

Our home for the week was a cracking bungalow at Crossal, advertised 'with fantastic views of the Cuillins'. Not a word to be uttered in my wife's presence; the Cuillin range, according to her, had photo-bombed



SARAH HARRIS



MATT WALLACE

**An unfortunate Little Auk was picked up dead while the team were out surveying the rugged coastline of Skye**



SARAH HARRIS

all of her holiday photos a few years previously. Thankfully cloud cover erased them from view and memory but for one day of the trip. That first evening she really came into her own; food and drink. We relaxed, knowing that whatever the weather threw at us, we would be well provisioned. Somehow, Matt got wet feet.

And the weather did throw itself at us, with heavy rain and gale force winds. At Talisker, the impressive cliff waterfall got halfway down before being blown back up over the clifftop! Not all bad though, I concluded, when being blown uphill by a 50 mph wind, I merely raised a leg, blown upwards, planting that foot and raising the other so on, it was like being on a conveyor. I casually watched a Golden Eagle going past downhill into the wind and thought to myself; 'yeah, this is good'. Other times though, hanging on to terra firma on the slippery, wet grass of

a cliff top was grim work indeed.

As we surveyed in small groups of two or three, or as a full team, we covered a good amount of sections, and got a fair share of rewards – Otters on the foreshore, regular eagle encounters and for some, pet rescue cetacean style. A cry of 'Porpoise' had Matt scanning the inlet, only for Rob to point out that it was beneath his feet, flipping about on the tide line. 'Maybe he's trying to tell us something'. Yeah, it's wet out there. There was only one thing to do, pick him up and march him out into the bay. Matt (and Rob) got wet feet.

The evenings were surprisingly social affairs, Sarah having worked on Skye and the Harris family having holidayed there meant that we had some old friends to see. Great times.

Then there was the fateful morning that Rob emerged from the shower and announced 'No water'. Never

mind that, I thought, put some clothes on. We spent the morning on the phone to the owners, or outside with our arms down wells, or dredging the nearby burn in search of the source of the magical turquoise pipe, all the while the local Goldies put on a show quartering the hillside. Sally made tea (how?), Matt got wet feet. By evening the brilliant owners (from afar) had organised a plumber who had sorted it all out and we could relax again.

Our one 'overseas' excursion had Matt all excited, being a keen devotee of pelagics. A ferry crossing to the neighbouring island of Raasay and.... more survey sections!

In a blisteringly cold, sleety wind we made the crossing. It wasn't like we'd decided when to go, or were err... driving the ferry, but it felt like pioneering stuff! The bemused locals sat cosily in their cars as we scurried around the top deck trying to spot birds and getting all over-enthusiastic. Two Little Auks were the stars, and after disembarking we separated to cover as many sections as possible. My own plot gave me Black-throated Diver, White-tailed Eagle and coincidentally a freshly-dead Little Auk which I slipped into my pocket to show the others later.

Soon we got a call. At the end of their section Matt and Rob had a pair of Goldies soaring low above their heads, really close. With our own first sections completed we were eager to get round to see them. I totally forgot that I'd put the dead Little Auk in my pocket so when I felt in there for a sweet and felt an unexpected furry incumbent I let out a girly yelp. Duh. We left that sad little corpse out for the Goldies in case there was a bit of the Kerry Katona about them and they fancied something from Iceland.

By the end we had surveyed 105 kilometres (62 miles) of coast and completed 37 sections. It had been very enjoyable and worthwhile. I visited places I'd never been to before and I saw familiar haunts in wintery conditions. All the team were great company and best of all, hard-working and determined – it was an excellent week.

[\* Scotch eggs]

# Validating WeBS data

Once the WeBS year ends at the end of June, the process of validating data begins in preparation of the following year's WeBS Report.

**Neil Calbrade** WeBS National Organiser

Every year, nearly 3,000 WeBS counters carry out monthly counts at over 2,000 WeBS sites. The data gathered each year are used to assess the size of non-breeding waterbird populations, determine trends in their numbers and distribution, and assess the importance of individual sites for waterbirds, in line with the requirements of international conservation Conventions and Directives. WeBS Data are widely used for academic studies, county bird reports and by professional environmental consultants for habitats or environmental impact assessments. The process of validating data therefore is an important step for the integrity of WeBS data.

For years, the thousands of WeBS count forms we receive were input by an external company and records had to be manually validated before they could be placed in the database. Since the advent of WeBS Online in 2006, the validation process, thankfully for the WeBS office, has become easier. WeBS counters on inputting their counts will see a summary page with any records which break set thresholds for number, location, season or rarity highlighted to be checked, and any inputting errors could be rectified by the counter before being submitted.

All these threshold breaking records which may not have been deemed an error are then checked again by the WeBS office and any records that seem incorrect can be queried.

In most cases, the data submitted will match those published but any counts of young birds or birds flying over where they have been commented as being as such from counts may have been removed by the WeBS Office.



Although WeBS sites during the summer may hold breeding birds and their offspring will be present, these young should not be included within counts.

## Young birds

WeBS is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK. Although counts are carried out year round, numbers of young birds should not be included within WeBS counts. The reason for this is that from a brood of chicks, be they ducklings, goslings, cygnets or waders, there will inevitably

**'The process of validating data therefore is an important step for the integrity of WeBS data'**

be some which are predated or die from other natural causes, so we ask that only birds which are **two-thirds grown** are included in WeBS counts. However, as county bird reports may be interested in brood sizes, if you do want to record the number of young birds of any species you see, please add these in the comments and exclude them from the total for that species.

The following guide will hopefully help you decide what age birds should and should not be included.

**Do not include**

MUTE SWANS BY ANNE CARRINGTON-COTTON



CANADA GOOSE BY JOHN HARDING



SHELDUCK BY JOHN HARDING



COOT BY RIC JACKSON



**Include**

MUTE SWAN BY NEIL CALBRADE



CANADA GOOSE BY NEIL CALBRADE



SHELDUCK BY MOSS TAYLOR



MOORHEN BY NORTHEAST WILDLIFE.CO.UK



**Fly overs**

Only birds using the habitat for feeding or resting should be recorded. Species such as gulls which are circling low overhead will be present due to the presence of the waterbody and so can be counted, but birds flying straight over without stopping should not be counted. If you do want to record a species flying over as it is an interesting record for the site, in WeBS Online you can tick the box to say it was present without adding a count and then in the comments add a note to state it/they was flying over along with the number or direction.

**Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2017–2018 season...**

- 2017...**
- 8 October
  - 19 November
  - 10 December

- 2018...**
- 21 January
  - 18 February
  - 18 March
  - 15 April
  - 20 May
  - 17 June
  - 15 July
  - 12 August
  - 9 September
  - 14 October
  - 11 November
  - 9 December

Keep up-to-date with counts and dates at [www.bto.org/webs/coredates](http://www.bto.org/webs/coredates)

# WWT Steart Marshes - A Working Wetland

Managed realignment sites create vital habitat for waterbirds while alleviating the risk to coastal communities from rising sea levels.

**Alys Laver** WWT Steart Marshes Site Manager

Climate change, rising sea levels, tidal surges and wave erosion are posing an increased risk to coastal communities. Sea levels have risen by 20cm since 1900 and will rise by a minimum of 26cm and a maximum of 1m by 2100 (IPCC (2013) 5th Assessment Report). The UK has 17,000 km of coastline, of which 18% has sea defences or artificial beaches but 17% of the coastline is currently eroding. For existing sea defences to continue to work the flood embankment heights need to be raised. These hard defences cost approximately £5,000 per metre, plus the continued maintenance costs. These costs are ongoing for the life of the structure and therefore result in significant levels of investment through a project's lifetime. Continued investment in maintenance is highly recommended to ensure defences continue to provide design levels of protection. Where businesses and homes are already established there is no other option but to build higher defences. This not only comes at a huge financial cost but also an environmental one. As sea levels rise and tidal inundations increase, the internationally important habitat



DUNLIN BY JOE COCKRAM, WWT

type Atlantic salt meadows, found at higher elevations within the range of naturally occurring saltmarsh communities, become inundated more frequently and would normally migrate inland. However where we have constructed sea walls it is unable to do so. This results in the saltmarsh being squeezed out, a term known as “coastal squeeze” (Fig.1). It is these losses of habitat, which provide important areas for

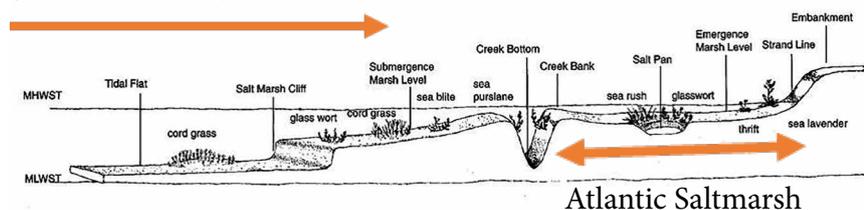
specialised plants and thousands of wintering waders, that need to be compensated for elsewhere.

## Sustainable Solution

In some places along the coastline where no property or coastal communities exist, often there is an opportunity to reduce costly flood defence management and seek a cheaper and more sustainable option. The process of managed coastal realignment, where the existing flood defences are breached after either new defences are constructed inland or rising topography allows natural flood protection, can provide valuable areas for the saltmarsh to develop creating habitat and a natural flood defence (Fig.2).

WWT Steart Marshes was created by the process of managed coastal realignment and is situated at the confluence of the River Parrett and

## Saltmarsh erodes landward



**Fig 1. Schematic diagram showing the profile of a saltmarsh and mudflat and the main physiographical features ([www.abdn.ac.uk/geospatial](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/geospatial))**



New wall is created inland



Tides now flood and new saltmarsh establishes



Fig 2. Artists impressions

Severn Estuary near Bridgwater, Somerset (Fig.3). At 477 hectares it is one of the largest habitat creation projects in the UK. The site provides current and future compensation habitat to the Severn Estuary, which holds SAC, SPA, SSSI and Ramsar designations on account of its importance to biodiversity which includes internationally important numbers of Bewick's Swan, European White-fronted Goose, Gadwall, Shelduck, Dunlin and Redshank. This was necessary under EU legislation, to ensure any loss of existing habitat caused by the flood risk management works undergone by the Environment Agency (EA) was offset. The farmland was purchased through voluntary

agreement in April 2011, and the EA entered into a 50 year lease agreement with WWT to help create and manage this mosaic of extensive inter-tidal and freshwater wetlands. Founded in 1946, WWT brings 70 years' experience of visitor and wetland management which fed into the design and construction process.

Works to transform the former farmland into tidal and freshwater wetlands started in March 2012 and the breach in the existing embankments of the River Parrett was completed in September 2014, both connecting the newly created wetland habitats to the river and estuary beyond and starting the process of tidal inundation.

The landscape at WWT Steart Marshes has undergone major changes, originally comprising a complex network of freshwater ditches, planted hedges and fields, the majority of which was in agricultural use as improved pasture or cultivated land. This low lying area of farmland was a natural choice for inter-tidal habitat creation as it was increasingly under threat from tidal incursion due to rising sea levels, with the potential for a repeat of the River Parrett banks breaching, as in December 1981 following a storm surge, causing extensive damage to the farmland and property.

WWT Steart Marshes is an exemplar of design and engineering, providing a fantastic mosaic of habitats within three main areas. The largest at 260 hectares, is the intertidal area of Steart Marsh. Otterhampton Marsh is also tidal, though regulated through a water control structure with the added provision for creating brackish lagoons. Stockland Marsh is a freshwater wetland habitat and was created to contribute towards EA regional habitat creation targets. All are connected via a network of freshwater ditches and water control structures. Over time a new creek system will begin to develop naturally within Steart Marsh and a range of intertidal habitats will form which including a range of saltmarsh habitat types. To compensate for hedgerows and ditches lost during construction, after the completion of the major groundworks more than 10,000 locally native shrubs and trees and 20,000 aquatic plants were planted.

### A Working Wetland

The opening of WWT Steart Marshes to the public in February 2014 was a big step to further the vision and mission of WWT, it is the charity's first 'Working Wetland' – a place that demonstrates how wetlands are productive and useful. As a free entry site Steart Marshes offers opportunities to reach new audiences, it offers the opportunity to focus on the ecosystem services or natural capital that wetlands offer.

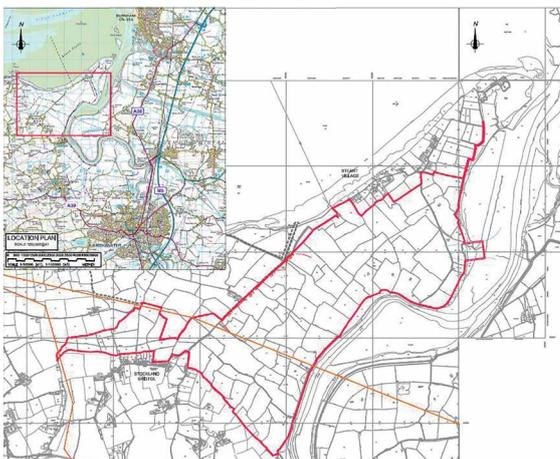
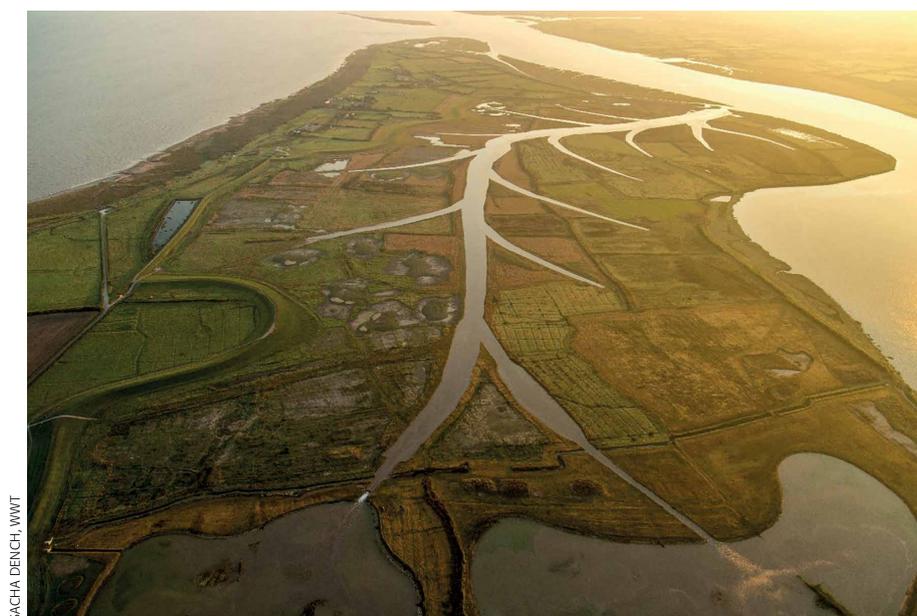


Fig 3. WWT Steart's location within the Severn Estuary

The site delivers a multitude of economic benefits such as flood risk management, with improved flood defences and the ability to divert and store freshwater. Saltmarshes are known to store 5–87 Mega Carbon Tonnes per year and provide a safe haven and ideal breeding ground for commercial fish species such as sea bass. The site also offers grazing opportunities for local farmers with the production of high end food products such as saltmarsh beef and lamb. With no shop or café on site, visitors are encouraged to use local amenities which in turn encourages revenue to be invested into the local area and helps support small local businesses.

There are numerous health and recreational benefits for people visiting the site and the facilities and interpretation have been developed to enhance these, including a large network of accessible paths, four large viewing hides and a car park and toilets – the latter featuring a constructed treatment wetland that helps improve the water quality from the liquid effluent.

The provision of habitat is also key, with the Severn Estuary having the second highest tidal range in the world, at around 15m. At low tide, vast expanses of mud, rich in invertebrate life are exposed which in turn support large numbers of waders and wildfowl. During the winter of 2016–2017, WeBS counts and additional survey effort from staff and volunteers recorded 25,427 individual waterbirds of 51 species on site. This included nationally important numbers of Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Greenshank, Lapwing, Little Egret, Redshank, Shelduck, Shoveler and Teal. The site is also of considerable value to passage birds during the spring and autumn months, with Green Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, and Ruff dropping by in notable numbers. Islands and the higher elevated areas of saltmarsh hold nesting Yellow Wagtail and Skylark and waders including Avocet, Little Ringed Plover and Lapwing, while Cuckoo, Reed Bunting, Linnet, Stonechat, Cetti's and Sedge Warblers breed in the surrounding



SACHA DENCH, WWT

#### September 2014 – First ever tidal inundation

mosaic of hedges, reedbeds and arable fields. Local birdwatchers have enjoyed several notable rarities including overwintering American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal and shorter visits from Gull-billed Tern and Lesser Yellowlegs.

A total of 15 plant species typical of saltmarshes were recorded in 2016, including Annual Glasswort (*Salicornia europaea agg.*), Annual Sea Blite (*Suaeda maritima*), Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*) and less commonly, Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*).

WWT Steart Marshes offers unique research opportunities with the involvement of a suite of universities such as Manchester Metropolitan University, Oxford Brookes University, the University of Southampton, Bridgwater College and the University of Plymouth. Research plays a pivotal and clearly defined role for WWT. The monitoring and assessment of the benefits provided by WWT Steart Marshes provides evidence that can help influence strategic audiences, and working closely with the Environment Agency can be fed into the Natural Capital accounts for the site. Focusing on five services – carbon storage, air quality, agriculture, recreation and properties protected from flooding the overall natural capital valuation for Steart Marshes is between £15 million and £28 million.

With the additional data obtained from the research and monitoring the number of metrics can increase which allows for a more accurate valuation which is expected to increase.

WWT Steart Marshes is developing into a fantastic site for people and wildlife and has already won a host of awards for its sustainable credentials and community involvement, including the Institute of Civil Engineering's 'This is Civil Engineering Award'. With a very ambitious vision for wetlands over the next 25 years and some major challenges ahead of us, WWT Steart Marshes plays an important part of realising that vision. We need to demonstrate and offer practical, achievable solutions, engage people with wetland nature, encourage wider action for wetlands locally and globally and use our knowledge to influence wetland policies and programmes. WWT Steart Marshes is a perfect example of what can be done to achieve this.

***“We need to be brave and bold if we are going to deal with the impacts of climate change. WWT Steart Marshes proves you can protect homes and businesses by using wetland technology that works with nature, not against it.”***

WWT Chief Executive Martin Spray

## IN THE NEWS...

### SURVEYS

## Low Tide Counts update

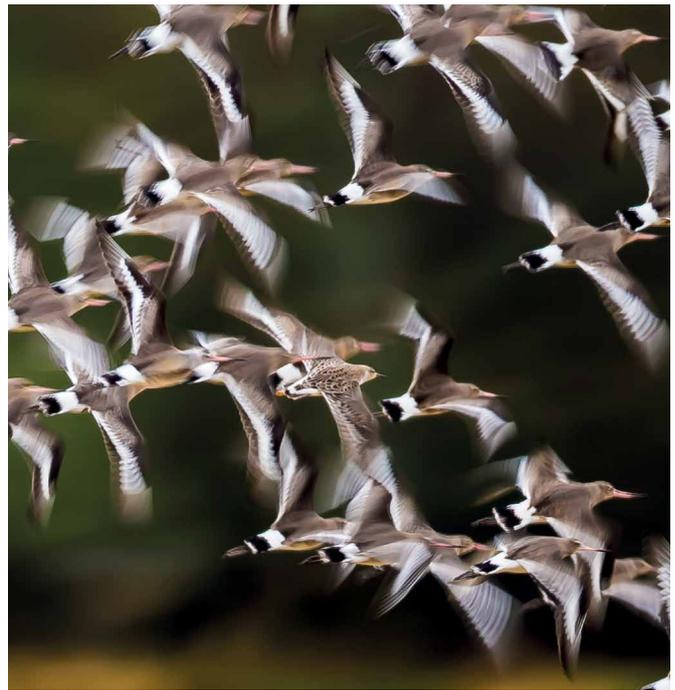
**Neil Calbrade** WeBS Low Tide Count Organiser

Low Tide Counts began in 1992/93 and, 25 years on, they continue to provide excellent distributional data on waterbird usage of estuaries.

The winter of 2016/17 saw Low Tide Counts carried out at 15 estuaries around the UK, including the Exe Estuary, Clyde Estuary and North Norfolk Coast, all of which were due under the six-yearly cycle.

The counts for the 2017/18 winter will be underway shortly, with the Mersey, Taw-Torrige, Conwy Estuary, Traeth Lafan (Lavan Sands) and Blackwater Estuary among those confirmed, and also thanks to funding from Natural England, The Wash will be included for the first time.

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme. Please email [lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org) if you would be able to organise a team of counters or be able to cover a whole site yourself.



TREVOR WILSON

**Black-tailed godwits are a common sight on many estuaries.**

Dot density maps for most sites and years have now been uploaded onto the WeBS Online Report and can be viewed at [www.bto.org/webs-reporting](http://www.bto.org/webs-reporting) where distribution maps and density statistics are available.

### HAZARDS OF DOING WeBS COUNTS

## What a croc...

**Over the years we have heard many tales from WeBS Counters of their experiences while carrying out their counts, but this short tale from Alan Pomroy remains one of our favourites...**

Just to prove that WeBS counts are not without their hazards, the 2.5m long beast in the photo oppsite caused my heart to skip a beat when I stumbled across it during the October count at Kitley Pond in South Devon. Shock was followed by

amusement as I realised it was one of a number of life-size models used as targets during field archery events on the estate!

I have been completing counts at Kitley and the adjacent Yealm Estuary for 25 years and this was one of the biggest surprises so far.



# Winter Wetland Bird Blitz in Greater Manchester

A bird blitz is great way to inspire local volunteers while carrying out important waterbird monitoring

**Mike Beard** Natural Course Project Officer

The Greater Manchester Ecology Unit organised a Winter Wetland Bird Blitz last winter in response to reports of significant changes to the wintering duck distribution on the River Irwell in Greater Manchester, where there are regionally significant numbers of Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. A Site of Biological Importance had been created on a section of the Irwell because it regularly held large winter flocks of these birds.

Using the WeBS survey method enabled us to investigate these changes, while also adding valuable data to the WeBS dataset. However, this was to be a 'blitz', covering as much of the river as possible for just one morning to make it easier to recruit volunteers. A simultaneous count would be a more accurate snapshot indication of the population of waterbirds. It also created a stepping stone, encouraging volunteers to become monthly WeBS counters.

We were delighted to receive support from the WeBS team and Jamie Dunning, our Local Organiser at the time. Almost all of the Irwell had vacant high priority WeBS sites, so the upside of the survey was greatly enhanced. Permission to use the WeBS online system meant volunteers could easily enter their own data, and collation of the results was simpler.

The count sections on the Irwell have evolved since counts began there in 1995. Clarifying the survey sections included splitting up very long ones into more manageable lengths; the counts could be combined prior to data being entered. We selected the lower reaches of the River Irwell and



MIKE BEARD

major tributaries, where the habitat is suitable for the key duck species mentioned above.

Assistant County Recorder Steve Atkins led a very enjoyable survey method and bird ID training course for 10 trainees on 17<sup>th</sup> December. Everybody was impressed by how many birds could be found on a heavily modified section of urban river. We also recruited additional experienced volunteers. Happily, we were able to meet everybody's preferences, such as pairing with experienced surveyors and assigning convenient counting sections.

The survey took place on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2017 - we chose a non-Core Count priority date in case we needed to draft in existing WeBS counters from other areas. Sixteen surveyors (and two companions) covered 41 km of the River Irwell, stretching from

Salford Quays to north of Bury.

After data verification by Steve Atkins, here are some highlight results. Caution should be taken as these are based upon just one sample, and the data series that we are comparing to is patchy with many sections having only occasionally been counted. Also, it was optional to record some of the species listed.

From a total of 69, the highest numbers of Goldeneye were found between Hough Lane Bridge and Agecroft Bridge, but numbering 50 rather than the 105–153 that were seen during January in the early 2000s. The good news is that the next section downriver, Manchester Cathedral to Hough Lane Bridge, had 18 whereas previously the highest January count had been just five. The news was not so good upriver as the next section, Agecroft Bridge to Ringley Road

Bridge, which had previously, but not consistently, seen double figures, was now down to just one Goldeneye. Another previous hotspot is Bury Bridge to Outwood Weir, but no Goldeneye were found compared to 14–21 in the early 2000s.

Tufted Duck are highly mobile and none of the various other water bodies nearby were frozen over. This might explain the total for 41km of the river – just 23. In contrast, the historic January records for Wallness Crescent 1999–2007 vary between 68 and 366. Another example, Salford Quays 1996–1998, has a low count of one and a high of 435.

Regarding other notable findings, a total of 420 Mallard were seen across all 10 sections. Moorhen were seen in nine sections. Their total of 61 was nearly matched by Teal at 58. It was good to see that Goosander were in seven sections with a total of 41 birds. Seven Kingfishers were found in four sections. Twelve Dippers were



MIKE BEARD

Two volunteers practising the survey method during our training workshop on the River Irwell

present in five sections. Possibly the least likely bird was one Woodcock. A total of 22 species were recorded, not counting Domestic Mallard and those entered as duck hybrids or unidentified large gull species.

There had been a previous coordinated count along the River Irwell during 1998–99,

as reported in *Birds of Greater Manchester 1998*. It was a great initiative, but unfortunately direct comparison with the 1998–99 counts is not possible as the length of the river surveyed may have been different (they report covering approximately 36km) and it is not clear whether the historic counts were conducted simultaneously. One comparison does leap out however: in January 1999 they only saw two Canada Geese compared to our 187. During that entire winter their highest count was 31 in December.

Another successful outcome was three volunteers becoming new WeBS counters, and two more sections of the Irwell are once more going to be regularly surveyed. After a successful first run and some great feedback from the volunteers, the group plan to run the Winter Wetland Blitz once again this winter.

.....  
This survey was initiated as part of the Natural Course LIFE IP project: a ground-breaking collaborative water management project which brings together the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Environment Agency, Natural England, United Utilities and the Rivers Trust. More information is available at: [www.naturalcourse.co.uk](http://www.naturalcourse.co.uk)

Species	Total count for survey	Number of count sections found in
Black-headed Gull	491	6
Canada Goose	187	7
Common Gull	10	3
Coot	16	3
Cormorant	26	5
Dipper	12	5
Goldeneye	69	4
Goosander	41	7
Great Black-backed Gull	1	1
Grey Heron	15	7
Grey Wagtail	9	6
Herring Gull	2	2
Hybrid duck	1	1
Kingfisher	7	4
Lesser Black-backed Gull	6	3
Little Grebe	28	4
Mallard	420	10
Mallard (domestic)	2	1
Moorhen	61	9
Mute Swan	7	2
Pied/White Wagtail	2	1
Teal	58	2
Tufted Duck	23	3
Unidentified Large Gull sp.	1	1
Woodcock	1	1



## COUNTER NETWORK

# Local Organiser News

**Heidi Mellan** WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Steve Meen (Somerset Levels), Mike Leakey (Tees Estuary), Norman McCanch (Kent), Jamie Dunning (Greater Manchester), Paul Daw (Argyll Mainland and Mull), Anne de Potier (Chichester Harbour), Trefor Owen (Merioneth (other sites)) and Bobbie Anderson (Tynninghame Estuary) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter was published. We were greatly saddened to hear that Norman Holton, the Local Organiser for the Inner Solway Estuary, passed away in September 2016, and Peter Gibbon, the Local Organiser for Derbyshire, passed away in January, our condolences go out to their families, and they will both be greatly missed.

We would also like to thank the following new Local Organisers: Barrie Galpin who has taken over as the Northamptonshire Local Organiser, Trish Harper for taking on the Somerset Levels, Adam Jones who is the new Tees Estuary Local Organiser, Tim Wilcox for taking on Greater Manchester, Nigel Scriven who is the new Local Organiser for Argyll Mainland and Mull, Peter Hughes who has taken over

as the Chichester Harbour Local Organiser, Tara Sykes who is the new Local Organiser for the Tynninghame Estuary, David Blackledge for taking on the Inner Solway Estuary and Jim Dustow who is the new LO for Merioneth (other sites). Welcome to you all!

Our special thanks go out to Jim Weston who has been a Pagharn Harbour counter for 34 years, and Tony Smith who has recently retired as a WeBS counter on Arran after more than 30 years. Both were nominated by their Local Organisers to receive a special mention as a thank you for their support!

### Desperately seeking organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Angus; Buckinghamshire (South); Clwyd (coastal); Derbyshire; Durham; Essex (other sites); Halifax/Huddersfield area; Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin); Co. Down; Co. Londonderry and Co. Tyrone. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org).

## WeBS LOAC

### LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff by providing ideas, feedback and advice.

The 12th meeting of the LOAC will be held later this year and with it we will be welcoming two new members; Eve Tigwell has joined the committee as the Southwest England representative and Bob Swann is joining the committee as the North and West Scotland representative – welcome to you both.

The minutes from all previous meetings are available via the website at [www.bto.org/webs-loac](http://www.bto.org/webs-loac)

We are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC. If you would like to know more about what is involved please contact Heidi ([webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)).

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS which you would like to bring to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your Local Organiser or LOAC representative listed below.

### WeBS LOAC Representatives

#### Southwest England

Eve Tigwell  
[eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk](mailto:eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk)

#### Eastern England

Chris Gunn  
[donandchris@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:donandchris@hotmail.co.uk)

#### Midlands

Brian Moore  
[b\\_moore@ntlworld.com](mailto:b_moore@ntlworld.com)

#### Northern England

Colin Wells  
[colin.wells@rspb.org.uk](mailto:colin.wells@rspb.org.uk)

#### Wales

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#### South and East Scotland

Allan Brown  
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#### North and West Scotland

Bob Swann  
[robert.swann@homecall.co.uk](mailto:robert.swann@homecall.co.uk)

#### Northern Ireland

Kerry Mackie  
[kerrymackie9@gmail.com](mailto:kerrymackie9@gmail.com)

or

#### Shane Wolsey

[shane.wolsey@btinternet.com](mailto:shane.wolsey@btinternet.com)

## BACKCHAT

### Word of mouth...

### Vacant Sites...

Do you have a friend who would make a good WeBS counter, or perhaps you have time to take on an additional site yourself? We are always looking for more help! Vacant sites and priority sites can be explored via the 'Find a vacant site' button on the webs homepage at [www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs).



Over the past few months we have refreshed these pages to make it easier to see which sites are in need of a counter. It is also possible to set up new sites, particularly where these would help fill gaps in coverage of certain habitat types and regions – contact the relevant Local Organiser or Heidi Mellan at the WeBS office to discuss.

### Site photographs request

Following on from last year's appeal, we are still looking for photographs of every site for use in the WeBS Online Report. If we currently don't have a photograph of your site (please note that for complex sites with several sectors, we can only use one image) on the site pages of the report, but you have a photograph you would be happy for us to use, please send labelled images to [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org).

### Another five years of WeBS



The BTO and JNCC recently signed a new five-year partnership agreement covering our core surveys including the WeBS (BTO/RSPB/JNCC in association with WWT), Breeding Bird Survey & Waterways Breeding Bird Survey (BTO/JNCC/RSPB) and the Ringing and Nest Record schemes. Here, BTO Director Andy Clements is pictured with JNCC Chief Scientist Christine Maggs.

### Snap shot



### A long way from home

Reader and WeBS counter, **David Elliot** sent us this superb photograph of a Pacific Diver, a species usually found on the west coast of America, that wintered at his WeBS site at Druridge Pools in Northumberland.

### EBBA2 - can you help?

We are in the final stages of data collation for the British and Irish contribution to the European Breeding Bird Atlas ([www.ebba2.info](http://www.ebba2.info)), and we're looking for breeding season records from 2013–2017 to help plug gaps in breeding evidence. You can view a map showing progress across Britain and Ireland, and see which species still need upgrading online ([www.bto.org/ebba2](http://www.bto.org/ebba2)). Records, with breeding evidence, can be entered into BirdTrack ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)), or contact Dawn Balmer ([dawn.balmer@bto.org](mailto:dawn.balmer@bto.org)) for more information.



The Pan-European Duck Symposium, convened by the Wetlands International/IUCN SSC Duck Specialist Group, takes place every three years in Europe.

This year, the 5<sup>th</sup> symposium will be the first of these events to be held in the UK. The venue will be the Field Studies Centre at Millport, on the Isle of Great Cumbrae in Scotland on the 16<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> April 2018. Further information can be found on the event webpages <http://www.ducksg.org/events/peds5/>