

ORWELL ESTUARY

Internationally important: Redshank

Nationally important: Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Gadwall, Pintail, Grey Plover, Black-tailed Godwit

Site description

The Orwell Estuary extends from Ipswich to the Port of Felixstowe where it meets the Stour Estuary. Much of the intertidal substrate is fairly muddy, although it becomes sandier towards the mouth. In mitigation for the latest port development, both the north and south shores of the lower reaches of the estuary have had soft silts placed behind stiff clay bunds within the intertidal areas, changing the substrate once again. Long stretches of farmland and wet meadow are situated along the mid-estuary, the latter providing roost sites for waterbirds. In the past, the main conservation issues concerned dock and marina developments. Dockland expansion at Felixstowe, since around 1964, has claimed all of the lower reaches of the Orwell's northern shore. Trimley Marshes Nature Reserve was established in 1989 as compensation for the loss of intertidal habitat to dockland development, and is managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. The reserve now provides a roost and safe refuge site for several thousand waterbirds during the winter period, as well as breeding sites for terns and other species (although it has not replaced the lost intertidal feeding areas). Other problems confronting the Orwell are pollution and disturbance from sailing and other leisure activities.

Bird distribution

Little Grebes were present at Trimley Marshes and in the upper part of the Orwell. Contrastingly, Great Crested Grebes were widespread although numbers were lower than in recent years. Cormorant, Little Egret and Grey Heron were all present in higher numbers at low tide than in previous years, with the 39 Grey Herons in February being a four-year high. The two heron species were generally around the mouth and at Trimley Marshes. Mute Swans were to be found on the upper part of the Orwell, particularly in the vicinity of Ipswich. Large numbers of Greylag and Canada Geese were recorded, mostly from Loompit Lake and Trimley Marshes. Dark-bellied Brent Geese were typically concentrated around the southern end of the estuary, particularly Trimley Marshes and Jill's Hole. A single Black Brant was noted in

February (the fourth consecutive winter at this site). Five Barnacle Geese of unknown origin were also present in February. Shelduck were distributed over the whole estuary with a peak of 700 in February. Their numbers have remained at this level for three years so the previous decline seems to have levelled off.

Wigeon numbers were down on the last few years. As is customary, they were widely distributed with Jill's Hole and Trimley Marshes the most favoured sites. Gadwall were found mainly at Loompit Lake, peaking at 376 in November then declining as the winter progressed. Mallard and Shoveler numbers were the highest Low Tide Counts for three years with most birds concentrated on Loompit Lake and Trimley Marshes. Most Pintail were encountered on Trimley Marshes and between the Orwell Bridge and Nacton (Figure 65). Trimley Marshes was also the site favoured by Teal and Ruddy Duck. Goldeneye and the few Red-breasted Mergansers recorded were found throughout the estuary on the river channel. Pochard and Tufted Duck numbers were the lowest for three years, but as usual favoured the marshes at Trimley and Loompit Lake. Mandarin was recorded for the first time on a Low Tide Count at this site in February. Water Rail, Moorhen and Coot were also recorded in their highest numbers.

Oystercatcher numbers remained high through the winter and in line with recent years most were between Mulberry Middle and Nacton on the north shore and off Redgate Hard on the south shore. Ringed Plovers were distributed throughout in higher than usual numbers, whilst the flock of Golden Plover was on the flats off Stratton Hall. Dunlin and Grey Plover were encountered throughout the whole estuary, with most occurring on both shores between Nacton and the Orwell Bridge. Lapwings were found mainly on Redgate Hard and off Stratton Hall, in their highest numbers for five years. In contrast, Curlew, although evenly distributed, were present in the lowest numbers for five years. Most Black-tailed Godwit occurred just south of the Orwell Bridge at Black Ooze flats and off Redgate Hard (Figure 65). Numbers of Knot were higher than last winter, mainly foraging on the inner estuary, between Mulberry Middle and

Nacton. Redshank favoured the same areas as the previous species, although they were generally more widely distributed throughout the estuary. Smaller numbers of Turnstone occurred than in 2002/03 although they were still found throughout the area. Small numbers of Avocet, Snipe, Bar-tailed Godwit and a

single Spotted Redshank were recorded. Sanderlings were not noted in any month this winter.

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

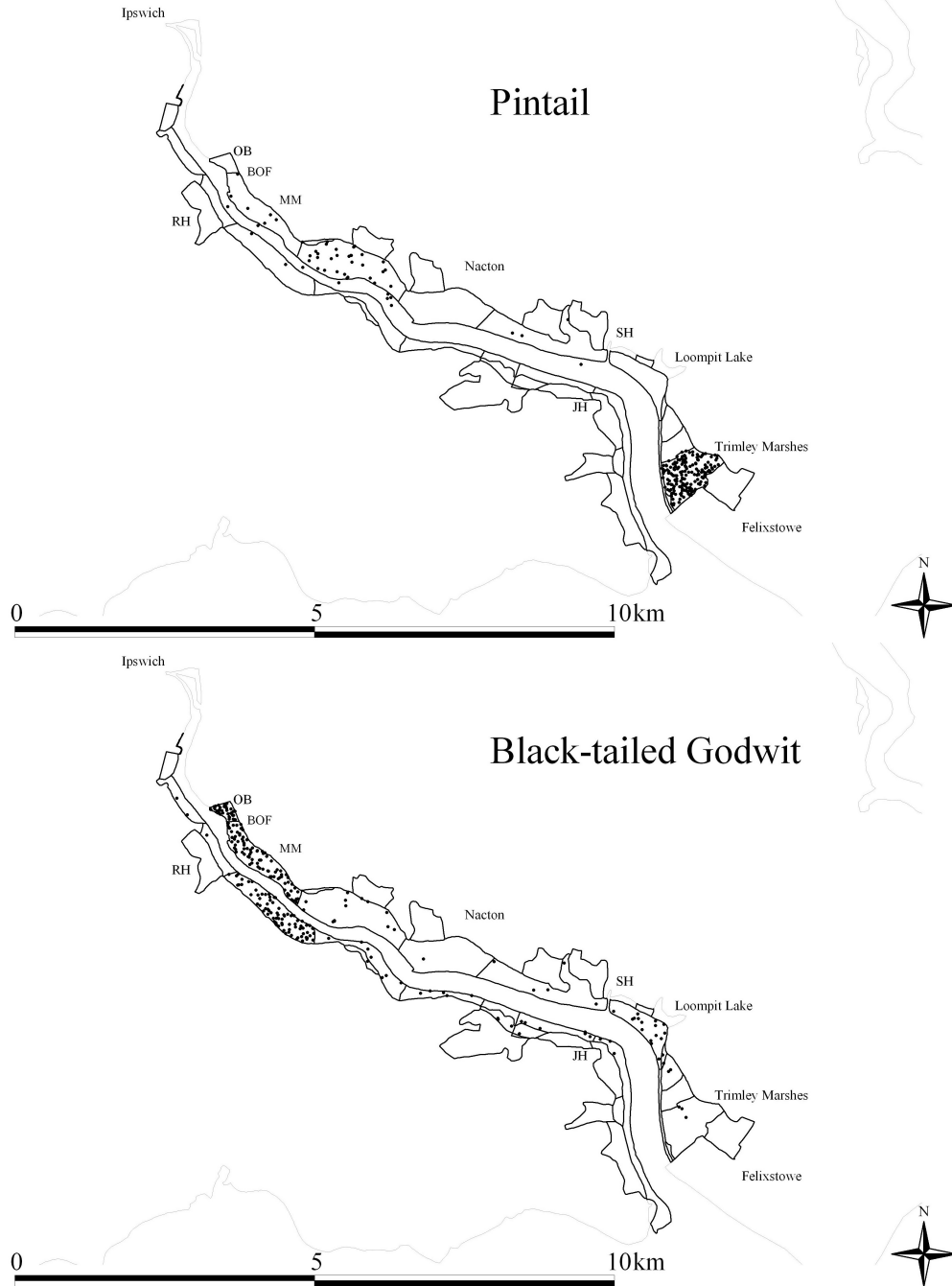


Figure 65. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Pintail and Black-tailed Godwit at the Orwell Estuary, winter 2003/04 (BOF=Black Ooze Flats, JH=Jill's Hole, Mulberry Middle, OB=Orwell Bridge, RH=Redgate Hard, SH=Stratton Hall).