

# WeBSnews

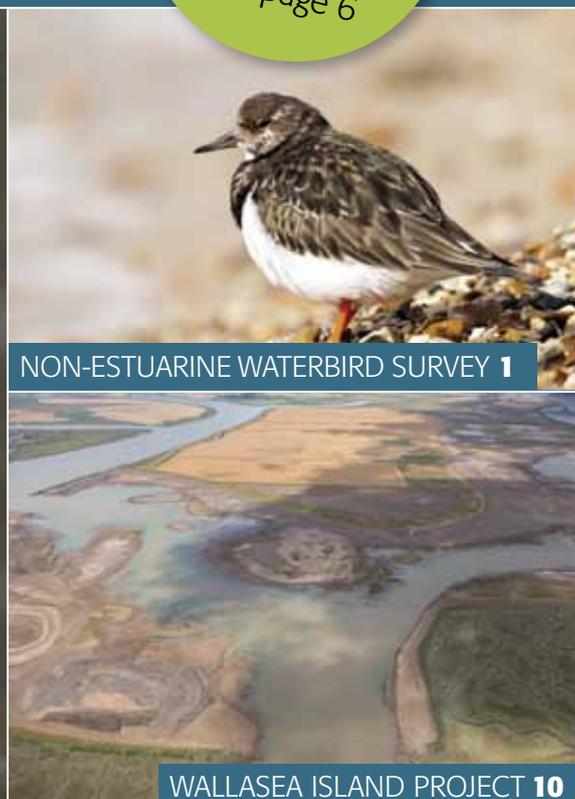
The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey



IEWS OF A  
YOUNG WeBS  
COUNTER  
See page 6



RECORDING SEX RATIOS 8



NON-ESTUARINE WATERBIRD SURVEY 1

WALLASEA ISLAND PROJECT 10

ISSUE 31 • AUTUMN 2015

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**PLUS** WeBS WHO'S WHO, CORE COUNT DATES & NEWS



## Hello, it's approaching 2016 and it's time for the NEWS

Funding is now in place for a repeat Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) this coming winter as Graham Austin explains...

In the most recent annual report of the Wetland Bird Survey, our featured habitat focused on the UK's non-estuarine coast. The extensive stretches of open coastline offer different habitats and feeding opportunities to those typical of estuaries such as rocky shores along which extensive beds of seaweed may be exposed at low tide or sandy beaches with extensive strandlines all of which can support substantial invertebrate populations. These are favoured habitats for a number of waders over-wintering in the UK,

species that are specialists in exploiting such resources. The king of the rocky open coast is undoubtedly the Purple Sandpiper but the majority of overwintering Turnstone also occur in this habitat, while substantial proportions (between 10% and 50%) of Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Redshank also overwinter along the open coast.

It's great for the birds that the UK has such an extensive open coastline but it presents a problem to those monitoring their fortunes. Whilst the WeBS Core Counts

## FROM THE EDITOR

# Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News. It is all change in the WeBS Office with Chas Holt, who has been part of the WeBS team since 2009, moving to pastures new. Very shortly, I look forward to welcoming his replacement, Teresa Frost, into the team.

This winter promises to be a busy one with the Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey running along with the usual WeBS Core and Low Tide Counts. I hope that if you are close to the coast, you are able to take part and improve our knowledge of some under-recorded species that use the rocky coastlines.

The decline in diving ducks in the UK has been a feature of recent WeBS Annual Reports. By recording the sex ratios of these birds, especially Pochards, researchers are hopeful this may be able to shed light on the reasons behind the declines.



**Neil Calbrade** Editor of WeBS News



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### NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION

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Thanks to Dawn Balmer, Sarah Harris and Heidi Mellan for proofreading this newsletter.

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 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of the statutory nature conservation bodies: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland) in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.



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When you have finished with this magazine, pass it to a friend or recycle it.

## CONTINUED FROM COVER

set the gold standard for monitoring coastal waterbirds within estuaries, the extensive open coast remains relatively poorly covered by the scheme. In order to address this, a series of periodic and extensive surveys of the open coast have been undertaken over the years. First up was the Winter Shorebird Count (WSC) during the winter of 1984/85, a survey concentrating on waders but also including Grey Heron and Eider. This was followed during the winter of 1997/98 by the Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) which, as part of WeBS, extended the remit to include all waterbirds. In 2006/07 (NEWS-II) we also recorded mammals associated with the shoreline, data that we passed on to the Mammal Society. Additionally, many surveyors have in

the past taken it upon themselves to report raptors and inshore seabirds.

And so we come to the next survey (NEWS-III). In the last annual report we could only tentatively announce NEWS-III would take place this coming winter. We are delighted to say that sufficient funds have now been secured to ensure that this can go ahead.

For the first time, and in line with WeBS Core Counts and Low-Tide Counts, NEWS becomes primarily an online survey. Volunteers will be able to offer their services to WeBS Local Organisers through the new online interface where they will find interactive maps showing the locations of count stretches in their selected area. Once volunteers have been allocated their count stretches by our Local Organisers they will have access to all ►

the support material and field-sheets they will need to take part in NEWS-III and access to the online data entry interface. No doubt Local Organisers will be contacting some of you directly. We will support paper submission of data where necessary and consider the extra work this entails for us time and money well spent – all data are important to us.

Once again we have retained those count stretches (or sub-divisions of more extensive stretches) that were originally defined by volunteers during the WSC. In so doing, we will be able to compare like with like and so make robust statements about any changes in bird numbers. For a similar reason we will also be promoting coverage of the same randomised count stretches prioritised for NEWS-II. However, in no way do we wish to restrict more extensive coverage and all offers to survey any of the count stretches will be received with equal thanks. NEWS-II achieved coverage of over 50% of the UK open coast during winter 2006/07 and it would be terrific if we could equal or exceed this target during winter 2015/16. Wherever you are based, if you are within striking distance of a mid-winter visit to the coast there should be enough count stretches to go around. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in particular you should not struggle to find plenty of count stretches up for grabs. Scotland has the lion's share of the UK's coastline with its many islands, inlets and headlands and some coastal areas are particularly remote. In the past a number of groups have mounted "expeditions" to remote areas as an "alternative" Christmas/New Year or mid-winter break and such contributions have been particularly valuable in filling the gaps.

Moving to a primarily online survey will allow us to continue the tradition of expanding the scope of NEWS. We will of course be recording all waterbirds as previously but it will now be more straightforward for volunteers to record raptors, inshore seabirds and mammals. Additionally, we hope to collect further data that will increase our understanding of how wintering waterbirds are using the resources of the open coast. We

**Purple Sandpipers favour rocky coasts and so are under-recorded by WeBS**



DAVE KING

will therefore be reintroducing the habitat recording that last featured in the WSC for the intertidal habitat and extending this to include a broad description of adjoining landward and seaward habitat - nothing particularly complicated or arduous to complete but nonetheless providing extremely welcome added value to the survey. One new aspect of habitat recording is aimed at getting a handle on the importance of the strandline to birds. The strandline, typically dominated by washed up and decomposing wrack offers rich foraging to many birds, not just traditional WeBS/NEWS species and so volunteers will be encouraged to record any and all species that they may encounter along the intertidal zone.

If you are interested in contributing to this important survey all that is required is that you commit to visit one or more count stretches, each on a single occasion, over the low-tide period, on a day of your choice, between 1st December and 31st January. There are a few simple protocols to adhere to but essentially this will involve walking a stretch of coast and recording the birds you encounter as you go. Count stretches are typically 2km long, some a bit shorter, some a bit longer. It is essential that all waders are recorded and indeed all waterbirds using the intertidal zone but we would hope that most volunteers would also count

all waterbirds on the sea to a distance where they would be visible to the naked eye, and all those using landward habitat immediately adjacent to the shore. Recording of groups other than waterbirds will be optional but most welcomed. Also additional visits will be welcomed especially if these collect data on birds associated with the strandline during different states of the tide to the standard low-tide visit.

Looking to the future, we are hoping to allow volunteers who so wish to do so to continue monitoring and submitting data online for their chosen count stretches after NEWS-III draws to a close. Any data so collected would be incorporated alongside WeBS Core data and so increase the representation of open coast habitats monitored routinely by WeBS.

NEWS-III is funded by the British Trust for Ornithology, Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage and National Resources Wales and the WeBS partnership.

**The Online NEWS interface will be going live shortly and will automatically appear as an option when you log into WeBS Online from where you can request sections. If you would prefer to submit paper forms, please contact the WeBS Office who will put you in touch with your Local Organiser for NEWS. For more information see [www.bto.org/webs-news](http://www.bto.org/webs-news)**

## WeBS Location Spotlight



# Bridgemarsh Island

From the heart of London to a little-known Essex backwater, WeBS counting always has the capacity to reward...and surprise.

**Steven Swaby** WeBS Counter

When I began volunteering for WeBS counts around 12 years ago, I lived in northeast London. My count area was the Hollow Ponds on Leyton Flats, a small remnant of southern Epping Forest. Girdled by busy roads and heavily used by the public as much-needed green space, this little patch of land seemed under siege and pretty unpromising at first glance. The ponds, Victorian gravel working now used as a boating lake in summer, seemed popular with rowdy gangs of Canada Geese and very little else. Was it really my fate to be counting just these avian jobs month after month?

Mercifully, a few counts soon revealed there was more to it than that. Winter months saw influxes of Mallard, Shoveler, Gadwall, Pochard and Tufted Duck along with hundreds of gulls (and what WeBS counter doesn't love counting gulls, eh?). Occasional guest appearances by other species made it worthwhile scanning the nooks and crannies around the islands. I may have missed the Smew that dropped in one day, but male Mandarin from the local Epping Forest population added a flash of exotic colour, and on another occasion two Ruddy Duck appeared – something very unlikely to happen today in our post-cull times.

When things were quiet on the water, the woodland fringing the ponds held interest: sometimes the elusive local Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers would put in an appearance, or maybe a passing flock of Redpolls. Spring brought passage migrants such as warblers, Cuckoo and Pied Flycatcher, and I discovered

breeding Grey Wagtails, which pleased me no end at the time. Okay, none of this was going to set the world alight, but it proved to me that effort, even in an urban plot, is rewarded. Just getting out there made the day better. Hollow Ponds weren't so bad after all; Damon Albarn even wrote a song about them.

Fast-forward a few years and I found myself living on Essex's comparatively remote Dengie Peninsula. My cottage in the village of Althorne was just a few minutes' walk from the Crouch Estuary, midway between the Essex Wildlife Trust's Blue House Farm reserve and the 'wild coast' now being restored by the RSPB at Wallasea Island. A chance meeting with another birder doing a WeBS count on my local patch had me press-ganged and back in the counting fold for a second time. I've been there ever since.

What my count area between Althorne and Burnham-on-Crouch has is birds: *lots* of birds. Things may slack off in the summer months, but from August there begins a rapid build-up of thousands of wildfowl and waders that keep me very occupied on count days. Jewel in the crown is Bridgemarsh Island; a slab of former farmland now returned to saltmarsh after the inexorable tides finally won the reclamation battle, midway through the last century. It is a magnet for roosting wetland birds. By mid-winter Wigeon, Teal and Pintail swell to their hundreds, and Brent Geese commuting along the valley with the ebb and flow of the tides fill the air with their muttering calls. Lapwing and Golden Plover flocks regularly hit several thousand birds each, and the sight of these charismatic waders filling

the big skies over the river at high tide is something no one in their right mind would ever tire of.

Bridgemarsh is good at keeping secrets too; its network of creeklets hide lots of additional waders and it takes either a very high tide or a hunting owl or raptor to push them all into the open. Sitting, watching and waiting is the only way to tackle it. On one occasion a Hen Harrier appeared from nowhere as I sat on the seawall, and amid the mayhem that ensued, no less that 61 Common Snipe sprang into the air. I'd had no idea they were lurking there, hunkered down; same goes for the lone Jack Snipe I accidentally flushed as I walked back.

I've been resident in my Essex backwater for nine years now. While I feel I've got to know the area well enough to predict what birds will be present – and in what numbers – at any given time, there is still always room for surprises. Cold snaps drive rarer visitors into the estuary: Razorbill, Goldeneye, Goosander, Scaup, or maybe a flock of White-fronted Geese may liven up a cold winter count. Most unexpectedly of all, just after last Christmas, an immature Night Heron appeared, sulking in a bush on the edge of my count area for just one frosty day before disappearing. A surprise of a very different kind on another occasion was finding a dead body – tragically a local man who had gone missing two months earlier had drowned in the Crouch; I discovered him as I began the monthly count 'scoping Bridgemarsh Island.

Just as the winter birds begin thinning out in March, the estuary air becomes filled again with a new



Saltmarsh and creeks teem with birds while large mixed plover flocks fill the skies above



BRIDGE MARSH ISLAND BY STEVEN SWABY; PLOVER FLOCK BY NEIL CALBRADE

clamour – frantically displaying Oystercatchers and the raucous chorus of several hundred Black-headed Gulls, returning to their breeding colony on Bridgemarsh, and always bringing a few smart-looking Mediterranean Gulls with them. The sounds of the wetland birds drifting up from the river on clear, star-smothered nights is life-affirming stuff.

I suppose my point is a simple one: both count locations are radically different, yet they share a commonality in two things. Both offered me opportunities to connect with nature, to be in the moment and feel more in tune with the natural world. WeBS counting presents a focus and motivation to get out there regularly, to learn the rhythms of a place and its wildlife through the seasons. And secondly, by putting in that time,

month after month, there are always unexpected rewards to be had. As the American naturalist John Muir wrote: "...in every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks". Cheers, John.

.....  
 With thanks to Peter Mason and the WeBS counters of the Dengie – a hardy and dedicated bunch. Steven Swaby is a freelance writer and heritage consultant. Currently he is Curator of the Walthamstow Wetlands project in northeast London.

## WeBS Snippets



### Erratum to 2013/14 Report

Although we take the utmost care to ensure the Annual report is correct, as with anything, from time to time, mistakes are made.

It wasn't until after the report had been printed and posted that we were alerted to the fact that counts for some sites in the Principal Sites table on page 13 were lower than expected. A bit of detective work revealed that the Icelandic Goose Count data had somehow not been included and so in some cases had resulted in large numbers of birds being missed. We have since amended these figures and updated the Principal Sites table on the website and you will find enclosed in this newsletter a new page 13 to slot into your report. We apologise for this error.

### Reporting colour-ringed birds

Many different species have been colour-ringed as part of specific studies into their movements. Many waders, geese, swans and gulls in particular can and do turn up at any site. If you do sight one of these birds, you can find out who is colour-ringing certain species at [www.cr-birding.org](http://www.cr-birding.org). Alternatively, you can report them to [www.ring.ac](http://www.ring.ac)



## Starting young

Enthusiastic young counters are the future for WeBS and something we are keen to recruit more of. Amy Robjohns, a young birder from Hampshire explains what motivates her...

**Amy Robjohns** WeBS Counter

Numbers of Little Egrets have increased dramatically in the past 20 years and are now a common sight at many places



LES FOSTER

I have been a WeBS counter for just over a year now, and enjoyed every minute of it. It might involve freezing to death on occasions or being blown away by the strong winds or not seeing much at all, but it's still a great survey to take part in. There is always something interesting to see even when there aren't many birds!

Based on the south coast in Hampshire, I leave my beloved patch

(Titchfield Haven) once a month to go and help over in Langstone Harbour. Most of the time I join fellow WeBS counters and spend a few hours wandering around Farlington Marshes, a lovely reserve on the edge of Portsmouth. We always have a good time catching up with each other's latest adventures and news, eating biscuits, oh and WeBS counting too! Every now and then I find myself on

the Good Tern, the RSPB's tin boat, and do the count around the islands. Counting from a boat is harder than it sounds, especially when it's choppy!

That boat is one reason why I am now a WeBS counter. Last year, I was volunteering for the RSPB who manage the islands out in the harbour for seabirds (and returned this year too). At the end of my placement I joined Wez Smith, the site manager,

to help out with the monthly count and also to count the gull and tern chicks. It was interesting, especially as few people are able to see the islands so close. I then set about contacting the relevant people to see how I could get involved on a more regular basis.

I've found WeBS counting enjoyable for a number of reasons. Firstly, here in Langstone Harbour, there's a nice group of us who cover Farlington Marshes so it's great to have company. I've also learnt lots, as there's a mix of experienced birders keen to pass on their knowledge to less experienced birders like myself. Secondly, for whatever reason I rarely leave my patch. If I'm off birding the default is Titchfield Haven. I love spending so much time on my patch, but spending time once a month away at another site is good. Farlington Marshes, and indeed the harbour as a whole, can be fantastic especially in winter and autumn so perfect for a

change of scenery.

The six-yearly Low Tide Counts are interesting too. I helped out with the Portsmouth Harbour one last year, and spent some time exploring Fareham Creek and the main harbour itself. It was a new experience – and extremely cold on the boat! – but well worth it. I'd never really explored Fareham Creek prior to this, despite it being on my doorstep (though I do remember seeing my first Eider there the year before). I was impressed to see Greenshank, among other species, as they don't seem to winter on my patch. From the boat in the main harbour we came across a flock of Golden Plover during one count and were taken aback having never stumbled across that many before!

The core counts in Langstone Harbour have thrown in a few surprises too, nothing super rare yet, but hopefully we'll strike gold soon! The September 2014 count recorded

121 Little Egrets across the whole harbour which was the highest record here ever (previously 109 in 2011). I remember counting from the boat that day "There's 24 Little Egrets... wait no, 27... 28... 30...!" I'm not sure I'd ever seen so many on one site before then. It was pretty spectacular. Other nice surprises at Farlington Marshes have included two Spoonbill, the occasional Water Rail, a single Golden Plover, stunning Whinchat, and more recently double figures of Whimbrel during the July 2015 count.

My first year of WeBS has been great and I hope there are many more years to come!

You can follow Amy on Twitter at [@amythebirder](https://twitter.com/amythebirder) or through her blog [www.birdingaroundhampshire.wordpress.com](http://www.birdingaroundhampshire.wordpress.com)

## WeBS Low Tide Update

**Neil Calbrade** WeBS Low Tide Organiser

The winter of 2014/15 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 15 estuaries around the UK, including the Dee Estuary, Portsmouth Harbour, Hamford Water, Alt Estuary, Pagham Harbour and Kent Estuary (Morecambe Bay).

The winter of 2015/16 will soon be upon us and among the larger sites that have not been counted for at least six years include the North Norfolk Coast, Colne Estuary, Southampton Water, Pegwell Bay

and the Firth of Forth.

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme. Please contact the WeBS office (email: [lowtide@bto.org](mailto:lowtide@bto.org)) if you have time to count one or more sectors once a month between November and February and would like to take part.

As part of the online WeBS Reporting interface, dot density maps for most sites and years have

now been uploaded and more will follow shortly. This allows the user to compare the low tide distributions of birds using a site between years or different species using the site in the same winter. The density statistics for all species are also given.

For the full maps and data for Low Tide Counts over the years, see [www.bto.org/webs-reporting-lowtide](http://www.bto.org/webs-reporting-lowtide)



◀ The reporting interface allows comparison of distributions of different species, in this example, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits at Chichester Harbour

# Recording sex ratios of Pochard

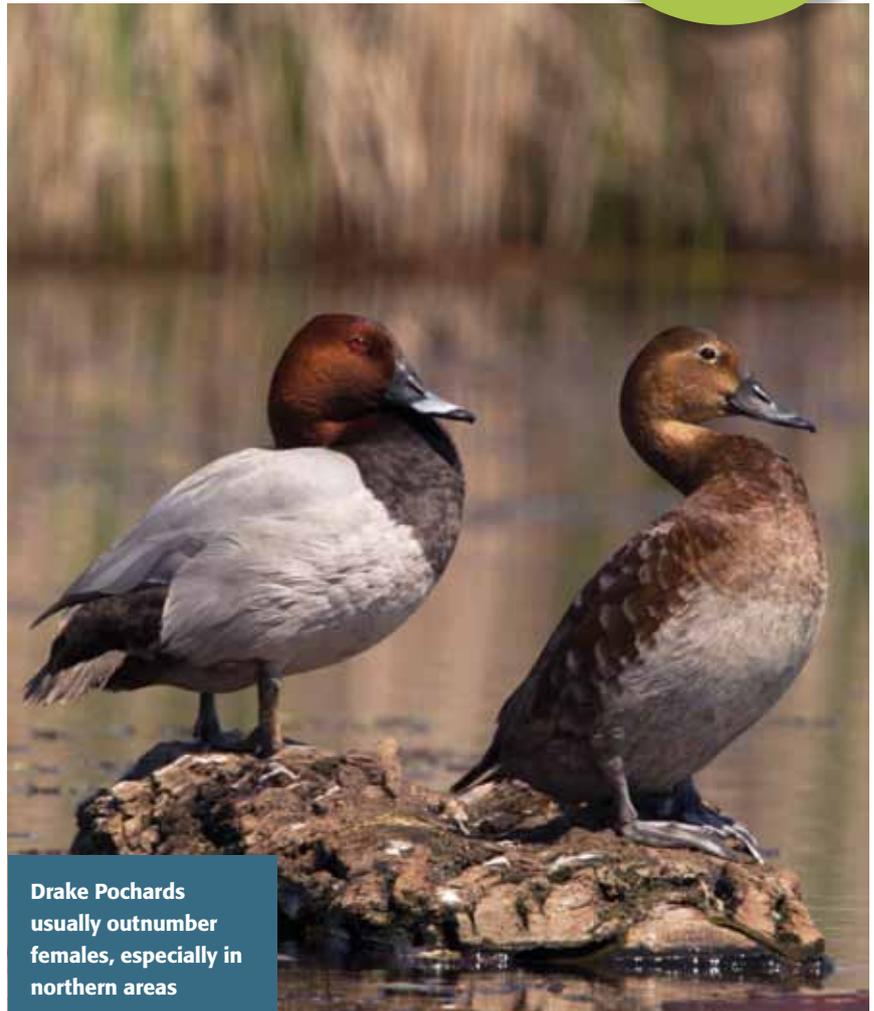
The Duck Study Group are assessing the sex ratio of Pochards during the January 2016 WeBS count, and your counts could help shed light on reasons behind the decline of this species.

**Richard Hearn** Head of Species Monitoring, WWT

**WeBS STAT...**  
**60%**  
 The decline in Pochard numbers between 1987/88 and 2012/13

It is well known that many wintering duck flocks exhibit considerable differences in sex ratio. Studies carried out during the 1960s – 80s showed that winter flocks of many duck species typically comprise a greater proportion of males the further north the flock is found. This arises because females typically fly greater distances down the flyway in order to winter in more southerly areas (a behaviour called alloheimy or differential migration), and because there are genuinely more males than females in most populations. In Europe, this pattern has been found in Wigeon, Pintail, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Goldeneye, and in North America, it has been identified in Canvasback, Ringed-necked Duck, Redhead and Common Merganser (a.k.a Goosander).

Differential migration and the greater proportion of males in the overall population are both the result of intersexual competition. Males are dominant over females and are thus able to occupy more favourable wintering areas closer to the breeding grounds, forcing the sub-dominant females to move further. Males also migrate away from breeding areas before females, giving them a further head start. Partly as a result of this more strenuous migration, and one other important factor, namely the increased predation levels experienced by females during the incubation period, the sex ratio in the population is often biased towards males even though sex ratios are near unity at hatching. Put simply, male ducks have an easier life and live longer!



**Drake Pochards usually outnumber females, especially in northern areas**

EDMUND FELLOWES

In a survey of several duck species in the United Kingdom, Owen & Dix (1986) found that sex ratios in the Pochard were highly correlated with latitude. Males predominated in the north, with over 800 males/100 females at 59° and only 150

**'the routine collection of sex ratio data has fallen by the wayside in the recent past'**

males/100 females at 50°. Carbone & Owen (1995) repeated this assessment in 1988/89 and 1989/90 across Europe in order to determine whether these patterns in sex ratios occurred throughout the rest of the Pochard's winter range and to use these results to estimate the population sex ratio. Their results suggested that the male bias was between 140 and 230 males per 100 females.

Waterbird counters, such as those

participating in WeBS, have in the past collected information on the sex ratios of wintering ducks. However, the routine collection of sex ratio data has fallen by the wayside in the recent past, even though such data can provide useful information on population structure and even a crude assessment of relative changes in survival rates between the sexes. As many European duck populations are undergoing rapid changes in distribution and/or numbers, and little is known about their population demographics, it would be advantageous to re-establish the collection of sex ratio data, which can be easily recorded for most species during standard waterbird counts.

One species of particular interest is Common Pochard – this species has undergone a widespread decline in the past 20 years and is of increasing conservation concern. Further information about this can be found on BirdLife International's Globally Threatened Bird Forum. For a population that is declining at least one of two demographic processes must be happening – either survival or productivity must be decreasing (*i.e.* more birds are dying or fewer young are being produced). In order to improve our knowledge of the population structure of Common Pochard we would like to undertake an assessment of the sex ratio of the European population in January 2016.

We are therefore seeking your participation in the collection of sex ratio data. If you undertake waterbird counts at a site holding Common Pochard, please try to count the number of males and females in the flock during your count in January 2016, or if preferable please make a separate visit during January to assess the sex ratio. You do not have to sex every single bird, but do please try to obtain as large a sample as possible. Simply record the total flock size, the number of birds assessed (the total of the number of males and females counted, which may be less than total flock size), the number of males and the number of females. Further details, including how to submit your data, will be available online

**'For a population that is declining at least one of two demographic processes must be happening – either survival or productivity must be decreasing.'**

in due course at [www.ducksg.org/activities/compoch/](http://www.ducksg.org/activities/compoch/)

It is important that a good selection of habitats is surveyed as males also tend to predominate at the best quality habitats (and these are often where important concentrations of birds are found, and thus where counts are usually focused). If you know of sites holding Common Pochard that are not routinely counted for WeBS it would be great if you could try to visit them during January to collect sex ratio data.

If you want to record the sex ratio of other duck species we would welcome your data!!

If you have any queries, please contact [monitoring@wwt.org.uk](mailto:monitoring@wwt.org.uk)

#### References

**Carbone, C. & M. Owen.** 1995. Differential migration of the sexes of Pochard *Aythya ferina*: results from a European survey. *Wildfowl* **46**: 99–108. (<http://wildfowl.wwt.org.uk/index.php/wildfowl/article/view/973>)

**Owen, M. & Dix, M.** 1986. Sex ratios in some common British wintering ducks. *Wildfowl* **37**:104–112. (<http://wildfowl.wwt.org.uk/index.php/wildfowl/article/view/731>)

#### Further information:

BirdLife International's Globally Threatened Bird Forum discussion on Common Pochard is at <http://www.birdlife.org/globally-threatened-bird-forums/2015/07/common-pochard-aythya-ferina-uplist-from-least-concern-to-near-threatened-or-vulnerable/>

**Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2015–2016 season...**

**2015...**

13 September

18 October

15 November

13 December

**2016...**

17 January

21 February

13 March

10 April

8 May

5 June

24 July

21 August

18 September

16 October

13 November

18 December

Keep up-to-date with counts and dates at [www.bto.org/webs/coredates](http://www.bto.org/webs/coredates)

# RSPB Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project

An ambitious project by the RSPB on the Essex Coast will provide important wintering and breeding habitat for tens of thousands of waterbirds.

**Chris Tyas** Wallasea Island Project Manager

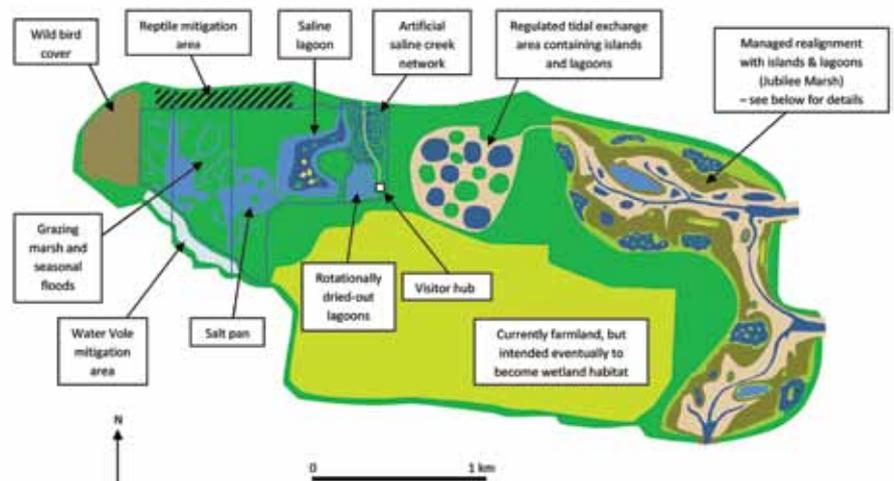
**Malcolm Ausden** RSPB Principle Ecologist



The Wallasea Island Wild Coast project aims to create a special landscape for people and wildlife in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and help wildlife adapt to the challenges of climate change. Within this overarching aim, the Project aims to:

- Create new intertidal habitats to compensate for expected future losses in the Crouch and Roach Estuary, and to offset historic losses of coastal habitats and species in the UK.
- Reduce the risk of future damage to the Crouch and Roach Estuaries, and Wallasea Island, from any future unmanaged breach of the existing sea wall at Wallasea Island.
- Create an extensive area of accessible coastal land for the quiet enjoyment of nature and open space, reconnecting people with their coastal heritage.
- Demonstrate a large-scale practical example adaptation to climate change and sea level rise on the coast.

An existing Defra managed realignment scheme at Allfleet's Marsh on Wallasea Island was created as compensation for two wintering bird sites lost to development, Lappel Bank on the Medway and Fagbury Flats near Felixstowe. Allfleet's Marsh was designed to mirror the proportions of habitat that were lost, with the area providing a mosaic of mudflat and



▲ Current and intended habitats at Wallasea Island Wild Coast.

lagoons with islands. The landward edge of the site was raised to create salt marsh, using silt from dredgings.

Allfleet's Marsh has since achieved its compensatory bird targets, with a winter peak exceeding 14,000 waterbirds. Maximum counts have included 891 Shelduck, 925 Teal, 2951 Golden Plover and 780 Redshank. The RSPB now manages Allfleets Marsh for Natural England on Defra's behalf, and this existing managed realignment scheme is an integral part of the Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project.

Meanwhile, the RSPB had been talking to the major landowner on the rest of Wallasea Island since 2000, leading eventually to the RSPB signing a 2-year purchase option in 2007 to acquire over 744ha of the island. The two-year period was to allow a larger-scale habitat re-creation scheme to be devised, consents to be obtained and funding secured on what is a multi-

million pound project – the largest so far undertaken by the RSPB in the UK. The RSPB exercised the option to buy the land in September 2009.

Wallasea Island is very low-lying, and if the existing sea walls failed, or were intentionally breached, then tidal flooding of the island would cause an increase in the tidal prism (the difference in volume of water between high and low tide) of the rest of the adjoining estuary of 11 million m<sup>3</sup>. Hydrodynamic studies showed that this would cause large-scale changes to the estuary downstream of Wallasea, and thereby interfere with navigation, oyster fisheries, and potentially affect both the estuary's flood defences and conservation interest. These studies suggested that to avoid these damaging impacts, any increase in the tidal prism of the rest of the estuary caused by allowing the sea back into Wallasea, needed to be restricted to around two million cubic metres.

To achieve this, our design involved importing 7.5 million m<sup>3</sup> of clean soils by sea to raise land levels on the Island, and thereby reduce the volume of water flowing onto, and off, the island on each tide. The first phase of fill material has come from Crossrail, using material from their excavation of new railway tunnels and railway stations beneath London. This material was transported to Wallasea Island by sea. This partnership with Crossrail was a perfect Win:Win, representing a marriage between Europe's largest civil engineering project and one of Europe's largest inter-tidal habitat creation projects.

The construction of Crossrail's purpose built unloading facility began in August 2011 and the first fill came ashore in August 2012. The material from Crossrail has been used to complete Jubilee Marsh, the first of three inter-tidal cells. Crossrail completed the delivery of material to site in March 2015, with a total of 3.02 million tonnes of clean earth. A maximum of five ships were used, delivering up to 45,000 tonnes per week. A further million tonnes of earth was gained through the creation of saline lagoons, creeks and grazing marsh habitat in the west of the project area.

The 4 million tonnes (c.2.2 million cubic metres) of fill were placed in Jubilee Marsh, carefully engineered to produce the ground heights required for the full range on inter-tidal habitats – mudflat, saltmarsh, saline lagoons and islands, grading through to non-tidal grassland. The transition from saltmarsh to terrestrial habitats happens on very shallow side slopes, with climate change proofing in mind *i.e.* allowing space for the saltmarsh to migrate upwards as sea levels rise. Material placement, completed in April 2015, was carried out using a 3-D ground model. An analysis comparing actual placement against the model showed a variance of just 0.1% *i.e.* 2,000m<sup>3</sup> variance on the 2 million cubic metres placed. We have further enhanced the area with the placement of 300m<sup>3</sup> of a mix of coarse sand, shingle and cockleshells on two islands over an area of 2,000m<sup>2</sup>. We also have a specifically engineered Spoonbill nesting area - a lagoon with

**'My estimate for Jubilee Marsh by year three would be 19,000 birds, made up with the principal component being the waders and wildfowl you would currently expect to see using the Essex Coast.'**

a kidney shaped island high enough to support willow/tamarisk for spoonbills to nest in.

The seawalls were breached on 11 July 2015, allowing water on to the island in a controlled way for the first time on 450 years. It was incredible to see the water flowing slowly, at around 1m/second, in to the channel behind breach one. With Jubilee Marsh completed we have 65% of the habitats on site created, leaving two further intertidal cells to be created. We are working hard to find this extra material.

Along with Crossrail and Defra the other key project partner is the Environment Agency (EA). They have provided significant funding, helping to ensure the project could proceed. These EA monies secured 155ha of saltmarsh and mudflat in Jubilee Marsh as replacement intertidal habitat to help offset losses from designated sites on the Essex coast due to coastal squeeze.

The Wild Coast Project has had a long lead in time and a wide range of consultation has taken place. Some local concerns were raised, particularly about potential impacts on the adjacent Crouch and Roach Estuaries. The extensive modelling carried out predicted that there would be no significant impacts on these areas. A comprehensive long-term monitoring programme is being carried out, designed to assess whether the new inter-tidal habitats are behaving as predicted. In the unlikely event that significant impacts be detected that are caused by the scheme then remedial works will be carried out.

This monitoring will (obviously!) include the bird populations using the site, though this will be challenging given the scale of the site. If we use Allfleets Marsh as an example, and extrapolate winter birds per hectare,

we arrive at a total of the completed site of 70,000 birds (as a sum of the winter species peaks). I quote a more conservative 50,000, some of which will be new and some redistributing from elsewhere. When you consider that the WeBS total for birds using Essex is around 350,000, it will be some achievement. My estimate for Jubilee Marsh by year three would be 19,000 birds, made up with the principal component being the waders and wildfowl you would currently expect to see using the Essex Coast.

We are speculating on a few more unusual breeding species. These include Spoonbill (as mentioned above) but also Black-winged Stilt and, if populations improve on the near Continent, Kentish Plover. However, we can certainly expect good numbers of typical coastal breeders, with management plan targets of 200 pairs Avocet and 30 pairs Common Tern. In the euphoria of breach day I rather rashly predicted 30 pairs of Little Tern nesting within Jubilee Marsh in 2016. It will be interesting to see how habitats develop and how birds and other wildlife colonise.

The Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project is producing a landscape that can be used by people as well as wildlife. Wherever possible in the design of the new landscape we have provided for public access that will allow visitors and wildlife to happily coexist. A modest start to the visitor facility improvements was made in 2015, with additional grass surfaced trails, a bike rack/shelter combo in the car park and two wind shelters at the extremities of the augmented path network. Further facilities will be added once we have more information on how birds are using the site. We are also planning to have improved access to the site by boat from Burnham-on-Crouch, with the latter promoted as a gateway to the Project.

The Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project is both large and complex. The importation of sufficient material and the creations of habitats will be challenging and will take some time to achieve. Please do come along and have a look!

# International Swan Census

As mentioned in the last WeBS News, an International Goose Survey was carried out in January 2015. Colette Hall from WWT explains how important these figures will be in assessing population changes...

**Colette Hall** WWT

A massive thank you goes to everyone who took part in the January 2015 International Swan Census (ISC). Without the tremendous help and support of the census organisers and the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP), WeBS, I-WeBS and other volunteer networks, the census in Britain, Ireland and Iceland would not have been possible.

The ISC is organised every five years by the Wetlands International/ IUCN SSC Swan Specialist Group and covers the three populations of migratory swans that occur in northwest Europe: the Northwest Mainland Europe Whooper, the Icelandic Whooper and the Northwest European Bewick's. The census in January 2015 was the fourth coordinated census, with censuses for Whooper and Bewick's Swans having been undertaken separately prior to 1995.

WWT works in partnership with BirdWatch Ireland, the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group and our colleague Óli Einarsson in Iceland to coordinate the census of the Icelandic Whooper population. Together, we also ensure coordinated counts of Bewick's Swans are undertaken in Britain and Ireland, although very few Bewick's now occur in the latter.

Since the first comprehensive census of the Icelandic Whooper Swan population in 1986, the estimated population size has increased from 16,742 to a peak of 29,232 in January 2010. There are also indications of a possible southwards shift in the swans' wintering distribution, with an increasing proportion of the population wintering in England:

**Unlike their smaller cousins, Whooper Swan numbers have increased by 48% in the past 25 years**



ROD CALBRADE

results indicate a 20% increase between 1986 and 2010, with only England showing a consistently higher rate of increase in numbers compared to the overall population increase.

In comparison, the Bewick's Swan population has been rapidly declining. Initially, the early censuses highlighted a growing population, with total estimates increasing from c. 16,300 in 1984 to a peak of c. 29,800 in 1995. However, since then, numbers have fallen, with only 18,055 recorded in January 2010. Despite the overall population decline, numbers in Britain have remained relatively stable; however, there has been a significant drop in the number wintering in Ireland, with only 80 birds recorded there in 2010 compared to a peak count of 2,004 recorded during the

1990 census.

At the time of writing, data from the 2015 census are still being collated and analysed, so it is with some anticipation that we wait to see how the populations have fared since the previous census in 2010 - particularly for the Bewick's Swan population, with the species now classed as Endangered in the European Red List of Birds.

Whilst the Swan Specialist Group will analyse results for the Bewick's Swan population, WWT will report on the outcomes of the Icelandic Whooper Swan census, along with results from counts of Bewick's Swans in Britain and Ireland. These latter results will be presented on WWT's Waterbird Monitoring website at <http://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/>

# Changing species order in WeBS Online

Switching the species list from taxonomic to alphabetical order can make inputting counts even easier...



**Heidi Mellan** WeBS Counter Network Organiser

When inputting counts into WeBS Online, not everybody knows the taxonomic order of species they have seen, and this can also be subject to change as more research into species taxonomy goes on.

In order to make inputting easier, it

is possible to change the order species appear from the taxonomic order seen in field guides to alphabetical order should you wish to.

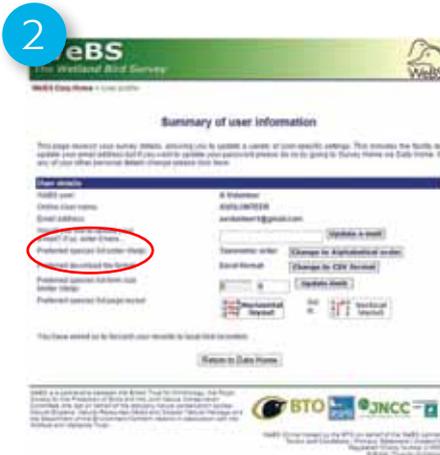
In the settings, you can also change the species list layout from horizontal to vertical, the preferred format for

downloading your data and limiting your preferred species list size, all of which can make inputting counts more straightforward.

## Your step-by-step guide:



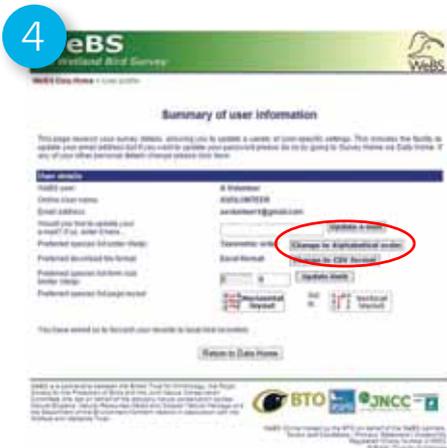
▲ On your data home page, click on "My Details and Settings"



▲ From the list of options you can change the "Preferred species list order".



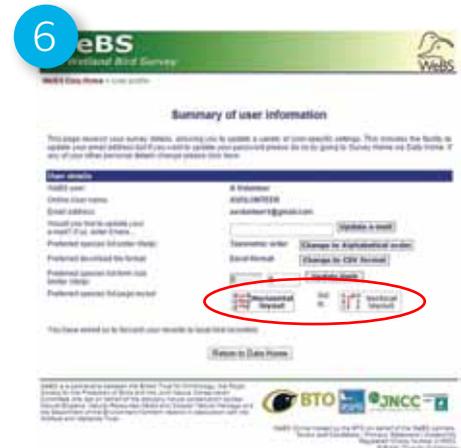
▲ By default the list is set to taxonomic order.



▲ By clicking on the "Change to Alphabetical Order"



▲ You will now see the list in alphabetical order.



▲ You can also change the layout so species list runs horizontally or vertically.

# WeBS Data used to thwart speed limit change

As well as being used for assessing national changes in waterbird numbers, WeBS data from a single site can be used for assessing environmental impacts

**Chris Klee and Gordon Waterhouse** WeBS Counters

A team of WeBS counters on the Kingsbridge Estuary in South Devon has been operating since 1973. We thus have really good data that characterises the use of the estuary by waders and ducks not only through the year but also broken down into 18 sections, a reflection of the difficulty in viewing birds on a six mile waterway with many creeks. So when a pressure group made a determined effort to persuade the Harbour Authority (part of South Hams District Council) to abandon the 8 knott speed limit and allow speed boats to tow waterskiers and wakeboarders on the central part of the estuary we could carry out an impact assessment from a firm evidence base.

Because the estuary largely dries out at low tide the skiing was to take place for between two to three hours either side of high water. Clearly, we feared this would cause a significant increase in disturbance to birds while feeding on the large expanse of mudflats during half-tide periods and to birds on known high tide roosts. Our data clearly showed how the birds were distributed both spatially



JOHN HARDING

▲ Relaxing speed limits would have had a detrimental effect on roosting waterbirds

and temporally and we had also recorded high tide roost locations. Many birds would have been within a few hundred metres of the speed boat activity for long periods of time.

A search of available literature, notably a Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT) publication titled “Waterbirds & Wetland Recreation Handbook” and the references this contained, gave good data on disturbance distances for the sort of species present on our estuary in the presence of waterskiing and other fast boat recreation. An English Nature study at Grafham Water in

Cambridgeshire by Arnold Cooke gave particularly relevant figures. For example Wigeon were put to flight at 200m from waterski boats and Goldeneye at 700m. A summary of many studies in the WWT Handbook led the authors to recommend that refuge areas should be established with diameters of 0.6km for Wigeon, 2.1km for Goldeneye and 1.5km for Brent Geese. There was no room for refuges of these sizes in the central part of our estuary. So the impact of waterskiing would have been severe disturbance.

We made this evidence available to the Harbour Board and to Natural England, since the estuary is an SSSI. We also attended the decisive Board Meeting at which we were allowed to address the members and make clear the reasons behind our objections. We were not the only ones making the case against, but when the Board unanimously decided to reject the proposal the chairman emphasised that our long-standing record of bird counts had been an important factor in reaching their decision.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

### Facebook, Twitter and Blogs

Since 2011, WeBS has had its own page on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/WetlandBirdSurvey](http://www.facebook.com/WetlandBirdSurvey)) which at the time of writing has nearly 1,150 people liking the page.

Much more recently, we created a dedicated Twitter feed (@WeBS\_UK) which has already received nearly 1,400 followers. If you use either of these social media websites, look us up and let us know what you see on your WeBS Counts.

If you know of any key sites in your area that are in need of a counter or any other WeBS stories or news items that would be of interest to counters, please get in touch so we can spread the word to all our followers.

Another way WeBS Counters like to share their stories is through blogs. We have set up a list of blogs which we will be adding to the WeBS website shortly that may be of interest to other counters. If you like to blog about your WeBS counts

and want to have your blog added to our list, please email [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)

Jonny Lawson: <https://whatwasthatbird.wordpress.com>

Leo de Feu: [www.landscapeartnaturebirds.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.landscapeartnaturebirds.blogspot.co.uk)

Gareth Harris: <http://cotswoldwaterpark.wordpress.com/>

David Steel: <https://isleofmaynnr.wordpress.com>

David Cookson: <http://cheshireswanstudygroup.wordpress.com>

John Armitage: [www.birdingodyssey.blogspot.com/](http://www.birdingodyssey.blogspot.com/)

Amy Robjohns: [www.birdingaroundhampshire.wordpress.com](http://www.birdingaroundhampshire.wordpress.com)

John Matkin: <http://thecoot.blogspot.co.uk>

Please note, WeBS cannot be held responsible for the content of any of these blogs!

## COUNTER NETWORK

# Local Organiser News

**Heidi Mellan** WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Steve Turner (Staffordshire); Eric Meek (Orkney); Ken Lodge (East Kent); Richard Bown (Sussex) and Daniel Turner (Northumberland Coast) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter was published.

We would also like to thank the following new Local Organisers: Norman Mchance for taking on the whole of Kent; Scott Petrek for taking over as LO for Staffordshire; Moray Souter who is the new Aberdeenshire Local Organiser; Morag Wilson for taking over as LO for Orkney; Helen Crabtree and Dave Boddington who are taking over as co-Local Organiser for Sussex; Gavin Foster for taking on Essex (other sites); and Kathy Evans who is the new Local Organiser for Northumberland Coast.

Welcome to you all!

Our special thanks go out to David Bates who handed over his Firth of Forth sectors to new volunteers in May after counting there for well over 20 years, and to Sue Swindell who has recently retired, she has helped with the WeBS counts at Ellesmere Lakes since 1989. They were nominated by their Local Organisers to receive a special mention as a thank you for their support over the years!

## Desperately seeking Organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Angus; Buckinghamshire (South); Clwyd (coastal); Durham; Halifax/Huddersfield area; Northamptonshire; Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin); West Inverness/Wester Ross; Co. Down; Co. Fermanagh; Co. Londonderry and Co. Tyrone. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org).

## WeBS LOAC

### LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff providing ideas, feedback and advice.

This year was the 10th meeting of the LOAC and with it came several Committee Member changes. We said a sad farewell to Nick Mason, Gladys Grant and Dave Shackleton, they will remain as WeBS Local Organisers but have stepped down from the LOAC – a huge thank you to them all for their contributions to the Committee! We'd like to welcome Chris Gunn, who is the new Eastern England representative; Brian O'Leary who has taken over as the Southwest England representative and Colin Wells, who is the new Northern England representative. We'd also like to welcome Kerry Mackie who has become a joint-representative for Northern Ireland with Shane Wolsey.

One issue raised during the meeting was the various problems associated with WeBS counts on lakes owned by fisheries or angling syndicates. Whether or not a

WeBS volunteer will be able to gain permission to count at a fishing lake is very hit-or-miss. More often than not access will be denied and in some cases syndicate members have been told that their membership will be revoked if they continue with their WeBS counts.

We will be looking at ways to engage the angling community so they are more aware of WeBS and how our data can help them with their site management plans.

The next meeting of the WeBS LOAC is scheduled to be held at the Nunnery in July 2016 (date TBC). The minutes from the meetings are available via the website at [www.bto.org/webs-loac](http://www.bto.org/webs-loac)

As always we are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving on the LOAC in the future. If you would like to know more about what is involved please contact Heidi ([webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)).

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS which you would like to be brought to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your Local Organiser or LOAC representative listed here.

## WeBS LOAC Representatives

### Southwest England

**Brian O'Leary**

*wayfarer1@cloud.com*

### Eastern England

**Chris Gunn**

*donandchris@hotmail.co.uk*

### Midlands

**Brian Moore**

*b\_moore@ntlworld.com*

### Northern England

**Colin Wells**

*colin.wells@rspb.org.uk*

### Wales

**Andrew King**

*andrew.king53@virgin.net*

### South and East Scotland

**Neil Bielby**

*n.bielby@sky.com*

### North and West Scotland

**John Armitage**

*c/o webs@bto.org*

### Northern Ireland

**Kerry Mackie**

*kerrymackie9@gmail.com*

or

**Shane Wolsey**

*shane.wolsey@btinternet.com*

## BACKCHAT

### Word of mouth...

## Farewell...and welcome!



...to **Chas Holt** who has left the WeBS team and BTO for new challenges elsewhere. We wish him well. We are delighted to announce **Teresa Frost** will be joining the team in Chas' place in November, we are sure she will fit in very well.

## Site photographs request

Every WeBS site has its own page on the new online WeBS Reporting Interface and we are in need of a photograph for every site. If you have a photograph of your WeBS site that you would be happy for us to use, please send labelled images to [webs@bto.org](mailto:webs@bto.org)

## Vacant Priority Sites

Some sites are listed as priority sites owing to their importance for the total number of waterbirds which winter there, or they support internationally important numbers of one or more species. There are several such sites or sections of larger sites around the country that do not currently have a counter. A list can be found at [www.bto.org/webs-vacant-priority-sites-home](http://www.bto.org/webs-vacant-priority-sites-home). If you would be willing to take on one of these sites, please contact the relevant Local Organiser or the WeBS Office.

### Snap shot



### Wonderful Wash

Long-standing WeBS counter Nicholas Watts sent us this wonderfully evocative photograph looking across the River Welland of Brent Geese and Waders on The Wash.

## Wild Goose chase

The oldest Barnacle Goose ever recorded, seen at Caerlaverock WWT reserve last winter is at least 30 years old. In that time, migrating to and from its Arctic breeding grounds it will have flown over 120,000 miles, which equates to five times the circumference of the earth!

### The WeBS team & contacts

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help.

#### Graham Austin

*WeBS Alerts, WeBS database management, Statistical analyses*  
[graham.austin@bto.org](mailto:graham.austin@bto.org)

#### Matthew Baxter

*Web software Developer*  
[matthew.baxter@bto.org](mailto:matthew.baxter@bto.org)

#### Neil Calbrade

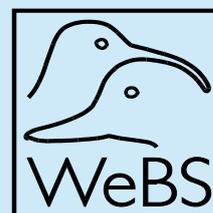
*WeBS Low Tide Counts, WeBS Data Requests, WeBS News Editor*  
[neil.calbrade@bto.org](mailto:neil.calbrade@bto.org)

#### Teresa Frost

*Management of WeBS, WeBS Core Counts, Annual Report*  
[teresa.frost@bto.org](mailto:teresa.frost@bto.org)

#### Heidi Mellan

*WeBS Counter Network Organiser Counter and Local Organiser database management, WeBS Online*  
[heidi.mellan@bto.org](mailto:heidi.mellan@bto.org)



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