WeBS

WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 23 Spring 2007

CONTENTS

WeBS Online Is Here!

At long last, we are pleased to announce that WeBS Online is operational. This new system allows any counter with access to the internet to enter their WeBS counts themselves, removing the need for them to use the paper forms. Moreover, WeBS Online allows users access to past counts for their sites. Counters can also see maps of their count section boundaries.

However, as we have stressed before, we would like to make clear to counters that use of WeBS Online is not compulsory. Whilst we are obviously keen that as many counters as possible benefit from the advantages of the new system, we are fully aware that some counters will have no desire to use WeBS Online and would prefer to continue to use the paper forms. This is fine and we envisage receiving paper forms for many years to come. Just let your Local Organiser know whether to expect paper or online returns from you.

Getting started

Your way into WeBS Online is through the new WeBS homepage at www.bto.org/webs. Click on **'Register to use WeBS Online'**. There are two parts to the registration, one of which is general to all users of BTO online surveys, the other being specific to WeBS.

You should now be at a page called **Register for WeBS Online**. You have two options here, depending upon whether or not you already use any of the BTO's other online surveys (such as BirdTrack, Breeding Bird Survey Online or Garden BirdWatch Online). If you are an existing online user, click on the lower of the two **'Register Here'** options (and skip the next section of these instructions).

Users completely new to online surveys

If you are totally new to BTO online surveys, click on the upper of the two **'Register Here'** options to get to the **Registration form**. On this page, please enter your name and contact details. We then ask a few extra questions, such as whether we can send your records and details onwards to county recorders. Once you've read through these, click on **'Submit my registration'**.

You will then be presented with a suggested username. You can change this if you wish, so long as you choose a unique username (you'll be prompted if the one you choose already exists). You will then also be asked to enter a password. This password needs to be at least six characters long and it is case-sensitive (i.e. 2gh4jjss is not the same as 2gH4jJSs). Tips on choosing passwords are available on the page, but please don't use any passwords you already use for internet banking or similarly sensitive ones. You need to remember this username and password to be able to use WeBS Online, although we can send you reminders if necessary.

Survey Home

If you've completed the above registration steps, or if you were already an existing online user, you should now have reached a page entitled **Survey home**. On this page you will see a list of available online surveys you can participate in. You should, as an existing WeBS counter, see a grey WeBS bar at the bottom of the list (if you don't see this, please contact us at webs@bto.org). Please click on **'Setup'** to get to the **WeBS Online setup page**.

You then have a few WeBS-specific terms and conditions to read through and, assuming you're happy with them, tick the box and click the setup button. You are now ready to start!

Continued on page 2

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data collected are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution and identify and monitor important sites for waterbirds. A programme of research underpins these objectives. Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. WeBS is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environment & Heritage Service in Northern Ireland).

BTO
The Nunnery, Thetford,
Norfolk IP24 2PU
T 01842 750050
F 01842 750030
W www.bto.org

WWT
Slimbridge,
Gloucestershire GL2 7BT
T 01453 891900
F 01453 890901
W www.wwt.org.uk

RSPB
The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
T 01767 680551
W www.rspb.org.uk

JNCC
Monkstone House, City Road,
Peterborough PE1 1JY
T 01733 562626
W www.jncc.gov.uk

WeBS contacts

Andy Musgrove *WeBS National Coordinator*
andy.musgrove@bto.org
Mark Collier *WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)*
mark.collier@bto.org
Alex Banks *WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts)*
alex.banks@bto.org

Newsletter contributors

Graham Austin is the WeBS Database Manager at BTO
graham.austin@bto.org
Helen Baker is an Ornithological Advisor at JNCC
helen.baker@jncc.gov.uk
Niall Burton is a Research Ecologist at BTO
niall.burton@bto.org
Greg Conway is a Research Ecologist at BTO
greg.conway@bto.org
Simon Gillings is a Research Ecologist at BTO
simon.gillings@bto.org
Richard Hearn is a Senior Project Officer (Waterbird Monitoring) at WWT
richard.hearn@wwt.org.uk
Ilya Maclean is a Research Ecologist at BTO
Ilya.Maclean@bto.org
David Stroud is the Senior Ornithologist at JNCC
david.stroud@jncc.gov.uk
Rachel Coombes & Heidi Mellan have been jointly responsible for this issue of *WeBS News*. Heidi is the WeBS Office Secretary heidi.mellan@bto.org

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Editorial

Well, it's been another interesting winter. Who could have predicted that three new waterbird species for Britain would turn up in just a few months. First was the somewhat surreal Long-billed Murrelet bobbing around off Dawlish, followed by a rather less obliging Glaucous-winged Gull around the Bristol Channel and then not one but three Pacific Divers. It looks like we need to add some new species to our databases. It has been suggested that the occurrence of these Pacific species could be connected with the reduction in the extent of the polar icecap allowing movements from the Bering Strait eastwards across the top of Canada and hence into the Atlantic. Whatever the truth, we live in interesting (if disturbing) times. As WeBS counters, we are providing information of fundamental importance in describing changes in distributions of our waterbirds, the more numerous species as well as the rarer ones.

The big WeBS news of the moment is that WeBS Online is now live. After a long time in the planning and testing, we are now confident we have a system which works well. Even before publication of this newsletter, numbers of users have been creeping up slowly and the 1000th online WeBS visit has just been entered. Sites so far entered online are spread from Kent to Argyll, with particularly good coverage already from Cambridgeshire, Renfrewshire and the Duddon Estuary (the first big estuary to go 100% online). Whilst use of WeBS Online is by no means compulsory, we look forward with interest to seeing how many of you take it up, perhaps entering data from notebooks from the 2006-07 winter into the system, or perhaps starting this coming autumn. However you send us your counts, though, we remain extremely grateful for all your hard work and thank you all once again.

Andy Musgrove

WeBS Online is Here

....continued from page 1

Once you're a registered user...

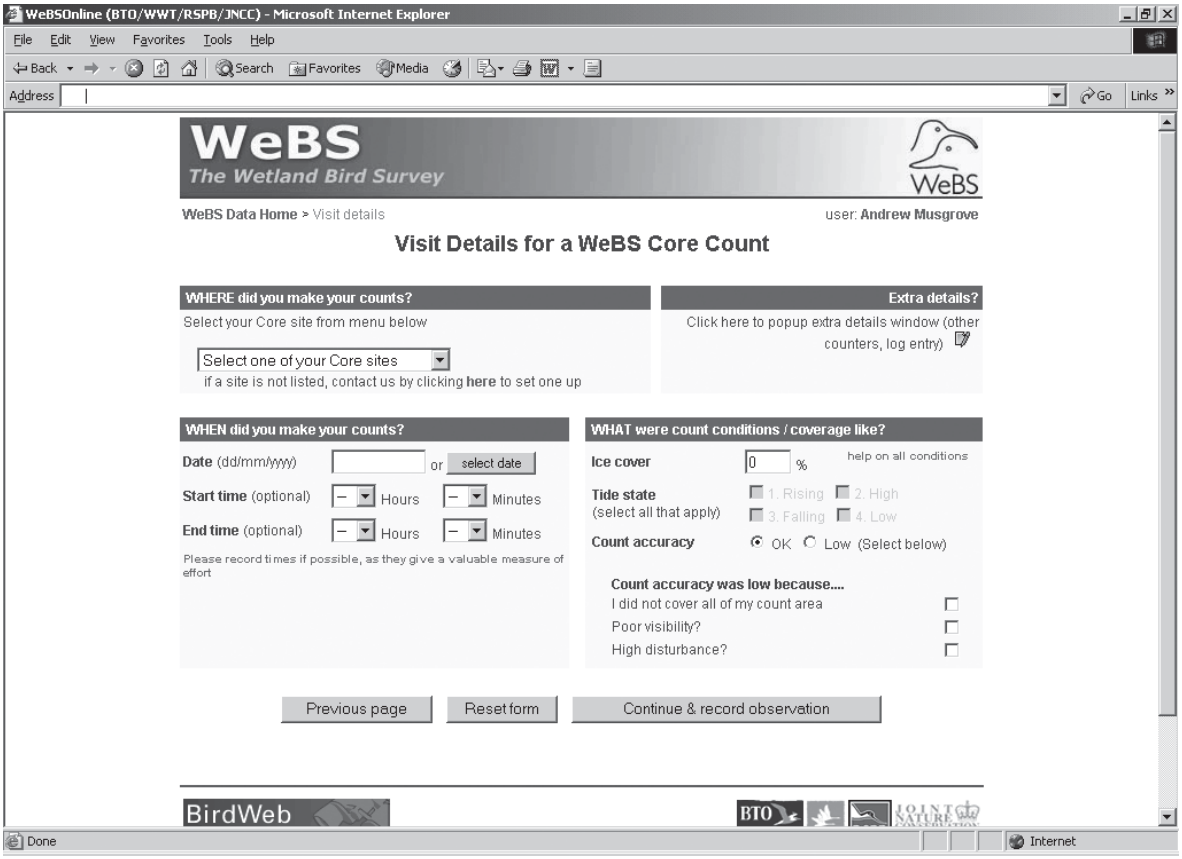
Following registration you will get sent straight into WeBS Online. On subsequent visits simply go to the WeBS home page at www.bto.org/webs and click on **'Login to WeBS Online'** from the options on the left-hand side of the page. You may need to enter your username and password to login to the system, although if you have 'cookies' enabled then your username and password may be stored on your own PC.

When you go into WeBS Online, you will find yourself at a page called **WeBS Data Home**. From here, you can access all the different functions of WeBS Online that are available to you. The following instructions aim to cover the main features, but note that instructions are also accessible online from this page. Most counters will have the same set of options open to them. However WeBS Local Organisers have additional functions to manage their local teams of counters, and can review any counts being submitted online by their counters. Additionally, Local Organisers are able to input counts for any of the sections in their area.

Entering your counts on WeBS Online

For standard WeBS counts, click on **'Core & LT Count Entry'**. First you will be asked to record the visit details for the count. Select the count section at which you recorded the count. If you want to record a count for a site that does not appear on the drop-down list then please contact the WeBS Office. The date of the count must also be recorded and, ideally, the approximate start and end time, as well as ice cover and (for coastal sites) tidal state. Importantly, if you feel that your count did not accurately represent the true number of birds present, please record a count accuracy of 'Low' and tell us why this was. There is also a facility to record additional details (e.g. additional counters, flooding, etc). Once you have completed this page, please click **'Continue & record observation'**.

If you are entering the first/only count for a site for a month (which will usually be the case), then this count will be treated as the **"primary"** count for that month. However, if you wish to



add subsequent counts within a given month, you will be given the opportunity to specify which should be treated as the primary count.

You can then enter your species counts. The species you see on the form may vary depending upon your user preferences. To reduce the size of the form you have to look through, we have set WeBS Online to show you only those species previously recorded at that site. However, we have currently set the system so that if there are less than 20 species recorded for a site, you get the original full set of species from the paper recording form. This can be changed through your User preferences however.

To record your count, simply enter the count of each species you saw in the relevant box. If you recorded a species but were unable to make a count for some reason (e.g. insufficient time, birds flushed before you could count them, etc) then simply tick the 'Present' box (but please make a count wherever possible).

If you feel your count was a significant underestimate of the numbers you would have been able to count under ideal conditions then please use [square brackets] to show this. Note however that if you have recorded an approximate count (e.g. circa 1500 Dunlin) then this does not need any brackets or additional notation.

If you do want to record any specific comments about a particular species then there is a comments box to click on against each species. **Important: If you visit your section and see no wildfowl or waders then please tick the box at the top to say "NO waterbirds were present".**

Gulls and terns are included as separate groups. As has been the case with WeBS in the past, recording of these groups is optional, but we would encourage all WeBS counters to count gulls and terns unless they have a particularly good reason not to do so. Approximate counts or even just a 'present' tick are better than no counts at all.

Important: if you have recorded no gulls or terns, it is crucial that we can determine whether a) these birds were truly absent, or b) these birds may have been present but you weren't recording them.

To do this, if you are happy to record gulls and terns but encounter none during your count then please tick the box at the top of each section to say "NO gulls/terns were present".

If you come across a species not on the main list, simply scroll through the list of additional species at the bottom to find the species you want. It will then appear on the right-hand side where you can enter the number present.

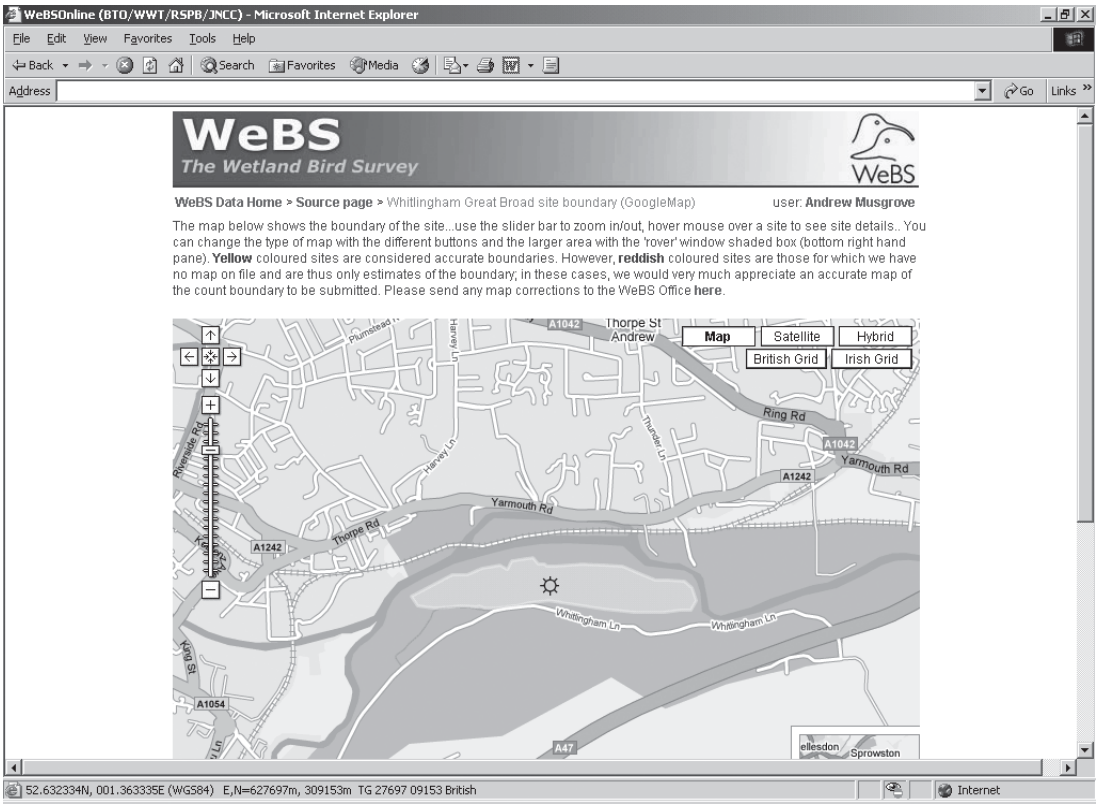
Once you've finished entering the counts, click on **'Submit Species Details'**. This will take you to a validation page, where a summary of your entered counts is shown for you to look at and make sure you haven't typed in a count for the wrong species, or added an extra zero to a number by mistake. To try to help you spot inputting errors, you will sometimes be prompted by comments about the species, the numbers recorded or the date. These suggestions are an advisory check only and can often be disregarded. However, they should hopefully reduce the number of mid-winter Little Ringed Plover records that should have been entered in the Ringed Plover box!

From the validation page, you can either go back to make any corrections or else click on **'Confirm species list'** if you are happy with what you have entered and would like it to be stored in the online database.

Submitting Casual and Roost Counts

From the WeBS Data home, the option to submit 'Casual & Roost counts' is for when counts of some species have been made, but not necessarily all. Examples could be an evening gull roost count, or daily counts of Whimbrels at key passage sites. Such additional information can be of great use in supplementing the main counts. NOTE however that if you want to submit a second complete count (all species recorded) for a month, this should be done by clicking on 'Core & LT Count Entry'.

When submitting casual/roost counts, there are only two differences



compared to the submission of standard counts. Firstly, you are asked to specify whether you are entering a casual daytime count, or a specifically targeted roost count (either dawn or dusk – enter the count times for us to know which). Secondly, you will see no pre-selected species names, but instead need to select any individual species concerned from the drop-down box.

Viewing and editing past records

By clicking on **'View/edit submissions'** counters will see a list of their sites.

Clicking on each site will then bring up a list of all the visits made to that site.A graph of the number of submissions per WeBS year is also shown at the top of the page. By clicking on the visit, counters can view that count in more detail.

If you happen to carry out a core count of a section of a larger site, then you will also be able to view the consolidated total counts for the larger site. These totals are calculated annually, once data for all sections have been received (from online and paper form submissions), so you will not be able to see consolidated totals for the most recent year.

For individual count sections, you will be able to edit or delete a count only if a) you are the counter who made the count, and b) if the count has only been entered recently and has not been uploaded to the main WeBS database for combining with paper-based submissions. If the record is editable, the relevant buttons are shown at the top of the page. If you can't edit a count, but notice an error, you can click on a link to send an email to the WeBS Team.

There are two main elements to the editing facility (aside from deleting a count entirely). Firstly, the visit details can be altered individually (e.g. if the location or date were entered incorrectly). Secondly, the species counts can be altered (e.g. if the species or numbers were entered incorrectly). The BTO keeps a track of all edited or deleted data in case of mishaps.

Viewing your sites

Clicking on **'View site details'** brings up a list of all the sites you are connected with, either through counting or viewing those counts as part of 'complex sites'. You can view a UK map showing the position of your sites by using the **'Google Maps'** button. More usefully, you can look at the boundaries of any of your count sites by clicking on the site code number next to the site name. This will show the boundary of the site displayed on a Google Maps backdrop, which can be viewed as a traditional 'road atlas' type map, a satellite map, or a combination of both. The Google Maps can be zoomed in and out of, and panned around using the on-screen arrows and zoom tools.

Boundaries of sites shown in yellow indicate that the map is based on information received from WeBS counters. For some sites, boundaries have not yet been provided by counters and in many of these instances an approximate 'best guess' boundary has been provided; such approximate site boundaries are displayed in red. **IF YOU HAVE A SITE WITH A RED OR MISSING BOUNDARY THEN PLEASE SEND A MAP OF THE CORRECT BOUNDARY TO THE WEBS OFFICE.**

Summaries

Two facilities for summarising WeBS data are available for counters. The first, **'Local site summaries'**, provides the ability to compare the counts for a site across a range of years, or months within a particular year. Counters can also compare different sites in the same year or month, or combinations of the two, using the **'Compare sites'** button.

The second option, **'Search and Download'**, allows counters to interrogate their data in any way they wish. They can select one or all sites, one or all species, and a variety of dates or date ranges. The feedback will summarise the data available, and depending on the data returned, will provide tabular results, graphs and the option to download the result as a separate file (e.g. for use in Excel or other packages).

Andy Musgrove

Little Ringed and Ringed Plover Breeding Survey 2007

During 2007, the BTO is organising a UK-wide survey of breeding Little Ringed and Ringed Plover. This will be the first breeding survey for these species since 1984.

The main objective of the survey is to obtain updated population estimates for the two species. Also, we are interested in their current distribution, habitat associations and patterns of co-occurrence.

The survey involves coverage of a large number of sites, including **key sites** identified from the 1984 survey or occupied subsequently. In addition, a stratified selection of random inland and coastal **sample tetrads** will need to be covered to provide estimates of the number of plovers away from these key sites and thus ensure completeness of overall population estimates.

There are over 7,000 tetrads across the UK, which we would like to get covered, so if you would like to survey a site in you area, we would be very grateful for your help.

Field methods will involve up to three site visits between mid-April and mid-July 2007 counting the number of pairs / adults present.

Little Ringed Plover, photograph by Lawrence G Baxter

Survey forms are available from BTO Regional Representatives (RRs). Casual records from the breeding season can be submitted on Supplementary Records forms also available from RRs or downloadable from the webpage, below.

Information about the survey sites, methods and species identification, as well as contact details for your BTO Regional Representative, can be found on the BTO website (www.bto.org/goto/ ringplovers.htm). If you require any further information, please contact Greg Conway, Breeding Plover Survey Organiser, BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU (E-mail: greg.conway@bto.org Tel.: 01842 750050).

Greg Conway & Niall Burton

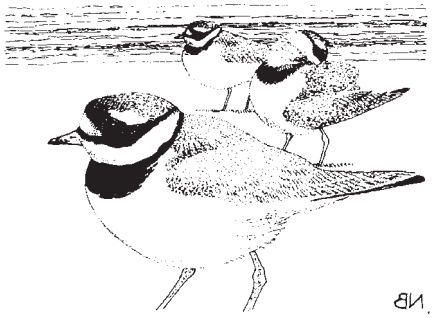
PRIORITY CORE COUNT DATES

2007—2008
15 July 2007
12 August 2007
16 September 2007
7 October 2007
11 November 2007
9 December 2007
13 January 2008
10 February 2008
9 March 2008
6 April 2008
18 May 2008
22 June 2008
2008—2009
20 July 2008
17 August 2008
14 September 2008
19 October 2008
16 November 2008
14 December 2008

Breeding Great Crested Grebe Survey 2007— POSTPONED

You may have read about the possibility of a breeding Great Crested Grebe survey in spring 2007. Unfortunately, it was not possible to secure sufficient funding to run the survey this year. The survey will be reconsidered once fieldwork for the forthcoming BTO Breeding and Wintering Atlases has been completed.

Greg Conway & Niall Burton



New international waterbird population estimates and international 1% thresholds

As WeBS counters, you should be aware already of how valuable your counts are for directing conservation efforts at a variety of levels. As well as using your counts in a local or national context, WeBS counts form an important input to the International Waterbird Census (IWC), run by our colleagues at Wetlands International in The Netherlands. Using counts from around the globe, Wetlands International have the daunting task of coming up with estimates of the international population sizes of every waterbird species in the world. Moreover, they break this down into estimates for each readily recognised population (e.g. Dark-bellied Brent Geese rather than Brent Geese as a whole species). Such estimates are interesting in many respects, but one practical consequence of them is that an international 1% threshold can be derived. This magic figure of 1% of the international population of a waterbird has direct conservation significance, as it is the basis on which protected areas such as Special Protection Areas and Ramsar Sites are designated.

Such population estimates (and thus 1% levels) are not set in stone, and are regularly updated on the basis on new surveys. Estimates may be changed due to a real change in the numbers of a given species, but also where new information comes to light that was not known before. The latest set of updates has just been published as Waterbird Population Estimates – Fourth Edition (available from Wetlands International). Listed above are a selection of the most relevant populations for which the international 1% threshold has changed.

These new estimates will be used in the next WeBS annual report (2005-06) for determining which sites now support internationally important numbers of each species.

Goldeneye, photograph by Jill Pakenham

Clearly, some populations have increased – the new threshold for islandica Black-tailed Godwits means that seven of the sites listed in Waterbirds in the UK 2004/05 as holding internationally important would, if numbers remain the same, no longer do so. The threshold which has changed most dramatically is that for Goldeneye, up from 4000 to 11500. The only site in the UK supporting internationally important numbers of Goldeneye in the past, Loughs Neagh & Beg, has a recent five-year peak mean of 5796.

Andy Musgrove

Species	Old 1%	New 1%
Mute Swan (GB only)	380	320
Bewick's Swan	290	200
Pink-footed Goose	2400	2700
Greenland White-fronted Goose	300	270
Icelandic Greylag Goose	1000	870
NW Scotland Greylag Goose	90	100
Greenland Barnacle Goose	540	560
Svalbard Barnacle Goose	230	270
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	2200	2000
Nearctic Light-bellied Brent Goose	200	260
Svalbard Light-bellied Brent Goose	50	70
Teal	4000	5000
Eider	15500	12850
Goldeneye	4000	11500
Red-throated Diver	10000	3000
Great Crested Grebe	4800	3600
Slavonian Grebe	35	55
Shag	2400	2000
Black-tailed Godwit	350	470
Curlew	4200	8500
Redshank	1300	2800
Turnstone	1000	1500
Common Gull	17000	20000
Lesser Black-backed Gull	5300	5500
Herring Gull	13000	5900
Great Black-backed Gull	4700	4400
Little Tern	340	490

The Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) went ahead as planned between 1st December 2006 and 31st January 2007. This survey was largely organised through the Wetland Bird Survey counter network and many thanks are due to everybody who took part.

As explained in last year's WeBS newsletter, whereas the monthly WeBS Core Counts scheme does a superb job of monitoring waterbird numbers on estuaries and inland water bodies, our routine coverage of the open coast is rather sparse. Many of the open coast stretches that are monitored by WeBS Core Counts, are those adjacent to estuaries and a few honey-pot sites. From these data it is not possible to make a reasonable assessment of waterbird numbers along the greater part of the open coast. To do this we need to undertake more focused surveys and this past winter's NEWS was the third in a series of periodic surveys that began in the winter of 1984/85, as the Winter Shorebird Count (WSC), and continued in 1997/98 as NEWS. By retaining the same count stretches originally defined by counters back in 1985 (were you one of those counters?) we will be able to undertake relatively powerful analyses of your data.

Without NEWS, our knowledge of the numbers and distributions of species such as Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper, and Turnstone would be very incomplete, and there would be serious gaps in our knowledge of Oystercatcher, Curlew and Redshank. Comparisons of 1997/98 showed that there were substantial declines in numbers, and a northern shift in distribution, of all four of the open-coast specialists. Consequently, we have been eagerly awaiting the arrival of your data, and look forward to repeating these analyses, albeit with some apprehension regarding what it may show.

Although many fieldworkers, especially in Northern England and Scotland, experienced some problems due to very poor weather conditions in late December through to mid-January, your efforts were tremendous. At the time of writing (mid-March), survey returns are still coming in so we cannot report on the final coverage achieved, however a breakdown of survey returns to date is given below.

	Total open-coast stretches A	Completed Survey Forms received B	Total count stretches in areas from which survey forms have been returned C	Coverage as running value - based on areas from which survey forms have been returned at the time of writing B ? C
Northern Ireland	169	140	169	82.8%
Scotland	5274	1725	4055	42.5%
Wales	453	178	441	40.4%
England	1076	544	614	88.6%
Isle of Man	63	58	63	92.1%
Channel Islands	5	0	0	0.0%
Overall	7040	2645	5342	49.5%

There were 7040 non-estuarine count stretches originally defined for the WSC and these cover virtually all of the accessible (and some not so accessible!) non-estuarine coast in the UK. Forms for all these were sent out to local organisers, some of whom must have wondered how on earth we expected them to get coverage of so many count stretches. Hopefully their fears were allayed when they learned that, at minimum, only a sub-sample of stretches needed to be covered. This notwithstanding, 100% coverage was obtained from many areas – an amazing effort. While one always hesitates to pick out individuals, especially as we do not have all the forms back yet, I'm sure you will all acknowledge the supreme efforts of the teams in Skye, Devon, Mull and Orkney with respectively 124, 169, 355 and nearly 500 (yes! 500) count stretches covered.

Oystercatchers, photograph by Tommy Holden

Purple Sandpiper, photo by Tommy Holden

At the time of writing we have received 2645 completed forms and this means that, for the regions these cover, coverage is currently running at 49.5%. This compares very favourably with the coverage of 38% achieved in 1997/98.

One last thing. If you enjoyed the opportunity to count waterbirds on the open coast, and would consider repeating visits to your NEWS count sections on a more regular basis then we would be delighted to receive your counts as part of the WeBS Core Counts. You would not necessarily need to commit yourself to monthly visits, as even one visit per year would be a vast improvement on one visit every nine years.

Graham Austin

Bird Atlas 2007-11—How You Can Help

November 1st 2007 is a big date. It sees the start of Bird Atlas 2007-11 — an ambitious and important project to map all of Britain and Ireland's birds in winter and the breeding season. Being over 20 years since the previous winter atlas and over 15 since the last breeding atlas this is an ideal time for a stock-take and you and WeBS can play a part in building up the picture of bird distributions.

Simply by continuing your WeBS counts you'll be contributing to the Bird Atlas as we will use your records of waterbirds to help complete the distribution maps. This will be especially interesting in winter when, for example, coastal WeBS records of Pink-footed Geese will be combined with those of Atlas surveyors on farmland to gain a complete picture of their winter distribution. The map (inset 1) shows the distribution of Pink-footed Geese back in the early 1980s from the last Winter Atlas. At that time there were an estimated 101,000 in Britain and Ireland. Now there are over 270,000! Where will they all be?

Of course you may see other species of interest during your WeBS count that are not normally submitted via WeBS – flocks of Twite on the coast or Sand Martin colonies at gravel pits for instance. We'd really appreciate these records and you can submit these interesting species via a 'Roving Records' form. Forms will be circulated in time for fieldwork, or you'll be able to submit your records online at www.birdatlas.net.

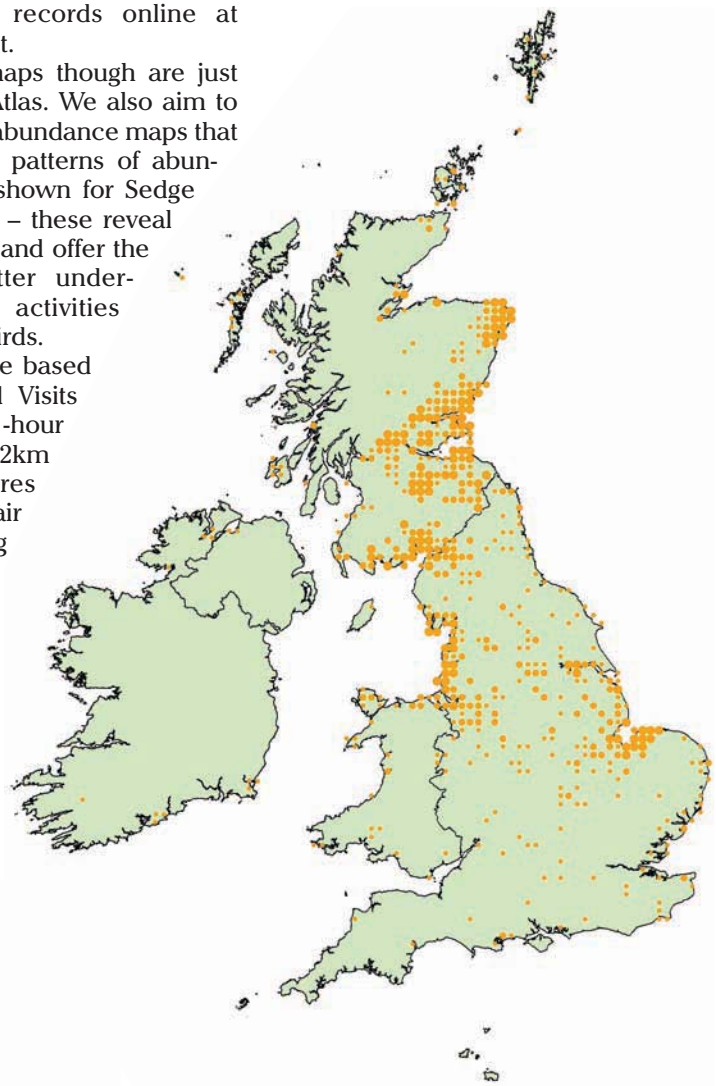
Distribution maps though are just part of the Bird Atlas. We also aim to produce relative abundance maps that depict the broad patterns of abundance, like that shown for Sedge Warbler (inset 2) – these reveal detailed patterns and offer the potential to better understand how our activities affect common birds.

Such maps are based on Timed Tetrad Visits which comprise 1-hour or 2-hour visits to 2km ˘ 2km squares ("tetrads") – a pair of visits during winter and a pair of visits during the breeding season to count all species present.

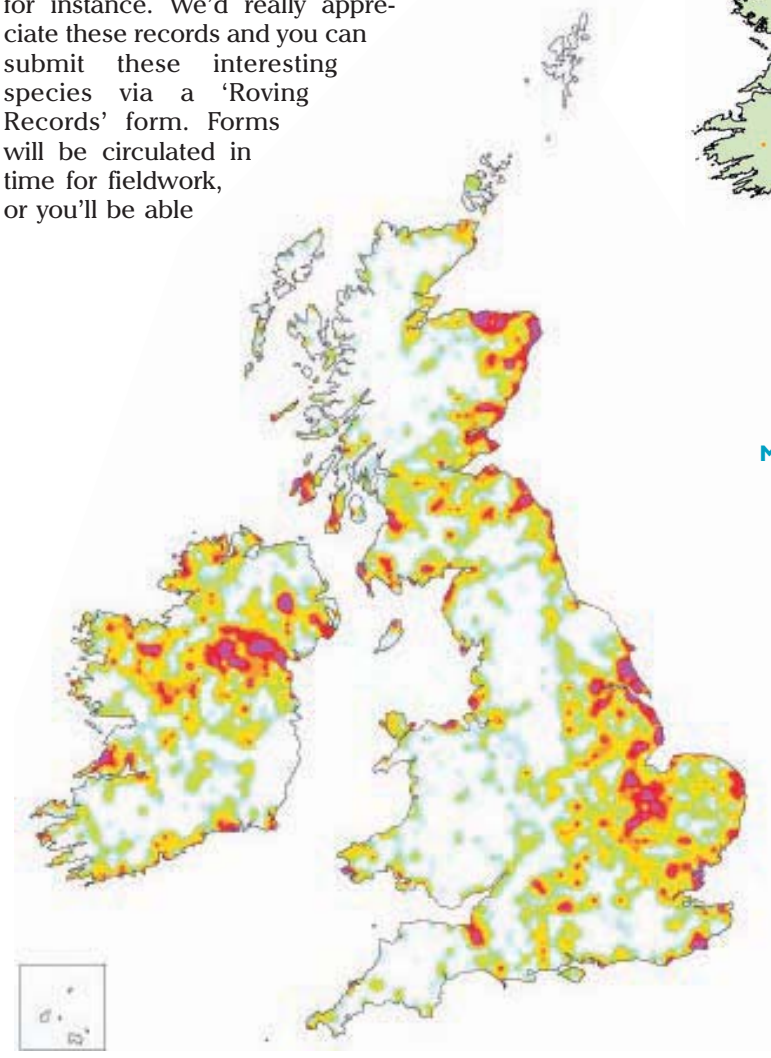
So why not kill two surveys with one visit and do a Timed Tetrad Visit alongside your WeBS count.

Or take on a different tetrad if you want a change of scene. Your Atlas Regional Organiser can tell you which tetrads are available. To contact your RO visit www.birdatlas.net or speak to Dawn Balmer, the Atlas Coordinator, at BTO HQ (01842 750050, birdatlas@bto.org).

Simon Gillings



Map 1. Winter distribution of Pink-footed Goose from the 1981-84 winter atlas. Increasing dot size indicates greater abundance



Map 2. Breeding distribution of Sedge Warbler from the 1988-91 breeding atlas. Colours ranging from White to Red indicate increasing relative abundance.

Wetland Bird Survey Low Tide Counts: Update

Those who keep a close eye on WeBS Low Tide Counts will have noticed a couple of significant developments over the past year or so. Firstly, the method of reporting survey results has been completely revamped for *Waterbirds in the UK 2004/05*. The new-style site accounts now show distributional changes in selected species, all in glorious colour (see Figure 1). The approach is designed not only to appear more eye-catching, but also to alert people to changes that may be happening to waterbirds at their sites of interest. Secondly, during the winter of 2005-06, the whole of Morecambe Bay was surveyed at low water for the first time under the WeBS scheme, a fantastic effort by a combination of WeBS staff and volunteers working both on the ground and from a small aircraft.

In total, 24 different sites were surveyed in 2005-6, including the aerial survey of Morecambe Bay. Some interesting patterns were detected on the sites surveyed using the standard count method; Figure 1 shows one such pattern for Wigeon on the Mersey Estuary. This species has triggered a High Alert from WeBS Core Counts, and the Low Tide Count pattern reinforces the warning. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of Wigeon on the Mersey in 1996-97 (blue dots) and 2005-06 (red dots).

It is immediately evident that there has been a retraction of the species from previously densely occupied areas. In both winters, Wigeon were most abundant along the south bank of the river, though densities in the earlier winter were far greater than in 2005-6. Most of the sectors counted between Eastham and Runcorn held Wigeon in high densities in 1996-7, but by the later winter many of these sectors supported few, if any, birds. On one sector of the marshes at Ince Banks, Wigeon density has declined from over 22 birds per hectare to a complete absence of the species. The peak count of the sector at Eastham in 1996-97 was recorded as 6,850, the highest across the site; by 2005-6 the figure was down to just 60.

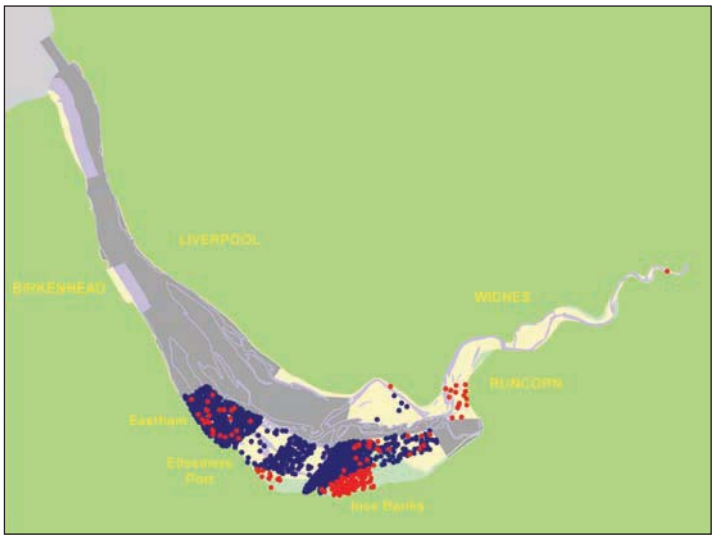


Figure 1. Relative distribution of Wigeon on the Mersey Estuary. Red dots = 2005-06; Blue dots = 1996-97. Each dot represents five birds.

Maps of this type will be produced for all sites covered in 2005-6 and published in the forthcoming *Waterbirds in the UK 2005/06*.

As previously mentioned, an additional aerial survey of Morecambe Bay was undertaken, which will also be summarised. Morecambe Bay is synonymous with Oystercatchers and holds more than any other individual site in the UK, (approximately 50,000 on average) . It is thus unsurprising that at low water, the species was widely distributed throughout. Most areas of intertidal habitat supported at least some Oystercatchers, with a notable exception in the mouth of the Kent Estuary. Highest densities of the species were recorded in four areas: the area north of Morecambe known as Warton Sands; the rocky 'scars', often covered with mussel beds, close to the shore at Morecambe; Cockerham Sands at the mouth of the Lune Estuary; and Newbiggin, on the west shore. Although we found no formal relationship between Oystercatcher and cockle density, (a key prey item), it seems that these areas of high bird density are close to feeding areas (such as mussel beds) and roost sites. It may be that birds recorded on these surveys had finished feeding by low tide, as local knowledge suggests that Oystercatcher begin foraging on raised mussel beds as soon as the tide recedes, leading the distribution to reflect some birds in resting or pre-roost areas.

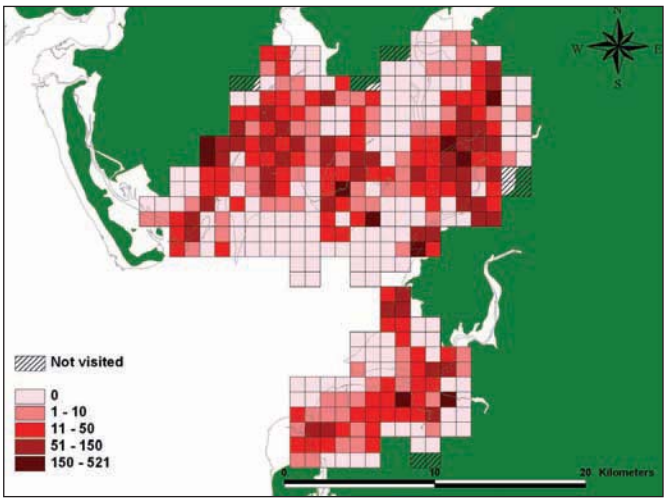


Figure 1. Relative distribution of Oystercatcher at Morecambe Bay from aerial surveys 2005-06.

Data will soon be received for 16 sites covered in 2006-7, and then the process of organising counts for 2007-8 will begin. As ever, WeBS is only as strong as the people involved, so please do contact the WeBS Office (lowtide@bto.org) if you have time to count one or more sectors once a month between November and February and would like to take part in the scheme.

Alex Banks
WeBS Low Tide Count National Organiser

Latest news from the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme

The Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) consists of a suite of surveys monitoring the abundance, productivity and survival of goose and swan populations in the UK. It operates in conjunction with partners in other countries that also support these species, whether during the breeding or wintering periods, or on migration, so as to provide flyway-wide assessments of conservation status.

Monitoring highlights from 2005/06

Most goose and swan populations visiting the UK continue to thrive, although there are some exceptions. The most prominent is the Greenland White-fronted Goose – a small and restricted range population that breeds in western Greenland and winters in Ireland and western Britain (primarily Scotland). It has been closely studied for the past 25 years and following concerted conservation efforts its conservation status improved considerably during the 1980s and 1990s, peaking at just over 35,000 birds in 1999/2000. However, since then there has been a reduction in the annual breeding success such that too few young birds are being produced to replace annual losses and as a consequence the population has declined to around 25,000 in 2005/06. The most likely cause of this decrease is an increase in the number of Lesser Canada Geese in Greenland, leading to the displacement of Whitefronts from breeding areas. Surveys in 2005 revealed a six-fold increase in non-breeding (probably moult migrant) Lesser Canada Geese since 1999. Although these are not introduced birds, such as those in Britain, anthropogenic actions are likely to have influenced this situation as it is likely that, as with many other geese, numbers of Lesser Canada Geese are artificially high due to the improved agricultural habitats available to these birds in their wintering quarters. On a more positive note, protection from hunting was implemented in Iceland during autumn 2006, where previously around 3,000 Greenland Whitefronts were taken annually; an important contribution to the conservation efforts needed to protect this declining goose.

Brent Geese, photograph Paul Doherty

Whooper Swan, photograph by Jill Pakenham

The other populations of some concern are Dark-bellied Brent Goose and Bewick's Swan. The former has declined by around one third in the past 15 years, although numbers remain relatively high, at 200,000 birds, and reduced breeding success is also the primary cause of this decline. The latest International Swan Census in January 2005 revealed that the number of Bewick's Swans wintering in the UK has decreased by 5% since the previous census in 2000. The greatest decreases were in Ireland, where numbers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were reduced by 62% and 39%, respectively. WeBS counts also indicate that this population has decreased in Great Britain, and counts from the Netherlands, where the majority of the rest of the population overwinter, have also decreased. However, it remains unclear to what extent these counts reflect a true decrease in numbers or a redistribution of birds to wintering sites elsewhere. In contrast, Whooper Swans in the UK increased by 26% between 2000 and 2005, with the majority of the increase in England.

Uncertainties over the status of Iceland Greylag Geese still persist. Recent Icelandic-breeding Goose Censuses (IGC) indicate that the decline (of about 20%) during the 1990s has ended, with numbers now stable or possibly increasing again. Counts of 110,000 and 95,000 were recorded during autumns 2004 and 2005, respectively, the largest since the peak in numbers during the early 1990s. This is partly due to the high breeding success experienced in these years; in 2004 an exceptional 28.2% of the population were goslings, and in 2005 this was 22.7%. The average for the past ten years is 18.3% and these two years are the highest during that period. Nevertheless, the increase in numbers cannot be accounted for by this high breeding success alone, and censusing difficulties associated with the later migration of birds from Iceland and confusion with other Greylag populations in the UK continue to hamper accurate population estimates.

Taiga Bean Geese continue to show contrasting fortunes at the two British wintering locations. At the former stronghold in the Yare Valley, Norfolk, numbers remain low at around 170. Although there have been small increases in numbers there for the past three winters, this followed a decrease from almost 500 birds in the early 1990s. In contrast, numbers at the Slamannan Plateau, near Falkirk,

continue to increase, reaching 300 for the first time in 2005/06. These two flocks of birds also show very different arrival and departure patterns, with the Yare birds present for a much shorter period each winter. It is possible that these two groups are completely separate, with discrete staging and breeding areas in Scandinavia. An increase in research on this population in the next few years should provide a greater understanding of how much exchange there is between these two groups.

Barnacle Geese from both the Svalbard and Greenland populations continue to thrive, although recent rapid increases now seem to have stabilised, with around 27,000 and 55,000 birds, respectively. Pink-footed Geese also continue to increase, with almost 300,000 counted in 2004. Around half of this number is now found in Norfolk during midwinter – a dramatic change since the early 1990s, when just a few thousand occurred there. This highlights how rapidly some geese can alter their distribution given suitable conditions, and emphasises the need for continued monitoring and adaptable approaches to their conservation. More surprising changes will no doubt unfold in the coming years, and with the help of the GSMP counters these surveys will continue to underpin the conservation of these Arctic migrants.

Forthcoming surveys

Annual surveys such as the IGC and productivity assessments will continue during 2007/08, and new counters are required for most of these surveys. Two periodic censuses will take place in 2008: the International Census of Greenland Barnacle Geese is planned for the spring, and in the late summer a complete census of the Northwest Scotland Greylag Goose population will take place. Counters are required for this census and further announcements will be made during 2007.

Finally...

Much more about the GSMP, including the latest issue of GooseNews, can be found on the WWT website at www.wwt.org.uk/Research/Monitoring

Richard Hearn
Programme Manager:
Waterbird Monitoring

LO LO LO!!

With around 3,000 birdwatchers counting over 3,300 sites for WeBS each year we at the WeBS Office are ever grateful for the help of the WeBS Local Organisers (LOs). The network of around 150 Local Organisers is vital in the smooth running of WeBS; acting as the main point of contact between ourselves and you; the all-important counters. The main role of the Local Organiser is this contact between the WeBS Office and the counters, be it distributing publications, issuing count forms or collecting completed forms amassed during the year this local coordination has been crucial helping WeBS grow to the size it is today.

Other tasks for the Local Organiser include ensuring continued coverage of key sites and, where possible, promoting WeBS through local groups.

Over the winter, some of our hard-working LO's have decided to take a well-earned rest after years (in some cases, very many years!) of service to WeBS. We'd like to say thanks here to Bob Treen (Duddon), Peter Allard (Breydon), Bill Edwards (Shropshire), Malcolm Ogilvie (Argyll), Chris Lowmass (Sussex), Anne de Potier (Chichester) and Geoff Siggens (Durham). In most cases, replacement LO's have been found. However, we currently have a few vacancies for Local Organisers in Warwickshire, Durham, East Lancashire & Fylde, Merseyside inland and South Yorkshire. There are also a few regions in Scotland that are also currently without a Local Organiser. These include Sutherland (excluding the Moray Basin), West Inverness/Wester Ross and in the Western Isles, Harris & Lewis.

One area where we are persistently short of counters is Northern Ireland. We are always looking for new counters in this area and are also short of Local Organisers. If you know if anyone who might be interested in getting involved with WeBS in this region then please spread the word.

To act as a Local Organiser you should ideally live near to the region concerned, although more important is to have a good knowledge of the area.

We will be able to inform you of the WeBS sites in the region and to put you in touch with the counters. If you would like more information about becoming a Local Organiser then please contact the WeBS Office.

To help Local Organisers, and ourselves at the WeBS Office, if you plan to retire from counting or are moving away from an area please let us know as soon possible. The more time we have to look for a new counter to cover the site the better. Also, it is often useful if the new counter can assist on a couple of the counts to gain knowledge about the site, both in terms of access and any vantage points. Don't forget if you are moving to a new area and wish to continue WeBS then let us know and we can put you in touch with the Local Organiser in your area

Mark Collier

WeBS Alerts: waterbird trends on protected areas

How are WeBS data used to help monitor the condition of protected areas?

WeBS Alerts

WeBS Alerts is an online information source that allows users to check how waterbird species are fairing in protected areas. Government bodies such as JNCC use it, because the government has a legal obligation to monitor protected areas and ensure they are maintained in a favourable status. If their status is unfavourable, the causes of declines must be identified and remedial action taken. WeBS Alerts is updated periodically, and the updated report, which covers the winter of 2004/05 is now available online (see web address at bottom of page). The WeBS Alerts System was developed to provide a standardised method of identifying the direction and magnitude of changes in bird numbers at a variety of spatial and temporal scales for a range of waterbird species. For each protected area monitored by the Wetland Bird Survey and for each waterbird species for which an area is designated, a statistical technique is used to smooth-out short-term fluctuations in numbers and produce a trend line. Site trends are then compared to regional and national trends, allowing distinction between declines due to site-specific factors and those driven by large-scale population changes. Species that have undergone major declines can then be flagged by issuing an Alert.

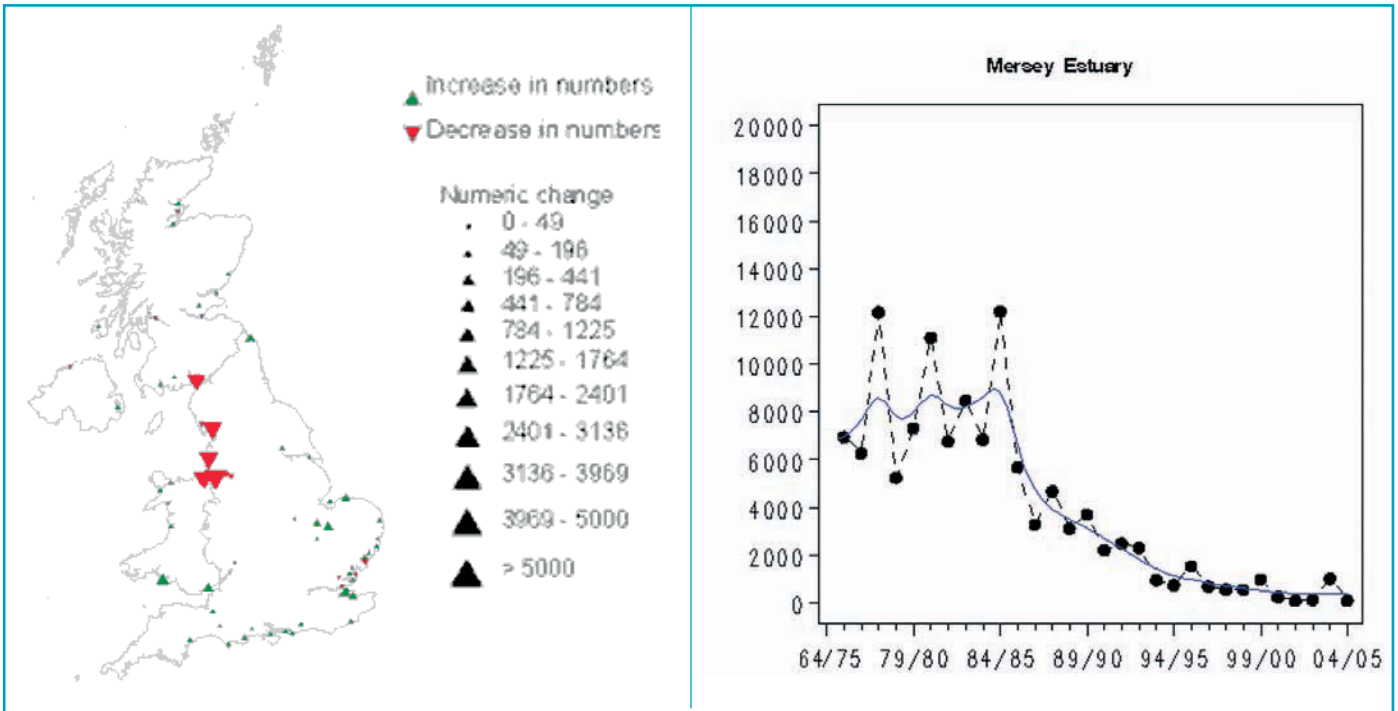
Scaup, photograph by John Marchant

Waterbird trends

A major conservation issue has been highlighted by this year's Alerts report. Pintail numbers in the northwest of England, particularly those wintering on the Mersey Estuary have declined precipitously. Almost 20,000 used to over-winter on the Mersey in the early 1980s, but numbers have declined to about 200. The site, which once hosted almost half the UK population, now no longer hosts even nationally important numbers of Pintail and similar declines have occurred at neighbouring sites. There is some good news though. Last year's report highlighted the catastrophic declines in diving ducks over-wintering on Loughs Neagh and Beg, but there is some evidence of a recovery. Goldeneye and Tufted Duck numbers are slightly up on the winter of 2003/04 and Scaup numbers on the site are higher than ever before.

The full report can be obtained by going to the following webpage: http://www.bto.org/webs/alerts/alerts/index.htm.

Ilya Maclean



In the last 25 years, Pintail have decline catastrophically in the north-west of England, particularly on the Mersey Estuary

Waterbirds Around The World

Ground-breaking book on the plight of the world's waterbirds published March 2007

In the summer 2004 newsletter we gave you a brief update on the *Waterbirds Around the World* conference, which had just taken place in Edinburgh. It was a major international gathering of the world's waterbird experts, conservationists and policy makers: over 450 delegates from 90 countries took part, including the WeBS Partners. The conclusion from the conference was a global statement, called the Edinburgh Declaration, which calls for urgent action on waterbird conservation and highlights key issues. Information on an incredible 614 species in 162 countries was presented to conference in the form of 264 papers by 453 authors from 59 countries. Of particular importance was new information for 170 Globally and Near Threatened species. Of course, the involvement of so many experts from around the world was the key to the conference's success, but it did mean that publishing the proceedings would be an enormous task. Happily this happened on 12 March 2007 and *Waterbirds Around the World* was launched at a special event in the Netherlands.

Glaciers in Greenland, photograph by David Stroud

Barry Gardiner MP, UK Minister of Biodiversity, the Dutch Minister of Nature Mrs Gerda Verburg, Secretary Generals from the Convention on Wetlands, the UN Convention on Migratory Species and the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) were all present at the launch.

In his speech, Barry Gardiner said: "Globally biodiversity is disappearing at an alarming rate, and we cannot ignore the significant role of climate change. We need to conserve migratory waterbirds as they are under threat. By investing in projects that monitor their populations, flying routes and habitats we hope to learn more about the impacts of climate change worldwide." He announced that among other actions the UK Government has committed a total of £176,000 to the following initiatives: identifying migratory species that can act as indicators of climate change, an Overseas Officer in the UK's Overseas Territories to help implement the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), and identifying population trends and the species most at risk from the negative impacts of climate change (under AEWA).

The key message from Waterbirds Around the World is that despite global conservation efforts, waterbirds are being sidelined by economic development. Too few conservation measures are currently being undertaken for globally threatened species. As a result, many wetlands of critical importance for long-distance migrants have been degraded and many populations of birds are disappearing. This is not only because of the loss and degradation of wetlands, but also the impacts of pollution and unsustainable hunting.

To address declines in waterbirds, the overall priority is for inter-sectoral action to halt and reverse the loss and degradation of wetlands. By using a "flyway approach", wetland conservation will contribute to the survival of waterbirds as well as to people's livelihoods. Currently, most major infrastructure developments take place in ignorance of these implications and many have a flyway-wide impact. International action is too weak or un-coordinated and the range of wetland services and values are largely ignored in planning processes. This is leading to further cycles of wetland degradation, poverty and species loss.

The three main priorities for increased global action on flyways are: taking action to safeguard wetlands and waterbirds; improving international collaboration; and, improving the knowledge-base to underpin action.

In the UK we have a pretty good record on all of these priorities, with WeBS playing a key role in allowing us to protect wetlands, detect declines in species, set and share internationally respected standards and, through its research element, give us crucial evidence for understanding pressures like climate change. Five of the papers in the book relate directly to WeBS and several others relied on WeBS data to provide wider context for specific studies.

Waterbirds Around the World is available to purchase in hardback from TSO (www.tsoshop.co.uk) or you can browse through the entire publication on the JNCC website (www.jncc.gov/worldwaterbirds).

Boere. G.C., Galbraith, C.A. & Stroud, D.A. (eds). 2006. Waterbirds around the world. TSO Scotland Ltd., Edinburgh, UK. 940 pp. ISBN 10: 0114973334

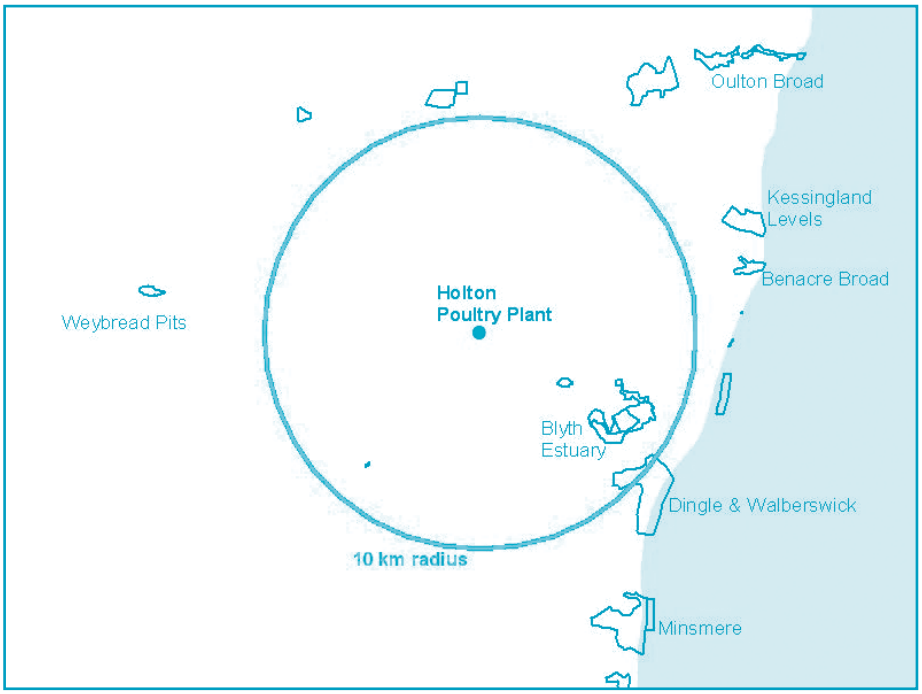
David Stroud & Helen Baker

WeBS data and the Suffolk H5N1 avian influenza outbreak

WeBS counters, unless they have been living in a cave for the last few months, will have followed the outbreak of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in Suffolk with interest. This disease is still mostly found in south-east Asia, but it spread more widely across the world since summer 2005. In the winter of 2005-06, there were a number of cases in wild birds in Europe, including the Whooper Swan found dead on the beach at Cellardyke, Fife, in April 2006.

Following extensive discussions and contigency planning over the previous 18 months, ornithologists from all of the WeBS partner organisations were ready to advise the National Emergency Epidemiological Group at Defra on the potential for the involvement of wild birds in the outbreak at a poultry plant at Holton in Suffolk. Additionally, several members of BTO staff attended the plant and were able to advise on the use of the site made by wild birds around both the rearing sheds and the adjacent abbatoir and meat-processing plant.

The immediate questions asked of ornithologists concerned the proximity of concentrations of waterbirds to Holton, any patterns of recent immigration into the area from mainland Europe, and whether any unusual mortality had been observed in the surrounding area. WeBS data were of of particular use for helping to answer the first question. The map above shows WeBS count sections within 10 km of the outbreak site. Obviously, the key site in the area is the Blyth Estuary, which supports about 15,000 wintering waders and wildfowl. In addition, there are large numbers of gulls using the estuary. Discussions with local birdwatchers, and additional fieldwork immediately following the outbreak, confirmed that many of the gulls at the Blyth make use of nearby pig farms during the day, but that many others arrive in the late afternoon from across a wide area of north-east Suffolk. Fieldwork confirmed that any gull movement in the vicinity of the Holton plant in the afternoon was consistent with birds moving east towards a roost either on the Blyth Estuary, or on the sea off Southwold.



WeBS sites in the vicinity of the Holton H5N1 outbreak site.

Information from several of our counters in the area gave us no reason to believe that there had been a substantial cold-weather influx into East Anglia in the weeks leading up to the outbreak. For example, numbers of Bewick's Swans on the Ouse Washes were substantially lower than seen in previous winters. Moreover, since the autumn of 2006, areas with large concentrations of waterbirds were identified for Defra by analysis of WeBS counts. Where possible, visual inspections had been made at many of these on a regular basis, often by reserve wardens, in order to look for unusual levels of mortality which might suggest the virus being introduced into an area by wild birds. Despite this heightened level of surveillance, no wild birds have been found with H5N1 in Britain during the 2006-07 winter (at the time of writing). Moreover, no cases in wild birds have been detected anywhere in western Europe this winter.

Our advice, therefore, was that it seemed highly unlikely that this virus had been introduced to the site by wild birds. Simultaneously, other scientists were investigating the molecular

Black-headed Gulls on roof on a poultry shed. Photograph by Andy Musgrove

genetics of the virus at the site, which appeared to corroborate this opinion. This rapid combination of ornithological and virological evidence was of great value to the team at Defra investigating the epidemiology of the outbreak, although the media reverted to type and started blaming wild birds before waiting for any evidence. However, as further evidence emerged into the public domain it was gratifying to see the consensus swing the other way. At the time of writing, investigations are still ongoing but the interim epidemiological report suggest that it appears most likely that the virus was introduced from overseas by human means to the processing plant, and that hygiene practices at the plant led to the potential for the virus to be transported the short distance to the poultry rearing sheds.

Worryingly, it remains possible that wild birds in the vicinity of Holton have been infected with H5N1 as a result of these lapses although to date, thankfully, increased surveillance on the premises and in the surrounding area has not yet shown this to be the case.

Hopefully, this will be the last we see of H5N1 for a while but WeBS data enables us to remain vigilant into the future. The quality of the counts provided by the WeBS volunteers has been highly praised by all involved.

Andy Musgrove

Yellow-legged Gulls

For many years, the large white-headed gulls have caused confusion and controversy. What was once simply considered the Herring Gull is now generally recognised to comprise at least three species in a British context. The north European races *argentatus* and *argenteus* remain as Herring Gull. The Mediterranean race michahellis is now generally referred to as the Yellow-legged Gull (previously Western Yellow-legged Gull) and further east, around the Black and Caspian Seas, occurs the race *cachinnans* which is generally referred to by UK birders as the Caspian Gull. The British Ornithologists' Union, at the time of writing, considers Yellow-legged Gull to be a separate species, but Caspian Gull to be a subspecies of Herring Gull, although this may well change shortly.

It is not the job of WeBS to pronounce upon taxonomic issues, but we do need to be clear about the different forms of these gulls we are recording, where possible in the field.

Caspian Gull, photograph by Peter M Wilson

In the past, we have had the following two-letter codes used within WeBS:

YG – unspecified "Yellow-legged" gulls (i.e. *michahellis* and *cachinnans*).

YM – *michahellis* "Western" Yellow-legged Gull

YC – *cachinnans* "Caspian" Gull

Following a review of the codes we use throughout the BTO, it has been decided to make a change. YC is left unchanged for Caspian Gull.

However, we feel that the vast majority of records assigned to YG in the past were actually *michahellis*.

We have, therefore, discontinued YM as a valid code, and now **YG represents Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis***.

The only point counters need to consider is whether any birds recorded as YG in the past were actually Caspian Gulls. If so, please get in touch with us and we'll change them in the database.

No doubt we'll be writing about American Herring Gulls (*smithsonianus*) shortly. Confused? You should try looking at the redpolls…

Andy Musgrove

Yellow-legged Gull, photograph by Peter M Wilson

Moving on

Two familiar names to WeBS counters have moved on to pastures new in recent months. Steve Holloway, who has been involved in WeBS and other waterbird surveys for many years, left the BTO in December and is now employed in environmental consultancy. Emma Glaister (nee Davies) has moved on to a new job in Thetford Council. We wish them both well in their new ventures.

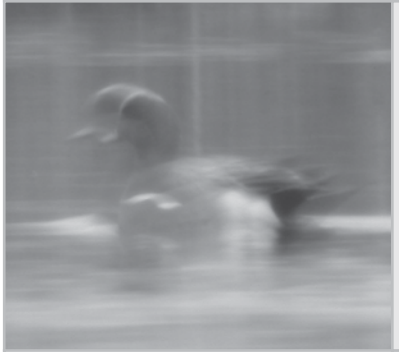
Emma is being replaced by Maria Knight, who has worked in a variety of roles at BTO for several years now and will be a familiar voice from her work on our reception. Steve's replacement will be announced in a future WeBS News. For the time being, however, any queries you would have sent to Steve should be directed to Mark Collier.

WANTED!

Although we have access to a number of excellent photographs and line drawings, donated to the BTO over the years by many kind souls, we are always after a wider range to illustrate WeBS News, Waterbirds in the UK and a variety of talks we give to promote WeBS and encourage new counters. If you have some images you'd be happy to let WeBS make use of then please get in touch. Otherwise, we'll have to start using our own, and they aren't really very good…

<< Mystery Bird 1...

Mystery Bird 2... >>



<< Mystery Bird 3...

Who's Who within the WeBS team—2007

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team at BTO. For the benefit of those that are not sure who does what and who to get in contact with for various matters, the following 'Who's who' is included to clarify the roles of the various personnel.

Graham Austin, WeBS Database Manager
WeBS Alerts
WeBS database management
Statistical analyses

Alex Banks, WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts)
Low Tide Counts
Carmarthen Bay Common Scoters, etc

Mark Collier, WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)
Annual Report
Standard data requests
WeBS News

Iain Downie, Web Software Developer
WeBS Online

Maria Knight, Assistant WeBS Secretary
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports

Ilya Maclean, Research Ecologist
WeBS Alerts, WeBS website

Heidi Mellan, WeBS Secretary
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports
Jointly responsible for the producton of this edition of WeBS News

Andy Musgrove, WeBS National Coordinator
Overall management of WeBS
WeBS database management
WeBS Online

Email
use the format of firstname.surname@bto.org e.g. andy.musgrove@bto.org

Web site – WeBS web site
WeBS web site:
http://www.bto.org/webs

WeBS Alerts – WeBS Alerts report
WeBS Alerts report:
http://blx1.bto.org/webs/alerts/index.htm

Mystery Bird Answers… 1. Great Northern Diver 2. Stilt Sandpiper 3. American Wigeon