

Newsletter

Number 11 Winter 1999-2000

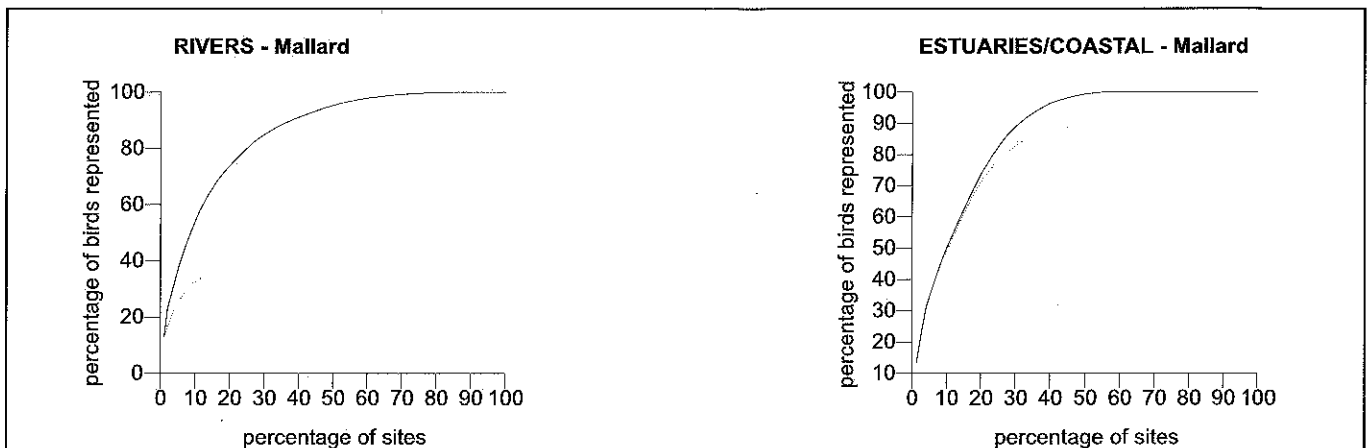
The WeBS Riverine Pilot Survey – an update

James Robinson (WWT)

As you read this newsletter, the WeBS Riverine Pilot Survey will be well underway. At present, coverage of rivers by WeBS is poor compared to that of estuaries and still waters (see Box 1). Consequently, WeBS undoubtedly misses a significant proportion of the UK populations of several species, e.g. Goosander, Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Mallard and Goldeneye to name a few. To

address these problems, a national WeBS Riverine Survey will be undertaken in 2001-02. Following this full survey, we plan to identify a number of riverine sites which might be included on an annual basis in the WeBS Core Count programme so that we can monitor populations of river birds more intensively. We also hope to link information from the full survey to data on water quality and habitat characteristics

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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, 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).



from the Environment Agency (EA) and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) so that we can identify the environmental factors which affect the abundance and distribution of birds on rivers.

A total of 85,000 km of rivers are classified for water quality - although we know this is far too much for WeBS counters to cover! Therefore, the full survey will focus efforts on the most useful stretches for assessing the size of waterbird populations on rivers. To ensure that the count sections we select are representative, we are conducting a pilot survey. Data collected during this pilot will be used to identify the most important river stretches for birds based on the effects of physical characteristics, habitat and water quality on bird distributions. The data will also allow us to select the most appropriate length of river to use as count sections.

In the late summer of 1999, we used River Habitat Survey data from EA and SEPA to identify a representative selection of rivers in the UK based on physical characteristics, e.g. river width, altitude, etc. We also chose a selection of canals. During the autumn we contacted many current, and some new, local organisers who live close to each of these rivers and canals and a large number agreed to co-ordinate teams of counters. These teams will be covering the following 34 rivers and canals which are spread widely over England, Scotland and Wales:

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Conwy	Spey
Dee	Stour
Derwent (Cumbria)	Tamar
Derwent (Yorks/Derbys)	Tame
Devon	Teith
Endrick Water	Tweed
Exe	Waveney
Findhorn	Wear
Forth	Windrush
Hull	Witham
Goyt	Gloucester-Sharpness Canal
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Lossie	Leeds-Liverpool Canal

If we achieve full coverage of these rivers and canals then approximately 3,000 km of linear waterways will have been counted. As you will appreciate, this will be quite some achievement.

Although the full survey will be a scientifically sound study, we aim to make it as enjoyable and rewarding for counters as possible. Therefore, we have sent a questionnaire to each counter asking for their opinions on the methodology we are using in the pilot, whether they experienced any problems during fieldwork, and whether they would be prepared to participate in the full survey. This part of the pilot survey is as important as the data collection process as it will have an important impact on how we organise the full survey.

We are confident that the pilot survey will be successful and that existing and new counters will be encouraged to participate in the full survey. I will be providing information on the results of the pilot in forthcoming newsletters but please contact me at WWT, Slimbridge (01453 891900 ext. 263) in the meantime if you would like any more information on the survey.



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The eighth season of estuarine low tide counts is now well underway. Counts are being carried out at the Alt Estuary, Belfast Lough, Cromarty Firth, Firth of Clyde, Mersey Estuary, Morecambe Bay, Newtown Harbour, Orwell Estuary, Pagham Harbour, the upper Severn Estuary, the Solway Firth, Southampton Water, Stour Estuary, Strangford Lough and parts of the Thames Estuary. If you're taking part (and many thanks to those who are), please get your counts back to your local organiser as soon as possible after the February count so that they can send them back to BTO. Counters will receive feedback on their site's counts once they have been analysed. If you have any questions concerning the counts, please contact Steve Holloway or Andy Musgrove at the BTO.

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One of the most significant events in recent times for the conservation of waterbirds occurred on 1 November 1999, when the Agreement on the Conservation of African and Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (known under the acronym AEWA) entered into force. The first Meeting of the Parties was held in Cape Town, South Africa, one week later. Although only 16 countries have fully ratified the agreement to date, the meeting was attended by government representatives from around 45 countries, including several outside the range area, demonstrating considerable interest in the agreement and, it is hoped, is an indication that many more countries will sign shortly.

AEWA is the seventh Agreement under the 'mother' convention, the 'Bonn' Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. Whilst AEWA has been a long time in the making, being originally conceived over 10 years ago, this has enabled considerable forethought and planning. Consequently, the Agreement was extremely well developed from the day it came into force. Detailed conservation guidelines, an action plan, priorities for conservation action and a budget could all

be discussed at length at the first Meeting of Parties, and all were accepted with relatively few amendments. This bodes well for the co-operative action at a flyway level that will be key to successful conservation of migratory waterbird species.

JNCC attended the meeting as part of the UK delegation, and WWT attended as observers. WeBS data were used in the preparation of several of the documents presented at the meeting and as a model for the development of waterbird monitoring in countries where such schemes do not currently exist. Indeed, we have recently received a number of requests from other countries for details of the WeBS scheme precisely for this purpose. Thus, everyone involved in WeBS can be proud of its successes, knowing that it plays a pivotal role in the conservation of waterbirds in both the UK and abroad. With your help, WeBS will continue to contribute to the AEWA aim of "creating a legal basis for a concerted conservation and management policy for migratory waterbird species".

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

New Faces in WeBS

Core Counts

Becky Hughes, the WeBS Assistant Organiser, took leave from WWT in August and, three months later, gave birth to Holly. Since then, Holly has proved too irresistible (compared with WeBS, anyway!) and Becky has decided to extend her leave from work indefinitely. Congratulations to Becky and Baz and we hope that the sleepless nights don't last for too long!

Colette Hall took over the reins from Becky in August, having spent a year working on WWT's Whooper and Bewick's Swan studies at the Martin Mere Centre, and has already learned most of the idiosyncrasies of WeBS. Colette is responsible for the Core Count data request service, as well as assisting in the day-to-day running of the scheme.

Low Tide Counts

Since its inception in the winter of 1992-93, the WeBS Low Tide Count scheme has gone from strength to strength. Each year, the number of estuaries counted at low tide has risen and the number of requests to access data has risen accordingly, a sure sign that the scheme is providing extremely valuable information. During this period, all of the organisation of the Low Tide Counts has been carried out by a single BTO staff member, namely Julianne Evans until 1996 and Andy Musgrove thereafter. It has now been decided to bring in a new member to the team to help

out with the Low Tide Counts. Many counters will already know Steve Holloway of the BTO's Wetland and Coastal Ecology Unit through his important input into many wetland-orientated projects, such as the Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird Survey (NEWS) and the BTO/ITE Birds & Sediments project. Steve has also been involved in fieldwork at, amongst others, Blacktoft Sands, Cardiff Bay, Findhorn Bay, Lodmoor, the Mersey Estuary, Co. Fermanagh, St Kilda and the Isle of May. From now on, Steve will be taking over much of the day-to-day running of the Low Tide Count scheme, and will be the first point of contact for counters with queries. Please bear with him while he tries to get to grips with the scheme! Andy will be making use of the extra time generated by Steve's help to carry out an important new piece of work, the WeBS Low Tide Count Atlas. This project aims to bring together all of the information generated by the huge amount of counter effort (more than 12,000 low tide 'visits' have now been made) and to attempt to reach a deeper understanding of what we have learnt from the counts. Work carried out for the Atlas will also direct efforts on estuarine monitoring in the future. However, Andy will still be contactable concerning Low Tide Counts if you have any queries.

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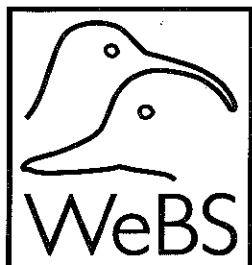
When making WeBS counts, occasions will arise when it is not possible to identify birds to species level, e.g. distant sea-duck bobbing on waves, or flocks of feeding waders on mudflats in drizzle or strong winds. However, it is important that you record the numbers of birds present, even if they cannot be specifically identified, not least because one measure of a site's importance is the total number of waterbirds it holds, irrespective of which species are involved.

Below are listed a number of categories that can be used to record unidentified birds on WeBS forms. Most of the categories are reasonably broad, e.g. unidentified diver, unidentified grebe, but there are several cases where there are particular problems with just two or three species and it is possible to be more precise, e.g.

unidentified scoter. Similarly, it is much more likely that any confusion between different geese will involve Pinkfeet and Greylags; the chances of confusing Greylags with Barnacles or Barnacles with Brents is highly unlikely, if only because they very rarely occur together. Nevertheless, more general categories of unidentified duck or unidentified goose will be required in some cases.

The most likely categories to be used are listed below, with a brief explanation where relevant. The preferred options are listed but, if necessary, you may have to resort to the options given in brackets. We have also taken this opportunity to list categories of hybrid and 'feral' birds and clarify their definitions. So, if you cannot identify the birds precisely during your count, please use these terms when completing WeBS forms to avoid confusion.

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'Commic' tern (Unidentified tern)	this term is used to record birds which may be Common or Arctic Terns, species difficult to separate at the best of times! any tern species)
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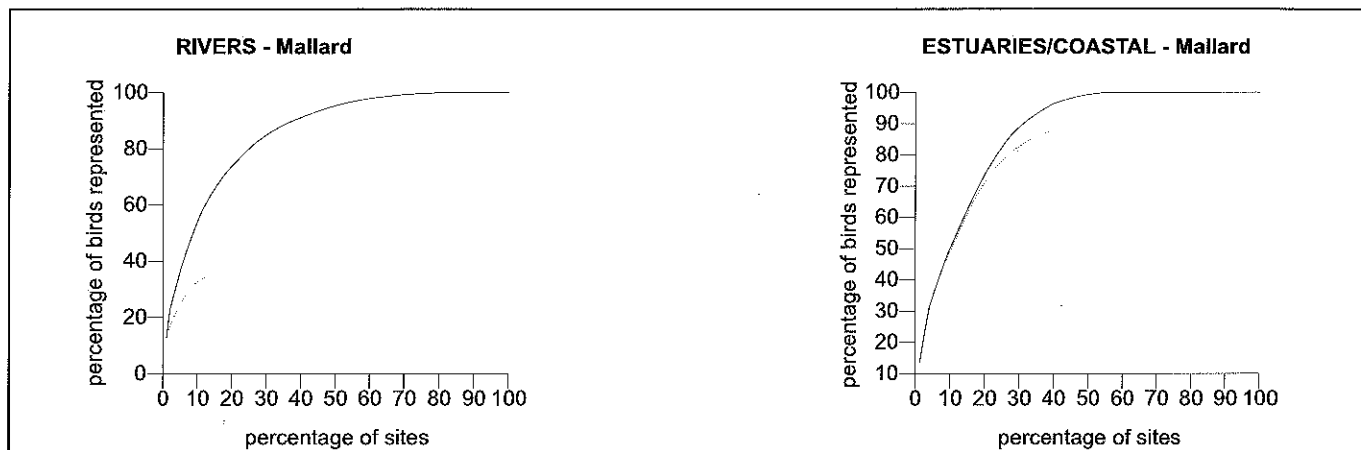
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Hybrid Aythya	any hybrid of different species of Aythya (Pochard x Tufted ducks are a relatively common occurrence)

The above list should cover the most frequently encountered situations. Please use only these terms when recording any of the species groups listed above, i.e. divers, grebes, wildfowl, waders, gulls or terns. Creating new terms will cause problems with our database, although please let us know if there are any obvious categories we have missed.

Several groups are not listed above, e.g. unidentified pelican, unidentified egret, unidentified crane, but we envisage that any of these situations will be remarkably rare in WeBS. Please use common sense when recording these situations on a WeBS form.

This may all sound remarkably involved, but such situations are the exception rather than the norm. And, if it all seems rather detailed, please plump for the broadest option (unidentified duck, unidentified goose etc). The most important point to remember with unidentified birds is that we need to know how many additional birds were present during your count to assess the conservation importance of the site. Similarly, it is important to distinguish between feral/domestic birds and wild populations and ensure that we can monitor their occurrence, numbers and trends. Thank you.

Naturalised Goose Survey 2000

In summer 2000, there will be a national survey of naturalised geese in the UK. The survey will focus primarily on Canada and naturalised ('feral') Greylag Geese, but will also include all other species of geese, including escapes, exotics and hybrids. This survey will provide an update of numbers and distribution since the last national survey in 1991 and provide key information on population sizes and important sites that complements other national waterbird monitoring schemes such as WeBS.

However, the 2000 survey will include an important additional aspect to the 1991 survey. Alongside counts targeted at the major moult sites, counts will also be made of birds in randomly selected tetrads during the breeding season. This aspect will considerably enhance the survey since, by comparison with the results of the *1988-91 Breeding Atlas*, it will enable us to measure precisely population change in different habitats. Further, it will identify the component of the population missed by the site-based approach and allow us to place confidence limits on the population estimate.

Owing to the different expertise required for this twin-pronged approach, and the extra complexity involved, the 2000 survey will be jointly organised by WWT and BTO to ensure its success. We are confident that it will be the most comprehensive survey of naturalised geese in the UK to date, providing important information to research the various conservation issues posed by these species, to monitor the spread of these populations and investigate potential impact on wetland habitats and agriculture.

In brief, methods for the site-based component will follow standard WeBS methods, with observers counting all geese on their local wetland site in late June/early July. The tetrad-based element requires counters to follow methods broadly similar to those used in the *1988-91 Breeding Atlas*. Up to two hours should be spent in each tetrad, surveying suitable areas for geese. Two visits are needed to each tetrad, the first in spring and the second between mid-June and mid-July. Numbers of juveniles are also requested for all counts, tetrad or site-based, in June/July. Full methods, count forms, tetrad maps, etc. will be distributed in early 2000.

For simplicity and to recruit sufficient number of counters for this large undertaking, the two components of the survey will be organised separately through largely different counter networks. We intend that the site-based component of the fieldwork will be undertaken by the WeBS counter network, co-ordinated by WWT, and that the tetrad-based component will be supported by the Garden Birdwatch and BTO member networks, co-ordinated by the BTO. Obviously, all counters participate in this survey on a voluntary basis and may undertake whichever component of the survey they choose. Similarly, WeBS Local Organisers and BTO Regional Reps may choose to be involved in either aspect, especially given that the counter networks are not mutually exclusive.

We will be contacting potential organisers for the Naturalised Goose Survey 2000 this winter and plan to assemble the counter networks for each aspect by late winter. We hope that you will be able to participate in this important and novel survey.

If you have any queries in the meantime, please contact Colette Hall at WWT.

WeBS Counters' Conference 2000

The annual one-day WeBS Counters' Conference this year will be held at WWT Martin Mere in Lancashire on 25 March 2000. Put the date in your diary now! The conference is a chance to meet up with the WeBS National Organisers and with other local counters. There will be a series of talks and posters, many with a "Northwest" theme. Admission will be free for all WeBS counters. Individual invites will be sent to all counters in the north-west shortly but if you would like to come and you live outside the region, please contact Steve Holloway at the BTO to book your place.

Recent Publications

Results from the International Waterbird Census in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia 1995 and 1996 published by Wetlands International.

WeBS counts not only provide valuable information about national populations and trends, but January counts also contribute to our understanding of international waterfowl populations through the International Waterbird Census co-ordinated by Wetlands International. The results of the 1995 and 1996 counts from 47 countries are summarised in this publication. Worrying trends were noted in several species, including Lesser White-fronted and Icelandic Greylag Geese; several other species whose populations had previously undergone strong increases (such as Dark-bellied Brent Geese) appeared to have reached a plateau, though encouragingly numbers of globally threatened Red-breasted Geese may be showing signs of recovery. Mallard declined in five of nine areas for which trends could be assessed (a trend also detected by WeBS counts in Great Britain) whilst Pintail numbers also fell in many regions. Flourishing populations of Shelduck and Wigeon continued to increase, the total count of the latter in January 1995 being 14% higher than the current population estimate. Most diving duck populations appear to be relatively healthy, though the long-term decline of Pochard in the West Mediterranean continued.

Whilst the greatest amount of information is available for wildfowl species, the report also covers results for waders and other waterbirds such as pelicans, storks and ibises. It is hoped that sufficient data will soon be available for trend analyses for these species in future reports.

For anyone wishing to put an international perspective on WeBS results, this 178-page report provides a thorough insight into Western Palearctic waterbird populations.

Delany, S., Reyes, C., Hubert, E., Pihl, S., Rees, E., Haanstra, L. & van Strein, A. 1999. Results from the International Waterbird Census in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia 1995 and 1996. *Wetlands International Publication No. 54*, Wageningen, The Netherlands. xiii + 178pp.

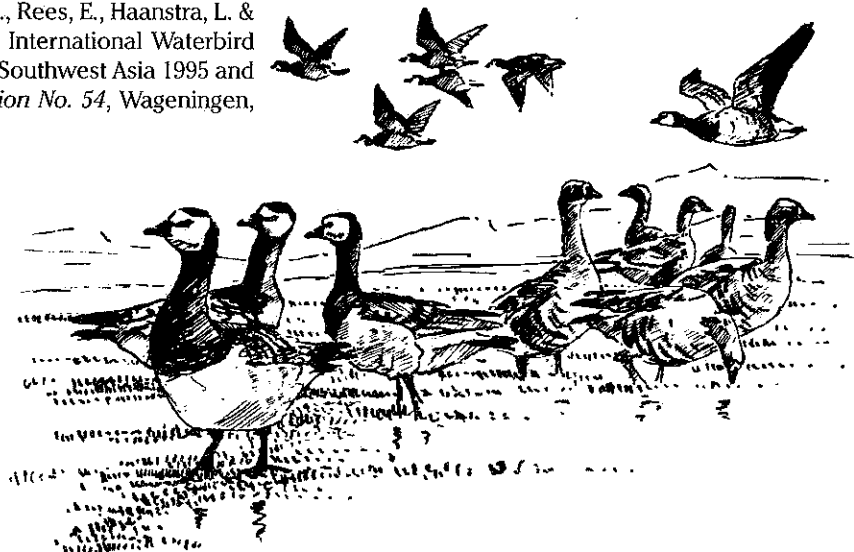
Goose populations of the Western Palearctic: a review of status and distribution published by Wetlands International & National Environmental Research Institute.

The UK is home to several internationally important populations of geese and these can provide some of the best birdwatching spectacles during the winter months. This comprehensive review, the first of its kind, pulls together a wealth of information on all nine species of Western Palearctic geese (eight native and the long-established naturalised populations of Canada Geese). Focussing on their numbers, trends and distribution, a chapter is given to each of the 23 recognised populations. The sections are subdivided by country, highlighting not only numbers and range but also other factors such as legislation for site protection and hunting and the current status with respect to conflicts with agricultural interests. It also serves to highlight the gaps in our current knowledge and should promote and focus further research into this intriguing group of birds.

Whilst the book is aimed predominantly as a source of reference for professionals involved with goose research and nature conservation and management, it also provides much to interest a broader audience of keen amateur ornithologists with an interest in geese and a desire to learn more about these attractive winter visitors.

Madsen, J., Cracknell, G. & Fox, A.D. (eds.) 1999. *Goose populations of the Western Palearctic. A review of status and distribution*. Wetlands International Publication No. 48, Wetlands International, Wageningen, The Netherlands. National Environmental Research Institute, Rønde, Denmark. 344 pp.

Both publications are available through the Natural History Book Service (address: 2-3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN email: nhbs@nhbs.co.uk web site: www.nhbs.co.uk) priced £15 and £35 respectively.





Bulletin Board

2000 Wader Study Group Conference

The annual conference of the Wader Study Group will take place at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, between Friday 8 and Monday 11 September 2000. Norwich is close to the Wash, the premier wintering wader site in the United Kingdom, and the North Norfolk Coast, two sites that between them hold 430,000 wintering waterbirds.

On Saturday, the talks will be closely linked to the conference's theme, "Counts and marking – past, present and future." The opening session on ringing will highlight what has been learnt during the last thirty years of ringing and the priorities for the next thirty years. The second session will describe how past counts have been used and how new techniques and perhaps wider coverage will improve our knowledge of wader population dynamics. The third session will suggest how integrated studies that make use of marked birds and counts can improve our understanding of wader behaviour, phenology and population dynamics. On Sunday, talks will be presented that cover the range of wader studies and there will be a chance to go on an excursion in the afternoon to some of East Anglia's renowned wader hotspots. On Monday, the workshop is likely to cover the predicted effects of Global Climate Change on wader populations.

More detailed information will be supplied in the April 2000 issue of the *Wader Study Group Bulletin*, or contact Mark Rehfish or Steve Holloway at the BTO.

New Recording Forms

The introduction of the new style recording forms last summer was generally well received by most Local Organisers and counters.

We hope that as forms are returned this spring we will begin to reap the rewards of the changes and save valuable time in processing the data. If you still have any problems or queries about the forms, which to use or how to complete them, please contact Mark Pollitt or Colette Hall at WWT Slimbridge.

International Bewick's & Whooper Swan Census

By the time you read this, the latest International Census of Bewick's and Whooper Swans will have taken place throughout Europe. By making a WeBS count, you will have contributed to the census, as the data will be pooled from all relevant surveys. Those of you likely to have encountered significant numbers of yellow-billed swans should have received special census forms, requesting additional information on the numbers of young, brood size and habitat use. Many thanks to everyone who helped with these extra counts. A final plea, as ever, is to ask that you ensure that all forms are completed and returned to your Local Organiser by the end of March at the latest. Many thanks.

New Telephone System at WWT

A new phone system has been installed at WWT, with a number of changes (please bear with us!). The main number is now 01453 891900 which connects you to an automated system. If you have a tone phone, you can then dial the required extension: 255 for Mark, 261 for Colette or 263 for Peter. A voice mail system will enable you to leave messages if we are unavailable or, if more convenient, if you phone outside office hours. Alternatively, if you crave a friendly voice, you can still dial 01453 890333 and your call will be taken by a receptionist. Mark and Peter also have direct line numbers (01453 891926 and 891931, respectively).

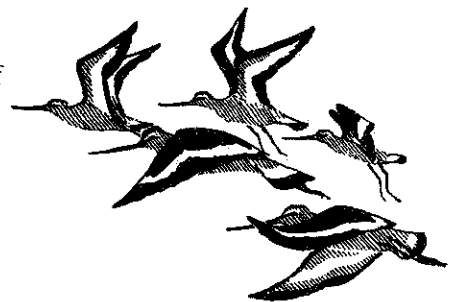
WeBS counts overseas . . .

WeBS is able to achieve reasonably complete coverage of the UK's wetlands, at least compared with many countries in eastern and southern Europe, north Africa and southwest Asia, where large gaps in coverage seriously compromise waterbird monitoring in these areas. Consequently, the International Waterbird Census (IWC) will include a gap-filling census in January 2002. Wetlands International, who organise the IWC, plan to expand coverage by organising a series of subsidised expeditions to these areas by teams from northwest Europe.

Many details remain to be worked out, e.g. a project proposal is being prepared for submission to potential funders. However, if you are interested in undertaking an expedition, please contact the WeBS Secretariat. This will enable Wetlands International to start to match teams to gaps. We will provide you with more information as it becomes available, including details of any gap filling to be done in the UK.

Priority Count Dates for 2001

You should receive a flyer listing the priority WeBS count dates for the year 2001 with this newsletter. Please contact your Local Organiser or the WeBS Secretariat if you haven't received a copy.



Why recording accuracy on count forms makes a difference

Participating in monthly counts for WeBS and other surveys can be rewarding and enjoyable, though filling in the paperwork at the end of the day rarely offers comparable enjoyment! This part of monitoring, however, is equally as important as doing the counts themselves, ensuring that we not only have the figures available to prepare analyses of populations and trends, but also so that we can interpret them correctly.

Transferring your counts accurately on to recording forms is, obviously, of the utmost importance. Based on personal experiences, it is often far better to do it straight after your count than to wait for several months when you can't read your writing from a frosty November morning or your February counts that were washed away in a March downpour! Whilst our computers can check for unusual numbers, we may never identify all of the rogue counts. However, also of vital importance is the information on the back of the form which ensures that we interpret your counts in the most appropriate manner. The fictitious example in the box shows how important completing the accuracy information on the forms can be; it can make a huge difference to how a site is perceived in terms of its importance to waterbirds. It allows us to be more confident in the use of the data you provide and ensures that we can take into account any circumstances which have adversely affected your counts. Thanks to improvements in computing power, we have been able to improve steadily the way in which we interpret your counts in recent years, and we hope to continue this as our new database is developed. The changes to the recording form introduced last summer have made collection of this information even simpler.

Please take the few extra moments necessary to complete this part of your count form after each visit.

Fred counts Bloggs Reservoir every month and sends his completed forms to his Local Organiser at the end of the winter. Unfortunately, Fred often fails to take notes about the count conditions on his visits and as a consequence doesn't complete the boxes on count accuracy at the end of the form. Fred's reservoir is an important site for Goldeneye, with up to 200 birds at the end of the winter. In the last four winters, the peak counts were 180, 200, 160 and 160. This winter, Fred's counts are disrupted by heavy fog in February and are completely rained off in March. Fred's February count reveals only 100 birds, though the fog prevents him counting the far end of the reservoir often frequented by large numbers of Goldeneye. Even so, this count is still the highest of the winter.

Taking Fred's figures literally, the average peak count of Goldeneye in the last five years at Bloggs Reservoir is 160, falling just below the 170 birds required for the site to qualify as holding nationally important numbers. Consequently the site is not listed in the annual WeBS report and not recognised by its readers, including the government's statutory conservation organisations, as being important. However, if Fred took a few moments to complete the Coverage box in section 6 of the recording form and circled his February and March counts as LOW, we would be able to take account of this when assessing the value of the site. Because we know that Fred's counts were poor due to bad weather, we are able to exclude the latest count from the average (the figure will appear in brackets in the annual report). The average peak count (for the four 'good' counts) now becomes 175, the site is deemed nationally important for Goldeneye and is listed in the WeBS report for all to see.

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.

Contact Details

		Automated system	Direct dial	e-mail
Head of Secretariat	Peter Cranswick	01453 891900 ext 265	01453 891931	Peter.Cranswick@wwt.org.uk
Core Count Organiser	Mark Pollitt	ext 255	891926	Mark.Pollitt@wwt.org.uk
Assistant Organiser	Colette Hall	ext 261		Colette.Hall@wwt.org.uk
(If you experience problems, dial 01453 890333 to speak to the WWT Receptionist)				
Low Tide Count Organiser	Steve Holloway	01842 750050		Steve.Holloway@bto.org
	WWT		BTO	
	Slimbridge, Gloucester GL2 7BT		The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU	
	Fax 01453 890827		Fax 01842 750030	

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