

STOUR ESTUARY

Essex, Suffolk

Internationally important: Pintail, Grey Plover, Knot, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank

Nationally important: Great Crested Grebe, Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Goldeneye, Golden Plover, Turnstone

Site description

The Stour is a long and relatively straight estuary, which forms the eastern end of the border between Suffolk and Essex. The estuary's mouth joins that of the Orwell as the two rivers enter the North Sea between Felixstowe and Harwich. The outer parts of the site are sandy and substrates become progressively muddier further upstream. There are five shallow bays; Seafield, Holbrook and Erwarton along the north shore and Copperas and Jacques on the south side. The estuary is backed by wooded cliffs and agricultural land. Since much of this land is private, there is very little disturbance to most of the estuary. Some sailing and shooting occurs (Buck 1997, Prater 1981, Pritchard *et al* 1992).

Bird distribution 2001/02

Great Crested Grebe peaked at 139 in December, which was a decrease compared to the previous year, although still over the threshold of national importance. They were generally distributed along the River Stour, although fewer were seen around the mouth. Little Grebe rapidly declined to just 3 individuals in January after 26 birds were noted in December, all within the inner part of the estuary. Cormorant were widely distributed throughout, although there were fewer around the mouth. As in previous years, the greatest concentrations of Mute Swan were found at the mouth of the Stour, around Harwich and also off Manningtree. More unusual were a couple of Bewick's Swan that frequented Erwarton Bay during November, along with up to 76 Greylags. The distribution of Dark-bellied Brent Geese was similar to the previous winter, with 'hotspots' in Seafield Bay, Erwarton Bay and, this winter, Holbrook Bay. Very few geese were recorded in Copperas Bay during 2001/02. These 'missing birds' might explain the increased use made of Holbrook Bay. Shelduck occurred widely albeit in lower densities towards the mouth. After the peak Low Tide count of over 4,000 birds in winter 2000/01, Wigeon numbers decreased to a mid-winter high of 2,920 birds, with the greatest concentrations in Erwarton Bay and Jacques Bay. A December influx of Teal produced a peak of over 1,300 birds, approaching the threshold

for national importance. However, numbers fell sharply during the second half of the winter. As in previous years, most Teal were to be found in the eastern part of Copperas Bay and off Manningtree at the western end of the estuary. Maximum counts of both Mallard and Pintail also occurred in December and they were located largely along the western end of both Copperas and Jacques Bays. Most Goldeneye occurred on the channels in the western zones, whilst Red-breasted Mergansers were more widely distributed. The peak count of 100 mergansers in February was unusually high and over the threshold of national importance.

Oystercatcher were distributed in a similar pattern to that of the previous winter, with Seafield Bay holding the greatest concentration. Counts of Ringed Plover declined from winter 2000/01, although their distribution was broadly similar, apart from a greater use made of the area between Jacques and Copperas Bays. Golden Plover numbers exceeded the threshold of national importance during three out of the four months, peaking at more than 8,500 individuals in January. Their distribution was virtually confined to Erwarton, Holbrook, Jacques and Seafield Bays. Conversely, Grey Plover were found throughout, with Holbrook Bay attracting the greatest concentrations. Grey Plover numbers exceeded the level for international importance in December when more than 1,900 birds were present. Many Lapwing and Knot frequented the inner zones and lesser numbers were also present in Holbrook Bay and Erwarton Bay. Knot peaked at 7,000 birds in November and then subsequently declined steadily over the winter. Dunlin numbers remained relatively more constant, although the peak also occurred in November. Dunlin were widely distributed and, compared to the previous winter, more use was made of the eastern mudflats. Although Black-tailed Godwit numbers still exceeded the threshold for international importance, the peak Low Tide count of 1,553 birds in January was lower than the maximum of over 2,800 noted during winter 2000/01. The godwits utilised the western half of the Stour, especially the western end of Jacques Bay. Bar-tailed Godwit remained scarce and frequented the eastern half of the estuary.

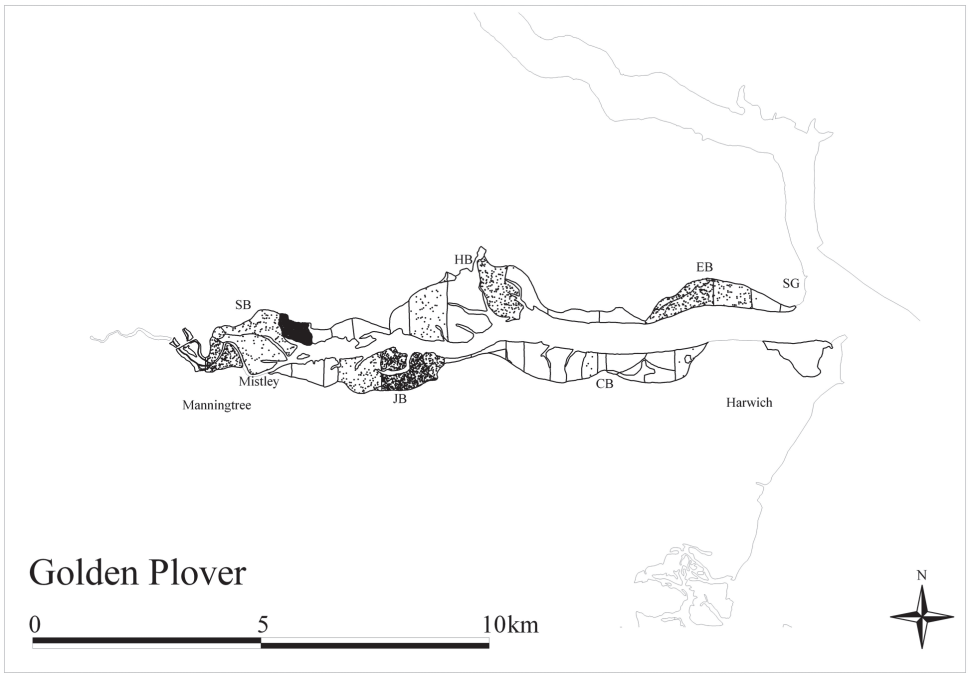
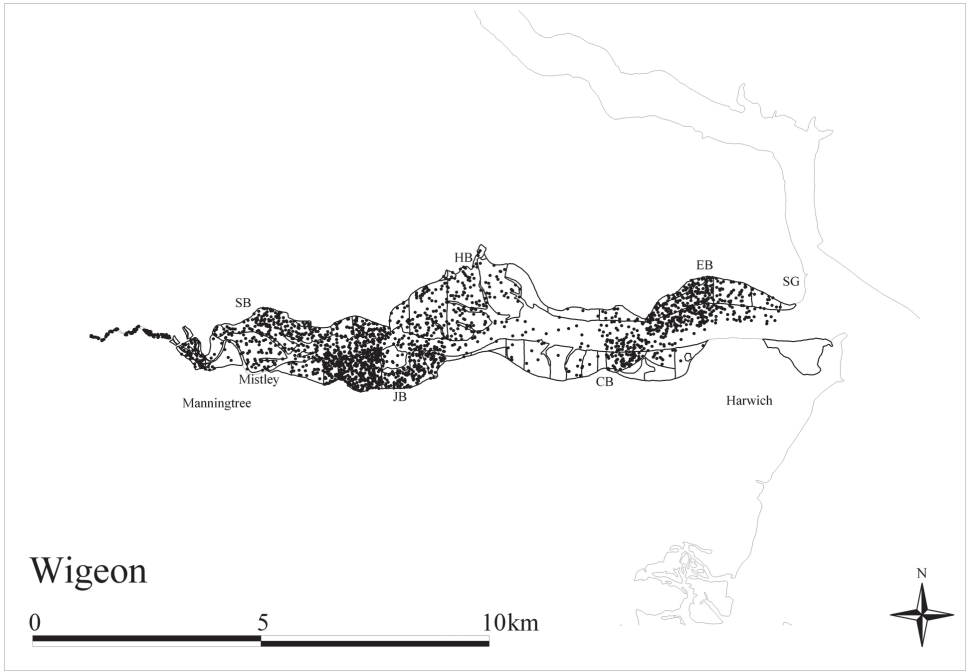


Figure 108 WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Wigeon and Golden Plover at Stour Estuary, winter 2001/02. (CB=Copperas Bay, EB=Erwarton Bay, HB=Holbrook Bay, JB=Jacques Bay, SB=Seafeld Bay, SG=Shotley Gate)

Curlew and Redshank were found throughout. Most Turnstone were found in Holbrook and Erwarnton Bays, as in previous winters.

Of the five species of gull recorded, Black-headed was the most abundant.

Bird distribution 2002/03

Numbers of Great Crested Grebe continued their recent decline of the last few years, with a peak count of 80 birds in February. The maximum count of 25 Little Grebe in December was virtually identical to the peak of 26 individuals noted in December 2001. Slavonian and Black-necked Grebe were also recorded, with up to 6 of the latter species a noteworthy count in December. Cormorants were widely distributed and Little Egret numbers continued their increase of recent years, with up to 22 birds in the first winter period. As in previous years, the majority of the Mute Swan were found at the western end of the estuary or at the mouth. Most of the Canada Geese favoured the outer half of the Stour. The peak count of Dark-bellied Brent Goose mirrored that of the previous winter and they were distributed in a similar pattern around the estuary. Shelduck and Wigeon were widely distributed and both present in higher numbers than the previous winter. Teal and Pintail were mostly confined to Copperas Bay and the flats off Mistley in the inner zones, with the latter species peaking at an impressive 613 birds in December. Most of the Mallard favoured the outer areas, with numbers exceeding those of the previous winter. Goldeneye numbers built up steadily throughout the winter, reaching a peak of 484 ducks in February. The majority of these were found on the main channel off Mistley at the western end of the Stour. Red-breasted Merganser, recorded in slightly lower numbers than the previous winter, were scattered along much of the main channel.

Seafield Bay and the flats off Mistley hosted the greatest concentrations of Oystercatcher and the counts were slightly higher than the previous winter. Ringed Plover continued their recent decline and were generally distributed in

Holbrook Bay and off Harwich. The numbers of Golden Plover were also lower than recent winters, below the threshold of national importance, with Jacques Bay, Seafield Bay and Erwarnton Bay the favoured areas. In contrast, Grey Plover counts were greater than recent winters. The majority of the Lapwing were found in the inner half of the estuary. Knot peaked at 8,648 individuals in November, which represented the highest Low Tide total to date for this site. In common with previous years, numbers quickly fell throughout the rest of the winter. Knot were generally widely distributed, although denser concentrations were noted in most of the bays. Dunlin were found throughout the Stour, with the fewest birds in the eastern part of Copperas Bay and the flats off Shotley Gate. Although the peak Low Tide count of Black-tailed Godwit was slightly higher than the previous winter at 1,689 individuals, it was lower than the peak Core Counts from 2002/03 and the previous four years. Following the pattern of previous winters, the majority of the birds frequented the inner half of the estuary. Although always a scarce species on the Stour, numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit reached a record 145 birds in February. Compared to some recent winters, they were scattered throughout most of the estuary. Curlew and Redshank were distributed throughout, both present in slightly lower numbers than recent winters. Turnstone were present in greater numbers than during any other winter, with more than 450 birds noted in February. This increase is reflected in a wider distribution within the estuary, with more birds using the mudflats in both Copperas and Jacques Bays on the southern side of the estuary.

Five species of gull were recorded, all in low numbers, with Black-headed being the most abundant.

The Stour Estuary was counted by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust under contract to the Harwich Haven Authority. These data are generously made available to the Wetland Bird Survey.

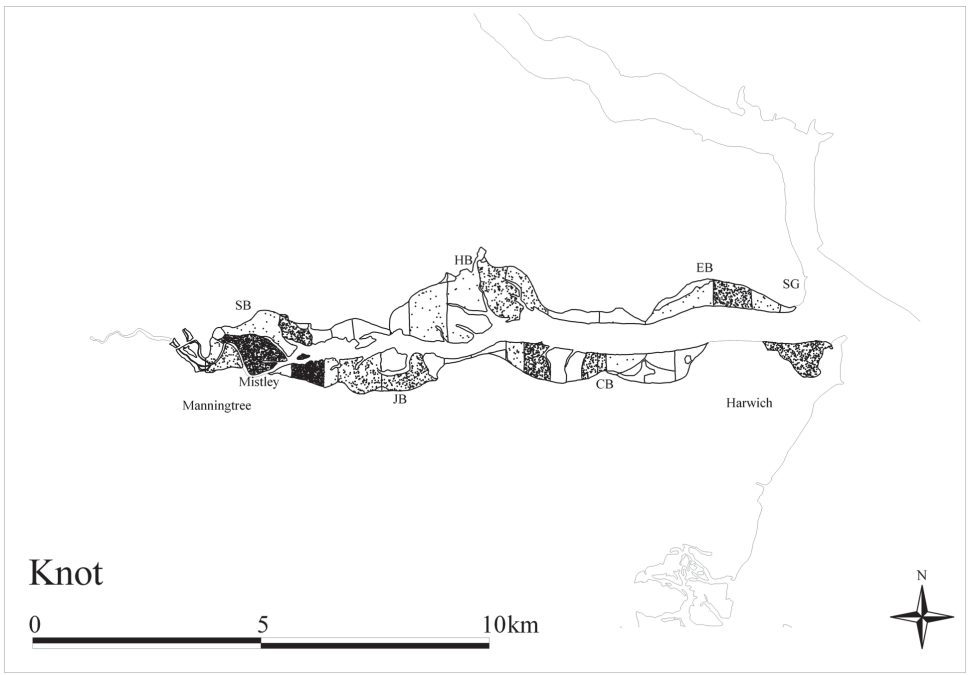
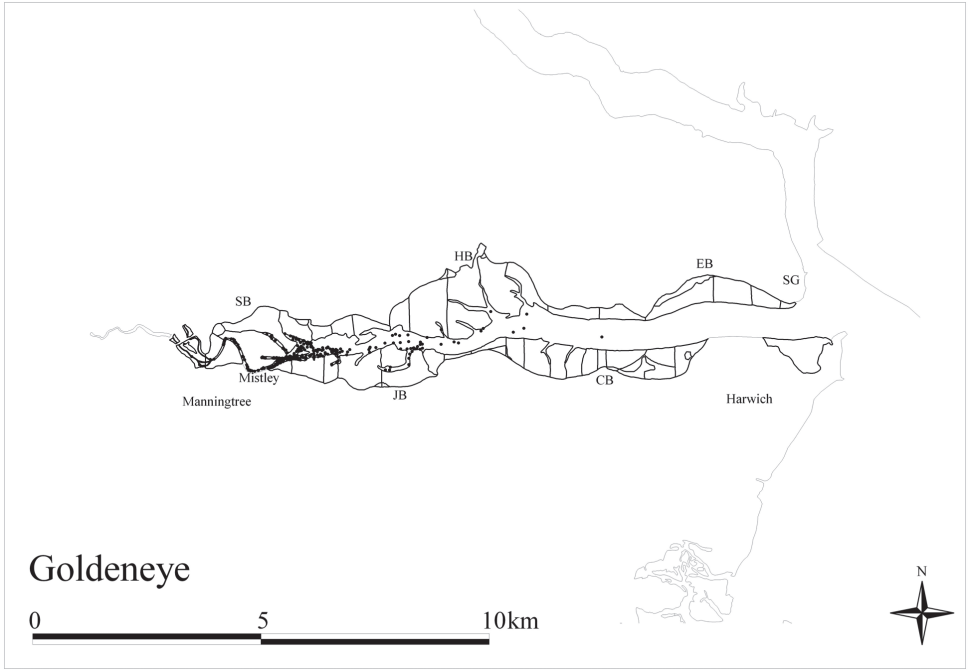


Figure 109. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Goldeneye and Knot at Stour Estuary, winter 2002/03. (CB=Copperas Bay, EB=Erwarton Bay, HB=Holbrook Bay, JB=Jacques Bay, SB=Seafield Bay, SG=Shotley Gate)

STRANGFORD LOUGH

Co. Down

Internationally important: Mute Swan, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank

Nationally important: Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Whooper Swan, Pink-footed Goose, Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, Shoveler, Eider, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew

Site description

Strangford Lough is a large (150 km²) shallow sea lough on the east coast of Northern Ireland, protected under various legislatures including designation as a Special Protection Area, a Marine Nature Reserve, and a Ramsar Site. The lough includes the Narrows, a deep rocky channel at the southern end that extends between the villages of Strangford and Portaferry to the Irish Sea. The vast main body of the lough is sheltered to the east by the Ards Peninsula, and is fed by various rivers and tributaries. The towns of Downpatrick in the south and Newtownards in the north are the largest nearby human habitations. Within the lough there are numerous rocky outcrops and small islands, and the north and north-west of the lough in particular hold extensive intertidal mud and sand flats. There are countless other bays and inlets, and large expanses of open water, providing a wide diversity of habitat. Since 2001, mobile gear fishing has been banned to allow populations of the Horse Mussel *Modiolus modiolus* to recover. Static fishing and catching of crustaceans still occurs and there is some recreational activity within the lough, including sailing and yachting.

Bird distribution 2001/02

Little Grebe and Great Crested Grebe were present in modest numbers, concentrated around Mahee Island, the former also occurring at other disparate locations around the lough. Numbers of Cormorant peaked at 156 in January, with the greatest densities recorded in the Narrows. Few Shag were present and were generally further inland along the south-east shore. Grey Herons appeared at various locations around the lough, although not in the north where intertidal habitat is less suitable for foraging.

Mute Swan were present in the highest density in Ardmillan Bay and near Greyabbey. The Comber River and the Greyabbey area harboured the majority of Greylag Geese, whilst Canada Geese were more often found around

the islands in the mid-west of the lough. Over 8,000 Light-bellied Brent Geese were counted in November, distributed widely, with notable concentrations in the north, and on the south-west coast between Chapel Island and Castle Island. The densest aggregations of Shelduck were in the very north of the lough, and Wigeon were distributed in dense pockets along the western shore. Teal were dotted around the various bays, river flows and other shallows while Mallard were more restricted in their distribution, the highest density in Castleward Bay and in the bay around Danes Point. Pintail and Shoveler were generally confined to the north, the former concentrated around the intertidal area near Newtownards Airport, and at Ardmillan Bay and the latter around the outflow of the Comber River.

Eider were found mostly in the north of the lough, while Goldeneye were usually in flocks along the mid-west and north-west shore. Red-breasted Merganser showed a scattered distribution around the lough.

Sixteen species of wader were reported, most of which favoured the massive intertidal area in the north. Oystercatcher were ubiquitous throughout the lough, whereas Ringed Plover were concentrated north of Rough Island, in the Greyabbey area, and along the Narrows. Counts of the latter tend to be higher than Core Counts, with Golden Plover counts also exceeding the Core Count peak, the highest densities of which were recorded in the north, between Greyabbey and Rough Island. Lapwing, often found in mixed flocks with Golden Plover, showed a similar pattern of abundance though their distribution was wider. Knot peaked at 4,000 in November, exceeding Core Counts, and were mostly in the north-west corner of the lough. Dunlin were more evenly distributed along the shoreline. Nearly all Black-tailed Godwit were at the mouth of the Comber River, though this was not an abundant species in this winter. Bar-tailed Godwits, however, reached a peak of 1,949 in January, exceeding the previous two winter Core Counts and again, most concentrations were in the north-west.

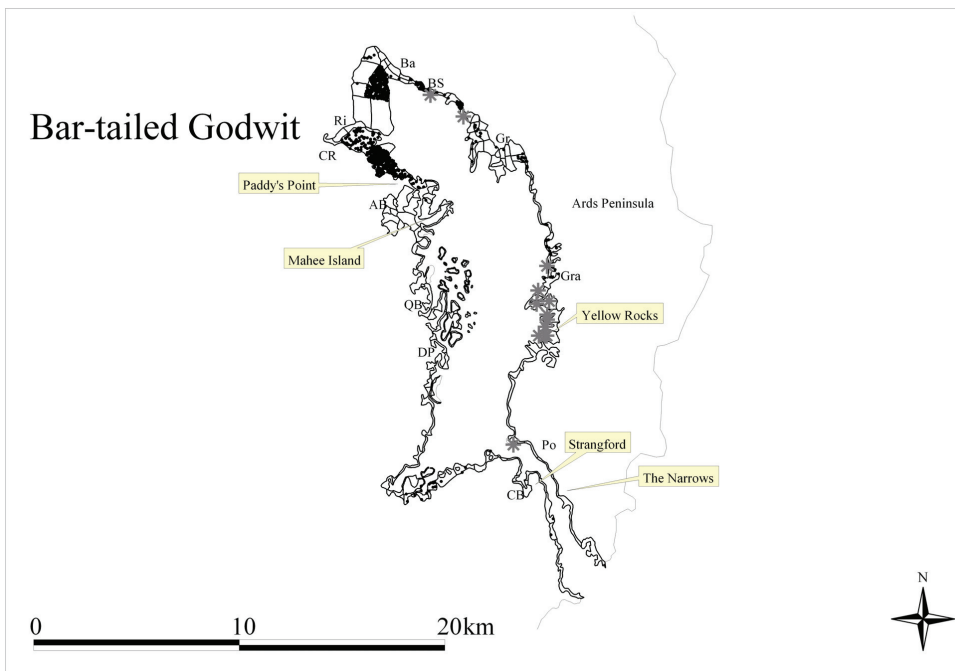
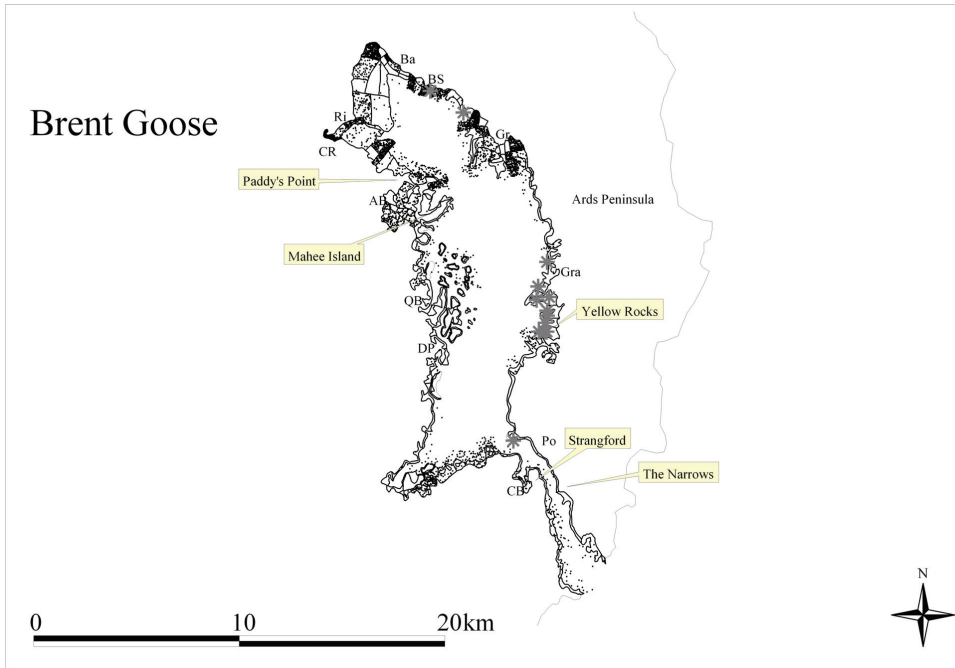


Figure 110. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Light-bellied Brent Goose and Bar-tailed Godwit at Strangford Lough, winter 2001/02. (AB=Ardmillan Bay; Ba=Ballyreagh; BS=Butterlump Stone; CB=Castleward Bay; CR=Comber River; DP=Danes Point; Gr=Greyabbey; Gra=Gransha; Po=Portaferry; QB=Quarterland Bay; Ri=Ringcreevy)

Curlew and Redshank occurred along the entire shoreline, the latter showing denser distribution, with numbers reaching 3,339 in November. The low tide peak of Redshank exceeded the Core Count peak and was also larger than the Core Count peak of the previous two winters. Small numbers of Greenshank were scattered along the western shore. Turnstone appeared in relatively high densities in the Narrows, although as these birds can be tricky to survey accurately when dispersed amongst rocks.

All five commonly occurring species of gull were recorded, Black-headed Gull being the most abundant.

Bird distribution 2002/03

The mean monthly total for Strangford Lough was greater in 2002/03 than the previous winter by 2,600 birds, and peak counts for many of the key species were higher. Little Grebe distribution was remarkably similar to the previous winter, and abundance was comparable. Great Crested Grebes were present in small numbers with the exception of a count of 267 in November, although it is possible that one sizable flock was double-counted by different counters on nearby sectors. Cormorants were again distributed around the Narrows and along the eastern shore to Horse Island. Shag numbers were greater than in the previous winter, and again were concentrated on the south-east shore.

Mute Swan distribution was similar to the preceding winter and in the area off Ringcreevy, 55 Whooper Swans were recorded in November. Peak counts of Greylag and Canada Goose were lower than in the previous winter, whereas counts of Light-bellied Brent Geese were similar, mostly concentrated in the north of the lough, between Paddy's Point and Greyabbey. The peak count of Shelduck exceeded peak Core Counts reaching 4,199 in November and were found in many of the same areas, foraging on the mudflats in the north of the lough. Wigeon distribution resembled that of 2001/02 but Teal showed some distributional changes, with greater densities of birds in the Narrows and off Mahee Island. Mallard counts tended to be slightly lower than in the previous winter but were generally found in similar locations, especially Castleward Bay and Danes Point. Pintail were not reported at low tide on Strangford Lough until December, when 121 individuals were counted, most flocks occurring in the far north of the lough. Shoveler numbers were very similar to the previous winter, and occurred mostly in the Comber River area.

Small flocks of Eider were seen in the north of the bay while Goldeneye were reported in the highest densities from Mahee Island in the west and Yellow Rocks in the east. Red-breasted Merganser were thin and widely scattered.

The intertidal zone in the north again supported densest aggregations of waders. Peak counts of Ringed Plover were lower than in the past winter but distribution was similar, centred on the Narrows and the Greyabbey area. The north of the lough and the Narrows were important areas for Golden Plover, and the non-tidal habitat at Gransha also supported high densities although numbers were lower than in 2001/02. November and February counts of Grey Plover were elevated above the previous winter monthly totals, and one sector around Butterlump Stone in the north of the lough held especially dense concentrations. Peak counts of Lapwing were lower than in 2001/02, with 3,876 in January, possibly due to alternative food sources such as farmland being utilised. Numbers of Knot built up throughout January and February to a peak of 10,340, the highest count since winter 1996/97. Dense concentrations occurred between Paddy's Point and Ballyreagh with other localised concentrations seen at Greyabbey and Gransha. Dunlin were recorded on similar areas as Knot, but were also along other shorelines, including Ardmillan Bay, the Narrows, Quarterland Bay, Yellow Rocks and the south-west corner of the lough. Snipe totals were higher than in the previous winter, the key areas along the mid-eastern shore. Numbers of Black-tailed Godwit exceeded those of the previous two winters, however, counts of Bar-tailed Godwit were comparatively low, with the low tide peak reaching only 960 birds in January. Both species were largely restricted to the north-west, with the Comber River to Paddy's Point area holding most Black-tailed Godwits, and the northernmost intertidal sectors holding most Bar-tailed Godwits. Curlew and redshank were again distributed throughout the lough, numbers of both lower than the preceding winter. Turnstone were recorded, especially in the Narrows, in comparable numbers to 2001/02. For many wader species, low tide counts often exceed those during Core Counts. It is possible that many individuals roost on more inaccessible sites within the lough at high tide, such as on remote islands, leading to lower numbers recorded during Core Counts.

Black-headed Gulls were again the most frequently counted species of gull, although in lower numbers than in 2001/02, possibly due to foraging elsewhere in surrounding farmland.

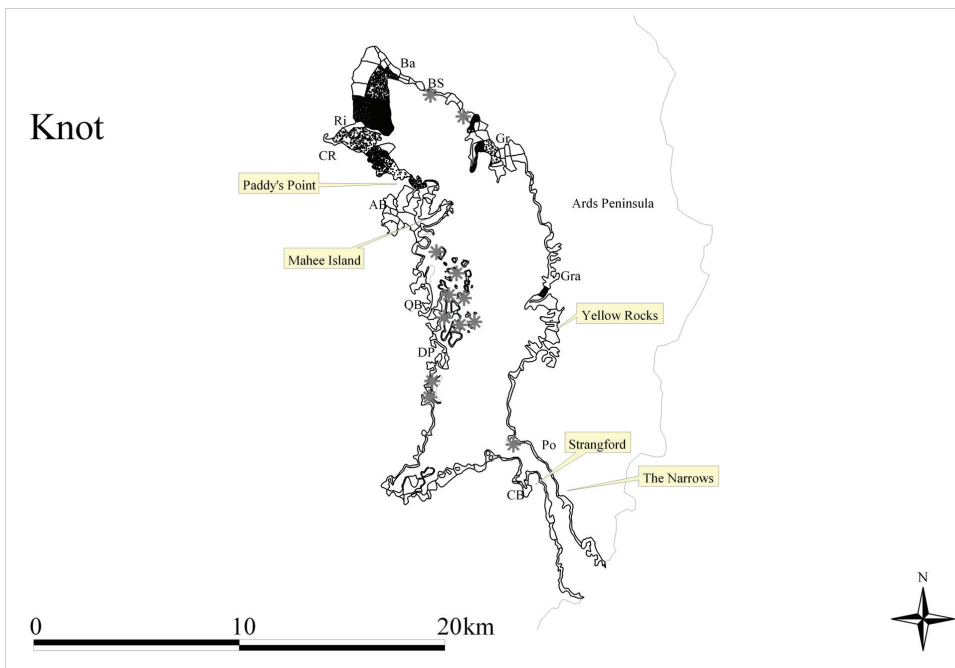
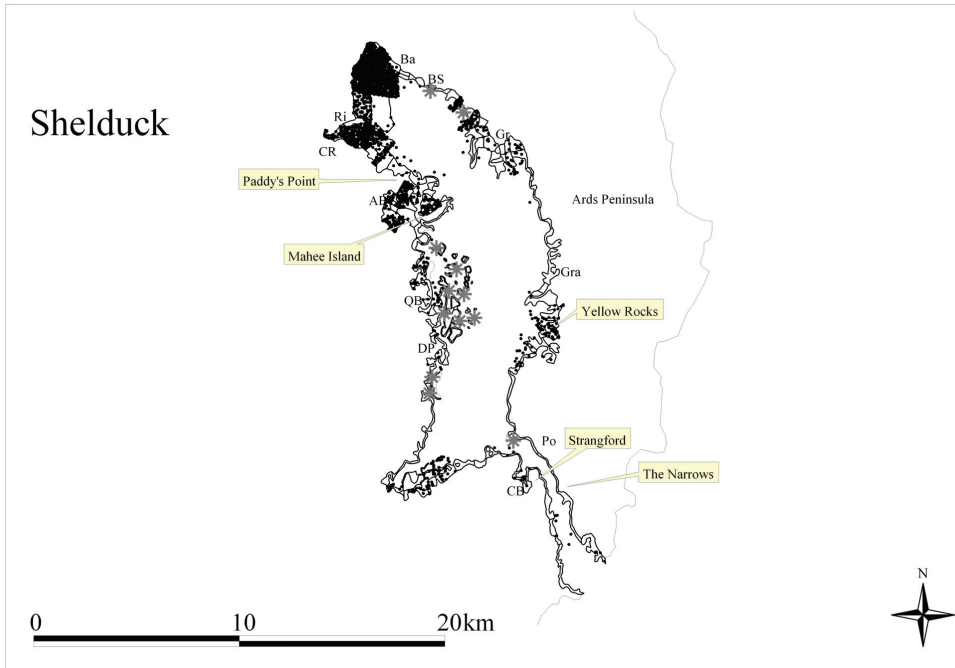


Figure 111. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Shelduck and Knot at Strangford Lough, winter 2002/03. (AB=Ardmillan Bay; Ba=Ballyreagh; BS=Butterlump Stone; CB=Castleward Bay; CR=Comber River; DP=Danes Point; Gr=Greyabbey; Gra=Gransha; NA=Newtownards Airport; Po=Portaferry; QB=Quarterland Bay; Ri=Ringcreevy)