

WeBS



**JOINT
NATURE
CONSERVATION
COMMITTEE**

Newsletter

No. 4 Summer 1995

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

At the time of writing we have now received the vast majority of your count forms for last winter. Thank you for keeping to the deadlines for sending in your results, enabling us to make an early start on the data analysis. Nearly all the forms we have received have been completed perfectly. There are still, however, a few difficult areas and these are covered on page 4. Only a few weeks ago we were still grappling with the first year's WeBS data for 1993-94. Computerising the data for every count sector, inputting gull and tern counts for the first time and just dealing with the sheer volume of data has taken a lot of our time over the past six months. The data are now completely sorted and archived. Everyone can be rightly proud of these data, which will provide even more detailed information to conservationists, researchers and others than has been available in the past. We have learnt many lessons from our first year which should speed up this process for 1994-95. Our heavy commitment to sorting the first year's data has resulted in a major delay in the production of *Wildfowl and Wader Counts 1993-94*. Apologies for this long delay.

Count data on birds are meaningless without accurate records of where the counts were made. We are therefore embarking on an Atlas project (see p.8).

Many thanks also to all who returned questionnaires giving your views on conferences. This information has helped plan our next Counters' Conference which will take place in Scotland (see below).

1996 WeBS Counters' Conference in Scotland

Our first Scottish counters' conference will be held in Perth on 23 March 1996. Some Scottish counters may feel rather isolated from Thetford and Slimbridge so this will be an opportunity for many of you to meet the National Organisers, as well as other professional staff and, of course, your fellow counters. We are certainly looking forward to meeting new faces and old friends. Although we have several ideas the talks have yet to be finalised but there will be an emphasis on comparing the local scene with the UK picture. Workshops will give ample opportunity for discussions on the new WeBS form, the service we provide and any ideas or complaints you might have. Any suggestions for possible topics should be forwarded to Ray as soon as possible.

Details:- **WeBS Counters' Conference**
Kilgraston Centre,
Perth, Scotland
Saturday 23 March 1996

The venue is only 3 miles from Perth, with "superb views of the Ochil Hills" (not just the words in the brochure but confirmed by an independent eye witness). The cost is likely to be around £10 to include lunch and tea/coffee. There will be an opportunity for overnight accommodation if required but there will, unfortunately, be an additional charge for this. Nearer the time we will be sending Local Organisers in Scotland further details. Enquiries and applications should be addressed to Ray Waters at BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU; Tel: 01842 750050.

Severe weather conditions Deirdre Craddock (JNCC)

Stress on wintering wildfowl and waders can be significant during periods of severe weather. Recent cold snaps have been relatively short, but are known to have resulted in high mortality of, for example, Redshank on the Wash in February 1991. The particularly early cold weather in November 1993 saw the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) calling on Scottish wildfowling to show voluntary restraint in wildfowling activity. This emphasises the need for continual monitoring of conditions and, if hunting restraint is required, a rapid response to severe weather.

One of our greatest concerns during cold weather is unnecessary disturbance to birds since this results in the wasteful use of critical body reserves. WeBS counters can provide valuable help and information during cold weather periods, both by raising public awareness of the need to minimise disturbance to birds and by reporting incidents of unusually high numbers of dead birds. In particular, supplementary counts during cold weather

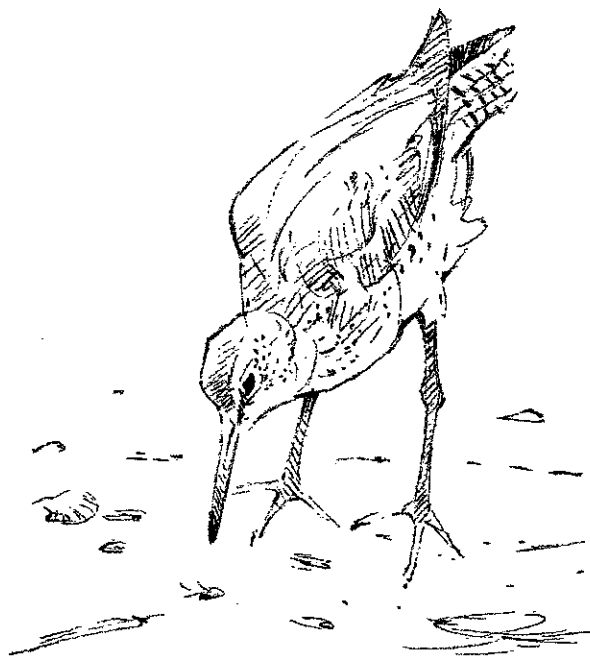
which may show the movement of birds between different areas are of great assistance. These help identify sites which act as refuges for birds displaced from elsewhere. Feedback on conditions helps JNCC, the country agencies and BASC assess weather and its effect on waterfowl populations. This information can be critical.

Anyone wishing to help should simply undertake an additional count during a period of particularly cold weather in their local area. Use the next free column on the WeBS form, recording the date, time and all other details as for priority count dates. Under "Additional Information" (section 9) please let us know that the count on that date was a "cold count" and record any weather details. If possible please continue beyond the first signs of a thaw as this is often short-lived. Remember that these counts are optional and totally separate from those on the priority dates. Other information, such as large numbers of dead birds, should be passed to Ray or Peter who will forward the information to JNCC.

Low Tide Counts 1994 - 95

Once again, the counts were a great success. The majority of the 1994-95 data were sent in promptly and have been input ready for analysis. Those who have sent in their counts should each receive a copy of the species distribution maps for their estuary by the end of July. The inclusion of the Low Tide Counts in the WeBS annual report makes it even more important that all data are submitted as promptly as possible after the counts have finished. Not only will this speed up the production of the annual report but it will mean that we are able to supply individual feedback to the counters involved that much sooner.

We hope to cover the following estuaries over the next two winters: Beaulieu, Cleddau, Crouch/Roach, Dundrum Bay, Exe, Fal complex, Inner Clyde, Irvine, Medway, Mersey, Pagham Harbour, Rye Harbour/Pett Levels, Severn, Stour, Tees. In addition counts will be continuing on Belfast Lough and Strangford Lough. If you are able to help or keen to find out more, please contact either your Local Organiser or Julianne Evans, who is National Organiser at the BTO and is in regular contact with all Local Organisers.



By John Busby

Non-estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey

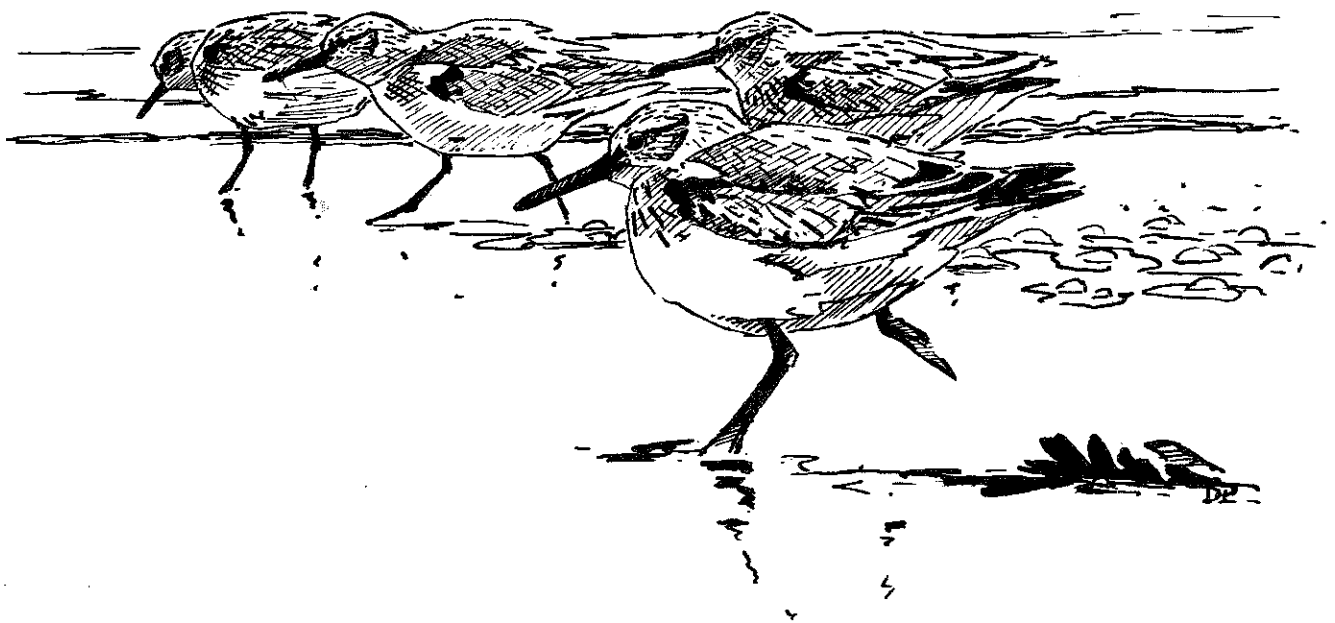
The conservation of the UK's wintering waterfowl populations depends on protection through notification of sites under various legislation. It is therefore essential that accurate estimates of overwintering waterfowl populations are calculated if the relative importance of different sites is to be assessed satisfactorily. WeBS covers regularly the great majority of waterfowl which overwinter on the UK's estuaries and inland wetlands but only a small proportion of those wintering on our open coasts.

To date, the only nationwide survey of the UK's open coast to have taken place is the Winter Shorebird Count, organised by the BTO and the Wader Study Group in 1984-85. Ten years later there is a need to update these results. A new Non-estuarine Waterfowl Survey is therefore planned for the near future with coverage of the open coast extended to include adjacent inland and sea areas, as well as the inter-tidal zone, and covering both waders and wildfowl.

As a prelude to the full survey, a pilot count was carried out during the 1994-95 winter, enabling new methods for counting non-estuarine wildfowl and waders to be tested. Counts took place between the 15th December 1994 and the 31st January 1995 and count

sections used were the same as those used in the original Winter Shorebird Count, so that direct comparisons could be made. Volunteers were asked to make a single visit to each count section. For each count section the numbers of waterfowl and gulls were noted in three different zones; those on the inter-tidal zone; those inland but visible from the high water mark and those on the sea. Extra information on habitat type, width of shore, disturbance and weather was also recorded. Counters were also asked to complete a questionnaire on the appropriateness of these count methods and the accuracy of the counts.

Enthusiasm of the 24 counties approached for this pilot survey was widespread, with 22 counties achieving at least some coverage and six of these achieving full coverage. In all, over 70% of the coast sections selected were covered by volunteers. Many thanks are due to everyone who took part in this pilot survey and made it such a success. Your findings and comments will be invaluable in refining the methods for a full-scale survey in the future. Data analysis has been delayed due to John Cayford's recent departure, but the results should be available by the end of July.



By Dan Powell

Completing WeBS recording forms

Mark Pollitt (WWT)

We appreciate that few of you relish the thought of filling in the paperwork at the end of a busy day's counting. However, only you, the counters, can provide the information that tells us not only how many birds were present, but also *why* they were (or were not) there. Sections 6, 7 and 8 on the form are designed so that, with a few pen strokes, you can inform us of how flooding prevented you covering the whole of your site or when a group of windsurfers frightened away every bird in view! This information adds much to the quality of the counts you supply and ensures that we in turn produce top quality reports and research.

In the last year, changes have taken place in the way the forms are processed. They are now sent to a data input company who enter data more quickly than we could ourselves. Unfortunately, this does mean that the information you provide on the forms needs to be as clear as possible as inputting is done by 'input experts' not 'bird experts'. It is important that information written in sections 2 to 8 of the form is in the exact format requested to avoid possible confusion and mistakes.

The following notes summarise the key problem areas that the input company have experienced when interpreting count information. You might think that some of these may seem trivial or that the alternatives would be easily interpreted. However, to ensure data are input accurately and quickly, it is important to keep to the symbols and notation that the data input company will be expecting. Please use those symbols in **bold** below and not those in *italics*:

- Use **NC** (for "not counted"), rather than \checkmark or *present* when a species was present but you were unable to get any sort of count. Such an indication is particularly useful for species such as Water Rail or Little Grebe which may be heard but not seen.
- Use square brackets to indicate significant undercounts, e.g. [**150**], rather than *150+*.
- If it is impossible to count individual birds, for example in large flocks, simply write the number present even if it is an estimated count. Avoid using *c.* or *ca* to indicate approximately, e.g. **2500** rather than *c2500*,

as these are sometimes mistaken for numbers.

- Avoid splitting the count between males and females – we only have to add them up again for the input company! Also, *1 ♀* and *1 ♂* can easily be misread as 10.
- Remember only to provide counts of young birds if they are at least three-quarters of adult size (no fluffy ducklings!) and then to enter these together with the total number of adults as a single figure e.g. **10** rather than *6ad + 4juv*. WeBS is designed to monitor numbers of non-breeding waterfowl. At present, we have no way of storing information on numbers of downy young or sex ratios on our databases.
- Only put six counts on one form – use a separate form for any further counts. Ray will happily send as many additional forms as necessary.
- On the back page, please complete all of Sections 6 and 7, circling the relevant choices. For large sites divided into sectors, please enter this information for each sector separately, even if the same conditions applied across the whole site.
- If you looked for activities and disturbance events (Section 8), but none were present, please tick the box at the top of the section to indicate this. Otherwise, we have to assume that you simply did not attempt to record this information.
- Use the Additional Information box for any further comments, such as ring sightings, possible reasons for particularly low or high counts, knowledge of breeding success or anything of interest, rather than squeezing this extra information into the counts in Section 4. We will, of course, copy any information provided in Section 9 to the relevant individuals and researchers in the WeBS organisations. (With this issue we have inserted a form on which you can forward any sightings of colour-ringed waders direct to the register co-ordinator).

As ever, many thanks for your help and co-operation.

Please continue to count in September

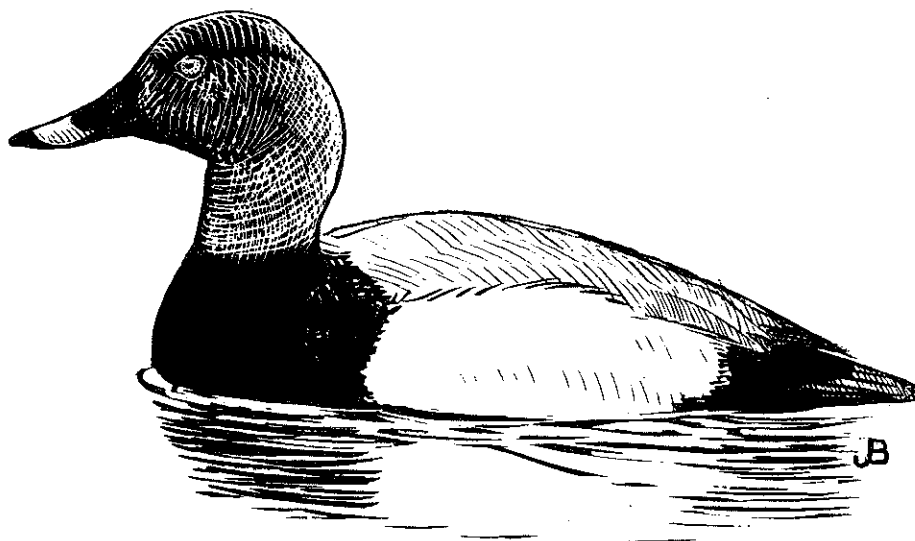
Many of you will have regularly been making counts from September to March in past years. With the WeBS form only containing six columns, it may seem rather wasteful to use a second form for just one count. We are seriously considering modifying the form to hold seven columns. Once we have received our first set of WeBS counts covering a full 12 month period (*i.e.* April 94 – Mar 95) we will re-examine this situation. If you have any thoughts on this matter please let us know. In the meantime, **please continue to count in September** – many species arrive in force for the winter at this time and these counts are vitally important.

Vacancies for Local Organisers

There are currently vacancies for Local Organisers in the following regions:

- Cambridgeshire – Peterborough
- Lancashire – (Inland) East
- Humberside – (Inland) North
- Tayside – (Inland) Angus
- Armagh – (Inland)
- Tyrone – (Inland)

Anyone who feels they may be interested in becoming an LO in any of these regions can get details about what is involved from Peter or Ray.



By Joe Blossom

WeBS mailings

In the past, the BTO and WWT have mailed count forms, newsletters *etc.* in one of two ways: either via the Local Organiser, or direct to counters. We are now adopting one method for the whole WeBS network, with all mailings going through LOs. Each year, all counters should receive at least one count form, one or, in some years, two newsletters and an annual report. If you have no LO, mailings will be sent direct to

you. Any LOs who would prefer that the reports, which are much bulkier than in previous years, be sent direct to counters should contact Ray or Peter straightaway (The very small number of LOs who already have this arrangement need not contact us again). Please let us know if you anticipate or experience problems with our mailings.

Wader Study Group Register of Permanent Colour Marks

Jane Marchant (WSG)

Some of you will have come across waders carrying coloured rings or with dyed plumage, and wondered where they were marked. Please report all such sightings so that the ringers can be informed of your sighting and you can learn the origin of the bird. Birds with temporary colour dyes should be reported to Roger Beecroft. The use of permanent marks is recorded by the Wader Study Group Register of Permanent Colour Marks which co-ordinates schemes throughout the East Atlantic Flyway (EAF), maintaining a central record, acting as a single contact point and minimising interference between projects. Over the years it has become necessary to charge ringers a small fee to cover expenses.

Colour marking is often the only tool we can use to understand some aspects of bird behaviour, movements and survival. Around 150 UK based projects are currently registered with

almost double this number listed for the rest of the EAF. Over ten UK schemes are listed for the following species; Lapwing (21), Ringed Plover (14), Oystercatcher (14), Purple Sandpiper (12) and Redshank (12). The Register receives around 300 sightings each year, although not all of these can be traced. Specially designed forms are available for reporting sightings. Details given should include the position of the rings (which leg, above/below knee) as well as colour, and any uncertainties.

Please continue to send your sightings to: Jane Marchant, WSG, c/o National Centre for Ornithology, (address below) (standard form enclosed) for permanent colour marks, or Roger Beecroft, WSG, c/o National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Nunnery Place, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU for plumage dyes.

Staff changes at the BTO

Major organisational changes at the BTO have resulted in the old Estuaries Unit expanding to form the Wetland and Coastal Ecology Unit. The new unit comprising Julianne Evans and Ray Waters, whom most of you already know, and five further staff is headed by Dr Mark Rehfisch. You may have already had contact with Mark through his involvement in the Sediments and Birds project. In the past four years at the BTO he has also worked on a variety of waterfowl issues involving a substantial amount of fieldwork. Radio-tracking of Teal and Pintail on the Mersey almost became a 'wild goose chase'. Before joining the BTO Mark spent one year at Ichkeul National Park, Tunisia where his work included censusing up to 200,000 waterfowl in one day. Under WeBS he is keen to make contact with both counters and staff from the WeBS partners.



By Andy MacKay

The BOU/JNCC conference on feral and introduced birds

J. Simons (JNCC)

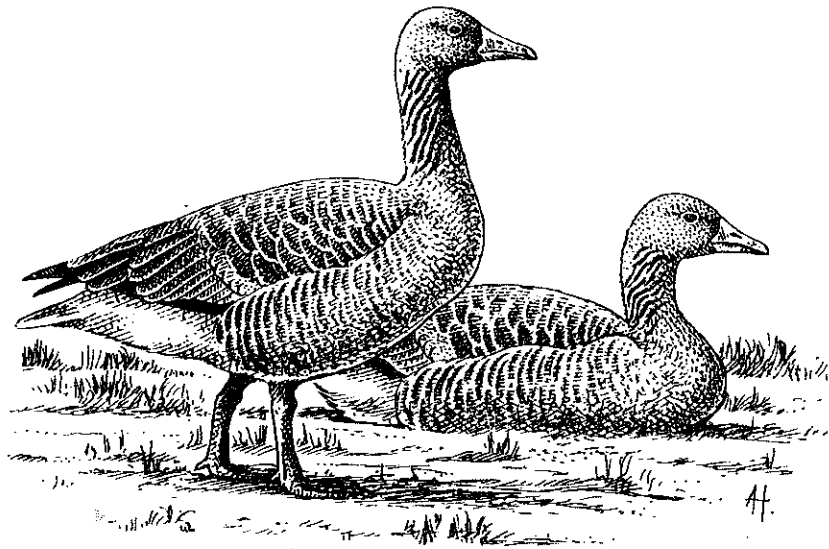
This year's British Ornithologists' Union conference dealt with 'Feral and Introduced Birds' and was held in Peterborough on the weekend of the 7-9 April. The conference was organised in conjunction with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. The Conference covered exotic non-native species, as well as species which have reached this country both naturally and as a result of introduction by man.

The first talk, given by Sir Christopher Lever, presented delegates with a review of introductions on a world-wide scale and highlighted the fact that very few introduced species have proven to be completely benign in their new environment. John Marchant then presented the BOU Records Committee view of introductions and explained the difficulty in assessing feral species populations because of under-recording by birdwatchers.

A diverse range of talks followed covering

hybridisation, wildfowl, gamebirds, legislation and re-introductions. Population models were often found to be an effective research and conservation tool. Case studies of individual species presented included Ruddy Duck, Canada Goose and Goshawk. Not all the news was bad; it would seem that Golden Pheasant is one of the few bird introductions to this country which has not yet caused problems. Simon Delany presented a key talk on the findings of the 1991 Introduced Goose Survey, much of the data having been collected by WeBS counters.

The conference was rounded off with a lively constructive debate that centred mainly on legislation. Some delegates called for the law to be strengthened to more effectively prevent releases in the first instance, and then to allow positive action after a release has occurred to prevent the establishment of the species concerned.



By Alan Harris

Data Protection Act

Under the Data Protection Act (1984) we are required to inform you that counters' names and addresses are kept on a computer database. We need to do this to compile mailing lists for distributing WeBS forms, newsletters and reports and, when a Local Organiser retires, to compile a mailing list of counters for the new LO. The database is not and will not be used for any non-WeBS purposes, nor will it be supplied to any

other organisation or individual. A list of LOs and their addresses is supplied each year to the *Birdwatcher's Yearbook*, which is a collection of key information and facts about birdwatching in Britain, although telephone numbers will not be included. If any LO does not wish their name and address to be included within next year's *Birdwatcher's Yearbook*, please let us know in writing.

An Atlas of WeBS count boundaries – Count Unit Definition Inventory

Peter Cranswick (WWT) & Alan Law (JNCC)

The statutory nature conservation bodies rely largely on WeBS data to identify sites of national and international importance for wetland birds. These data are often combined with information relating to other species and habitats to produce a case for site protection. The UK has international obligations as a member of the European Union to designate important bird sites as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and, as signatories to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the 'Ramsar Convention'), to designate wetland areas as Ramsar sites. Conservation benefits enormously from these designations as this targets the finite resources available and provides protection for these sites. In order to identify and designate these areas we need to know the precise extent of the area where observations were made. This is vital to ensure that the designated areas do not exclude areas important for birds.

In the face of development proposals, we are increasingly called upon to justify the inclusion of even small areas of land within designated sites through demonstrating their importance for birds. To do this we again need to know the precise boundary of each area that has been counted to enable correct comparisons to be made with the designated area. In fact, the overall value of WeBS data hinges on accurate records showing the precise areas where the counts were made.

Over the coming year, we aim to build on the information already provided by some counters to establish an atlas comprising a set of maps showing the precise boundary of each WeBS count unit. A copy of each map will be held by:

- all WeBS Partner Organisations *i.e.* BTO, WWT, RSPB, JNCC (on behalf of the country agencies)
- the relevant Local Organiser
- the relevant Counters

Once established, this atlas will be invaluable to Local Organisers, for example, to show to new counters. WeBS partners will be able to provide maps to accompany the data used in Public Inquiries and, most importantly, will be able to identify and designate important sites.

Whilst we appreciate that it will take some time to set up, maintaining the atlas will be simplicity itself (we promise!). If a count boundary changes (which will only happen in exceptional circumstances), it will be straightforward for the counter to annotate their copy of the existing map and return it with the recording form. Otherwise a new map will only be needed when a completely new site is counted.

Establishing the atlas requires only two pieces of information from each counter:

- the boundary drawn on a map supplied
- the years in which that boundary was used

Once we have received these, the remaining information will be input by our staff. All Local Organisers and Counters will then be sent an official copy of the relevant sections of the atlas. Possessing a map for your count unit will become a routine part of WeBS; it will provide far more useful details than just county or grid reference.

Later this autumn you will receive a Count Unit Definition Inventory form and map for your count unit. We simply need you to draw the boundary. If a boundary is already drawn, but is not entirely accurate or has changed over time, please mark on the current, correct version. Please remember that, even if the map we have sent you is accurate, we do need you to return it this time. In the future, the only time you will need to provide further information is if you change your count boundary or if you count a completely new site.

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, conservation of waterfowl and wetlands throughout the UK and abroad.

WeBS NATIONAL ORGANISERS

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