

WeBS



Newsletter

No. 6 Winter 1996-97

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

The very first nationally co-ordinated counts of waterfowl in the UK were made in January 1948, as part of the then National Wildfowl Counts. The WeBS counts this winter mark 50 years of regular, national monitoring. The long-term dataset collected, with monthly counts made at a large number of sites is, to our knowledge, unrivalled in its extent. The achievements that have arisen as a result of these data are also unrivalled in terms of their influence on conservation of waterfowl, not just in the UK, but in Northwest Europe and beyond. Many wildfowl refuges, SSSIs, Ramsar sites and SPAs in the UK have been designated using these data, the initiative and operation of the International Waterfowl Counts were strongly influenced by the UK scheme and the books *Wildfowl in Great Britain* and *Estuary Birds* drew heavily upon WeBS data. The key to this success is easy to identify: counters. We extend sincere thanks to all those who have contributed over the years, in particular those still counting after 50 years! A history of wildfowl counts will be published in the journal *Wildfowl* as part of a bumper edition to coincide with the 50th anniversary of The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (a copy of the paper can be obtained from Mark Pollitt or Peter Cranswick), whilst we intend to summarise significant events in the history of the scheme in the next WeBS Newsletter.

Amidst some stiff competition the new National Organiser for Low Tide Counts has recently been appointed. Andy Musgrove, a keen young Yorkshire birdwatcher recently took over from Julianne Evans at the BTO. Andy has just finished a PhD studying the highly controversial interaction between Peregrines and racing pigeons. He has already had experience counting waterfowl both at tidal areas, such as Poole Harbour, and at inland wetlands, including west London reservoirs. Andy is already working well with both counters and other staff and is happy to be contacted at any time.

1997 WeBS Counters' Conference

The 1997 conference will be held at WWT Llanelli, Carmarthenshire, on **Saturday 22 March**. Talks will focus largely on local issues, including the Llanelli Coastal Park, the effects of the Sea Empress, up-to-the-minute results from the current research on fish-eating birds, 30 years of

counts on the Burry, and more.

Registration for the conference, including refreshments and lunch, and entrance to the reserve is free to WeBS counters. To obtain a registration form, please contact Mark Pollitt at WWT, Slimbridge (extension 255).

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).

International Whooper Swan Census

Peter Cranswick (WWT)

In January 1995, a co-ordinated census was made of the Icelandic population of Whooper Swans throughout Iceland, Ireland and Britain, organised by WWT, IWC Birdwatch Ireland, the University of Iceland and the Icelandic Institute of Natural History, following previous censuses in 1986 and 1991. This was undertaken as part of a wider census, for the first time, to survey all Bewick's and Whooper Swans wintering in northwest Europe.

In addition to the many WeBS and I-WeBS counts received, special effort was made by some observers to visit known and possible Whooper Swan resorts not otherwise covered, whilst some of the larger sites were counted using planes or large teams of counters. As a result, excellent coverage was achieved. Estimates were included of birds thought to have been missed in the few remaining gaps.

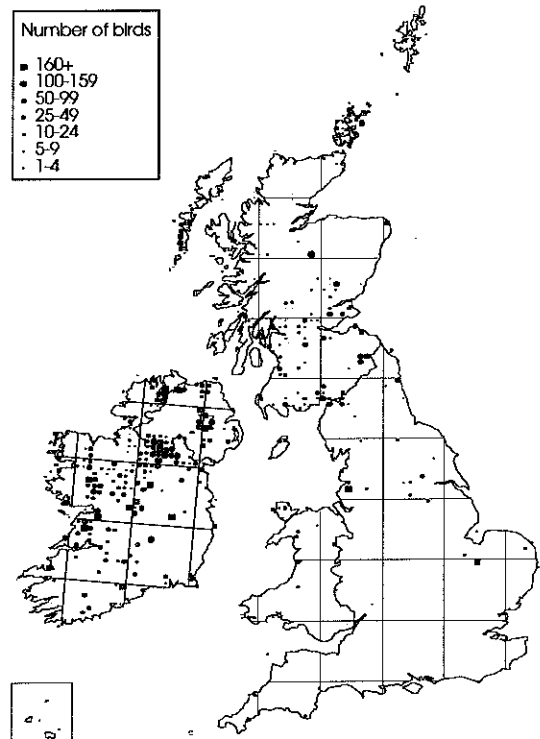
The total of just under 16,000 birds represents a decrease of 12% since the last census in 1991. However, that winter followed a poor breeding year, whereas the proportion of young in the 1995 total was much higher. If only the numbers of adults are compared, the decrease is 20%. Part of this decline is explained by a degree of double-counting in 1991, resulting in an overestimate, although there does appear to have been a genuine fall in numbers also.

Despite the smaller numbers in 1995, the distribution of birds was remarkably similar to that in 1991, with similar proportions of the total found in each country. The majority of birds were found in Ireland, with Counties Antrim, Londonderry, Fermanagh, Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Offaly and Cavan each holding over 500 birds. Over half the districts in Scotland held over 200 birds, whilst

Norfolk and Lancashire accounted for the majority in England. Eight sites each held at least 1% of the population (160 birds): Swilly/Foyle (1,149); Ouse Washes (1,034); Loughs Neagh & Beg (955); Shannon Callows (901); Martin Mere (723); Upper Lough Erne (683); Glen Lough (248); Derry Lea House (180); and Lough Atedaun (165). Of note is that several sites in Scotland, namely Loch Eye, Loch of Harray and Loch Skene, have all fallen dramatically in importance in the last five years, in at least one case due to poorer feeding conditions. Around 400 Icelandic birds wintered on the continent, whilst an unknown but probably smaller number of Scandinavian/Russian Whoopers wintered in Britain. Further ringing studies are needed to determine the precise nature of the overlap in these two populations.

Full results of the census will be published shortly (Cranswick *et al.* in press *Wildfowl* 47). Many thanks are extended to the counters, including those from WeBS, who helped ensure a complete census.

Distribution by 10 km square, January 1995



Numbers of Whooper Swans in
Britain, Ireland and Iceland, January 1995

Country	Flocks	Birds
Iceland	55	971
Northern Ireland	84	2,783
Republic of Ireland	226	7,072
Scotland	162	2,602
Isle of Man	2	36
Wales	8	109
England	46	2,269
Total	583	15,842

Vacant Local Organiser Positions

The following regions are those with no Local Organisers, or where LOs are seeking replacements, and we are particularly keen for help in Northern Ireland:

- Christchurch Harbour
- Lincolnshire North (Inland)
- Spey Estuary
- Co Amargh (Inland)
- Co Down (Inland)
- Co Fermanagh
- Co Londonderry (Inland)
- Co Tyrone (Inland)

WeBS benefits enormously from the work of LOs. If you feel you may be able to help, or know of possible volunteers for the posts, please get in touch.

An Atlas of WeBS Count Boundaries (CUDI)

All counters in Northern Ireland, England and Wales should have now received 'draft' maps for sites counted in the last three years (either blank maps, or with a boundary drawn by us from existing information). Please complete all details as necessary, ensuring in particular, (1) that you are happy with the name, as this is how the area will be referred to in the annual report, and (2) that the boundary is as accurate as possible. This should be drawn to *include all counted areas*, even if counted irregularly. Be sure to include within the boundary areas such as an adjacent piece of grassland which is dry in most months, but floods once a winter when it holds flocks of Lapwing and small numbers of ducks that are added to the count. Please return the form and map to Slimbridge, preferably with count forms via your LO, following the March count at the latest. We will input all details onto our databases and hope to

distribute 'final' maps late next summer. Given the scale of the task, we have decided to split this project into two stages, and have delayed distributing maps for sites in Scotland until this first stage is up and running.

If you have counted a site in the last few years, but have not yet received a map, it may be that we are having problems with gathering all relevant details (or, in the case of some estuaries, your LO may have completed all sector details). However, all 'draft' maps will eventually be distributed as part of an annual update when we approach counters of those sites for which information is lacking. Soon, this will only involve sites counted for the first time in that year. If you do count a new site, we would be grateful for a boundary drawn on a photocopied map or, failing that, a sketch map of the site. Many thanks.

Counter Codes Save Everyone Time

As outlined in the previous newsletter, the BTO and WWT are currently installing new database systems that will enable more detailed and efficient data analysis. As well as information on count data that you collect, we also intend to record the name of the counter who completed the form. Although we currently ask for full name and address on every form we hope soon to issue each counter with their own unique **counter code**, probably a 4 digit number. Not

only will this save you time completing the form but there will also be an added advantage to us at headquarters, since only a 4 digit code will need to be entered onto the computer. Some time in the New Year we should be supplying Local Organisers with a list of counter codes for distribution to their own counters. Full details have yet to be finalised but will be circulated when available.

Severe Weather

Prolonged periods of cold cause major stress for wintering wildfowl and waders, often resulting in increased mortality and may require the introduction of a shooting ban. Counters can provide useful information on local conditions and local mortality during such periods by ringing Dr Nigel Clark (BTO tel 01842 750050) or Dr Nick Davidson (JNCC tel 01733 62626). Counts additional to standard monthly WeBS counts are also very useful but must be clearly recorded as a 'COLD COUNT' on the recording form. Please remember, however, that the birds' welfare comes first and keep any disturbance to a minimum. We are very grateful to all those counters who sent in very useful extra information during last winter and hope we get a similar enthusiastic response this winter should any cold snaps occur.

Contacting WeBS Staff at WWT and BTO

WWT has recently had an automatic phone system installed (not everyone's cup of tea, we appreciate!). After ringing Slimbridge, you will be prompted to ring the extension of the person you require. If you have a tone phone, you can connect directly to Peter Cranswick on 280 and Mark Pollitt on 255. Alternatively, you will be put through to the receptionist who will connect you. For those who are able, you can also contact us using e-mail: Ray.Waters@bto.org, Andy.Musgrove@bto.org, Peter.Cranswick@wwt.org.uk or Mark.Pollitt@wwt.org.uk.

What to Record on Core Counts

• Species to record

In response to several queries from counters, a list of what and what not to record on WeBS count forms is provided below. All species from each group should be counted or marked as 'not counted' if present but a count was not possible.

Divers; grebes; Cormorant; herons (including egrets and Bittern); Spoonbill; flamingos; all swans; geese; ducks; rails (including Water Rail, crakes, Moorhen and Coot); cranes; waders; gulls (optional); terns (optional); Kingfisher. We do not store numbers of Shag, skuas, auks, wagtails, Dipper, or any passerines on our databases, although we appreciate that many observers write these counts on the form for their own records.

Remember to include all species in these families (some common ones are not listed due to lack of space), but also rarities and escapes, e.g. Bar-headed Goose, Black Swan, Muscovy Duck and Ring-necked Duck. WeBS aims to provide a complete database on all species in the bird families that comprise waterfowl. Please, however, include only free-flying birds. Pinioned birds which form part of collections on 'public' lakes should be excluded. Counts should also be included even if the birds could not be identified to species; we already have codes for unidentified scoter, unidentified Yellow-billed Swan, unidentified diver, grebe, duck, goose etc. and are happy to add others if necessary.

• 'No counts' and 'nil counts'

It is vitally important to record whether or not a site

was counted, even if no birds were present. For example, if a reservoir is completely frozen during a count, it is still necessary to note that the site was counted, the count being 'nil birds'. Simply record the date and times as normal, write 'nil' in the appropriate rows, and complete the 'ice cover' section on the back of the form, which tells us why no birds were present. We would hope that these birds would have moved to an ice-free site where they were counted (so don't wait a week to make a count when the site is unfrozen and the birds have returned, or the same birds may get counted twice!). If the form is returned simply as 'not counted', we would interpret the data as missing. Consequently, we would calculate how many birds were expected to have been present, which are then included in national indices. Obviously, this produces incorrect figures. Please, therefore, ensure you complete all relevant details on the form each time you visit a site, regardless of the numbers of birds present; a 'no count' tells us nothing about the birds nor the conditions and is very different from a 'nil count'.

• Months to count

The mainstay of WeBS is the winter counts, when most waterfowl occur in the UK in peak numbers. Many counters also undertake counts during summer months, particularly on larger sites, e.g. many estuaries. The data collected during the summer may be of key importance and we will always encourage summer counting. Nevertheless summer counts remain strictly optional, at the discretion of each counter.

Returning Count Forms

Please remember that we need all count forms to be returned to Slimbridge by the end of June at the latest to be sure the data are included in *Wildfowl and Wader Counts*. Please complete your count forms and return them to your Local Organiser as soon after the March count as possible to allow time to collate and forward them to WWT. Many thanks.

Erratum - Correction to 'The Wetland Bird Survey 1994-95'

P.21. Due to an error during the final stages of production at Slimbridge the February and March totals of Grey Plover given for estuarine sites in GB are incorrect. The correct totals are 47,741 and 53,721 respectively. Apologies for any confusion.

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.

WeBS NATIONAL ORGANISERS

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