

Newsletter

Number 10 Summer 1999

Important changes to recording forms

This Newsletter is something of a bumper edition, and we hope that the articles included are of interest to you; comments, as always, would be gratefully received. However, if you read nothing else, **it is vitally important that you take a few moments to read the centre pages of this newsletter** which detail a number of revisions that we have made to the WeBS recording forms this summer. These have been necessary in order to clear up a number of ambiguities about data received, and to implement a system of 'counter codes'. Other changes will save the WeBS Secretariat considerable time and reduce errors when processing forms and,

we hope, make forms easier and quicker for counters to complete. Though significant, most are simply minor tweaks but please read the centre pages carefully which provide more detail. We have consulted many WeBS Local Organisers and counters and staff from the WeBS partner organisations and hope you will favour the changes, but our apologies for any inconvenience caused in the short term. If you have any queries, please contact the WeBS Secretariat—we will be happy to provide clarification.

Happy reading and happy counting . . . happy form-filling it will never be, but we hope it is less arduous than before!

Waterbirds or waterfowl?

One of the most contentious issues in birdwatching currently is the debate about English bird names. Whilst, thankfully, WeBS does not have to concern itself with Hedge Accentor versus ~~Duncock~~, the question has recently been raised as to what the collective term for the species monitored by WeBS should be. With an increasingly international audience for many of the waterfowl/conservation publications, and with Directives and Conventions often necessitating co-operation between many different countries, it is important that the terms used are unambiguous.

At the seventh meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention in May 1999 in Costa Rica, it was

agreed that the term to refer to divers, grebes, swans, cormorants, herons, storks, flamingoes, ducks, geese, ducks, rails, cranes, waders (shorebirds), gulls and terns (and several other groups that do not occur or occur only very rarely in the UK) should be 'waterbirds'. The term 'waterfowl' has different connotations in other parts of the world, particularly the USA where it is generally accepted as a hunting term for ducks, geese and swans (what we call 'wildfowl' in the UK). 'Waterbirds', then, will be the term that we use from now on in WeBS publications such as the annual report. Rest assured, however, we will not be changing either the name of the Wetland Bird Survey or the logo!

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).



Alerts!

Phil Atkinson & Mark Rehfisch (BTO)

The past few months have seen much progress towards the development of a new system to assess notable changes in the numbers of waterbirds. The overall aim of the WeBS Alert system is to devise a method whereby it is possible to flag up large changes (both up and down) in our internationally important waterbird populations. At the moment, changes in national populations are dealt with only in the annual WeBS reports and no mechanism exists for highlighting changes of a particularly worrying size. The development of the WeBS Alerts will allow us to look routinely at changes in numbers at the regional and site level and trigger off warnings of major change to the relevant statutory agencies and conservation bodies enabling more detailed investigations to be considered. This will be especially useful for monitoring Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Ramsar sites and other sites designated as being of importance for waterbirds.

The concept of alerts is simple. The percentage change in each waterbird population is measured over 5, 10 and 25 years, and alerts are raised if a change exceeds 25% (a 25% alert) or 50% (a 50% alert). It is possible to generate alerts for the UK, for regions within the UK, as well as for single sites. The results can then be compared to see how WeBS species are faring nationally and in different parts of the country.

The process of alert generation is illustrated in Figure 1 using the UK population of Dunlin and the Welsh estuarine population of Turnstone as examples. The top line in each graph shows the population index that has been smoothed and is relatively easy to interpret. For example, the Dunlin index increased by 50% in the first five years of monitoring, from 100 in the 1969–70 winter to 150 in the 1974–75 winter. (You will be more familiar with the more spiky Underhill index published in the WeBS Annual Reports. The smoothing is necessary to reveal the underlying population trend by ironing out year to year differences in population size that may be due to short-term factors such as cold weather movements and count quality.) The bottom line shows the percentage change in numbers over a 10 year period: in 1984–85, for example, Dunlin had decreased by about 40% from the population level in 1974–75.

This process graphically represents the national decline in Dunlin from its peak in the 1974–75 to a low in 1984–85 and the subsequent partial recovery. The 10-year change line dips below the critical level of -25% in 1982–83 and a 10 year 25% alert would have been triggered for that winter and the four subsequent winters. In the early 1980s, it would have been sensible to be worried about Dunlin which was showing a long-term slow decline. We still do not know why this decline occurred and what led to the subsequent recovery. Welsh Turnstone, on the other hand, have shown a massive decline of over 70% in the

ten years since 1984–85. This makes it a high alert species in Wales although the UK index is fairly stable. The decline of Turnstone and other waders in Wales triggered off WeBS research that demonstrated that several species of wader are moving their distribution eastward as a consequence of milder winters, an exciting finding for the many of us that are concerned about the potential impacts of Global Climate Change. Traditionally, waterbirds have moved westwards and southwards to escape harsher winters further east.

In short, alerts won't tell us why populations are changing but they will highlight geographical areas where changes in waterbird populations are a cause for concern and trigger off investigations that can lead, hopefully, to conditions being improved for declining species. The development of alerts for waterbirds is part of work on alerts for a wide range of birds species.

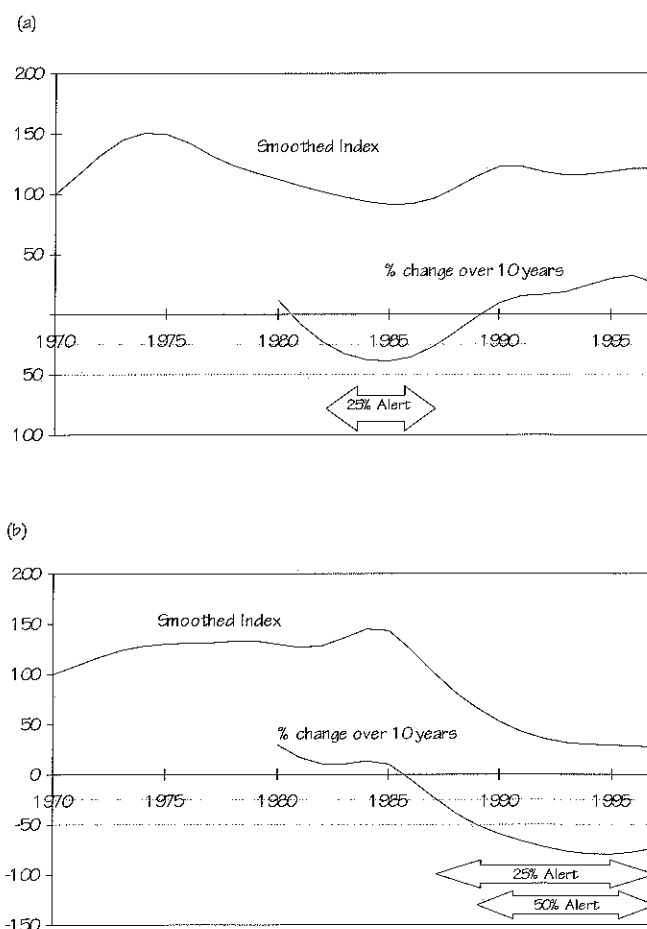


Figure 1. The smoothed indices of, and the 10-year alerts for, (a) UK Dunlin and (b) Turnstone in Wales. The left-hand axis represents both the index values (upper line in each graph) in arbitrary units and the alert values (lower line in each graph) in percentages.

Special surveys

Many counters will be aware that, in the early 1990s, 'special surveys' were organised on a regular basis, e.g. Mute Swan census, introduced goose survey, Shelduck survey. There was then something of a lull until the non-estuarine waterfowl survey (NEWS) in 1997-98, though little announcement about anything further. However, the need to hold such surveys, aimed at providing additional or fuller information about individual species than can be obtained from WeBS Core Counts or Low Tide Counts alone, remains as before and a full programme was compiled several years ago as part of the WeBS forward strategy. Apart from the current Little Egret survey, the rest have remained under wraps whilst the various reshuffles in WeBS took priority. We are now, however, in a position to undertake these additional surveys.

A provisional timetable is as follows:

Little Egret	1999-2000 (ongoing)
International Whooper and Bewick's Swan Census	January 2000
Introduced goose Survey	late summer 2000
Mute Swan Census	spring 2001
Riverine Survey	winter 2001-02
Dispersed Species Survey	winter 2002-03

As ever, participation in these surveys, as with WeBS, is voluntary, and being a WeBS counter or Local Organiser does not mean that you have to participate in these surveys. However, these surveys will undoubtedly benefit greatly if WeBS counters, as the observers most familiar

with their sites and these species, are able to undertake the counts. Similarly, the Local Organisers are best placed to organise the survey locally and the surveys will run that much more efficiently and smoothly with your input.

In all cases, the survey will be announced in advance in the Newsletter and appropriate forms distributed. Where methods or organisation differs significantly from WeBS, we will approach LOs in advance to ensure that they are willing to assist with the survey or enrol new LOs for the special survey otherwise.

Details about the forthcoming International Swan Census are provided elsewhere in this Newsletter. An overview of the two brand new surveys, of rivers and of 'dispersed species', is also given in this Newsletter. These are exciting new surveys which will greatly improve our knowledge and understanding of the relevant habitats and species.

These surveys do not necessarily form part of the WeBS work programme, and even the strictly WeBS surveys may be the responsibility of different organisers at BTO or WWT, rather than the Secretariat. However, all information will be provided to WeBS counters in advance and recording forms, instructions etc will be forwarded through the normal channels where appropriate for efficiency. Please contact the WeBS Secretariat in the first instance if you have any queries regarding these surveys and we will put you in touch with the appropriate organiser.

We are conscious that participation in these special surveys may add to the significant commitments of time and effort already given by WeBS counters. However, we hope that you will agree that they are important to enable WeBS to plug gaps in our existing knowledge of waterbirds and that, in view of the short duration of these additional surveys, many of you will be able to take part. Thank you.

WeBS Low Tide Counts

The winter of 1998-99 was another successful one for the WeBS Low Tide Count scheme. Counts have been received for a number of new sites: Adur Estuary, Breydon Water, Carmarthen Bay, Deben Estuary, Hayle Estuary, Humber Estuary, Irvine Estuary, Moray Firth, Severn Estuary, Solway Firth, Thames Estuary and Tyne Estuary. Additionally, repeat counts have been carried out at the Alt Estuary, Belfast Lough, Chichester Harbour, Mersey Estuary, North Wirral Shore, Orwell Estuary, Pagham Harbour, Southampton Water and Strangford Lough. Thanks once again to all who took part in the counts and particularly to the organisers for getting the

forms back to me promptly. Everyone who took part in the counts should be receiving feedback once the data have all been input and analysed.

The final set of sites to be covered during the 1999-2000 winter has yet to be finalised, but we will be making a start in tackling the major new sites of Morecambe Bay and the outer Solway. We are always on the look-out for new counters so if you think you might be interested in taking part in just four counts per winter then get in touch with Andy Musgrove at the BTO and I'll let you know when and where you'd be able to help.

International Swan Census

Every five years, the Swan Specialist Group of Wetlands International organises a census of all Bewick's and Whooper Swan populations wintering in Europe. This is a truly international co-operative effort, with 21 countries participating, and separate co-ordinators for each population (Jan Beekman of The Netherlands for Bewick's Swans, Bjarke Laubek of Denmark for continental Whooper Swans and Peter Cranswick of the UK for Icelandic Whooper Swans). The last census in 1995 was the most comprehensive to date and recorded 29,300 Bewick's Swans (a continuing rise), 59,000 Whooper Swans (double the previous estimate as a result of the first co-ordinated census of this population) and 15,700 Icelandic Whooper Swans (around the same as the 1990 census, suggesting numbers have stabilised).

The next census is scheduled for January 2000. As before, it will be conducted at the same time as the WeBS Core Count (16 January) and recording forms will be distributed through the UK-WeBS and I-WeBS counter networks for simplicity.

If you simply count the number of birds present on your site at the time of the WeBS Core Count, then it is sufficient simply to send in your Core Count form as normal. If, however, swans at your site are best counted at a dawn or dusk roost, or birds are present on other sites not normally visited for WeBS (e.g. agricultural fields) or if you wish to help record additional information about

these birds (e.g. brood size, ring numbers or habitat used) please use the Swan Census Form. These forms will be distributed, along with instructions, to all WeBS regions which hold significant numbers of birds in the autumn. If you do not receive swan forms and know of a site that holds Whooper or Bewick's Swans, we would be grateful to receive counts on the supplementary count form.

As a result of the long-term ringing programmes for these swan populations, it has been shown that there is a degree of overlap between the Iceland and continental Whoopers, with Icelandic birds visiting Norway, Denmark and Germany, and continental birds using the UK, particularly East Anglia. Only small numbers have been reported to date, but assessing the true number involved is problematic. Observations of marked birds would assist greatly in this respect. Whooper Swans bearing either blue neck-collars or blue leg-rings are continental birds (Icelandic birds sport yellow or white rings or yellow collars). Thus, if you see a blue-marked bird, even if you cannot read the inscription on the ring or collar, please report the sighting (date, time, place, number of birds). All sightings of colour-ringed swans should be sent to Jenny Earle at WWT (via the WeBS Secretariat if this is more convenient).

If you have any queries about this census, please contact Peter Cranswick at WWT. Many thanks in advance for your help.

Ramsar and the conservation of internationally important wetlands

David Stroud (JNCC)

The Contracting Parties of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands meet every three years to review global priorities and progress regarding wetland conservation. The seventh Conference of Parties (CoP7) met in Costa Rica in early May. The meeting was attended by about 1,500 representatives of the 115 Contracting Parties, together with numerous national and international organisations. As well as reviewing the conservation status of listed sites around the world, much emphasis was placed on developing 'best practice guidance' for many areas of wetland conservation activity. These will be particularly valuable in developing countries and those parts of the world without well-developed legislative frameworks covering the wise-use of wetlands, as well as helping to share good ideas with other countries.

One of the most significant documents (which can be downloaded from the Ramsar web site www.ramsar.org) was the agreement of a strategic framework for the global list of Ramsar sites. This provides an international vision for the establishment of national

and international networks of designated Ramsar sites. In the UK, with our 138 Ramsar sites (many designated with the help of WeBS counts), we are moving towards the establishment of a full national network of sites. Many other countries, however, have just a few designated wetlands of international importance and thus the international acknowledgement of the importance of these national networks is a real step forward. The strategic framework also includes minor revisions to the Ramsar site selection criteria and a major enhancement of the guidelines for their application. The development of the guidelines had major inputs from the UK and, for the waterbird criteria, reflects current WeBS practise. Among the many issues covered, the new guidelines stress that totals of alien or introduced species should not be used in the preparation of a case for Ramsar listing. This will lead to changes in how WeBS handles species totals at sites.

A fuller analysis of the conclusions of CoP7 will appear in the next WeBS annual report.

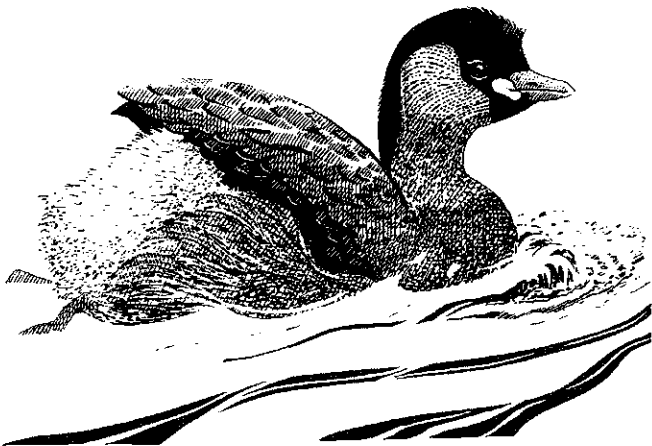
WeBS Riverine and Dispersed Species Surveys

Whilst WeBS obtains especially good coverage of most of the UK's waterbirds, particularly those occurring on estuaries and large inland waterbodies, a number of wetland habitats are visited only infrequently and are represented in the WeBS database by a relatively small number of sites. Open (non-estuarine) coast is one such habitat, and thus was the focus of the recent NEWS survey, conducted especially to obtain up-to-date information on the numbers and distribution of species such as Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone which occur primarily or in large numbers on this habitat.

The other key habitat to receive relatively poor coverage by WeBS is rivers, whilst species which occur widespread on small backwaters, ponds and marshes, such as Mallard and Moorhen, will also be missed by WeBS Core Counts. Consequently, two novel and large-scale surveys are proposed as part of the programme of WeBS Special Surveys over the next five years.

Riverine Survey

With growing pressures upon the UK's river system, as a result of increased abstraction and drought in recent years, and as the first habitat to encounter the effects of agricultural run-off, waterbirds using this habitat may be experiencing very different fortunes to those which use estuaries, gravel pits or reservoirs. Further, there may be several sites which support large numbers of waterbirds, perhaps in nationally or even internationally important numbers, that go unnoticed by WeBS. It is also likely that our estimates of the numbers of Goldeneye, Goosanders and Cormorants in the UK, along with several other species which use rivers extensively, are very much underestimated because a large proportion go uncounted on rivers. The problem is, because this habitat is little covered by WeBS, we simply don't know!



A one day workshop was held at WWT in February 1999, attended by representatives from the WeBS partners, DETR, Environment Agency, the Water Companies, the Wildlife Trusts and experts from other riverine habitat surveys (e.g. BTO's Waterways Bird Survey), to discuss how we might organise a survey of non-breeding waterbirds on rivers. The precise details of how to survey birds on rivers will be finalised during the summer and relevant forms and instructions designed accordingly. A pilot survey will be organised this winter (1999-2000) in which we will seek to obtain good coverage of a number of target rivers. This will be linked, where possible, to existing information on habitat, e.g. from the Environment Agency's River Habitat Survey. Since a full survey of all the UK's rivers is prohibitive, this information should allow us to undertake a stratified survey in two years' time and thus ensure that the results are representative of the UK as a whole.

During this coming summer, we will be contacting particular LOs and counters to see if they would be willing to take part in this pilot survey. In the meantime, or if you are not contacted but would be willing to participate, or feel that your local river would form a particularly good pilot site, please contact James Robinson at WWT.

Dispersed Species Survey

Once the WeBS Riverine Survey has been completed, WeBS will have covered most of the important clearly defined wetland habitats that hold waterbirds. The one missing piece of the jigsaw will be the number of wintering waterbirds on all of the less easily defined habitats: small pools and other waterbodies, ditches and dykes, streams and flooded fields. Between them, these habitats are likely to hold considerable numbers of certain species of dabbling duck, both species of snipe, grassland plovers, Moorhen and Coot, Little Grebe and Grey Heron. Clearly it would not be possible to use standard WeBS methodology to carry out near complete counts of wintering waterbirds on such varied habitats.

Thus, the Dispersed Species Survey will use an approach new to WeBS. If the Pilot Survey is successful, each count unit will be a randomly selected tetrad (a 2 km \times 2 km unit of 4 km²). The Pilot Survey, planned for the winter of 2000/01, will assess the feasibility of counting the target species using tetrads. One square kilometre will be counted intensively. In the other three square kilometres the major emphasis will be on counting the more visible birds such as herons, grassland plovers etc. If the Pilot demonstrates that the methodology is practical, the full survey is planned for 2002-03.

New WeBS recording forms — Important information for all counters

We have chosen this summer to make several minor, though significant, alterations to the WeBS recording forms, both to the information we collect and the way in which we collect it. This has been necessary to ensure we receive all of the information we need. There are also changes designed to save you time when completing the form and save us time processing them. **Please USE ONLY THE NEW FORMS to submit all future counts to the WeBS Secretariat** and recycle any remaining copies of the old yellow forms or white cards. WeBS data are input by an external company so any counts sent on old forms will cause us considerable problems. Many thanks in advance.

Please read the information below carefully so that you are fully aware of how the changes affect you.

Counter Codes

Each counter has been allocated a unique 'counter code'. This comprises five numbers and up to five letters e.g. **54321-BLOGG** or **97531-DALE**. Instead of filling in your name and address on every form you complete, you need only write your counter code in the box provided. A list of all codes for counters in your area is included with this newsletter (please keep it somewhere safe!). If you have not yet been allocated a code (e.g. new counters), or if, for some reason, you lose your code, simply complete your name and address as normal. If you move address, please provide all details in full on the form. An updated list of codes for your local area (incorporating all new counters) will be sent out annually with the WeBS summer newsletter.

WeBS Core Count Form (buff-coloured form)

This replaces the yellow form and is the form that most counters will use for recording the monthly WeBS Core Counts. There are a handful of minor changes:

Each form can record up to seven monthly counts. This is simply for convenience, given that September to March represents the main recording period for many sites. As before, counts are welcomed for all twelve months of the year, particularly from those sites with significant waterbird interest during other periods (e.g. estuaries during passage periods or sites with significant numbers of breeding or moulting waterbirds). The most important point is to ensure that all of your counts are sent to your LO immediately after the March count, regardless of how many columns on the recording forms have been completed. Your LO will inform you of any additional local deadlines for submission of forms.

Tick boxes are included wherever possible to make completing the form quick and simple, e.g. to record if you have counted gulls and terns or provided additional information on activities and birds of prey.

The section on count accuracy has been greatly simplified to make completing the information less time consuming. *As before, it is vital that you record whether you feel your counts were 'OK' or whether a significant number of the birds present at the time of your count were missed (i.e. 'LOW'). Only if the count accuracy was 'LOW' do you now need to record (using tick boxes) which factors affected the count.*

To save time and reduce processing errors, we have provided labels with site name and other site details. These should already be affixed over box 2 by your LO. Labels are provided for all recently counted areas. If no label is provided for your count area, simply fill in the site name and OS grid information as previously. Labels will be distributed each year with the summer Newsletter.

One fundamental change is that **each form can only be used for one count unit. PLEASE USE A SEPARATE FORM FOR EACH COUNT UNIT** that you cover. This change has been made to allow us to provide labels which, in turn, will save us considerable time and reduce errors. Whilst it may mean that some counters will have to complete forms and organise their filing differently to before, it should not entail any more work on your part than previously. Our apologies for any inconvenience.

IMPORTANT WeBS Core Counts Forms should only be used to record a count of all species on the date and, crucially, at the time stated on the form. Those counters who also make additional counts at the site at a different time, e.g. of roosting geese, Cormorants or gulls, should not substitute the count of birds present during the Core Count with the roost count; unfortunately, this causes major and insurmountable problems when storing and, importantly, when interpreting data. We have introduced a supplementary count form (see below) for these roost counts. This matches the Core Count form almost exactly but allows you to record counts of just a few species. Importantly, the time and count accuracy provided on this form are then relevant to the roost count.

WeBS Single Visit Core Count Form (orange-coloured form)

For those of you who used to submit counts to your Local Organiser on 'postcard-sized' recording cards, a new single visit recording form will now take its place (if you use the standard WeBS Core Count Form you do not need to read any more of this section!). This form is used to record one WeBS Core Count at sites where counts are sent to the Local Organiser on a monthly basis. It is effectively a miniature version of the Core Count Form; please, therefore, note the changes and information listed above for Core Count Form.

These forms have been redesigned so that they can be input directly by the data input company. There is no need for LOs to transcribe counts to recording forms before sending them to WWT. Please ensure, therefore, that you complete these forms carefully and accurately.

Non-breeding Waterbird Supplementary Count Form (pink-coloured form)

This new form is for recording counts of species which are systematically under-recorded by the WeBS Core Counts. If your site holds significant numbers of birds which are missed when carrying out your WeBS Core Count, this form will enable us to add any extra counts you make to our database. This might include, for example, roost counts of Cormorants or gulls at dawn or dusk which are absent from the site at the time of the Core Counts, or, at coastal sites, additional counts of sea-ducks under more suitable weather conditions. When submitting data on these forms, there is no need to record all waterbird species, just the 'target' species relevant to your site. Copies of the form are available from your LO.

Most parts of this form match the WeBS Core Count Form exactly. The key point is that the information about time and accuracy of your visit will be recorded specifically for each supplementary count you make, not the WeBS Core Count.

It is important to emphasise that there is no obligation to make additional counts at your site. But, for those counters who already make these counts (or those who have been thinking about it!), simply enter each count you make on the form (up to seven visits per form). You may submit as many or as few counts as you wish (e.g. monthly, weekly or even daily dawn/dusk counts of roosting Cormorants, Goosander, gulls, geese etc). All data will be gratefully received. Simply send all forms with your Core Count Forms, via your LO, as soon as possible after the March count.

Please remember that this form is for recording counts which are *additional* to the WeBS Core Counts and will enable us to improve our monitoring of those species. The Core Counts remain the main priority for WeBS; please carry out and complete your Core Counts as normal.

If you are unclear about any of these points, please contact the WeBS Secretariat (01453 890333 ext 255 or 280 — there is an answer phone for out-of-office-hours calls). We will be happy to answer any queries you may have.

These changes have been necessary to ensure we record exactly the information we need in the correct manner and to save time and costs. Rest assured, this is not change for the sake of it! We hope, also, that we have made several sections easier and quicker for counters to complete. We hope that the changeover will be as quick and as painless as possible. Our apologies, however, for any inconvenience caused whilst implementing these changes.

Questions & Answers

What if I haven't been given a counter code?

Simply complete your name and address in full. A list of codes for your local area will be published annually with the summer newsletter, so you should automatically be allocated a code for the following year.

What if I forget or lose my code?

Your Local Organiser should have a full list of codes for counters in your area. Alternatively, simply fill in your full name and address or contact the WeBS Secretariat at WWT directly.

Which form should I use to fill in my counts?

Your Local Organiser will provide you with the correct form to complete. Most counters will use the buff-coloured recording form. If you send your results to your LO immediately after each monthly count, the small orange single visit form is most suitable. Only use the supplementary count form if you make additional counts of just a few species at a different time to your Core Counts, e.g. at dawn/dusk roosts.

What if I do not have a name label for my site?

Simply provide details for the count unit name and grid reference (and site name if applicable) as before in box 2. Labels for all newly counted areas will be issued with the summer newsletter the following year.

When should I send in my counts?

We produce the annual report based on counts from April through to March. It is vitally important, therefore, that all of your counts up to and including the March count are with your Local Organiser as soon after the March count as possible (regardless of how many columns on the form are completed) so that he/she can pass them on promptly to the WeBS Secretariat. Some LOs may operate slightly different systems locally, for example so that the information can be used in the county bird report. Your LO will inform you if you need to return your counts more frequently.

What if someone else helped me with my counts?

Everyone who carries out a WeBS count is entitled to a copy of the WeBS annual report for that particular year. Space is provided in the 'additional information' section of the form for the counter codes (or name and address) of additional counters who assisted with the counts to ensure that they receive their free copy of the annual report.

What if I have lots of old forms left?

Whilst it may seem a shame to have to throw away any stockpiles, the time and cost of having to deal with any future counts submitted on the old forms will be considerable. If possible, please recycle unused old forms with your newspapers etc. Please use only the new recording forms from now on.

Early results of the Non-estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey (NEWS)

Mark Rehfisch, Steve Holloway & Graham Austin (BTO)

An enormous thank you to those counters who contributed to NEWS. As usual your response has been excellent and we hope that you will agree that even these provisional results illustrate how worthwhile your efforts have been. We will present a summary of the full results in the 1998-99 WeBS Annual Report.

During NEWS, over 4,500 km of the UK's non-estuarine coast were counted, only slightly less than the exceptional 6,000 km covered by the 1985 Winter Shorebird Count (WSC). All of your data are in a Geographic Information System (GIS) which allows the distribution of the data to be presented visually at the click of a button at any scale from UK-wide to an individual count section.

Non-estuarine coasts hold particularly high proportions of the UK populations of four species of wader: Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone. For this first set of analyses, we compared the number of birds counted on coastal stretches covered by both the WSC and NEWS. Unlike the population estimates, these analyses do not make use of all the available data as some sections counted during NEWS were not counted during WSC and vice versa.

Our results indicate that Turnstone numbers appear to have decreased on most of the west coast of the UK and on much of the east coast to the north of Tyne & Wear. Only in Orkney has there been an apparent increase of 42% from 4,103 to 5,840 birds. Unfortunately, this localised increase is probably more than counter-balanced by a 57% decrease in the Highland region, a 63% decrease in Grampian, a 48% decrease in Strathclyde, a 82% decrease in Lothian . . . the list goes on.

Purple Sandpipers also appear to have decreased in much of their UK range, from Cleveland up to Orkney. There does not appear to have been a significant increase anywhere and some of the apparent decreases are large. For example, numbers have decreased by 33% in Orkney, 81% in the Highland region, 78% in Grampian and an amazing 95% in Lothian.

The story is slightly less worrying for Ringed Plover and Sanderling. Ringed Plover appear to have increased by 63% in Orkney, but this is probably more than offset by decreases of 36% in the Western Isles, 52% in Strathclyde and numerically smaller decreases in many regions from the Isle of Wight to Cornwall and up to Fife. Sanderling numbers also appear to have decreased slightly, but the story is more confused for this species as the decreases have occurred in Derry in Northern Ireland, the Isle of Wight, Norfolk and Tyne & Wear. If anyone can find a clear pattern to these changes we would love to know what it is!

These preliminary results are potentially worrying. The most positive explanation that we can come up with

Table 1. Comparison of Turnstone numbers recorded during the Winter Shorebird Count (WSC) and the Non-estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey (NEWS) on 3,433 paired count sections for each county where a significant change in the Turnstone density has occurred.

County	WSC	NEWS	Change (+/-)
Cornwall	1433	592	-
Devon	212	53	-
Northumberland	1285	697	-
Cumbria	306	135	-
Dyfed	199	62	-
Gwynedd	763	301	-
Co. Down	611	29	-
Dumfries & Galloway	251	41	-
Strathclyde	2406	1248	-
Western Isles	2503	2073	-
Highland	1427	613	-
Orkney	4103	5840	+
Grampian	3171	1181	-
Fife	663	138	-
Lothian	1661	296	-

is that these species are shifting their distributions, perhaps as a result of increasingly mild winters. This would tally with our recent WeBS analyses that have demonstrated that the common estuarine wader species have tended to winter further east in the UK as winters have become milder over the last 30 years. If this hypothesis is incorrect, we have the worrying situation that four species of wader present in internationally important numbers on the UK coastline have decreased quite considerably over a 13-year period. The exact magnitude of the problem will be confirmed once the new population estimates for these species have been generated.



The African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) — the role of WeBS *James Robinson (WWT)*

The African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) has been developed, under the Bonn Convention, as a mechanism for countries to co-ordinate measures to conserve migratory waterbirds throughout Europe, Africa and parts of western Asia. Since August 1996, the Agreement has been open for signing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague, The Netherlands. On the 2nd of February 1999, World Wetlands Day, the UK Government announced that it had ratified the Agreement.

The AEWA builds upon some of the principles of the Ramsar Convention and the EC Birds Directive but provides a clearer and far more focussed framework for the conservation of waterbirds. The fundamental principle of AEWA is that countries should take co-ordinated measures to maintain migratory waterbird species in a favourable conservation status or to restore them to such a status. The Agreement covers some 170 species of waterbird throughout 120 range states. An Action Plan has been produced which guides countries through their requirements to meet the objectives of the Agreement with respect to a suite of species listed within it. Currently these include Storks, Spoonbills, Ibises, Flamingoes, Ducks, Swans and Geese. Other species will be added in the future. The duty of each signed-up state is to implement this Action Plan.

Within the Action Plan, there are many requirements regarding species and habitat protection, management of human activities, education and information and research and monitoring. For those species with

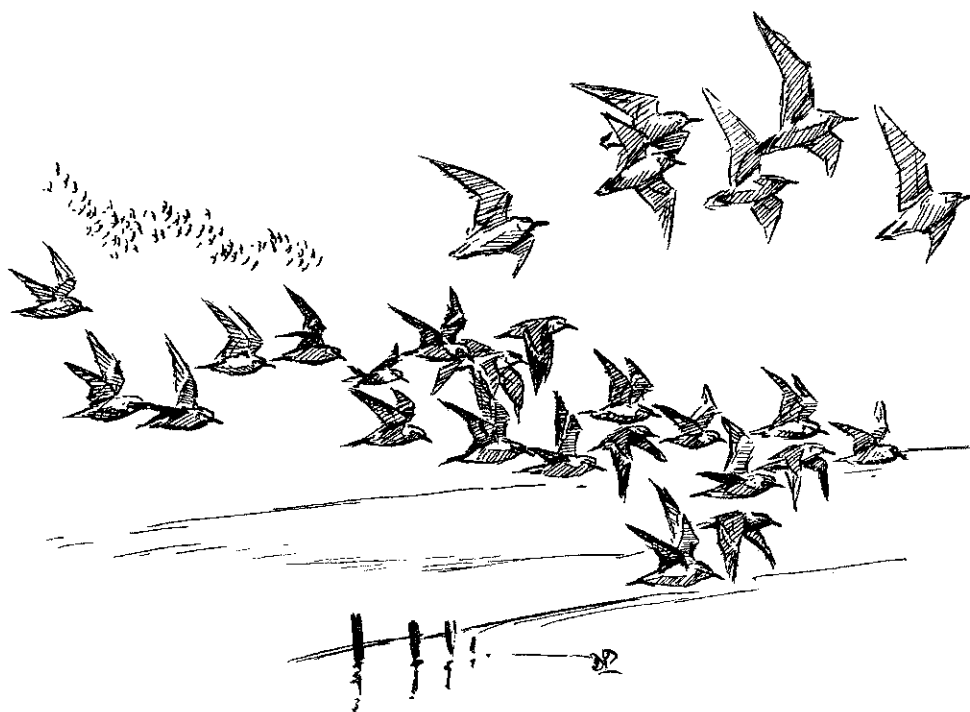
particularly poor conservation status, single-species action plans will also be developed and implemented. Two of the major requirements of the Agreement are:

- i to identify sites and habitats which are nationally and internationally important to species listed in the Agreement; and
- ii to monitor the status and trends of populations of these species.

The UK is fortunate in that WeBS already fulfills many of the requirements, e.g. it provides the data which allow site importance to be determined. The intensive monitoring of waterbird numbers also allows the UK to be able to produce accurate population indices which quantify changes in the status of individual species and populations at both site and national levels.

In WeBS we have one of the most comprehensive schemes for monitoring non-breeding waterbirds in the world and, by working with other countries, the UK will be able to give advice on the development of similar schemes initiated throughout the range of the Agreement. The UK would not be able to fulfill its requirements under the Agreement or be in a position to provide this advice without the dedicated band of WeBS counters who supply the necessary data and maintain the smooth running of these schemes — so hats off to you all!

For more information on the agreement visit the AEWA web site at www.wcmc.org.uk/aewa



Conservation action for Common Scoter in the UK

Baz Hughes (WWT)

The Common Scoter is recognised as a nationally threatened species in the UK because of its small and declining breeding population. Common Scoters spend most of their lives out at sea, feeding mainly on shellfish, but migrate to tundra habitats in northern Europe to breed. A survey co-ordinated by WWT in 1995 found only 200 breeding females in Great Britain and Ireland (89 in Scotland, 111 in Ireland). Furthermore, Common Scoters have become extinct as a breeding species in Northern Ireland (there were 150 pairs in 1967) and numbers in the Flow country of northeast Scotland have declined from 55 pairs in 1988 to only 28 in 1996. Eutrophication and afforestation of breeding waters, fish stocking leading to increased competition with scoters for invertebrate food, and predation by introduced mink may be to blame. Wintering populations are threatened by oil pollution and over-harvesting of shellfish. Because of its threatened status, the UK Government has produced a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for the Common Scoter linked to UK implementation of the Biodiversity Convention — WWT and RSPB will act as joint lead partners in its implementation.

The Common Scoter BAP contains the priority actions needed to achieve three main targets:

- in Scotland, to increase the breeding population to at least 100 pairs by 2008, and to at least maintain the existing range
- to regain Common Scoter as a breeding species in Northern Ireland

- to safeguard the current range and distribution of moulting and wintering Common Scoters. Research initiatives include ecological studies of breeding and wintering birds, and studies of the origins of breeding and wintering birds.

The Common Scoter's concentrated wintering distribution makes it highly vulnerable to oil pollution as illustrated when the Sea Empress oil tanker ran aground in Milford Haven in February 1996 spilling 72,000 tonnes of crude oil and killing 4,500 Common Scoter. Subsequent land and aerial surveys by WWT in 1997 and 1998 found very few scoter in the bay — no more than 7,000 birds compared to pre-spill totals of over 15,000 birds — probably because the oil had killed much of the scoters' shellfish food. Concerns over the health of the Carmarthen Bay ecosystem led the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to fund a study of the feeding ecology of Common Scoters. In collaboration with WWT, Andy Woolmer and Lucy Smith from the University of Wales Swansea, are now studying both the scoter and the shellfish on which they feed, trying to determine which factors determine the numbers of birds using the bay. They have already achieved notable success. In January, Lucy counted over 17,000 Common Scoters indicating that the bay is well on the way to recovery. This count confirms Carmarthen Bay as the top site in the UK for Common Scoter and CCW are therefore recommending it be designated a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive.

1999 WeBS Counters' Conference

The 1999 WeBS Counters' Conference was held on 13 March at the Southampton Oceanographic Centre and was attended by about 60 counters, conservation professionals and environmental consultants. This excellent venue, which was generously provided for the day by Hampshire County Council, was in the heart of the docks on the shores of Southampton Water and as such acted as a reminder of the different pressures with which our wetland habitats, particularly estuaries, have to contend.

Clive Chatters of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust opened the day with a thought-provoking "View from the Tideline" in which he stressed the value of high quality data of the type WeBS provides to those concerned with conservation issues on wetlands. Peter Cranswick then detailed some of the changes planned for WeBS over the coming months. Many of the other talks were specific to the Solent. Pete Potts of the Solent Shorebird Study Group presented results of studies into waterbird movements within the Solent, involving colour-marking, colour-ringing and radio-tagging birds. These studies are very helpful in

linking together both WeBS Core and Low Tide Counts from neighbouring sites and in determining the effect of habitat loss on waterbird species. Dave Burges from the RSPB discussed some of the issues facing bird conservation on the Solent and Jeff Edwards from Hampshire County Council followed this up by describing the maze of legislation involved with the planning system. These more generalised topics were counter-balanced by more specific discussions of the waterbirds of the Beaulieu Estuary and Southampton Water by Bob Lord of English Nature and Dave Unsworth of the Solent Shorebird Study Group respectively. More research-based presentations were given by Jenny Gill from the University of East Anglia, who described her work on Black-tailed Godwits in East Anglia, and Graham Austin from the BTO who discussed recent work on regional shifts in wader distributions. The whole day was smoothly chaired by Alan Inder from Hampshire County Council and Mark Rehfisch of the BTO. As usual, the talks were complemented by a full range of informative posters. Thanks again to everyone involved.

WeBS counting— a local perspective

Every local bird club has one. A small site which everyone knows, one with considerable local interest for the commoner wintering or breeding bird species, and for one which no-one ever submits any records. Then along comes a proposal for a development at the site . . .

It's happened all over the country. Small, locally important sites lost or adversely affected by developments simply because of the lack of baseline data on the site's ecological value. Whether it be a housing development or a watersports centre, a new superstore or simply the re-routing of a local footpath, each can have a significant effect on the bird usage of the site. So who do the planners turn to for information when people object to these developments? Amongst others, the WeBS partners are regularly contacted for information by people carrying out environmental assessments of the potential impacts of such developments; indeed we deal with over 200 requests for WeBS data every year. In these situations, the WeBS partners are able to provide valuable, up-to-date information on over 3,000 different sites, data that is not only cross-checked with all the other counts but which, most importantly of all, is collected completely impartially. Because counts are carried out routinely on a month-by-month, year-by-year basis, there is no inherent bias to the information we collect. The information is not collected by a consultant operating on behalf of developers or by local conservationists in response to a perceived problem, but is available to all as an assessment of the bird interest over time. The users of the information we supply can have confidence that we are supplying the best information possible, enabling the decision-makers to make an informed judgement.

That is not to say that the presence of data will necessarily save a site from a development. The needs and wishes of all interests will need to be taken into account by the planners and assessors of each scheme. Having information readily to hand, however, can only improve the chances that each new development will proceed without adversely affecting any wildlife interest at the site.

These same circumstances can apply to any site, whether it be an estuary important for thousands of waterbirds or simply your local gravel pits or park lake. Having waterbird counts available will not only ensure that the ecological voices are heard, but also provide the decision makers with sound information collected in a rational and scientific manner. Make sure your locally important sites are counted by WeBS — every little helps!

'New WeBS species'

Whilst the debate as to what constitutes a species and whether particular races or sub-species should be elevated to full species status continues amongst professional and amateur ornithologists alike, it has long been recognised in conservation that many sub-species are worthy of individual conservation action. Most conservation legislation and Conventions concerning waterbirds take this a step further and recognise individual populations or flyways.

Consequently, we urge counters to record separately all 'forms' of waterbirds that are distinguishable in the field. This is already done for Brent Geese (dark and light-bellied) and White-fronted Geese (European and Greenland). If you are able, however, the following recognisable forms should also be noted separately on the recording forms for scientific and conservation reasons:

- Bean Goose: Taiga (*fabalis*) or Tundra (*rossicus*) — the former has a long neck and a long bill, with an extensive area of orange; the latter is structurally more similar to a Pink-foot, with a shorter neck and shorter, deeper bill with a more restricted area of orange.
- Yellow-legged Gull — part of the Herring (or 'white-headed') Gull complex: adult Western Yellow-legged Gull (*michahelis*) has a much darker back and wings (half-way between Herring and Lesser-black Backed Gull) and obviously yellow legs and feet (immatures, however, are much less obvious!); 'Caspian' Gull (*cachinnans*) looks altogether much more like a Herring Gull and is much more difficult to identify (and, thankfully, is much rarer in the UK).
- All sub-species that occur as rarities in the UK, e.g. Green-winged Teal, Black Brant, Black Scoter, should also be noted separately on the recording forms.

Given the current debate about species and sub-species, the finer points of identification for most of these forms have been discussed in detail in the recent 'birding' magazines and journals. The new Collins Bird Guide (by Mullarney, Svensson, Zetterstrom and Grant) also provides an excellent overview of all of these features.

We appreciate that many of these forms are not easy to identify and that spotting one in a flock of hundreds or thousands of other geese or gulls may be impossible. We don't intend that you spend any longer during your counts or look particularly harder than at present; just that, if you do note something different, put it on the WeBS form. Many thanks.



Bulletin Board

Does your annual report arrive safe and sound?

Each year we mail out around 3,500 WeBS reports to WeBS counters and Local Organisers. Despite our best efforts in packaging our reports carefully, we have received a number of complaints from counters that the report has arrived battered and bruised following its postal travels (and many of the undelivered packages returned to WWT have also been badly damaged). Please let us know if your report doesn't reach you in an acceptable condition so that we can take up the case with the Post Office and ensure that future reports arrive undamaged.

WeBS sites and internationally important designations — update

As mentioned in the last winter newsletter, we are currently conducting a pilot study involving a small number of sites to explore ways in which the configuration of WeBS count units may be best arranged to improve the monitoring of areas designated due to their international importance for waterfowl (SPAs and Ramsar sites). At the same time, we hope to highlight any important areas that are not currently protected by designations. Following initial comments from the first stage of the pilot project, we have now revised and simplified the information requested and will run a second pilot stage at a number of other sites. We hope that

you will be able to assist with this project should your site be amongst those selected. In the mean time, a big thank you to all of you who have already helped to provide invaluable site information and maps for our Count Unit Definition Inventory which provides a great deal of added value to the counts you regularly supply.

Bird Monitoring Manual

The RSPB has recently published a new manual of 'Bird Monitoring Methods'. The weighty 464-page manual aims to go beyond previous publications on techniques for bird censusing by providing not only methodologies but practical techniques which the fieldworker needs to monitor each species successfully. The manual does not cover all species but focuses on those of conservation concern, and covers both breeding and non-breeding periods. As well as listing specific monitoring techniques for individual species, the manual details the relevant generic monitoring techniques within which WeBS features prominently. It is hoped that the methods proposed in this publication will become standards for all future monitoring, whether this be by reserve wardens, local bird clubs or environmental consultancies. These guidelines will form the basis for a 'counter handbook' which is planned for production and distribution to all counters in the coming year. *Bird Monitoring Methods* by Gillian Gilbert, David W Gibbons & Julianne Evans is

available priced £17.50 from the RSPB.

WeBS Little Egret Roost Survey

Offers of help have been received for this survey from most of the southern estuaries which hold important numbers of Little Egrets. However, if you think you could provide information and monthly counts of Little Egret roosts on the Tamar Complex, Yealm Estuary, Kingsbridge Estuary, Dart Estuary, Christchurch Harbour, Portsmouth Harbour, Medway Estuary or the Swale Estuary please contact Andy Musgrove at the BTO as soon as possible.

Prints available

The recently published 1997-98 WeBS annual report bears a painting of a Tufted Duck on the front cover by professional wildlife artist Martin Ridley. High quality signed and numbered prints of the painting (image measuring 15cm x 25cm) are available direct from the artist at a cost of £25 including package and postage. If you are interested in obtaining a copy, please contact Martin at 2 Grove Villas, Dye House, Inchbrook, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 5EZ. We still have a number of limited edition prints of the 1996-97 cover by renowned wildlife artist Terence Lambert available. These are available at a cost of £20 (plus £1.50 postage and packing) direct from the WeBS Secretariat at WWT, with all profits going to WeBS.

Many thanks for all your help

The great strength of WeBS, arguably the biggest count scheme of its kind in the world and the envy of many other countries, lies in the tremendous volunteer input from you, the counters. We hope that you will continue to support WeBS, and through it, the conservation of waterbirds and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

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Line drawings by Dan Powell, Thelma Sykes and Mark Hulme.

Compiled by Mark Pollitt, Peter Cranswick, Andy Musgrove and Becky Hughes.

Designed and typeset by Alcedo Publishing, Colorado Springs, USA • e-mail engl@ibm.net

Printed by Crowes of Norwich, UK • (01603) 403349 • e-mail graphics@crowes.co.uk

Printed on Barbican Laser Matt paper in Cheltenham ITC BT and M Gill Sans fonts

Published by BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC. © WWT & BTO 1999.