

## CROMARTY FIRTH

**Internationally important:** Pink-footed Goose, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank  
**Nationally important:** Wigeon, Scaup, Knot

### *Site description*

The Cromarty Firth is a long, sheltered estuary on the east coast of the Scottish Highlands, and is a Ramsar Site and SPA. Its narrow mouth encloses the remainder of the river, and the area has the largest expanse of intertidal flats in the Moray basin, fringed by well-developed saltmarsh around inflows. Some lengths of shore are rockier, with finer sediment in the bays, such as Nigg Bay, near the river mouth. These expanses of mudflat support notable eelgrass (*Zostera*) beds. A lagoon behind the shingle spit at Alness retains water at low tide. The estuary as a whole is dominated by industrial activity, including an oil terminal and a disused oil rig yard at Nigg, and a large metal industry complex at Invergordon. The sheltered shores provide prime agricultural land with cereal and improved grassland predominant. Grazing, both on these grasslands and on the areas of saltmarsh, is intensive and has led to some sand dune systems being converted to 'improved' grassland. Leisure activities exist but are not intensive, and include water sports and beach recreation around Cromarty, Dingwall and Alness. The RSPB has reserves on the estuary, at Nigg Bay and Udale Bay. Mussel cultivation and small-scale bait digging occur at Cromarty Bay.

### *Bird distribution*

Slavonian Grebes peaked at 27 in November, almost all off Udale Bay. Cormorant and Shag were present in small numbers mainly in the outer half of the estuary. Grey Herons were widely distributed over the whole estuary. Mute Swans peaked at 93 in January, mostly in Udale and Nigg bays, and 11 Whooper Swans were recorded in November. Nearly 1,100 Greylag and over 900 Pink-footed Geese were reported over the winter, although the firth is principally of importance as an overnight roost for these species. The Greylag Geese were widely distributed with the highest density in the inner section, whilst the Pink-footed Geese occurred both on the inner estuary, and at Nigg Bay, particularly the eastern side. Shelduck numbers reached a record Low Tide Count of

688 in January. The flats of the inner estuary, Alness and Nigg Bay held the highest numbers. Red-throated Diver, Little Grebe and Canada, Barnacle and Brent Geese were recorded in small numbers.

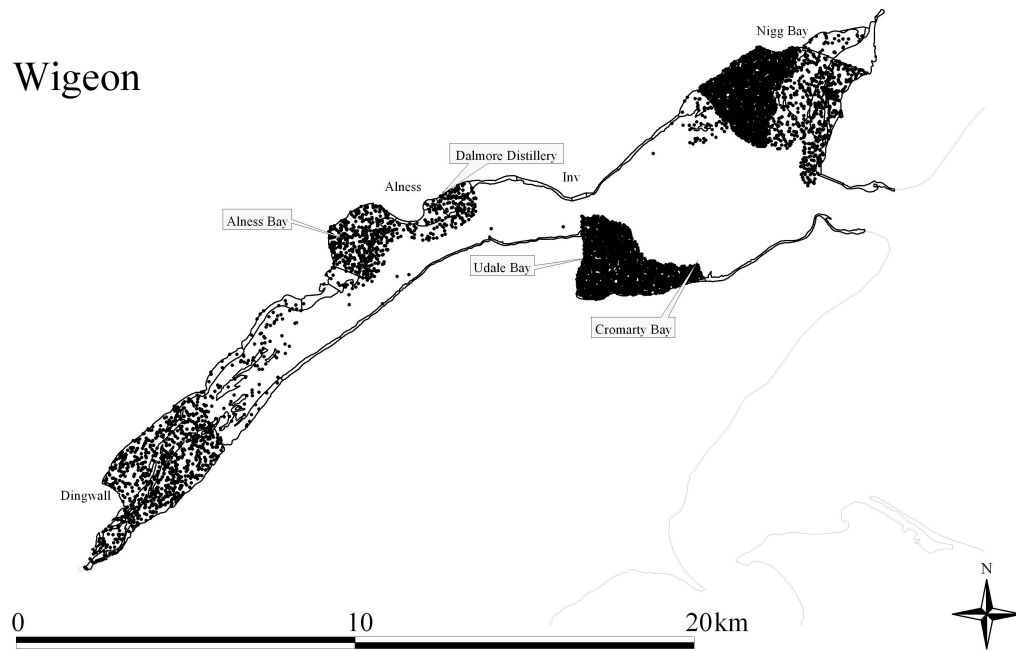
Wigeon numbers varied greatly over the winter with record numbers of 16,494 in November dropping to just 1,410 by February. The greatest concentrations were in western Nigg Bay and Udale Bay, although birds were widespread in the inner estuary (Figure 60). Teal were absent completely from Nigg Bay, otherwise being widespread over the whole estuary, as were Mallard. Pintail peaked at 540 birds in January, exceeding Core Counts from the last five winters, with most of the birds found on the eastern half of Nigg Bay. This pattern is to be expected, as the species uses the bay as a foraging site, with birds moving to Bayfield Loch at high tide. Shoveler occurred only off Dalmore distillery, possibly benefiting from any discharge into the river. Scaup numbers totalled 58 in November, with the maximum Core Count only 13 in January. This appears to be a substantial reduction in numbers when compared to previous years. It should be noted that numbers have increased simultaneously on Inverness (Beauly) Firth, so it is likely that local movement explains this decline (Dave Butterfield *pers. comm.*). Most of the Scaup, Eider, Long-tailed Duck and Goldeneye were found in the outer Udale Bay area. The latter species was also found alongside Red-breasted Merganser along the length of the estuary, predominantly in the main channel. A single Tufted Duck was recorded in December.

Low Tide Counts of Redshank exceeded the international importance threshold in all months, but peaked at 2,096 in January. This species is widely distributed throughout the whole estuary, utilizing all of the bays and much of the shoreline (Figure 60). Oystercatchers were found mainly in Nigg and Udale Bays with smaller numbers elsewhere. Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit were present in nationally important numbers in the estuary, the greatest densities occurring at Nigg Bay, with Knot also occurring at Udale Bay. Curlew

were found throughout the Cromarty Firth, whereas Golden Plover were confined to the eastern flats in Nigg Bay. Lapwing were widespread with Dingwall, Alness, Dalmore and the eastern side of Nigg Bay all used. Alness and Nigg Bays were also favoured by

Dunlin, although lesser numbers were found in the inner estuary and Udale Bay. Ringed Plover were widely distributed, but at low abundance. Snipe and Turnstone were also recorded.

## Wigeon



## Redshank

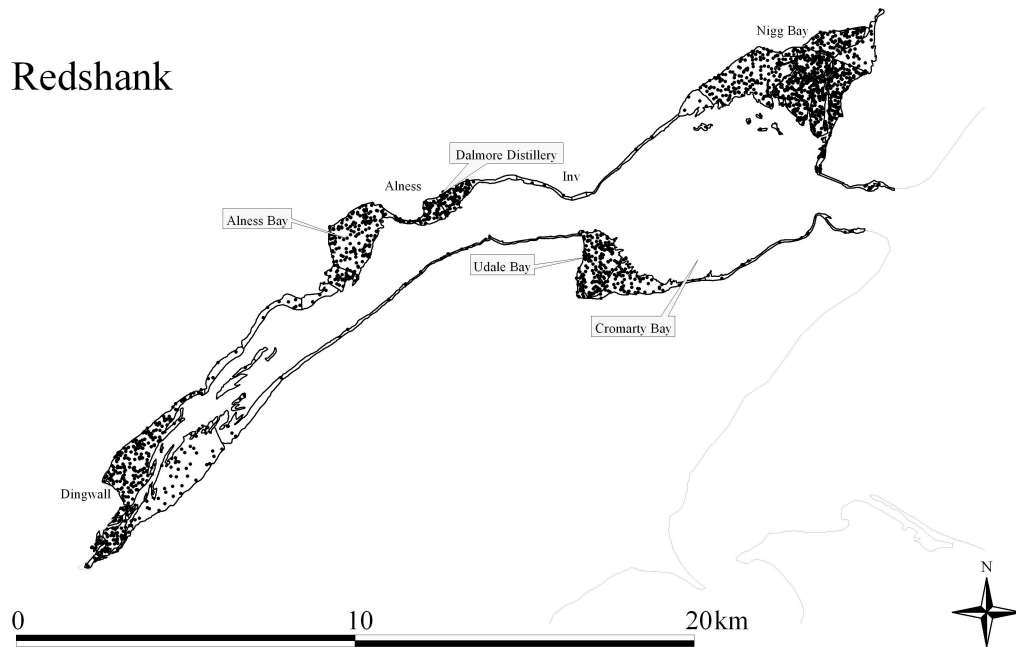


Figure 60. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Wigeon and Redshank at the Cromarty Firth, winter 2003/04 (Inv=Invergordon).