

## BELFAST LOUGH

Co. Down

**Internationally important:** Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank

**Nationally important:** Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Shelduck, Scaup, Eider, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Knot, Dunlin, Turnstone

### *Site description*

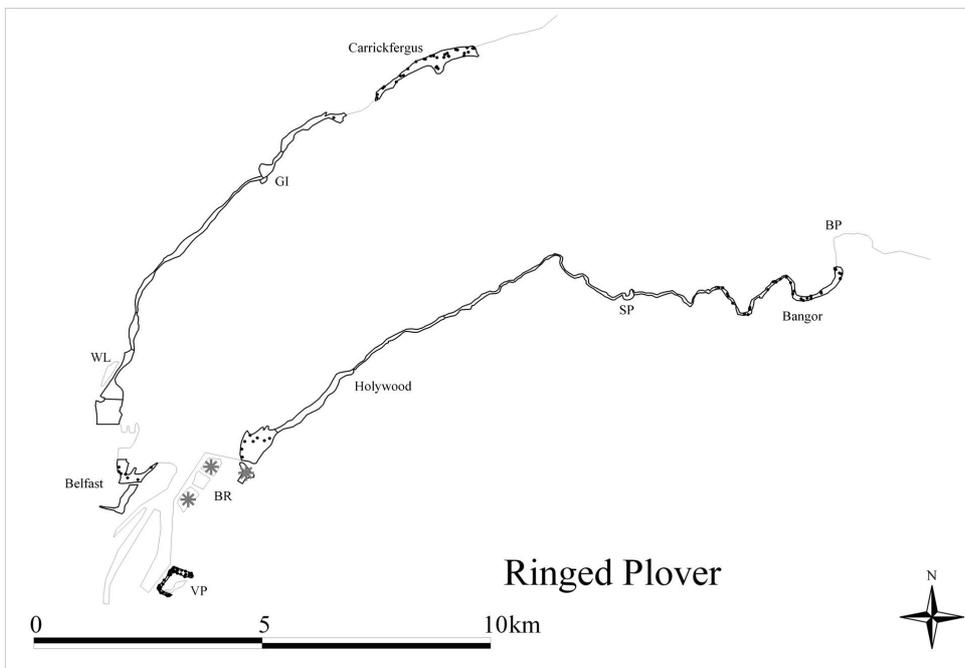
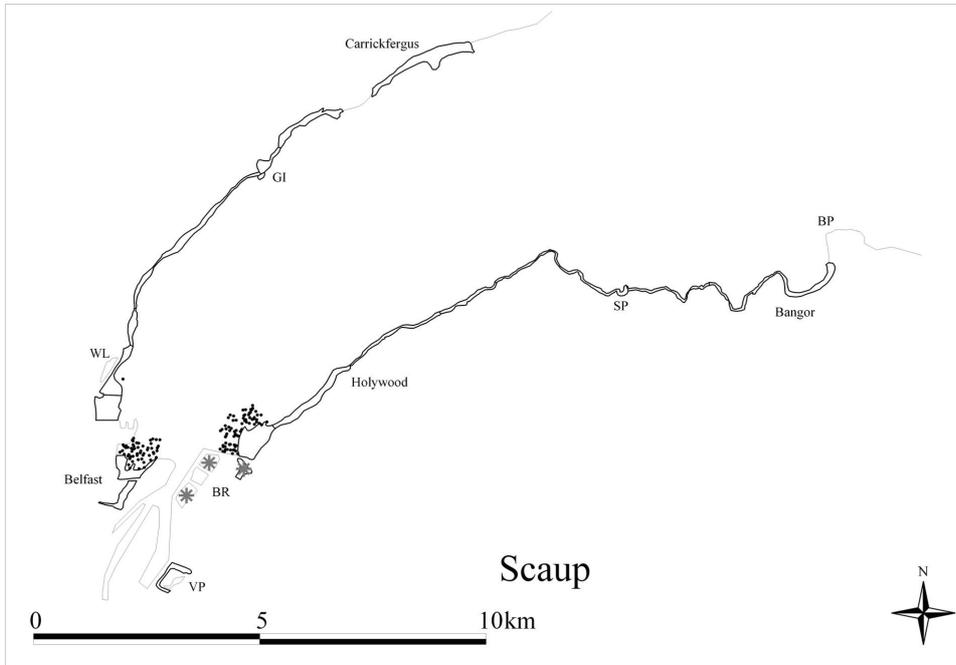
Belfast Lough is a large sea lough in the north-east of Ireland, with the city of Belfast at its head. The area surveyed comprised the coast from Carrickfergus on the north shore around to the eastern end of Bangor on the south shore. The outer parts of the Lough's shore are generally rocky with some sandy bays, although more extensive areas of intertidal mud are found toward Belfast. Industrial land claim has, however, reduced the area of the mudflats over the last 150 years, and Belfast has become the main port in Northern Ireland for heavy cargo. More recently, some of the area, including the important Belfast Harbour Pools, has been given a degree of protection. There are also problems of refuse disposal, pollution and general disturbance.

### *Bird distribution 2001/02*

The following account is based on two counts only; December 2001 and January 2002. By January, Great Crested Grebes had increased to more than 1,600 individuals, exceeding the last two peak Core Counts. The greatest concentration of birds was just north of Whitehouse Lake, although compared to recent winters, more grebes also used the coastline between the RSPB Reserve and Swinely Point on the southern shore. Cormorant were fairly evenly scattered along both the northern and southern shorelines, with fewest birds in Bangor Bay. As in previous winters, both Mute Swan and Greylag Geese were virtually confined to Victoria Park. Only three Light-bellied Brent Geese were recorded in December, a decline over recent years. There was a considerable increase in the numbers of Shelduck present in the second winter period, with the birds concentrated around Belfast Docks. Both Wigeon and Teal were mostly confined to the RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve where only relatively low numbers were counted. The highest numbers of Mallard were counted in December, when 282 were present. They were quite widely distributed at the south-western end of the Lough, particularly on Whitehouse Lake, Victoria Park and the RSPB Belfast Lough

Reserve. Small numbers of Pochard and Tufted Duck also favoured Victoria Park, with scattered individuals additionally located in Belfast Harbour. Counts of Scaup decreased from a peak of 323 during winter 2000/01 to 155 individuals. Once again, these flocks were found off Holywood and to the west of Belfast Docks. Similarly to Scaup, after the impressive counts of Eider recorded during winter 2000/01, numbers more than halved to a peak of 837 ducks in January 2002. Compared to the previous winter, greater numbers of Eider were found off Bangor and the western shoreline between Green Island and Whitehouse Lake. Long-tailed Duck, Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser were scattered between Carrickfergus and Whitehouse Lake with the latter two species also present along the southern shoreline of the Lough.

The western half of the Lough supported the greatest densities of Oystercatcher, with more than 4,200 birds recorded in the first half of the winter. Ringed Plover were to be found in five distinct and widely separated areas on the estuary. These were around Bangor, Carrickfergus and Holywood, to the west of the docks entrance and at Victoria Park. Lapwing generally frequented only the south-western end of the Lough, where the greatest numbers were seen at the RSPB Reserve and Whitehouse Lake. January saw the only record of Knot, when a mere 80 individuals were present. Similarly, the Core Counts have revealed a steady decline in Knot numbers since winter 1998/99. Dunlin distribution was virtually identical to that of previous winters, with the greatest concentrations around Whitehouse Lake and west of Belfast Harbour. As usual, the numbers of Black-tailed Godwit were far greater than those of Bar-tailed Godwit, with the former concentrated at the south-western of the Lough and the latter scattered along the northern shoreline. Curlew were widely distributed apart from the coastline between Swinely and Ballymacormick Points. In January, peak numbers of over 1,700 Redshank occurred. They were mostly concentrated in the south-western corner, whilst Turnstone were more likely to be found along the southern shoreline.



**Figure 100.** WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Scaup and Ringed Plover at Belfast Lough, winter 2001/02. (BP=Ballymacormick Points, BR=RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve, GI=Green Island, SP=Swinely Point, VP=Victoria Park, WL=Whitehouse Lake)

Six species of gull were counted in January, when Black-headed were marginally the most abundant at 8,986 birds. Herring Gull came close behind with 8,622 individuals. More than 2,100 Common Gulls were present, along with lower numbers of Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls.

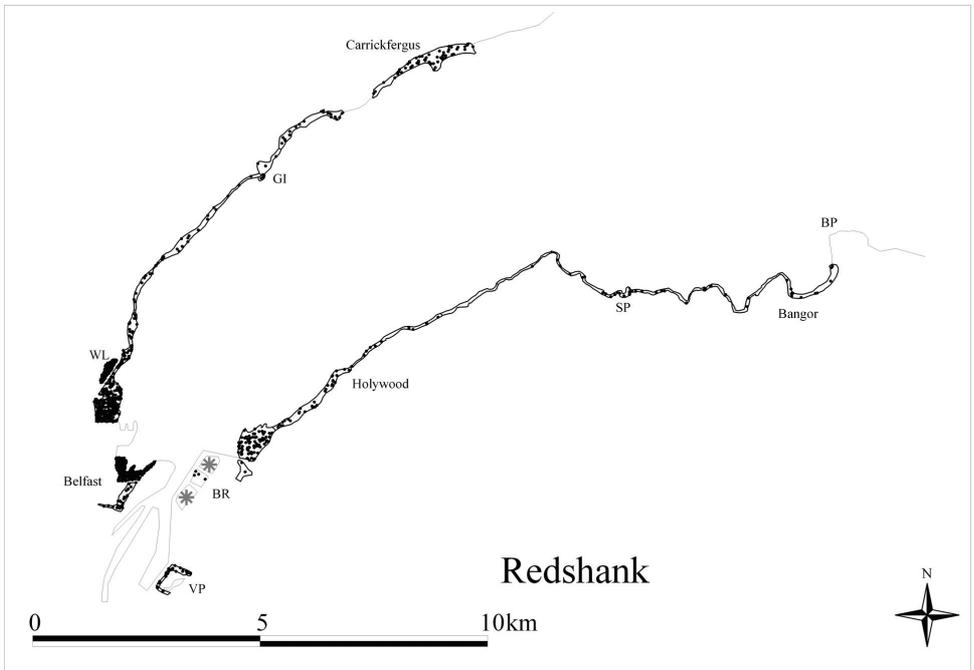
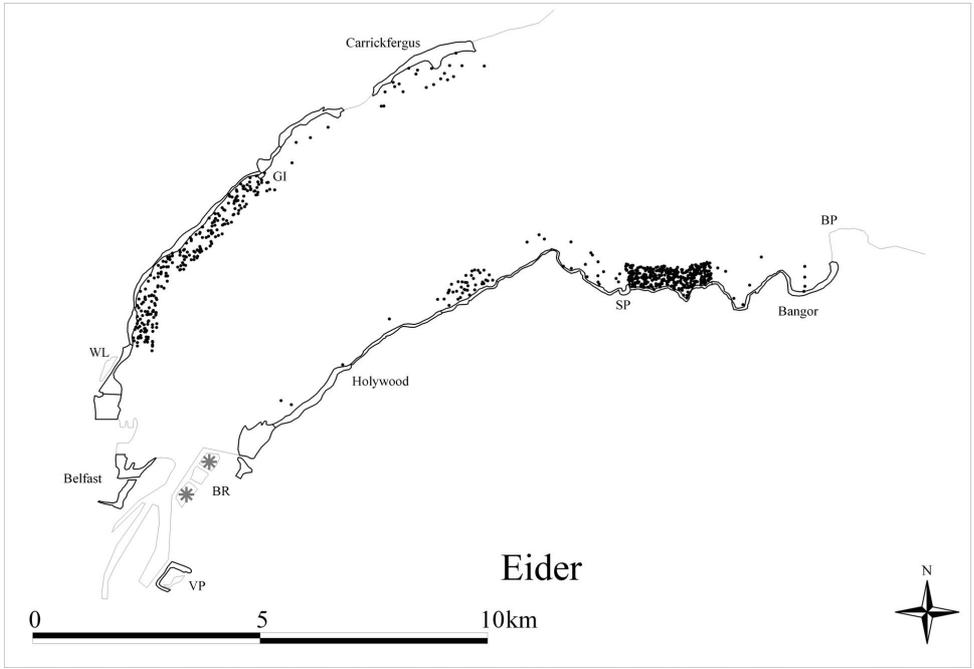
#### *Bird distribution 2002/03*

The following account is based on two counts only; December 2002 and February 2003. Numbers of Great Crested Grebes were low in comparison with recent years, peaking at 461 birds in February. These birds were distributed fairly evenly along both northern and southern shorelines, with higher densities between Whitehouse Lake and the western edge of Carrickfergus, and also at Holywood. High densities of Cormorants were also recorded at Holywood, with further concentrations at Bangor and Carrickfergus where Shag were also recorded in reasonable numbers. Mute Swan and Greylag Goose were found exclusively in Victoria Park, following the trend of past winters. Seventeen Light-bellied Brent Geese were recorded in December, a low figure consistent with recent years. Belfast Docks again harboured all Shelduck counted, where numbers remained consistent between counts. Both Wigeon and Teal were mostly confined to the RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve. The peak Low Tide count of 316 Teal exceeded the 5 year mean peak Core Count figure. Mallard were concentrated at the south western end of the Lough, particularly on self-contained water bodies such as Whitehouse Lake, Victoria Park and the RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve. Small numbers of Pochard and Tufted Duck also favoured Victoria Park, as did Coot and Moorhen. Numbers of Scaup returned to levels resembling the winter of 2000/01 following a drop in 2001/02, although birds were restricted to the Dock area. Eiders were distributed in very similar areas to the previous winter, with most ducks seen off Bangor and off the western shoreline between Green Island and Whitehouse Lake. The southwest corner of

the Lough supported the greatest concentrations of Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser, especially the Holywood area.

Oystercatcher were distributed throughout the Lough, with notable concentrations in Belfast Docks. Peak counts for December were higher than during the past two winters, reaching 5542 individuals. Ringed Plover were largely confined to Whitehouse Lake and Holywood. Lapwing were distributed mostly through the south-western end of the Lough, with the greatest numbers at the RSPB Reserve and Whitehouse Lake. The distribution of Dunlin was similar to that of previous winters, with the greatest concentrations around Whitehouse Lake and west of Belfast Harbour, although more birds were found at Holywood than in 2001/02. Black-tailed Godwit were almost four times more prevalent than Bar-tailed Godwit and they were concentrated to the south-western areas of the Lough. Bar-tailed Godwit were mainly located in the Whitehouse Lake area, with a few low density groups also scattered along the northern shoreline. Curlew showed a similar distribution to Black-tailed Godwit, although Curlew exploited more of the northern shore and the Holywood area. Redshank were scattered along both shores, as were Turnstone, with largest concentrations in the southwest. Numbers of Redshank, a species of international importance for Belfast Lough, were markedly lower than in previous years, with about 200-300 birds fewer. As different months were used for the later count, it is possible that this is a contributory element to the relatively low Redshank count.

Lower numbers of gulls were recorded than in the previous winter, although this could be an effect of different count months. However, the five species observed were apparent in similar proportions to the previous year's count: 5,503 Black-headed Gulls were seen in comparison to 2,926 Herring Gulls, 1,148 Common Gulls and lesser numbers of Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.



**Figure 101.** WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Eider and Redshank at Belfast Lough, winter 2002/03. (BP=Ballymacormick Points, BR=RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve, GI=Green Island, SP=Swinely Point, VP=Victoria Park, WL=Whitehouse Lake)

## DYFI ESTUARY

### Dyfed

**Internationally important:** None

**Nationally important:** None

#### *Site description*

The Dyfi is the largest estuary flowing into Cardigan Bay, situated approximately 12 km north of Aberystwyth. The estuary is predominantly sandy in nature, with fringing saltmarsh along the southern edge. Introduced *Spartina* has now become the dominant species within the original saltmarsh. By the 1970s, the existing cockle and mussel beds had been inundated by *Spartina* and soon disappeared. The mouth of the estuary is narrowed by the northward growth of a sand-covered shingle spit, the Twyni Mawr. There has been considerable land-claim of parts of the estuary. Aberdyfi, situated on the north shore at the estuary mouth represents the only large settlement around the area. Industrial development is absent and tourism provides the main focus for local employment. Leisure water-based activities such as sailing, water-skiing, wind-surfing and jet-skiing impact on the estuary.

#### *Bird distribution 2001/02*

Over 2,100 Canada Geese were recorded in January, when the majority were found on the flats within the inner part of the estuary, although they occurred in greatest densities on the saltmarsh adjacent to the Afon Leri. The Dyfi holds one of the largest populations of this species in the UK and the Low Tide counts are consistent with an increase in Core Counts recorded over the last five years. Feral Barnacle Geese were also located on the flats and saltmarsh in the inner part of the estuary, with 158 present in December. Greenland White-fronted Geese peaked at 168 birds in January and they frequented the central flats and saltmarsh, along with saltings/grassland on the northern side of the estuary. This flock represents the most southerly population of Greenland White-fronted Geese in Britain. Both Shelduck and Wigeon were widely distributed, mostly on the middle flats. For the latter species, however, concentrations also occurred around the estuary mouth. Wigeon numbers decreased between the peak of 1,900 in November and January, a pattern that was repeated for Teal. The saltmarsh below Ynys-hir was the favourite feeding area for many Teal.

The few birds recorded away from this area were virtually all found in the peripheral saltings along the southern edge. Mallard were also concentrated within the inner part of the estuary. They also occurred on the sandy central flats and around the Afon Leri freshwater flow where it crosses the flats at the estuary mouth. Over 300 Pintail were present in January, which is an increase over recent Core Count totals and exceeded the threshold of national importance. Pintail distribution is concentrated in three specific areas: the freshwater Afon Leri flow at the estuary mouth, the upper reaches where the River Dyfi starts to expand and on the central sandy flats. Generally low numbers of Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser were confined to the River Dyfi channel, the former frequenting the upper reaches and the latter the more central part of the estuary. Oystercatcher were widely distributed around the non-saltmarsh areas, with the exception of the flats towards the estuary mouth. Small numbers of Ringed Plover were confined to a small area at the end of the Twyni Mawr spit. Up to 800 Golden Plover were found on the saltmarsh around the Afon Leri inflow and in the middle of the estuary on sandy substrate adjacent to the river channel. Lapwing peaked at 1,105 birds in January and were located in a similar central area of the estuary to Golden Plover. However, Lapwing also occurred on the saltings and damp fields adjacent to the canalised freshwater inflow from Craig-y-penrhyn. Only 26 Grey Plover were counted in January when the birds were very widely scattered. Dunlin distribution was similar to that of Lapwing, in that most were found on the flats around the channel in the central part of the estuary, along with the area adjacent to the Craig-y-penrhyn inflow. However, the densest concentrations of Dunlin occurred at the end of the Twyni Mawr spit. Both species of godwit only occurred in low numbers. Up to 20 Bar-tailed Godwit frequented the central sandy sections, whilst Black-tailed Godwit were located on the saltings and meadows around the inflow channel from Craig-y-penrhyn. Curlew were widely distributed, using both saltmarsh and the open flats. Numbers increased throughout the winter, to a peak of 615 birds in January.

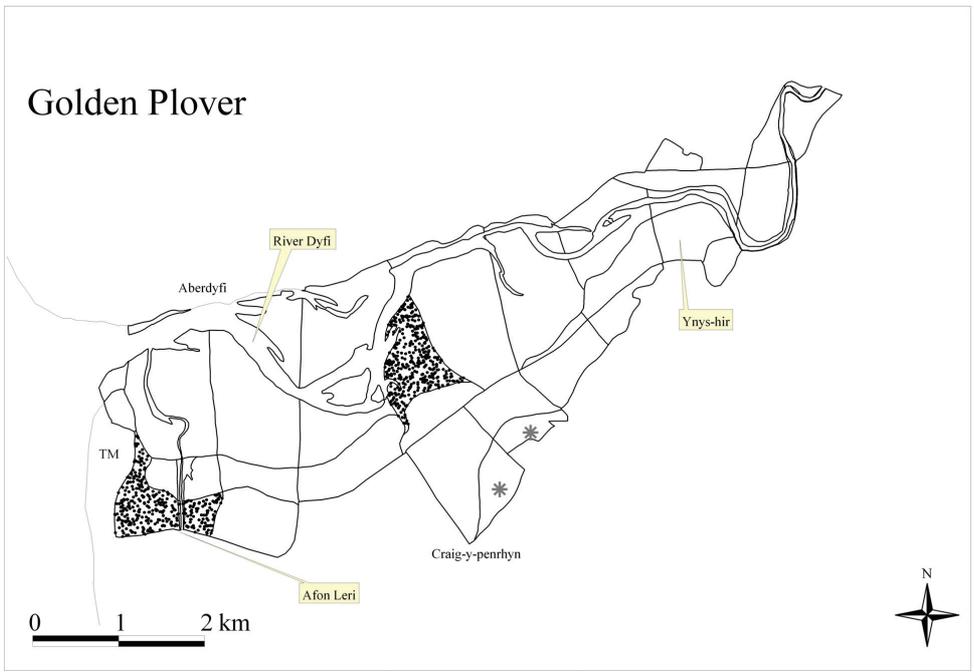
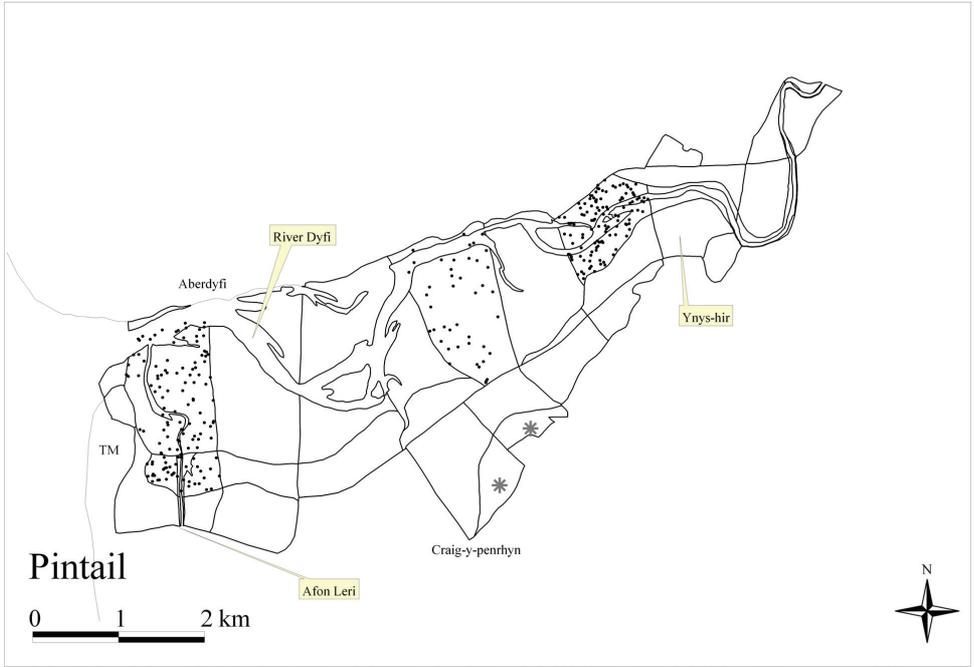


Figure 102. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Pintail and Golden Plover at Dyfi Estuary, winter 2001/02. (TM=Twyni Mawr)

Redshank also peaked in the second half of the winter period, with a maximum count of 142 individuals in January. Most of the Redshank fed within the saltmarsh, particularly in the vicinity of the Craig-y-penrhyn inflow channel.

Of the five species of gulls recorded, all were present in very low numbers. Black-headed Gull was the most abundant, with a peak count of six individuals!

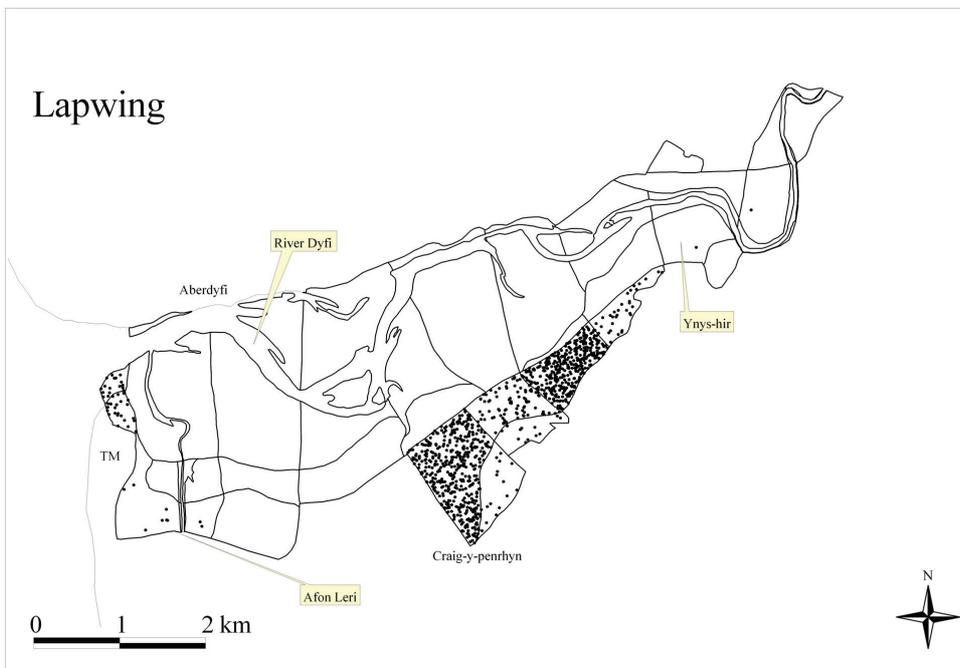
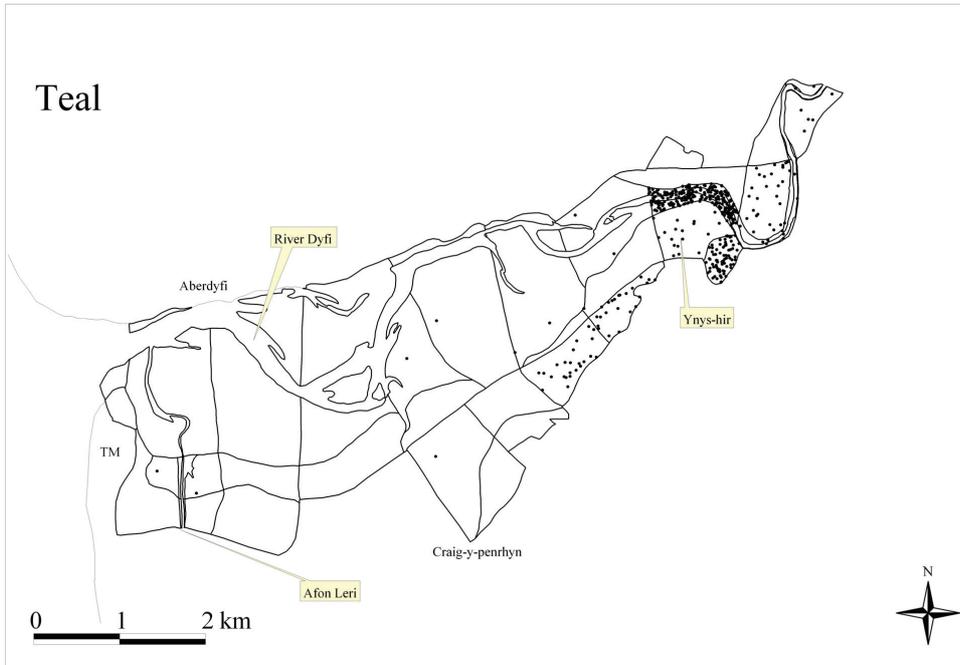
#### *Bird distribution 2002/03*

The maximum Low Tide count of Greenland White-fronted Goose (212 birds in February) was higher than the 2002/03 Core Count peak and exceeded the national importance threshold during that month. As noted during the previous winter, the geese frequented the central flats and saltmarsh, along with saltings/grassland on the northern side of the estuary at the point where the River Dyfi expands into the estuary. Canada Geese were mostly located within the inner zones, particularly on the saltings along the southern side and they occurred in the highest numbers during February when 1,900 were present. Feral Barnacle and Greylag Geese were also found on the flats and saltmarsh in the inner part of the estuary, with numbers of the former remaining fairly constant throughout at around 90 individuals, fewer than the previous winter. The latter was found in smaller numbers, at a peak of 17 birds. A single Dark-bellied Brent Goose was more unusual in January. Both Shelduck and Wigeon were widely scattered within the estuary, although the latter species avoided the mudflats towards the mouth. Wigeon were concentrated towards the estuary mouth, with overall numbers similar to the previous winter. The greatest concentrations of Teal, which peaked in November, were found on the River Dyfi, close to where it expands into the estuary itself, with a few also scattered along southern saltings. Most of the Mallard were present on the saltings in the inner half of the estuary, whilst most of the Pintail were recorded from the inner mudflats. Pintail numbers were substantially lower than the previous winter. A peak of 196 birds was present in November, after which

numbers decreased dramatically and none were recorded in February. Small numbers of Goldeneye were widely scattered in channels at the mouth and in the inner reaches of the estuary. Red-breasted Merganser were also recorded within the channels towards the estuary mouth. In contrast, the few Goosander present were confined to the River Dyfi in the inner reaches of the estuary.

Oystercatcher were widely distributed in a similar pattern to the previous winter, although they were rarely recorded on the flats around the estuary mouth. In contrast, the small numbers of Ringed Plover present were virtually confined to the estuary mouth. The peak count of Golden Plover (1,250 birds in December), was higher than that of winter 2001/02, with the birds concentrated around the Craig-y-penrhyn burn and saltings to the east. This distribution is different to that of the previous winter when the greatest concentrations were noted around the Afon Leri inflow and the sandy substrate adjacent to the river channel in the middle of the estuary. The distribution of Lapwing was very similar to that of Golden Plover, with the birds again located around the Craig-y-penrhyn burn and saltings to the east. Small numbers of Lapwing were also recorded from the mouth of the estuary. The peak count of Lapwing was also higher than that of the previous winter. Small numbers of Grey Plover were mostly confined to the central mudflats, whilst Snipe were generally found within the saltmarsh along the southern side of the estuary. Dunlin numbers gradually increased during the course of the winter and they frequented the central mudflats and also the saltings to the east of the Craig-y-penrhyn burn. The peak count of Curlew (825 individuals in February) was considerably higher than the peak of the previous winter. Conversely, the peak count of Redshank (52 birds in January) was considerably lower than the peak of 142 birds of January 2002. Most of the Redshank occurred in the southern saltmarsh.

Few gulls were recorded, but of the four species noted, Black-headed was the most abundant.



**Figure 103.** WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Teal and Lapwing at Dyfi Estuary, winter 2002/03. (TM=Twyni Mawr)