



# WeBS News

Newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

Issue no. 24 Spring 2008

## WeBS

# 60th Anniversary!

*How many of the thousands of counters undertaking WeBS counts over this past winter realised that their counts were forming the 60th year of national waterbird monitoring for the UK? Mark Collier explains ...*

**T**he Wetland Bird Survey as it is today evolved from the merging of two previous schemes, the National Wildfowl Counts and the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry. Together, these schemes have now been running continually for 60 years, ensuring that the UKs wintering waterbirds remain some of the most well monitored birds around.

My first involvement with WeBS came whilst I was at school, helping out Pat Mabon in the Cotswold Water Park where I used to tag along tallying up all the Coots as I went. Later I participated with Low Tide Counts at Langstone Harbour and, as I cycled along the seawall, little did I realise that I would eventually be involved with the scheme from the organisational side and ultimately be writing the annual reports. So, in some form or another, I have helped with WeBS for around 15 years, albeit with some rather long gaps in that time. However, my involvement remains insignificant compared to the many counters who have given up their time, month after month and continue to do so. I am always astounded by the efforts of the WeBS volunteers, which have enabled the continuous monitoring of waterbirds since 1947 and are the reason that waterbird monitoring in the UK is held in such high esteem. It is impressive enough that waterbird monitoring has been going for 60 years but I was even more impressed to learn that some of the counters have been going for that

long as well! So, to find out what inspires someone to persistently venture out on cold wintry Sundays I spoke to two long serving WeBS volunteers, who between them have been counting for over 119 years.

Bryan Sage, whose interest in birds began at age eight after he was given a copy of *The Observer's Book of Birds*, has been counting waterbirds since 1949 both in Hertfordshire and Norfolk. Bryan told me how he first became involved with the National Wildfowl Counts at Aldenham Reservoir in Hertfordshire and that he still has the letter that he received from Lady Barclay-Smith of the International Council for Bird Preservation (the organisation that initiated the first wildfowl count scheme) inviting him to become the Regional Organiser for all wildfowl counts in the county. As well as this role Bryan also counted several other sites around area, including the then newly formed Hilfield Reservoir in 1955. Bryan recalls "In the extremely cold winter of 1962/63 I remember walking several miles across snow-covered fields to count Hilfield. I arrived at the site only to find the 115 acre reservoir almost completely frozen." Fortunately for Bryan his trip was worthwhile as hundreds of wildfowl were packed into a small unfrozen area of deeper water near to the reservoir's valve house. Not to be deterred by these sorts of conditions Bryan continued to count the

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

**Neil Calbrade** WeBS National Organiser  
(Low Tide Counts)  
neil.calbrade@bto.org

#### Newsletter contributors

**Dawn Balmer** is Atlas Co-ordinator at BTO  
dawn.balmer@bto.org

**Teresa Frost** is a PhD student at the  
University of Kent

**Colette Hall** is a Waterbird Monitoring Officer at WWT  
colette.hall@wwt.org.uk

**Carl Mitchell** is a Waterbird Monitoring Officer at WWT  
carl.mitchell@wwt.org.uk

**Nicholas Watts** is a WeBS Counter  
and farmer

**Lucy Wright** is a Research Ecologist at BTO  
lucywright@bto.org

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(www.surniaphotography.co.uk)

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(www.tonicross.co.uk)

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# Editorial

Welcome to another edition of *WeBS News*. The winter 2007-08 has now drawn to a close and the Little Ringed Plovers should be arriving back in Thetford shortly. We look forward to seeing what the WeBS counts for the past winter will reveal. It clearly takes a little time to collate and analyse the 30,000 or so WeBS visits submitted to us each year by you, the hard-working and much-appreciated counters. It seems to have been a fairly quiet winter, with the mostly mild conditions producing little in the way of cold-weather influxes from the near continent. Even without analysis of your counts, however, we can already confidently name one species that has had a record year. The Cattle Egret (or EC if you were wondering what its two-letter code is!) has been increasing northwards throughout France for

years and has long been predicted to follow the Little Egret in colonising Britain and Ireland. This finally seemed to begin in earnest in autumn 2007, when many birds appeared, especially in the south-west. WeBS Online users have already submitted records of Cattle Egrets from 3 sites, Bridgwater Bay, Tavy Estuary and Lewes Brooks whilst fieldwork for *Bird Atlas 2007-11* has revealed even more birds (see map on page 14). Although Cattle Egrets are more of a farmland bird than Little Egrets, it seems a fair bet to expect that this species will become increasingly familiar to many WeBS counters over the coming years. Thanks again for all your counts and enjoy the spring!

*Andy Musgrove*

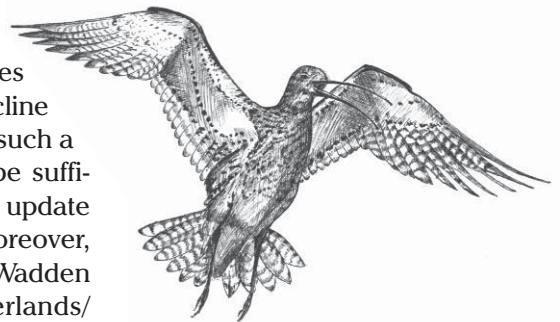
## WeBS News—IUCN Red List Update

WeBS counters will be concerned to hear that one of our most familiar waders has recently been added to the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* has been uplisted to a status of 'Near Threatened' on the basis of recent declines in Europe and central Asia.

This might come as a surprise to many people, as the Curlew remains a common and widespread wintering bird in the UK. Although WeBS indices have started to show a decline from the turn of the century, such a decline would not by itself be sufficient to trigger such a status update at an international level. Moreover, wintering numbers on the Wadden Sea (Netherlands/Germany/Denmark) have shown no evidence of decline. However, analyses of the European breeding population of the nominate

subspecies suggest that it declined by 24% during 1990–2000, with further declines in at least the UK breeding population since that time. Additionally, it is thought that the race *suschkini* (breeding in the south Urals and Kazakhstan) is also declining, whilst the status of the eastern race *orientalis* is less clear.

*Andy Musgrove*





Lapwing / Neil Calbrade

### **WeBS 60th Anniversary** *...continued from page 1*

wildfowl around Hertfordshire until he moved to Norfolk in 1981 and it wasn't long before he was contacted by the then count organiser for Norfolk, Geoffrey Matthews, requesting that he count the Brent Geese that wintered along the Norfolk coast. These first counts took Bryan all the way from Holme to Salthouse and on one such count in February 1983 he notched up over 7,000 Brent Geese. Nowadays, Bryan's monthly counts take him around Burnham Overy Freshmarsh where this species is still recorded in large numbers. In over twenty-five years of counting waterbirds along the Norfolk Coast Bryan has witnessed many changes along this part of the Norfolk coast, principally a noticeable increase in the number of both breeding and wintering waterbirds. Bryan recalls that the increase in the number of both breeding and wintering waterbirds has fundamentally been brought about through the conversion of arable land back into wet grassland.

"The most noticeable increase is the number of Pink-footed Geese here now, which I can only describe as spectacular." It has been the enjoyment that he receives from being outdoors counting birds that has motivated Bryan to continue counting the birds in his local area.

Gaining an intimate knowledge about local wildlife has been the inspiration for another long-serving counter, Frank Gribble. Frank began counting waterbirds at Kempston Hardwick in Bedfordshire in 1947, long before he owned a car. Instead he had to cycle to the site and was so determined to continue counting when access became difficult that he used to cycle a nearby railway line and walk down some disused sidings to view the birds from there.

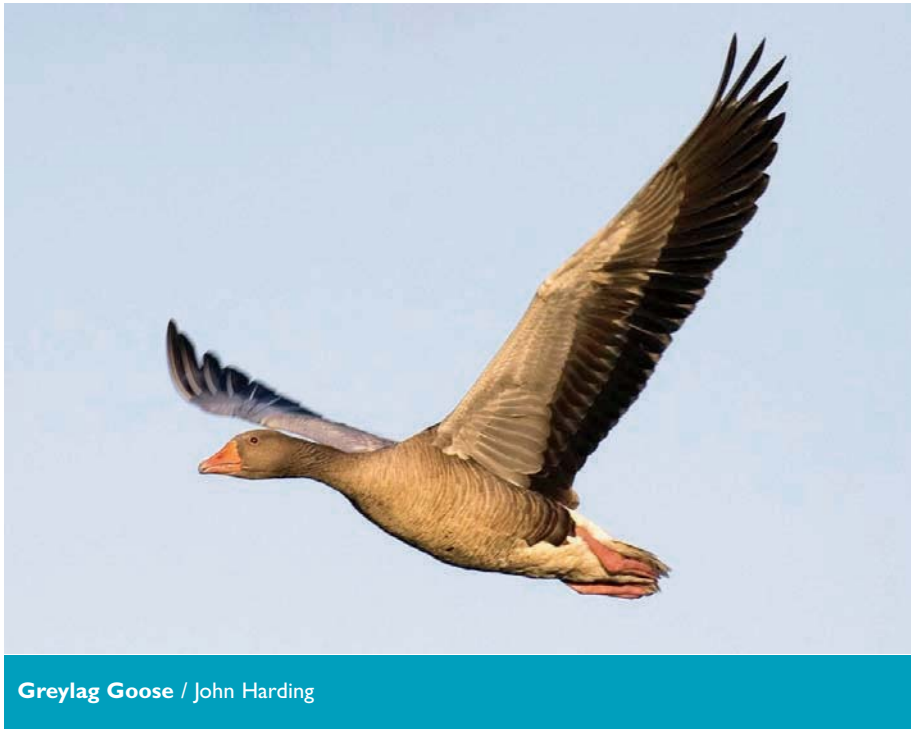
In his years as a WeBS counter Frank has also made regular visits to Bedford Sewage Farm, Venus Pool in Shropshire and more recently Aqualate Mere in Staffordshire. As well as waterbird counting Frank has also been involved with the survey work for the last three atlases and is now helping with the fourth. "I really enjoy seeing the changes on my

local patch," Frank explains, "and by spending time there I can become fully aware of why these changes are happening."

It has been through the knowledge gained by his regular visits to Aqualate Mere, where Frank has counted waterbirds for the past 35 years that he was able to help protect the site when it was threatened with drainage and Aqualate Mere is now a National Nature Reserve. Frank commented, "Through imparting this knowledge to local landowners it has been possible to influence decisions; local knowledge has real power and drives changes for the better." One of the key strengths of WeBS is the amount of long-term data that are available for a so many sites. It is only through bringing together this vast amount of local knowledge about these sites and their birds that it is possible to monitor the nation's waterbirds on the scale that WeBS does.

**Mark Collier**

# 2008 survey of summering Greylag Geese in Scotland



Greylag Goose / John Harding

An assessment of Greylag Geese encountered in Scotland to the south and east of the Great Glen (generally considered to be re-established birds) found 2673 birds in 1989 and the early 1990s (Brown & Dick, 1992). A survey of summering birds in 1997 (Mitchell *et al.* 2000) found c. 10,000 presumed native birds to the north and west of the Great Glen, with principal concentration on the Uists (c. 3,300 birds) and Coll/Tiree (c. 2,360 birds). A recent assessment for *The Birds of Scotland 3* estimated there to be as many as c. 25,000 birds summering in Scotland and numbers were increasing, with notable recent increases on Orkney and the Uists (Swann, 2007). The distribution of the species also now extends to many more areas of Scotland than that described in the 1990s.

Therefore, an up to date survey of the summer status and distribution of the species in Scotland is overdue. The issue has climbed the political ladder too, since the species is increasing in areas where it may

come into conflict with agricultural interests.

Consequently, a survey of Greylag Geese in Scotland is being planned for July and August 2008. This will hopefully cover the whole of Scotland and will involve a combination of counts on moulting lochs and post-breeding gatherings on, primarily, agricultural land.

The survey will dovetail into existing counts undertaken on the Uists and Coll/Tiree. As ever, we will be reliant on your valuable support and full details of the survey will be sent to volunteer counters in the spring.

For further information about the survey please contact me at the address below.

**Carl Mitchell**  
**WWT, Slimbridge,**  
**Gloucester, GL2 7BT**  
[carl.mitchell@wwt.org.uk](mailto:carl.mitchell@wwt.org.uk)

## References

- A. W. Brown & G. Dick. (1992) Distribution and number of feral Greylag Geese in Scotland. *Scottish Birds* 16: 184-191

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Swann, R. (2007) Greylag Goose. In: Forrester, R., Andrews, I.J. et al. (Eds) *The Birds of Scotland*. The Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Aberlady.

## WeBS CORE PRIORITY DATES

### 2008-2009

9th March 2008

6th April 2008

18th May 2008

22nd June 2008

20th July 2008

17th August 2008

14th September 2008

19th October 2008

16th November 2008

14th December 2008

18th January 2009

22nd February 2009

15th March 2009

19th April 2009

10th May 2009

14th June 2009

12th July 2009

23rd August 2009

20th September 2009

11th October 2009

22nd November 2009

20th December 2009

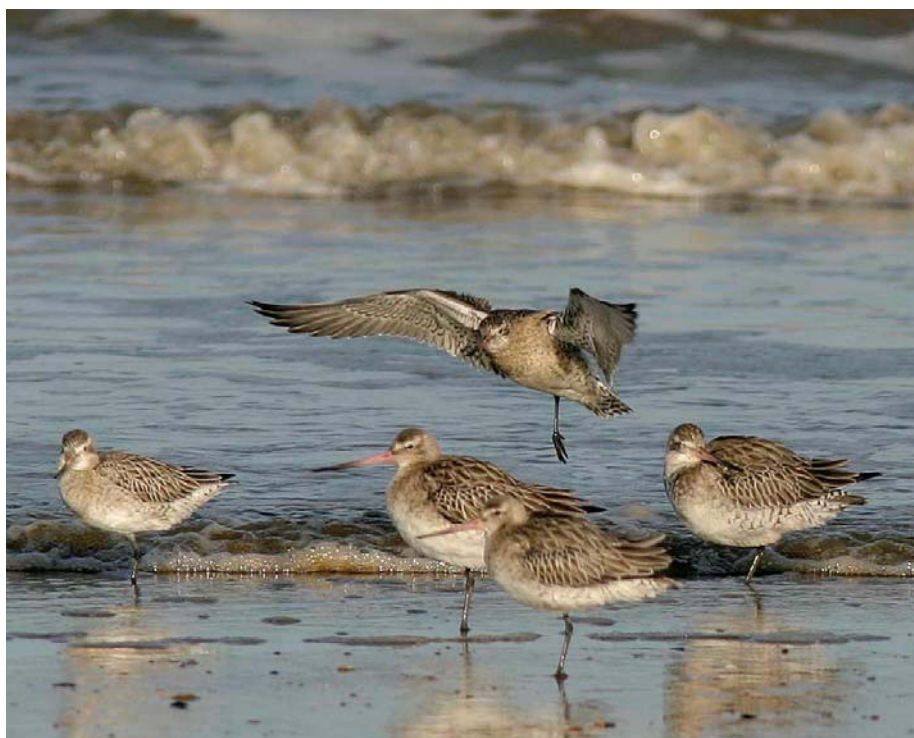


# WeBS Low Tide Counts: Update

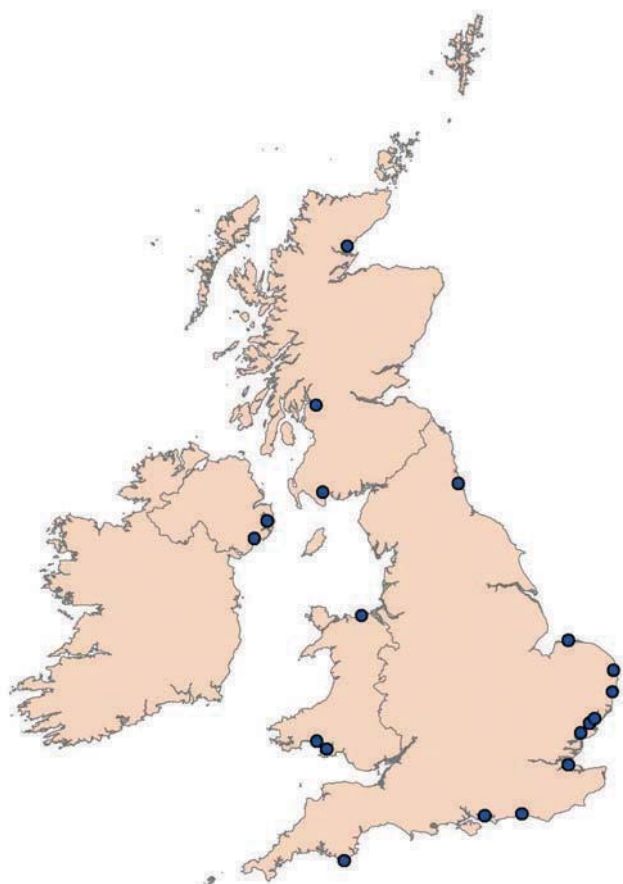
The winter of 2007–08 has been another busy time for Low Tide counting, with 19 different sites being covered under the scheme. There were no new sites covered this winter, though the Colne Estuary in Essex was counted for the first time since 1994–95, thanks to funding from Natural England.

Other sites counted were the Adur, Stour, Orwell, Langstone Harbour, Burry Inlet, Carmarthen Bay, Firth of Clyde, Strangford Lough, Tyne, Dundrum Bay, Clwyd, Breydon Water, Loch Fleet, Wigtown Bay, Blyth (Suffolk), Kingsbridge and Medway Estuaries and the North Norfolk Coast.

We will soon begin the process of organising counts for 2008/09, with some large sites such as Severn, Solway, Ribble and Thames Estuaries being targeted. These are just a handful of the estuaries we will



Bar-tailed Godwits / Al Downie



Low Tide sites counted in 2007/08

be looking to get counted, we would welcome counts from any estuary, so please contact the WeBS office (email: [lowtide@bto.org](mailto: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.

With the advent of WeBS Online, it is now possible to input your Low Tide Counts online in the same way as for Core Counts. Once you are registered for online, just contact us to let us know which site and sectors you count and we can set you up.

We are in the process of loading the 2006–07 data from the 16 sites covered into the database, the results of which will be produced in *Waterbirds in the UK 2006/07* due later this year.

*Neil Calbrade*  
**WeBS Low Tide Counts**  
**National Organiser**

# Latest news from the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme



Barnacle Geese / Rob Robinson

The following is a brief summary of the annual counts and age assessments conducted in Britain and Ireland during winter 2006/07.

Overall, results indicated that 2006 was a poor breeding season for most of our goose and swan populations, with wintering numbers for many below those recorded for the previous year.

Exceptions to this, however, were the two **Barnacle Goose** populations. Almost the whole population of Svalbard Barnacle Geese was, typically, present at the Solway Estuary by the end of October, with the proportion of young noted as the highest recorded since 1998, thus representing a good breeding season. Greenland Barnacle Goose numbers, recorded at key sites in Argyll, Western Isles and Orkney,

noticeably exceeded the current population estimate, indicating a continued rise in those wintering in Scotland. The next international census of the population is due to take place during spring 2008, and these latest results suggest the census will reveal a large increase has occurred over the past five years.

Productivity was found to be below average for both the **Whooper** and **Bewick's Swan** populations. Unseasonably cold temperatures and snow on Icelandic breeding grounds are likely to have reduced Whooper Swan breeding success. In the Netherlands and Britain, a low proportion of young in Bewick's flocks indicated a poor breeding season for the Northwest European population, although the mild temperatures in the UK and on the continent may

have resulted in families wintering further east than normal.

Perhaps also influenced by the mild winter weather were **Taiga Bean Geese**. Numbers were low at the two key British sites, Slamannan Plateau, Falkirk, and Yare Valley, Norfolk. In fact counts at the latter site were the lowest since 1977/78.

The Icelandic-breeding Goose Census produced notably low counts for **Pink-footed** and **Icelandic Greylag Geese**. That for Pink-footed Geese is likely to be explained by their late arrival to Britain due to unfavourable weather conditions, whilst extensive flooding in many areas may have resulted in greater than usual dispersal of geese. Of note were the low counts at the key arrival site, Loch of Strathbeg, around half of the typical autumn count. North

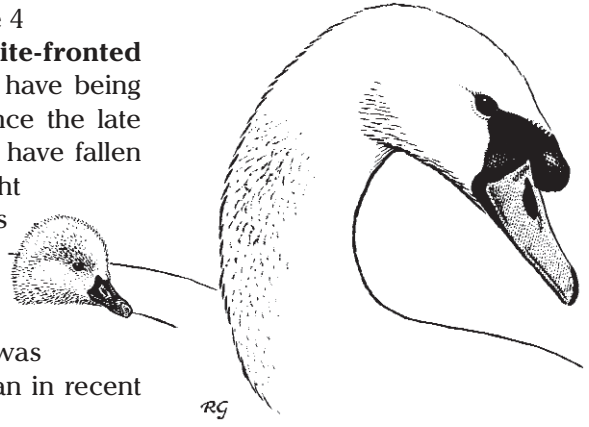
Scotland held the majority of Greylag Geese, with over half the population found on Orkney – where an increasing proportion of the population has been wintering each year. Although coverage was incomplete on Shetland, it may be expected that numbers there will also increase given the redistribution northwards in recent years. The noticeably lower numbers at sites such as Loch Skene and Loch Eye suggest this shift is now also affecting key sites in the Moray Basin. **Northwest Scotland Greylag Geese** have steadily increased on Tiree (Inner Hebrides) over the past ten years, and the latest results showed the highest numbers recorded thus far. In comparison, numbers on the Uists (Outer Hebrides) were lower than the previous winter, continuing the downward trend that has occurred at the site in recent years. Whilst counts are conducted annually at these key Hebridean sites, regular monitoring of many areas within the population’s range is not possible due to their remoteness.

A complete census is, however, planned for late summer, the last

having taken place in 1997 – see Carl Mitchell’s article on page 4

**Greenland White-fronted Goose** numbers, which have been decreasing in Britain since the late 1990s, were reported to have fallen again following the slight stabilisation the previous year, and although the breeding success was still below the long-term average it was encouragingly higher than in recent years.

Conversely, **European White-fronted** and **Dark-bellied Brent Geese** suffered a crash in productivity following an exceptionally good breeding season in 2005. This was, however, to be expected in a year of low lemming abundance in Arctic breeding areas, where the rodents are an alternative food source for predators. Age assessments of the East Atlantic **Light-bellied Brent Geese** conducted at Lindisfarne recorded the lowest percentage of young in Britain since 1992/93, and similar results were also obtained from key wintering sites in Denmark. Preliminary data from the East Canadian High Arctic Light-bellied



Brent census, which covers sites in Iceland as well as Ireland and the UK, suggested a slight decline in numbers since the previous year. This was, however, to be expected given the poor breeding season, which was highlighted by the low number of young recorded amongst flocks in both Ireland and Iceland.

Full species accounts and reports, along with more information about the GSMP, can be found on the WWT website at <http://www.wwt.org.uk/Research/Monitoring>

*Colette Hall  
WWT*

## Checking and validation

**W**eBS counters collect a vast quantity of information every year, which is then put to good use in a myriad of ways. To maintain the integrity of the scheme, and the high regard in which it is seen, it is important that more unusual records are checked for possible errors. The first level of checking is by your Local Organiser, who will have a quick check through the records coming in from their region to look for obvious mistakes. Following this, a set of checks are carried out within the WeBS Office. There are some types of errors that occur commonly. For example, it is not unusual for counters to enter a count in the wrong box on the paper form or on WeBS Online, so a count of 5000 Golden Plovers might end up as 5000 Grey Plovers.

However, on very rare occasions, a counter may record a less common species but their Local Organiser may feel that the case for its occurrence was not proven beyond reasonable doubt. In such a case, we have a slight difficulty, in that we have conflicting advice as to whether a record should form part of the official, long-term WeBS dataset.

In cases such as this (and they are very rare), we would tend to go with the advice of the Local Organiser in the majority of cases. It is important that we have a defensible position with regards to the validation of records, so that we can defend the integrity of the whole dataset. However, we recognise that in instances like this, counters may disagree with the opinion of their Local Organiser and may have

a strong desire to maintain their record. Thus, we intend to keep such disputed records within the WeBS database but flagged in such a way that the counter themselves will be able to view that record, but so that it will not be used in any analyses of WeBS data. At the end of the day, whilst they do add spice to a morning’s count, rarer species are not the primary focus of WeBS anyway, as the scheme is more designed for the monitoring of more common species. However, we feel it is important to get this point explained publicly, for the integrity of the scheme.

*Andy Musgrove*

# WeBS Data and introduced waterbirds

Data collected by WeBS counters have recently been used as part of an international review spanning 119 countries! The BTO has been working with the secretariat of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds, or AEWA) to review all available information on introduced non-native waterbird distribution and abundance throughout the region covered by the agreement, which stretches from South Africa to the arctic. Lucy Wright explains . . .

**I**ntroduced species of animals and plants are one of the biggest threats to global biodiversity, and because of this important conservation issue, a priority of the AEWA has been to find out more about the status and impacts of introduced waterbirds.

We contacted bird conservation organisations, ornithologists and civil servants in 119 countries to find out what they knew about introduced waterbirds in their country. The UK has one of the best datasets on introduced waterbird distribution and abundance of any country, and these data came largely from WeBS counts. However, 88 of the other countries that we contacted also participated in the project, and sent us information about all the species of introduced waterbirds

known to be present in their country, and any known impacts on native wildlife. In the whole AEWA region, at least 104 different species of waterbird have been introduced, and most of these are wildfowl. Thirty-two species have been recorded breeding more than five times, and 15 of these species have increasing populations. Another 27 species had been recorded breeding less than five times, and a further 45 species had been introduced in at least one country, but the introduced birds were not thought to have bred in the wild. Most introductions have occurred in Western Europe, with relatively few in other parts of the AEWA range. Many of the introduced species have increased dramatically in recent years. For example Egyptian Goose populations in the Netherlands increased from around 345 pairs in 1989 to 4,500–5,000 in 2000 according to their latest Atlas, while numbers in Belgium and Germany have also increased by



Male Mandarin Duck / Neil Calbrade

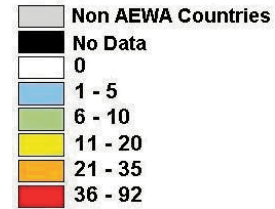
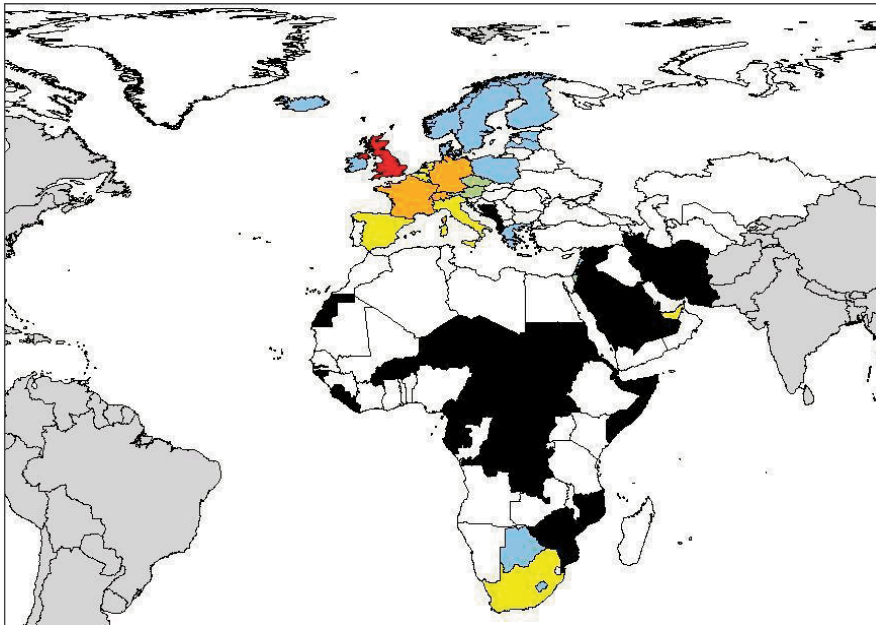
almost 10 times during the past decade. WeBS data show that Egyptian Goose numbers are increasing here too, and it will be very interesting to see what the new Atlas tells us about Egyptian Goose distribution and population size.

Of course the review wasn't just about numbers of birds. We also looked at the evidence for how introduced waterbirds were affecting native species. You may already know about the problems caused by introduced Ruddy Ducks hybridising with native White-headed Ducks in Spain, but other species can cause similar problems elsewhere in the world. For example, introduced Mallard are causing concern in South Africa, where they hybridise with native African Yellow-billed Duck, and in Madagascar, where

they occupy the native range of the globally endangered Meller's Duck and there are concerns that hybridisation could occur between these species, as it has on Mauritius. Other problems were caused by introduced species competing with native species. Introduced Ruddy Shelduck were shown to compete with other hole-nesting species such as Barn Owl and Kestrel for nest sites in Switzerland. Some introduced species, particularly geese and swans, may compete with native birds simply by aggressively defending their territories, and therefore excluding native species from those areas. In contrast, for some species of introduced waterbirds there was little evidence of any effect on native species.







Numbers of introduced waterbird species recorded in 2007 in each country in the AEWA range.

The most striking result of the review was how little is known about introduced waterbirds, and their impacts on native biodiversity, both in this country and throughout the AEWA region. Because of WeBS counters, the UK has some of the

best data in the world on the numbers and distribution of these species, but we still know little about their ecological impacts, and more work is needed to understand this better in the future. So, keep sending in records of any non-native water-

birds that you see during your WeBS counts, and if you see any elsewhere why not submit them (along with any native species you see) to the Bird Atlas via a roving records form?

*Lucy Wright*

## Announcing the WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee

The WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) has been set up to improve the opportunity for communication between the counter network and the staff in the WeBS Office at the BTO. The LOAC is an advisory committee, which is made up of around eight LOs and a number of WeBS staff, with at least one representative from each of the partner organisations. Although the LOAC has no remit to make decisions, such as concerning funding and spending issues (which is the role of the WeBS Steering Group), it is intended that the LOAC will instead be able to provide ideas, advice and feedback.

The inaugural meeting of the LOAC took place in July last year,

and minutes of this meeting are available from the WeBS website <http://www.bto.org/webs/resources/LOAC> or via the WeBS Office, and the second meeting was in February this year. The next meeting will take place this summer. If you would like to raise any points at this meeting then please contact any of the members of LOAC or the WeBS Office; contact details for the members of the LOAC are available through the website or via the WeBS Office. Finally, we are looking to hear from any LOs who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future. In general, there will be two meetings a year, usually held at the BTO in

Thetford. If you are potentially interested in being involved with the LOAC then please contact the

WeBS Office to let us know or to ask for more details.

We would like to thank Robert Ratcliffe (Northants), Howard Vaughan (Essex) and Vince Chambers (Berkshire) who have retired as Local Organisers after many years of dedicated work.

We currently have vacancies for Local Organisers at Cheshire (inland), Durham (coast and inland), Essex (parts of), East Lancashire, Doncaster, Berkshire, Sheffield, Angus, Barnsley, Warwickshire, Huddersfield/Halifax, Antrim, Londonderry, Down, Tyrone, Armagh, Sutherland, Wester Ross and Harris/Lewis.

*Mark Collier*

# Where have all the Mallards gone . . . . ?

In response to the continuing decline in the WeBS index for Mallard, long-term WeBS counter Nicholas Watts offers his perspective on this species in the fens . . .

In the 1960s there were probably 2000 Mallard resident in Deeping Fen, whilst today there would be no more than 200. Deeping Fen is situated in the South Lincolnshire fens. The field boundaries are dykes and about half of these dykes have water in them and would seem to be suitable for Mallard to rear a family in.

Since 1992 I have been surveying breeding birds over an area of 8800 acres. I walk the length of nearly every dyke and annually I see only one or two Mallard with ducklings but probably 100 adult Mallard, some as pairs and some in small groups. Mallard in Deeping Fen are rearing so few young that their numbers are declining.

There are only six species of birds that have increased in numbers in Deeping Fen over the past 30 years: Wood Pigeon, Collared Dove, Sparrowhawk, Magpie, Carrion Crow and Barn Owl. These birds have one thing in common; their young do not get fed on insects.

Fifty years ago Deeping Fen was teeming with wildlife, then spraying of weed killers and insecticides started to take place annually. The

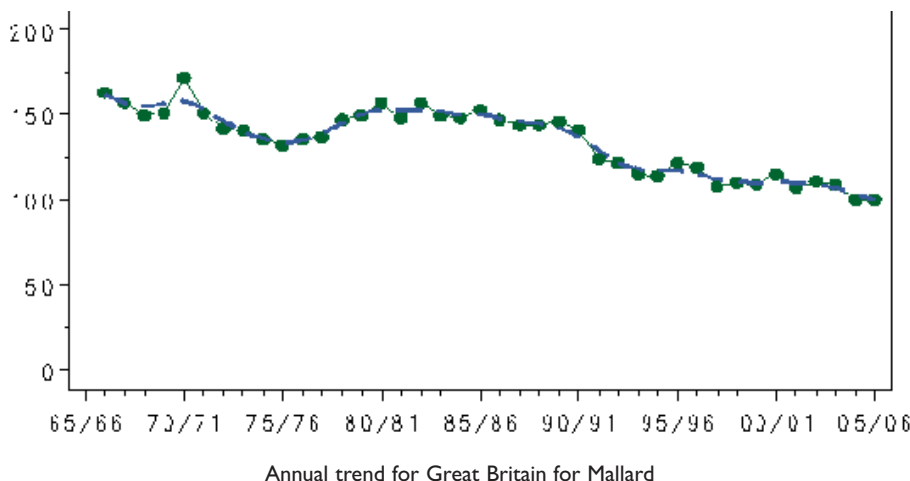


Mallard / Jill Pakenham

Fens had been drained before 1950 but we have continued to farm more efficiently and lower the water table even more, not only in the Fens but also over the whole country as farmers were given grants to drain their fields and fill dykes in.

Farmers have to be very careful how they spray weed killers; if there is a crop downwind of the field they are spraying different to the crop they are spraying, the spray may well scorch or even kill the crop downwind but if the crop downwind was wheat then the drift from the spray would be all right to drift over the dyke to the wheat crop. No farmer would ever think of the dyke in between the two wheat crops and over the years some of these dykes would have received the full dose of weedkiller, which would kill some broad-leaved weeds making the dyke less diverse.

No farmer would worry about an insecticide drifting across the dyke and so that would kill insects directly. Over the last twenty years block cropping has become more commonplace so the farmers don't have to consider the crop downwind so much as they used to, the dykes



get a whiff of spray more often than they used to.

Over the years as we have lowered the water table in the Fens our dykes have got deeper and the banks of them have got steeper. Now there are only a few hours a day when the sun shines into the bottom of the dyke, so there are very few hours for the sun to warm up any ducklings. Not only that, but our dykes are efficient water carriers, the sides symmetrical and steep, and so there is no where for a family of young ducks to haul themselves out. and keep warm in the sun. Ducks come to these small dykes to rear their young to keep out of the reach of Pike, which are in our wider drains and lakes. There are also a lot more foxes about and foxes kill adult Mallard and take them back to their young so I am sure they can catch ducklings. If there was a duck with a brood of ducklings on a wider piece of shallow water and I did not have binoculars I might never see them as

the mother would see me before I could see her and would gently take her brood away from me. However if I was to come to a dyke or walk along the brim of a dyke and there was a brood of ducklings in the dyke I would almost be bound to see the family of ducks as I would be walking faster than they can swim and there is probably nowhere for them to hide. I would be able to catch some of them with my bare hands so I am sure a fox could catch more of them than I could. There were no foxes in the Fens until the 1960s and in the wider countryside they were a rarity before World War II; indeed my father planted two spinneys just after WWII because he didn't think there were enough foxes around!

Out of the Fens there used to be ponds in fields where ducks could rear a family but most of these in-field ponds have disappeared, whilst those that have remained have had spray drift over them. Foxes abound

in far greater numbers than they did fifty years ago.

Feral geese are doing well because they do not have insects in their diet; they thrive on short grass and we are a nation of grass cutters. Geese generally go to larger pieces of water to rear their goslings and never get too far from water and so can escape from foxes easier than ducks in a dyke. Both of the adult geese protect the goslings while only the female duck will look after the ducklings. Two sets of eyes are better than one and of course some broods of goslings and adults get together and there is safety in numbers.

Where have all the Mallard gone? They are not able to rear enough young to maintain their population because there are not enough insects and too many foxes.

*Nicholas Watts*

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## Reporting ringed and colour-ringed birds

**W**eBS counters are in an ideal position to find ringed birds, particularly those washed up dead along the shoreline. This is a very important opportunity that we want to make the most of, so read on about reporting these birds.

Ringling involves placing a uniquely numbered metal ring around a bird's leg, allowing us to identify birds as individuals. Some ringling projects will also use colour-rings or marks to allow birds to be identified at distance. These are most commonly colour-rings, widely used on waders, and neck collars, which are more often on geese and swans. In Britain and Ireland, over 800,000 birds are ringed annually,

with fewer than one in fifty subsequently reported; so all reports of ringed birds are of great value.

Unfortunately, due to the volume of WeBS count forms that we receive, we may overlook comments about ringed birds on the actual forms themselves. So if you're lucky enough to find a ringed bird, it should be reported direct to the BTO's Ringling Unit. They will then be able to trace the origin of the bird and send a report back to you detailing the original ringling information and any previous sightings. The easiest way to report both ringed and colour-ringed birds is online at <http://www.ring.ac/> where they will be forwarded to the appropriate ringling scheme or colour-ring coor-



dinator. Alternatively, you can email the Ringling Unit at [recoveries@bto.org](mailto:recoveries@bto.org) or by post via BTO HQ.

*Mark Collier & Mark Grantham*

# Counting Ducks — A Statistician's Wildfowl World

**I**t's funny; when I used to tell people I was studying maths at university they made a certain kind of face. When I used to tell other mathematicians that I wanted to move into statistics, they made the same kind of face. Now, when people ask me what's the subject of my PhD, I tell them it is about counting ducks – and they smile.

I've been interested in birds since a child, so when I saw a PhD project on overwintering wildfowl advertised by the University of Kent and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust I just knew that I had to apply for it. At that point I didn't know anything about WeBS, but numbers of people that volunteered for the scheme soon impressed me. At the same time, I was a little daunted by the scale of the data collected.

There are a few things about counting wintering wildfowl that are particularly tricky to deal with. When you are surveying a breeding population, you can be fairly sure that the birds are sticking around for a while. However, in winter they'll move according to where the food is, sometimes on WeBS sites, and sometimes not. For most species, each monthly WeBS count is a snapshot of a mobile population. As a birdwatcher this is what is interesting: you can never be sure what you are going to see at a site when you turn up, even if you are repeating a visit from yesterday. As a statistician, this means that it is particularly challenging to create models of what is happening and to fill in any counts that are missing.

Another aspect of this project I have found fascinating is investigating whether there are changes over time for particular species in their arrival dates and how long they stay. What could be the consequences of these phenological changes for estimating population trends? One way of investigating is to make computer



Male Pintail / Neil Calbrade

simulations of what you imagine could happen, and apply WeBS procedures to the simulated data.

For example, I designed a simulation where a species was arriving in Britain an average of one day later each year, perhaps because they lingered longer on their breeding and migration routes due to milder weather caused by climate change. In this simulation, they still leave our shores at about the same time, because their return migration to breeding grounds was prompted by increased daylight hours, indicating spring is on the way. Using this simulated dataset with the current methods used to analyse WeBS wildfowl data would show an apparent decrease of 20% in the population index over 15 years, even though the actual population hasn't changed at all.

Thought experiments such as this simulation are useful for understanding what we can do with WeBS data, and discovering which statistical methods we can use to get as

much value out of WeBS counts as possible.

Hopefully the statistical research I'm doing in simulations, sampling and modelling methods will lead to improved methods for analysing WeBS data and help us learn even more from the data collected by WeBS counters. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who are WeBS counters, past and present; it is your hard work and dedication that has enabled me to work on such exciting research.

*Teresa Frost*

*Teresa Frost is based at the University of Kent and her project **Stochastic Modelling and Analysis of Wildfowl (Anatidae) Data from the Wetland Bird Survey** was funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.*

# WeBS Online update

**W**eBS Online has now been running for a year, and we have been very pleased indeed with the way things have been going. At the time of writing, 735 counters have registered to make use of WeBS Online. Between them, they have entered summed bird counts now exceeding 11 million. This is a great achievement, especially so soon after launching WeBS Online.

To put the figures into context, for the WeBS Year 2005–06, we received 27,812 standard WeBS Core Count visits. For the first half of the 2007–08 season, we have already received 6,900 WeBS visits submitted online implying that we will be getting at least 36% of visits for 2007–08 submitted online. In fact, the true figure will doubtless be higher than this, as many counters will probably be waiting until they finish their last count of the season before submitting.

As well as this being a great help to us, many counters have commented how useful (and enjoyable) they've found it being able to look back over the counts for their sites in the past.

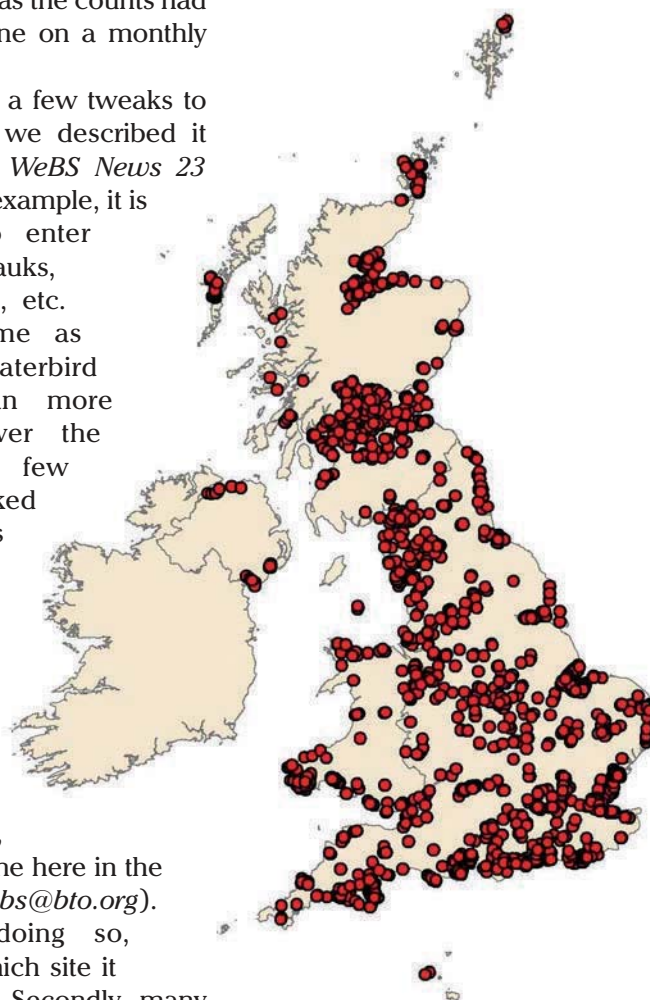
Many counters have taken advantage of being able to see the maps of the site boundaries that we hold, and have in some cases updated these for us. In some parts of the country, county bird recorders have requested access to the counts in order to feed them into local bird reports (with appropriate acknowledgements and caveats) much more rapidly than has been the case in previous years. Additionally, having counts entered online has proved very useful for specific queries that have required very up-to-date information. For example, when H5N1 Avian Influenza was detected at Abbotsbury Swan-ery in Dorset, it was possible for us to provide advice on the wild bird populations along the Fleet from just

two weeks earlier, as the counts had been entered online on a monthly basis.

We have made a few tweaks to the system since we described it more fully during *WeBS News 23* (spring 2007). For example, it is now possible to enter counts of raptors, auks, coastal passerines, etc. at the same time as entering your waterbird counts. We plan more developments over the coming year. A few questions get asked frequently, so it is worth covering them here.

Firstly, if you try to register but during this process don't see an option to select WeBS as a survey, simply drop us a line in the WeBS Office ([webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)). Importantly, if doing so, please confirm which site it is that you count. Secondly, many people have asked why they can't see all the most recent counts they've submitted on paper forms. This is because we initially load the paper forms into our internal master database, then validate them and analyse them here. Only once they've been fully processed will the counts then be uploaded to the online system. At the time of writing, the uploading of the 2005–06 counts is imminent (sorry for the delay with these), and we expect to upload 2006–07 counts from paper forms in summer 2008.

Although WeBS Online is an important development, it is important to point out still that its use is not compulsory. The majority of counters are still using paper forms, and are very welcome to do so. Please do not feel under pressure to



Sites that have counts input online to date

make use of the online system if you don't want to. However, if you would like to have a look into using WeBS Online, then please go to <http://www.bto.org/webs> and click on the links on the left-hand side to get yourself set-up.

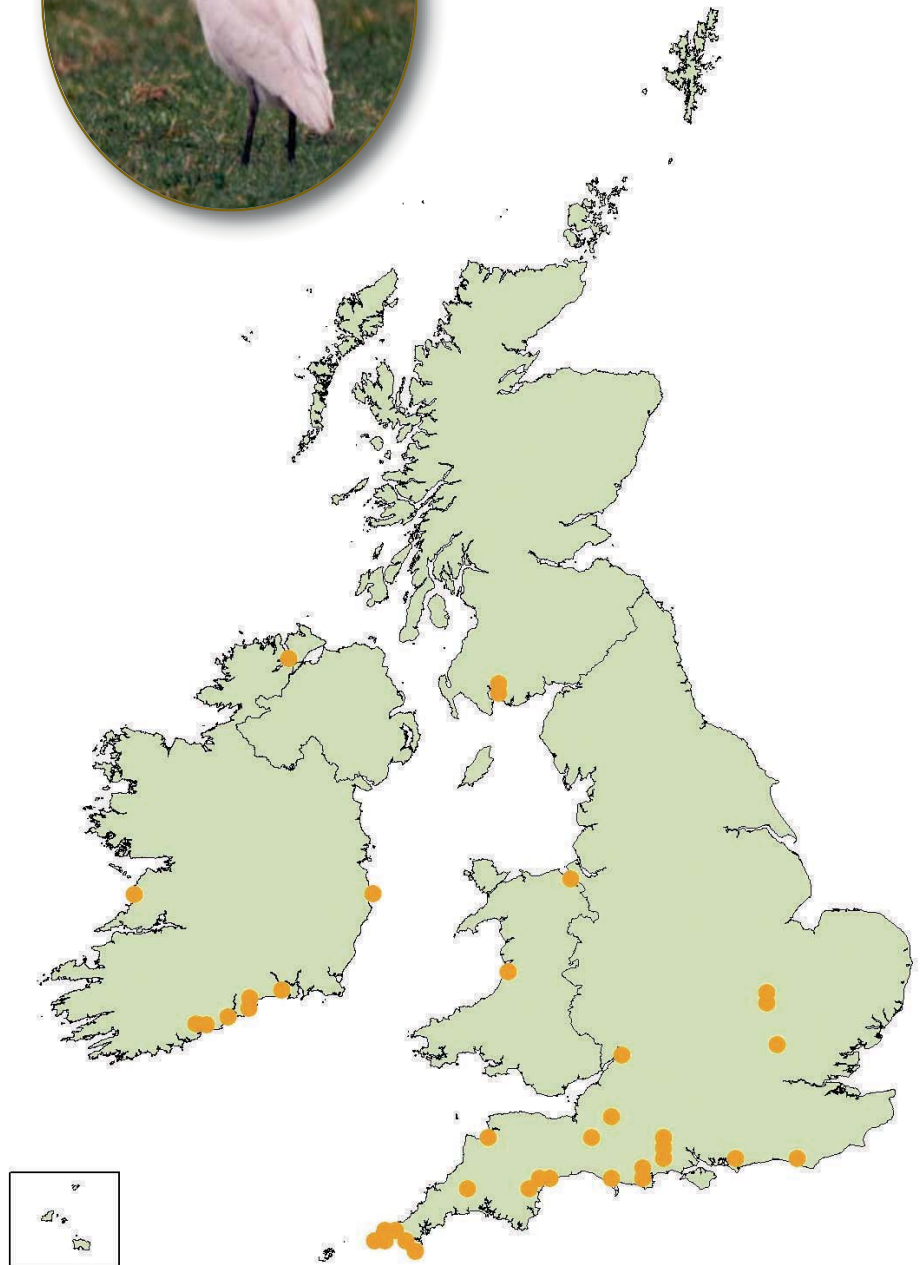
*Andy Musgrove*

# Bird Atlas 2007–11 update

The first winter recording period for the Atlas finished at the end of February and records from *Timed Tetrad Visits* and *Roving Records* are still coming in online and on paper. We are absolutely delighted that over 11,000 tetrads have received two *Timed Tetrad Visits* during the winter and many tetrads in remote areas have received the necessary coverage too. *Roving Records* have proved popular and over 415,000 records have been submitted online alone! The Roving Records, together with records from BirdTrack and other surveys such as WeBS, Breeding Bird Survey and Garden BirdWatch will help 'top-up' the database and help make the distribution maps for the national atlas as complete as possible.

We hope to bring in WeBS records from many areas into the Atlas database for mapping at the 10-km scale. Some count sectors fall between two 10-km squares and it will not be possible to incorporate these records into the Atlas. Many of the common waterbird species will be recorded during atlas fieldwork in a 10-km square, but as a WeBS counter it would be great if you could submit any records of the more unusual species you come across whilst counting to ensure they get recorded for the Atlas. You can enter them online at <http://www.birdatlas.net/>, through BirdTrack or request paper forms from BTO HQ. Over 30 counties are planning to undertake tetrad scale atlases during the next four years, so if you live in one of these areas (see [www.bto.org/goto/localatlas.htm](http://www.bto.org/goto/localatlas.htm)) it would be really helpful if you could record your sightings at the tetrad level.

*Dawn Balmer*



Cattle Egret records November 07–February 08: An example of the Atlas results. Each dot is a 10km square which has a record for Cattle Egret that have been submitted online so far.

# Waterbirds in the UK 05–06

By now you should all have received (and read from cover to cover!) the latest WeBS report. As is inevitable when producing such reports, errors creep in. This time, we unfortunately omitted the productivity information from the headers to the swan and goose accounts, and have thus included them here.

There is a list of errata on the WeBS website where you can also download copies of the report ([http://www.bto.org/webs/news/AR05\\_06/index.htm](http://www.bto.org/webs/news/AR05_06/index.htm)).

## Productivity estimates for Wildfowl & Wader Counts 2005–06

Population	Percentage young	Mean brood size
Whooper Swan	12.1	2.5
Bewick's Swan	10.9	2.2
Pink-footed Goose	18.1	1.7
Bean Goose	14.4	1.3
Iceland Greylag Goose	22.7	2.3
NW Scotland Greylag Goose	18.8	2.0
European White-fronted Goose	34.3	3.0
Greenland White-fronted Goose	8.6	3.1
Svalbard Barnacle Goose	7.9	2.5
Greenland Barnacle Goose	6.6	1.8
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	28.4	2.8
ECHA Light-bellied Brent Goose	12.9	3.0
Svalbard Light-bellied Brent Goose	6.5	2.1

Data provided by WWT from a variety of sources.

## A new WeBS Species— American Herring Gull

Following on from last year's WeBS News where we discussed Yellow-legged Gull and Caspian Gulls, the Herring Gull has now been split further. In its Records Committee Report, the BOU (British Ornithologists' Union) now considers American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* to be a separate species from the European Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*.

However, the identification of American Herring Gull is far from straight forward and much still needs to be learned. At the time of writing, no two-letter code has been assigned to this species though should you be fortunate enough to see an American Herring Gull (and confident in its identification) during a WeBS survey please get in touch and we will provide you with a code.

Although WeBS has been recording Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* as a distinct form since the last newsletter, the BOU now also recognises this as a separate species.

Neil Calbrade



American Herring Gull / Dawn Balmer



### Moving On

Another year in the WeBS office has seen yet more comings and goings. Alex Banks, who has been running the Low Tide Counts since 2004 left the BTO at the end of October and is currently taking a year out to travel the world!!

Neil Calbrade has replaced Alex as Low Tide Count Organiser and Lucy Wright has joined the unit taking on much of Alex's analytical work.

### Seeking motivation. . . . ??

In case you need inspiration to carry out WeBS counts, just consider what you may find. Two potential major rarities, a White-rumped Swift and a Booted Eagle were both seen by WeBS counters on the same day in September last year!! If accepted by the British Ornithologists' Union Rarities Committee they would constitute the first British records of both species. Just think what may be around your site. . . . .

### WeBS clothing

Want to look the part when carrying out your counts?? Why not get yourself kitted out in the WeBS clothing range; we have fleeces, sweatshirts, polo shirts, woolly hats, baseball caps and even a WeBS canvas bag all adorned with the distinctive WeBS logo. For more information on colours, sizes and prices, please contact the WeBS office.

We will again have a stand at the Bird Fair at Rutland this year with a stock of all clothing and will be happy to answer any WeBS queries you may have, so please come and say hello, it's always good to put faces to names!

### Did you know that. . . .

. . . if all the WeBS Counts were printed on A4 paper and then laid end to end they would stretch for 40 miles, more than one and half times the entire length of Loch Lomond, the longest water body counted!

## Who's Who within the WeBS team— 2008

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

**Neil Calbrade**, WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts)

Low Tide Counts  
Data Requests  
WeBS News

**Mark Collier**, WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)

Core Counts  
Annual Report

**Iain Downie**, Web Software Developer

WeBS Online

**Maria Knight**, Assistant WeBS Secretary

Counter and Local Organiser database management

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

**Lucy Wright**, Research Ecologist

Research into waterbird ecology

### Email

use the format of [firstname.surname@bto.org](mailto:firstname.surname@bto.org) e.g. [andy.musgrove@bto.org](mailto:andy.musgrove@bto.org)

### Web site—WeBS web site

[www.bto.org/webs](http://www.bto.org/webs)

### WeBS Alerts

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