

STOUR ESTUARY

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 straight estuary, which forms the eastern end of the border between Suffolk and Essex. The estuary's mouth converges with that of the Orwell as the two rivers enter the North Sea. The outer estuary is 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. Over much of its length, the estuary is bordered by sharply rising land or cliffs, leaving little room for saltmarsh development, which occurs mainly as a fringe with a substantial proportion of *Spartina*. The rising land and cliffs are covered by ancient coastal woodland with agricultural land behind. Since much of this land is private, there is very little disturbance to most of the estuary. Nature conservation in the area includes the Stour Estuary SSSI and the estuary is part of the Stour and Orwell Estuaries Ramsar site and SPA. Major parts of both Copperas and Erwarton Bays are owned or leased by RSPB and substantial adjacent woodlands are owned by Woodland Trust and Essex Wildlife Trust. Some sailing and shooting occurs. A governmental decision is soon expected regarding proposed port development at Bathside Bay.

Bird distribution

Great Crested Grebes were well distributed along the main channel, and numbers of this species and Little Grebe were high for recent years. Additionally, nine Slavonian Grebes formed a site record. Cormorant and Grey Heron were widely distributed, whilst the increase in Little Egret numbers was reflected with a peak of 38 in November. Mute Swans were concentrated mainly off Manningtree and Mistley, and at Harwich near the mouth of the estuary. Canada Geese preferred the west of Copperas Bay. Dark-bellied Brent Geese were widely distributed throughout the estuary, with concentrations off Mistley and at Stutton Mill, and on the eastern side of Holbrook Bay.

Shelducks were located over the whole estuary (Figure 66), but tended to favour the western end; numbers were down on the previous winter. Small numbers of Great Northern Diver, Red-necked Grebe, White-fronted Geese, Barnacle Geese and a single Bar-headed Goose were also recorded.

Wigeon were widely distributed throughout the estuary with concentrations at Stutton Mill, and in Jacques and Erwarton Bays but none around Bathside Bay. Teal numbers were up by a third on 2002/03 with most in Copperas Bay in the east and on the flats off Mistley in the west. Mallards were found over the whole estuary, but mainly south of the river channel in Copperas Bay. Most Pintails were found off Mistley and in Copperas Bay, although the peak was less than half that of the previous winter. Goldeneye reached 233 in December, most of which were in the river channel off Mistley. Red-breasted Mergansers, like Goldeneye, favoured the river channel, but were not concentrated in any specific area. The count of 45 Goosander in February in Jacques Bay was a record for the site. Occasional Mandarin, Gadwall, Shoveler, Eider, Common Scoter, Smew, Water Rail and Moorhen were also noted.

Oystercatchers were found throughout much of the estuary with the greatest concentrations present in Jacques and Holbrook Bays and off Stutton Mill, whilst Ringed Plover preferred Bathside Bay. Over 7,000 Golden Plovers were present in December with all the bays except Holbrook and Bathside being used by large numbers. Grey Plovers were distributed over the whole estuary, the highest densities observed in Holbrook Bay. Lapwing and Knot both favoured the inner half of the estuary. The low tide count of nearly 14,000 Dunlin in December exceeded the international importance threshold, and was well in excess of the peak Core Count for the winter, suggesting movements of feeding birds into the site. The only area not used by large numbers of Dunlin was the eastern side of

Copperas Bay. Black-tailed Godwit numbers peaked in November; the densest concentrations as usual were towards the western end of the estuary (Figure 66). Bar-tailed Godwit favoured the central part of the estuary, in Holbrook and Copperas Bays with small numbers elsewhere. Both Redshank and Curlew were widespread over the whole estuary and were present in all of the bays, though both were less dense towards the east of the estuary. Turnstones were present in

nationally important numbers on the Core Counts, numbers were somewhat lower at low tide, most birds occurring in Holbrook, Copperas and Erwarton bays. Other species of wader recorded included Avocet, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Jack Snipe, Snipe, Spotted Redshank and Greenshank.

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

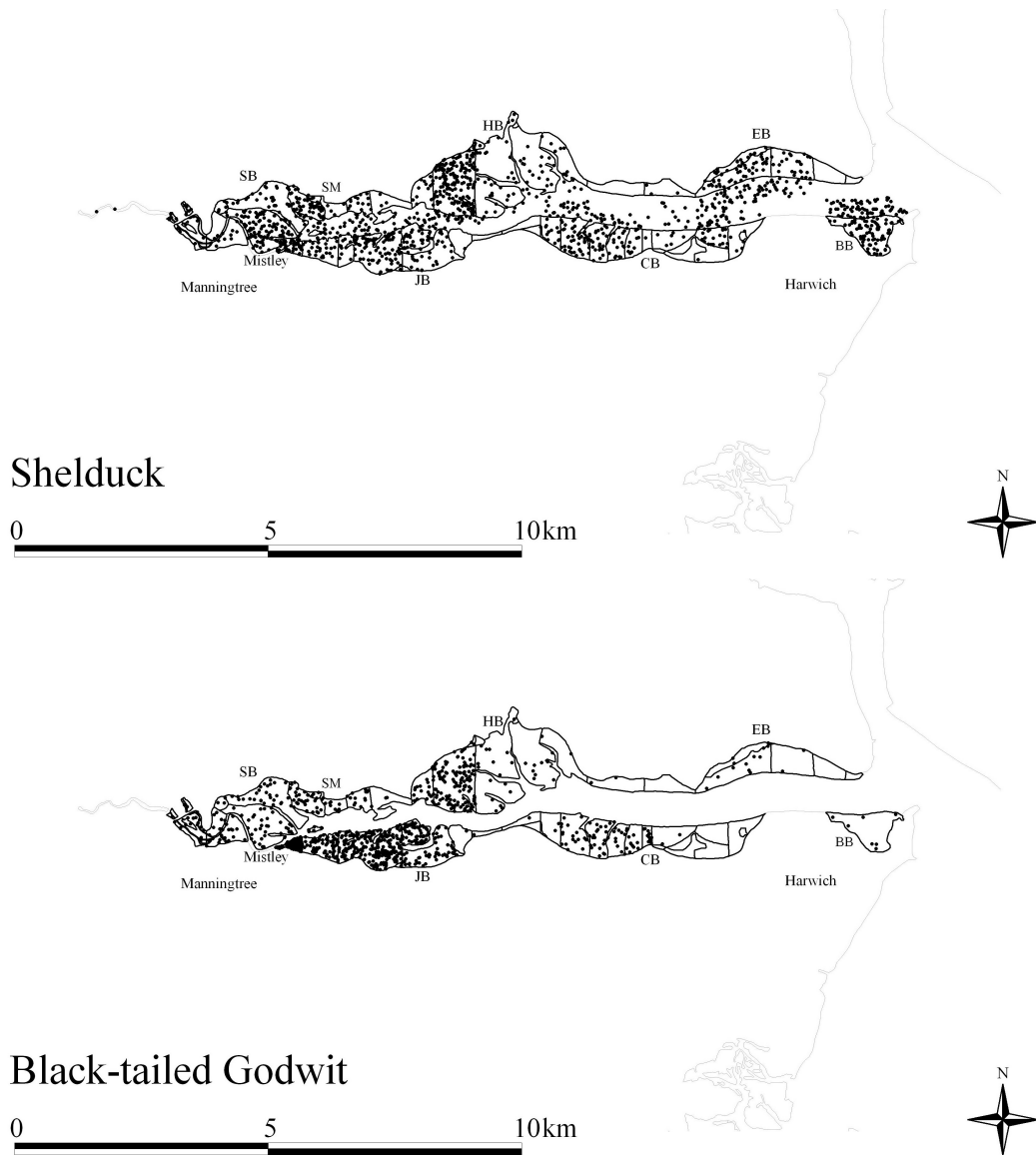


Figure 66. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Shelduck and Black-tailed Godwit at Stour Estuary, winter 2003/04. (BB=Bathside Bay, CB=Copperas Bay, EB=Erwarton Bay, HB=Holbrook Bay, JB=Jacques Bay, SB=Seafield Bay, SM=Stutton Mill).