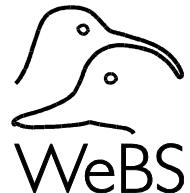


Wetland Bird Survey

1 General information & background



Waterbirds in the UK

The UK is of outstanding international importance for waterbirds. Lying on some of the major flyways for arctic-nesting species, several million waterbirds are attracted, especially during the winter months, by the relatively mild climate and extensive areas of wetland habitat.

The UK has both moral and legal obligations to conserve both these waterbirds and the wetlands upon which they depend. As well as wishing to protect our

natural heritage for future generations, the UK, as a signatory to a number of international conservation conventions and a member state of the European Union, is bound by international law to identify and protect areas important for waterbirds. Implicit in these obligations is the need for regular monitoring to identify such sites and monitor their long term fortunes.

Waterbird surveys

The importance of the UK for waterbirds has long been recognised, and formative schemes to assess their numbers and distribution began in 1947. Early counts included only wildfowl; routine monitoring of waders on estuaries followed in the late 1960s. These separate recording schemes combined in 1993 to form the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS).

WeBS is a partnership scheme of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) (the last on behalf of Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, the Countryside Council for Wales, Natural England and Scottish Natural Heritage) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT).

A variety of different methods and surveys are used to monitor waterbirds effectively in the UK, and WeBS constitutes the longest-running and most extensive of these schemes.

Aims and objectives of WeBS

WeBS aims to monitor all non-breeding waterbirds in the UK to provide the principal data on which the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats is based. To this end, WeBS has three main objectives:

- to assess the size of non-breeding waterbird populations in the UK
- to assess trends in their numbers and distribution
- to assess the importance of individual sites for waterbirds

WeBS count programme

Core Counts provide the long-term data used for assessing population sizes and trends and identifying

important sites. For a predefined area, the observer counts all species of waterbirds present (in the UK this includes divers, grebes, cormorants, herons, swans, geese, ducks, rails, waders, gulls, terns, and Kingfisher). Counts are made at all wetland habitats, including lakes/lochs/loughs, ponds, reservoirs, gravel pits, rivers, freshwater marshes, canals, open coast and estuaries. Counts are made once per month, ideally on predetermined **priority dates**. This enables counts across the whole country to be synchronised, thus reducing the likelihood of birds being double-counted or missed. Such synchronisation is imperative at large sites which are divided into **count sections**, each of which can be practicably counted by a single person in a reasonable amount of time.

Low Tide Counts are undertaken on estuaries and are designed to complement the information gathered by Core Counts (which are typically collected at high tide when birds are easiest to count at their roosts).



Photo by Dawn Balmer (BTO)

Low Tide Counts aim to assess the relative use of intertidal areas through a rolling programme of counts covering most individual estuaries about once every six years. Counts of feeding and roosting waterbirds are made between November and February on pre-established subdivisions of the intertidal habitat in the period two hours either side of low tide.

Uses of WeBS data

WeBS data form the basis for informed decision-making by conservation bodies, planners and developers and contribute to the sustainable wise-use and management of wetlands and their dependent waterbirds. As a signatory to a number of international conservation conventions, and bound by European Union directives, the UK is required to identify important wetland sites for birds and designate them for protection. WeBS data are instrumental in identifying and monitoring these sites and are used extensively by the UK Government in fulfilment of its international conservation obligations, e.g. under the Agreement on the Conservation of African Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds. Similarly, WeBS data may be called

upon for environmental assessments of proposed developments on wetland sites and help to ensure that the planning decisions are based on sound, current data.

WeBS data are used extensively by the WeBS partners for conservation, research and policy formulation. The data are combined with those from other countries in the International Waterbirds Census (IWC) to report on waterbird populations and trends at an international scale (undertaken by Wetlands International).

Structure and organisation

Priorities and overall direction are provided by a Steering Group comprising members from all the partner organisations. The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides ideas, advice and feedback from the volunteer community and is made up of around eight LOs, a number of WeBS staff, and at least one representative from each of the partner organisations. The day-to-day organisation and administration of the scheme is undertaken by the WeBS Team at the BTO in Thetford.

Becoming involved

WeBS is dependent on the enthusiasm and dedication of the several thousand volunteer counters throughout the UK who participate. New counters are always needed to cover new sites, particularly habitats such as rivers which are monitored less comprehensively, as well as to replace counters who retire.

Core Counts take just a few hours and are made once a month, winter being the key period. They require no special skills other than the ability to identify waterbirds. Advice and training can be provided to counters whose sites support large

numbers of birds which may prove awkward to count.

All counters receive, free of charge, a copy of the annual newsletter *WeBS News* and a comprehensive annual report, *Waterbirds in the UK*. These provide regular feedback and information, and summarise the survey results for the recording year, including total numbers counted, annual trends and data for important sites. The report gives a brief overview of relevant research or developments for individual species.

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