

WeBS



JOINT
NATURE
CONSERVATION
COMMITTEE

Newsletter

No. 5 Summer 1996

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

This summer is the start of a crucial phase for WeBS. During the next few months we shall be developing and installing new database systems for the storage and analysis of the data you collect. Faster and more efficient data sorting and analysis will then be possible, (although during the development stages there may possibly be one or two teething problems!). Alongside the development of our computer systems, we have spent some time re-vamping our procedures for providing WeBS count data for conservation bodies, commercial clients, researchers and counters. This should result in a faster and more efficient service.

The first WeBS counters' conference in Scotland was well received (p2) and the first for Wales is detailed below. Currently, we are busy finalising *Wildfowl and Wader Counts 1994-95*, which, of necessity, is an abbreviated version. We hope you will receive your copy early this autumn. On a sadder note we say good-bye to Julianne Evans who set up the Low Tide Count Scheme. Julianne's cheerful personality, in particular, will be missed, but certainly will benefit the RSPB, her new employer.

1997 WeBS Counters' Conference

Make a note in your diaries for the next counters' conference which will be held on Saturday 22 March 1997 at WWT's Llanelli Centre in Dyfed. The one day conference, including entrance to the reserve, refreshments and lunch, will be free to all WeBS counters. The programme, which will include talks by staff of the WeBS partners

and others on wetland birds and related issues, will be finalised during the coming months. Full details, including information on local accommodation, will be available in the autumn and will be circulated to all counters in the region. For advance bookings or other queries please contact Colin T. Menendez at WWT Slimbridge.

WeBS is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterfowl 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 waterfowl populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution, and identify and monitor important sites for waterfowl. 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, the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, English Nature and Scottish Natural Heritage).

Counters' Conference - Perth 1996

An exclusive boarding school for well-to-do young ladies may appear to be an unlikely venue for a Counters' Conference but Kilgraston School, Perth, proved to be an excellent choice. The locality enabled counters from all corners of Scotland to attend and the pleasant building and grounds made for a relaxed atmosphere, even though the organiser fell foul of the "Bastille-like" security system.

Although talks were deliberately kept short to encourage the all-important socialising, a variety of diverse topics were well presented and often led to lively discussion. The speakers between them have travelled to almost every corner of the world, have vast experience working for a wide variety of influential organisations but above all have been involved in counting waterfowl for a variety of projects and schemes. This wealth of experience ensured the talks were not only authoritative but also related well to the majority of the audience.

For much of the afternoon the conference split into a variety of discussion groups. By far the most well attended was that on Grey Goose monitoring, not surprising perhaps in Scotland. The subject of the newsletter and annual report attracted only two delegates. After their separate discussions the groups reconvened to present and discuss their main findings, some of which are summarised below:-

Recruiting more counters

- A major problem was rare birds proving more attractive to some potential counters
- Advertising on a wide variety of fronts might be productive
- A more attractive package of guidelines and slide packs would be useful, especially for Local Organisers
- Continuing encouragement and training of potential counters is highly desirable if experienced local counters are willing

Recording forms/cards

- Counters felt completing the forms was generally straightforward, with no major complaints
- Clearer guidance would be welcomed on which species to record
- Counting gulls and terns met with a mixed reception and should therefore remain optional

- The section entitled "Disturbance" would be completed by more counters if it was re-titled "Activities Noted" or something similar, reflecting more accurately the information requested
- There was a call for a box on the front page for counters to enter their site name. However there is currently enough space for this to be entered on the front by those who wish to, or alternatively the form can be folded "inside-out" to display the site name more prominently

Feedback

- The annual report should be amended to attract potential counters into WeBS. The use of graphs rather than tables and the use of a "lighter" language might make it easier to read
- It was suggested that the report should only concentrate on the core species and omit rarities
- The newsletter was considered to generally provide good feedback but more articles based on a specific site would be appreciated

Servicing of Counters and Local Organisers by HQs

- A major grumble was the frequent lack of notice given for forthcoming surveys

Grey Goose Counts

- Much of the discussions centred on the methods used including the frequency and accuracy of counts, field counts and goose guides, as well as the objectives of the counts. It was useful to have counters from different regions and staff from headquarters together, enabling ideas to be pooled
- Roost counts are the preferred method for finding all geese but the success of these counts varies with time of year and in different parts of the country, where field counts may prove more productive
- Annual monitoring was considered important and therefore needs to continue
- Age counts would be useful from more areas

Low Tide Counts

Julianne Evans (BTO)

I am very sad to have to announce that I will be leaving the BTO for pastures new at the end of July. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to run a scheme where I have made so many friends, visited so many places and seen so much commitment to the cause of estuary conservation. If my successor has anything like the support I have had then the scheme should go from strength to strength.

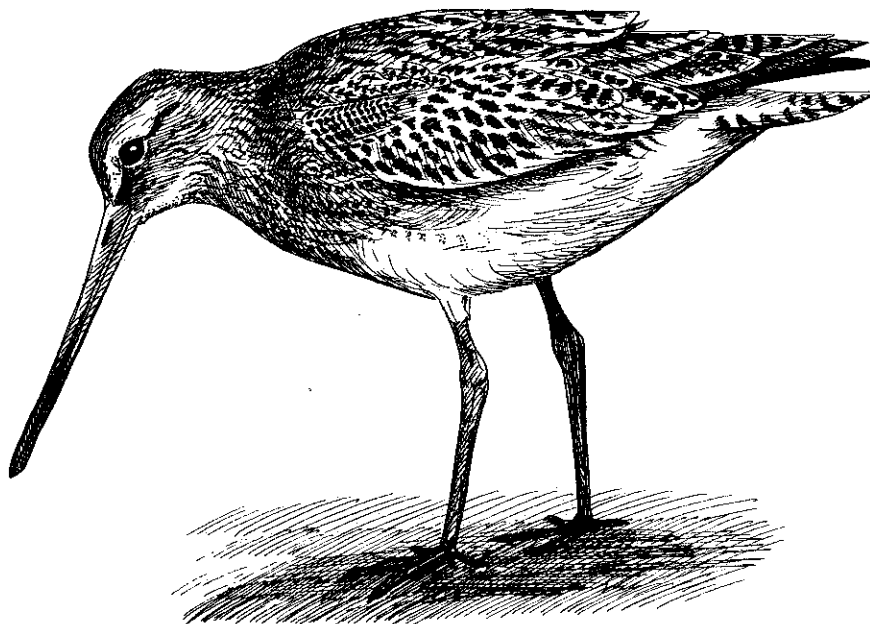
On a lighter note, and for the first time, Low Tide Counts were included in the 1993-94 WeBS Annual Report. Their inclusion in the report is another step forward in the development of what is still a relatively new concept in estuary monitoring. The past four years have shown how successful it can be, and each new improvement that is made ensures its continuing success. As they gather momentum, it is important that the counts are seen as an integral part of the WeBS scheme. Every opportunity should be taken to attract new volunteers into the scheme and to use the data as intended.

A further improvement will be the change-over from the existing database to one which is much more up-to-date and efficient. This

process should begin this year and will mean that the Low Tide Counts are fully integrated into WeBS. Counters should not be affected but please bear with my successor, if he or she sounds harassed when you phone up!

In the course of the 1996-97 and 1997-98 winters we hope to cover the following estuaries: Severn, Exe, Dart, Beaulieu, Medway, Rye Harbour/Pett Levels, Christchurch Harbour, Stour, Tees, Coquet, South Alnmouth, Blyth (Northumberland), Mersey, Alt, Dee (Eng./Wales), Ribble, Cleddau, Carmarthen Bay, Burry Inlet, Inner Clyde, Lough Foyle, Dundrum Bay, together with Strangford Lough and Belfast Lough which continue to be covered. I have discussed coverage with the Local Organisers of some of these estuaries already, but if you are able to help or keen to find out more then please contact your Local Organiser, or my successor at the BTO. I will be continuing to ensure that the scheme is going as smoothly as possible before I leave.

Finally, I would like to say a sincere thank you to all those who have been involved in Low Tide Counts over the years. Keep up the good work!



By Rob Hume

Data Protocol

WeBS partners have recently finalised a protocol to deal with WeBS data sales and provision to third parties. This includes a proforma, with terms and conditions, for anyone requesting data, and a series of notes explaining the standard formats provided and possible uses of the data, largely to prevent misinterpretation. The protocol also ensures, for example, that data are not provided to separate organisations conducting research on the same topic without informing one another of their common interests. Depending on the nature of use, a charge may be made for the data, although we would stress that these do little more than cover the costs incurred by WWT and BTO in dealing with the request. There are three basic categories of charges depending on the use, the first two applying to commercial users, or at least those receiving a high level of funding, whilst the last applies to non-funded amateur or academic research uses:-

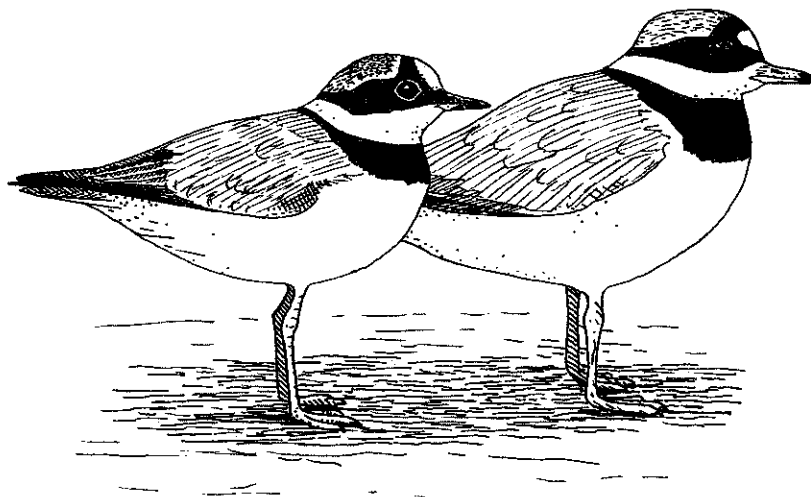
1. Standard rate: this covers the cost to the BTO and WWT of processing the request and includes a small profit to be fed back into WeBS.
2. Discount rate: users who can demonstrate that the work includes conservation benefits

will be eligible to a discount. For example, a local authority preparing a regional plan for reservoirs that includes conservation measures would only be charged the cost of providing the data.

3. Volunteer/educational rate: amateur studies, for example by WeBS counters or for county bird reports, or academic research by universities, are not charged for data requests *per se*. However, a nominal fee of £1.00 is levied so that the terms and conditions of use are legally binding.

Whilst we accept that some might take exception to paying anything for the data, we hope that you will appreciate the need to make such a charge to ensure everyone uses the data correctly, and that, to be consistent, we must charge everyone, including WeBS counters. We have, however, kept this to what we feel is the minimum manageable amount. Anyone simply requiring a photocopy of their own data because they mislaid their copy, or forgot to copy it in the first place, will not be charged anything.

If you wish to obtain WeBS data please contact either Ray at the BTO or Mark at the WWT.

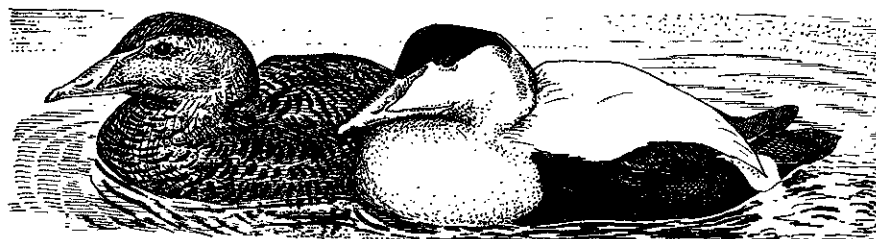


By Rob Hume

Wildfowl and Wader Counts 1994-95

By the time you read this Newsletter, the WeBS annual report for 1994-95 will have been largely finished. Regrettably, however, we decided to reduce the size and content of this report considerably, dropping the species and estuary accounts, although we would like to stress that this is very much a one-off. As you will have noticed, the report has been published progressively later in recent years, due in part to the size of the report, but also as a result of the change from the previous count schemes to WeBS. Thus, we have taken drastic action this year so that the timetable for production of the 1995-96 report can begin on time. The reduced amount of time taken to produce this report will also allow us to make further changes to our computer systems in particular, which should

allow us to produce the report more efficiently in the future. We hope to publish future reports some time in late winter each year, i.e. within about a year of when the counts were carried out. We appreciate that many counters will find this report of considerably less interest than recent years and apologise in advance and ask you to bear with us. Any points of particular interest in the species accounts that are omitted as a result will, of course, be picked up in the following report, which will contain data from both 1995-96 and 1994-95 together with the preceding three years. Furthermore, all data are held at BTO and WWT as normal, and anyone requiring more detail before then can get in contact with any of the National Organisers.



By Rob Hume

Cost of the annual report

Following the last report, letters were received from several counters offering financial assistance for future publications, given the apparently large increase in cost, not least to ensure that they received a copy! Whilst we are very grateful for these offers, we thought a few words of explanation seemed appropriate.

Wildfowl and Wader Counts is widely received by a large number of people and organisations. It is provided free to statutory and non-governmental conservation bodies including large numbers to the WeBS partners. A relatively small number are bought by consultants and local authorities etc. Perhaps most importantly, it is also provided to all WeBS counters who contributed to the report. We appreciate that counters do not expect rewards for their efforts, but make counts because they enjoy them and/or feel they are worthwhile.

We hope, therefore, that the report demonstrates the usefulness of the counts and at the same time is an interesting read. The WeBS partners see the report as the most important source of feedback to counters and sufficient money is set aside in the budget each year to ensure that all counters receive a copy free of charge.

We would also like to point out that the report costs less to produce than the price given on the back cover, so providing all counters with a copy is not making a huge dent in our coffers. However, since money is always short, we thought it reasonable to ask those who buy the report, such as consultants, to contribute a very small amount over and above the production cost to help with the day-to-day running costs of WeBS, e.g. the collection of the data on which the report is based.

Changes to the Recording Form

New recording forms for Core Counts have been issued with this Newsletter and include a number of changes suggested by counters. Those involved in Goose Counts will notice the biggest change. The "Alternative methods" section has been removed. The roost information that was provided using this section (mainly for Pink-footed and Greylag Geese) is still extremely useful and we would still be very grateful for this. However, we were missing vital information if roost counts were given amongst counts for other species made during the daytime WeBS counts. Most importantly, there was no means of recording the ancillary information on disturbance, weather etc, separately for daytime and roost counts.

For WeBS Core Counts, please record only the number of species present during the time of the count, even if this means recording eight Pinkfeet at a site that holds 30,000 roosting birds overnight. WWT now has separate forms for recording roosting geese, and co-ordinates a separate annual census of these species. Counters participating in the national census should receive a count form via their local Goose Organiser. If not, please contact Carl Mitchell at WWT Slimbridge who will provide forms and put you in contact with the relevant person. If you wish to make a roost count of other species, e.g. Cormorants on a Sussex estuary or Goosanders on a Somerset reservoir, please complete a separate column on the WeBS form, giving the correct date, time and count accuracy information for that count visit and clearly record in the "Additional Information" section that this was purely a roost

count of the species listed. In time, we hope to produce a separate Roost Count form for these counts. Section 8, previously titled "Disturbance" has been re-named "Activity", to more accurately describe the requested information. Counters are also reminded that they should not put themselves in a position which could place them, or others, in danger. The WeBS partners do not take any responsibility or liability for any actions and subsequent consequences from the activities of fieldworkers. This is needed for legal reasons but we are naturally very keen to promote your well-being so that we continue to receive counts in future!

Several counters suggested that a seven column form would be useful. However on examining the number of counts that were received for each month, it was found that the number of sites counted in seven months of the year was no greater than the number counted in six or twelve months. Given that seven columns would also mean a more cramped form, we decided to keep to six, which is also more convenient for those counting in all 12 months. If this situation changes, however, we will consider changing the form to ensure the best use of paper, postage etc. In the meantime, please continue to count in September, even if it means starting a new form for just one count. Many thanks.

There are also a number of small changes that make data input easier for us. Please, therefore, use the new forms and throw the old ones in the nearest recycling centre!

Submitting data for sectors

In recent years, an increasing number of counts have been submitted at the sector level, such as individual pits within a gravel pit complex, or small scale divisions of large estuaries. We would like to thank those counters for their increased effort, especially given the arduous form-filling involved, and reiterate that this does allow us to make greater use of the data, especially when defending small parts of sites against recreational pressure and developments.

However, a couple of recurring problems are evident. Firstly, please ensure that you complete a separate column for each sector, even if this means having to start another form just for one sector. There are several cases where counters have drawn a line down the middle of a column to divide counts of birds, but we are then unable to distinguish, for example, which disturbance

activity was occurring in which sector. Secondly, many counters also lump sectors if very few birds were present. For example, on a complex of six pits A to F counts have been submitted as "E+F" in one month, when only two Mallard and one Coot were present. However, this requires us to invent a whole new site in our database called pits "E+F", as we cannot assign the birds individually to sectors "E" or "F". This makes administering the database very much more complicated. We appreciate that some counters may think lumping low counts of birds like this would save us time, but in reality, it makes life a lot more complicated. Please, therefore, keep to recording birds on a sector-by-sector basis and submitting the data as such, using a separate column for each. Many thanks.

Cold Weather Stress

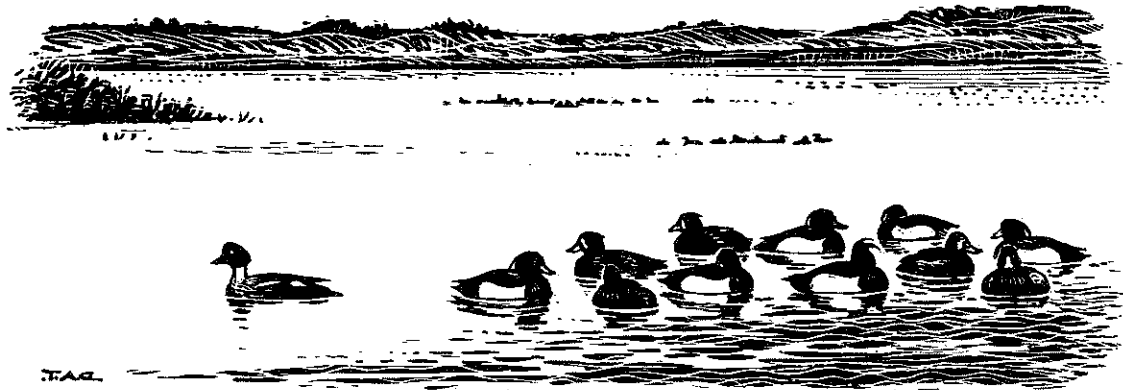
Deirdre Craddock (JNCC)

Periods of severe winter weather can result in significant stress for wintering wildfowl and waders. Reacting to the prolonged spell of severe weather last winter, the Department of the Environment and the Welsh Office introduced a statutory suspension of shooting on the English and Welsh foreshore, for the period of 10-20 February 1996, following the fulfilment of agreed criteria.

In periods of severe cold, it is always useful to have feedback on local conditions to assist the country agencies, JNCC, British Association for Shooting & Conservation and others assessing national and regional patterns of weather and its effect on waterfowl populations. WeBS counters have an important role to play by phoning in any observations of any waterfowl that are dead or in poor condition as soon as possible, so that the national situation can be monitored.

Since 1981 the Wader Study Group has run a project to monitor the effects of severe weather on waders. Nigel Clark (BTO tel. 01842 750050) and Nick Davidson (JNCC) are the organisers of the project and collate information from reports around the country. Many thanks to those counters who submitted extra "cold" counts during the harsh weather conditions last winter.

In such periods it is important not to cause any unnecessary disturbance to waterfowl as this results in the depletion of body reserves that might otherwise be critical to the individual's survival. At a local level, any steps that can be taken during major freeze-ups to reduce incidental disturbance to waterfowl from bird watchers, dog walkers etc. would be most useful and should be promoted.



By D Thelwell

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

Count Dates

July 1996 to December 1997

These dates have been chosen to be suitable for most parts of the UK. However, at a few coastal/estuarine sites, the dates shown below will be unsuitable due to local tide times. In these cases the Local Organiser or Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates with their counters so that whole regions are counted simultaneously, even if these differ from the dates suggested below.

1996	1997	
21 July	12 January	20 July
18 August	9 February	24 August
15 September	9 March	21 September
13 October	6 April	19 October
17 November	11 May	16 November
15 December	22 June	14 December

Advance notice for 1998 - Count dates have already been set for 1998: - January 18, February 15, March 15, April 26, May 17, June 14, July 12, August 9, September 6, October 11, November 8 and December 6.

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 waterfowl and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

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