

WeBSnews

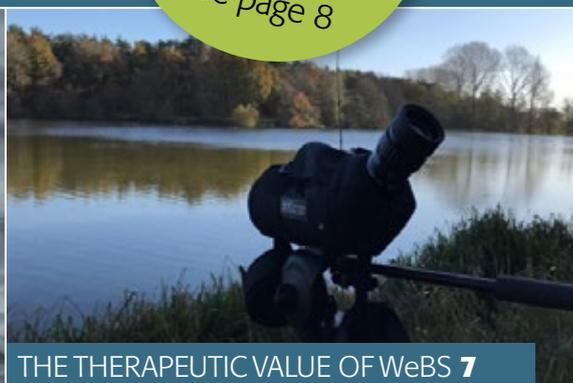
The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey



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New look WeBS Online!

We are very pleased to announce the refreshed version of WeBS Online, announced in the 2018 edition of *WeBS News*, went live on the 7th August 2019. Most online users will by now have had an email from us explaining some of the main changes, and many of you have successfully entered counts using the new system...

The idea for a WeBS Online data entry system was first proposed in the 20th edition of *WeBS News* in Summer 2004. Following a couple of years of development and pilot data entry, the system was opened to all WeBS counters in spring 2007. As the editorial in the Spring 2007 newsletter noted, “the big WeBS news of the moment is that WeBS

Online is now live... we are now confident we have a system that works well.”

The system did indeed work very well, and most WeBS counters moved to the online submission method. It improved further over the years, particularly in developing functions to help Local Organisers manage their WeBS teams and allowing WeBS partners and county bird



in association
with
WWT

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News.

Thirteen years after WeBS Online was launched, we have finally given it a much needed facelift (pg. 1). Although much of the functionality is the same and so will be familiar to regular users, we hope the new features will be similarly well received.

With so many threats to sites and habitats from developments such as housing or energy production, WeBS data are more valuable than ever. In this issue are articles on the Mersey Estuary (pg.10), an important site on the forefront of massive development pressure along its already developed shores, and how WeBS data from sea loughs in Northern Ireland (pg.12) have been used to assess the impacts of shellfishing in a recent report. These datasets would not be possible without the amazing efforts of our WeBS counters, and we thank you all.

Lastly I would like to welcome Gill Birtles to the WeBS team, who has replaced Heidi as the Counter Network Organiser.



Neil Calbrade Editor & WeBS Officer



CONTINUED FROM COVER

recorders to access raw counts.

As time went on, the code that lies behind the system was beginning to show its age, meaning that when there were changes to the underlying database software or servers, those dreaded 'bugs' started to creep in and were getting more time consuming and difficult for us to fix. People were also requesting new features which were just too problematic to incorporate into the existing code.

Although the most important launch in 2007 was undoubtedly WeBS Online, it was also the year that the first iPhone went on sale, and use of smartphones and tablets skyrocketed over the next decade. WeBS Online did work on these devices, but it hadn't been designed with them in mind, and some

features just didn't work at all. For example, anyone using them had to contact their Local Organiser or the WeBS office whenever they saw a new species at their site, as they were not able to 'double click' to add a new species.

These problems were not restricted to WeBS, and any of you who take part in some of the other surveys run by BTO, such as the Breeding Bird Survey, Garden Birdwatch or BirdTrack, will recognise some of the design elements in the new WeBS Online, as all the main BTO online systems have been overhauled in a similar way. As a user, it will be the front end – what you see on the computer screen – that will feel like the biggest change. But for us, just as important is that the computer code behind it is now much easier for us to maintain and improve. For you, this ▶

WeBS NEWS

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The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK, which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data collected are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, assess trends in numbers and distribution and identify and monitor important sites for waterbirds. A programme of research underpins these objectives. Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is a partnership jointly funded by BTO, RSPB and JNCC, in association with WWT with fieldwork conducted by volunteers.



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WeBS

The Wetland Bird Survey

About WeBS Taking part Results Counter resources Wetlands and birds Partners Help



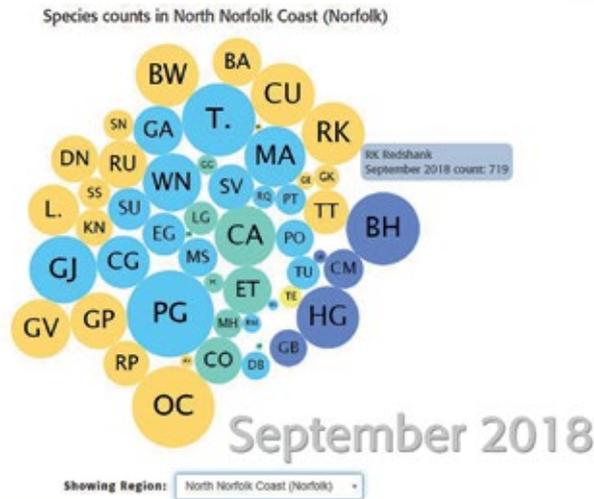
AVOLUNTEERS Logout

WeBS Online / Data Home

Data Home

Welcome to WeBS Online! From here you can submit your Core, Low Tide, Casual and Roost Counts, view details of your WeBS sites and explore your Historic records.

The menus at the top of the page can be used to access other parts of the WeBS website. If you are unsure how to proceed please review the WeBS Online instructions, or the guide to what's new.



WELCOME A VOLUNTEER

View/Edit My Details

YOUR OPTIONS

Core Count Entry

Casual/Roost Counts

View/Edit Submissions

View Site Details

Explore Data

HELP

Counter Resources

FAQs

Core Count Methods

Low Tide Count Methods

▲ The new-look WeBS Online homepage

matters too, as it means that we should be able to fix any problems and add new features much more easily.

SO WHAT'S CHANGED?

The major changes to data entry were introduced on pages 16–17 of last year's newsletter, *WeBS News 34*, and there are video guides and support materials available through the help menu within WeBS Online. One of the changes you will notice is a rephrasing over the questions of whether you recorded gulls and terns. This is to help us be sure of when there should be true zero counts of gull and tern species. You can change your default answer to these questions by editing your preferences in the 'My Details and settings' section. You can also change the default number of species that need to have been recorded on the site for the entry form to show you a site-specific list of options rather than the full list of common species.

You will all be familiar with the typical outputs from WeBS of species trend lines and site total tables that are available on the WeBS Report Online, but we thought it would be fun to display the raw data in a more dynamic, informal way within WeBS Online. On the new data homepage

is a visualisation of the bird counts in your WeBS local organiser area – by pressing the play button you can watch the relative numbers of species changing throughout the year. The circles show the species two letter code and are coloured by species group, and the full species name and count can be viewed by hovering over the circle. You can view other regions using the drop-down menu. It is fascinating to see for example the numbers of wader species on some of the big estuaries peak during late summer, and watch as the wader numbers decrease through autumn into winter as the wildfowl species counts increase.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The version of WeBS Online that launched in August was largely a like-for-like replacement for the existing data entry system. Now the exciting work begins!

One of the most frequent requests we've had when speaking to WeBS counters is from those who also use the BTO's general recording system, BirdTrack. BirdTrack has apps for iPhone and Android phones which work offline and so can be used in the field, and some counters find it convenient to use

the app instead of a notebook whilst doing their counts. At the moment they then have to manually transfer those counts to WeBS, typing them in again. We are planning to add an "Import a BirdTrack list" button to WeBS Online, which will transfer the counts you recorded in BirdTrack into the WeBS data entry form for you to check and add other WeBS-specific information such as ice cover. This also means that those of you who like to use BirdTrack to keep a list of all species, not just the wetland species, from your site visit will only have to type the data in once.

One of the other improvements we plan to make in the next few months is the return of recording the number of birds of different ages and sexes. The very first National Wildfowl Counts forms from the 1940s used to have space to record this information, so this is a return of data collection after a very long hiatus! The data gathered will be invaluable for future analyses of breeding success such as the number of young cygnets for the International Swan Census (see pg. 6) and also tracking changes in migratory behaviour by recording the ratio of male to female birds (see *WeBS News 31*, pg.8–9).

WeBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT



The Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary

Situated on the east coast of Scotland, the Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary is a Ramsar site and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), notable for 20 bird species of international and national importance.

Norman Elkins WeBS Local Organiser

The SAC embraces St Andrews Bay and a Special Protection Area (SPA) of 70 sq. km, which includes extensive invertebrate-rich intertidal flats and areas of reedbed, saltmarsh and sand dunes. A National Nature Reserve (NNR), Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and several Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lie within the SPA, which qualifies by regularly supporting the winter presence of 28,000 wildfowl and 20,000 waders. Within these are internationally important populations of Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Greylag and Pink-footed Goose and nationally important populations of Eider, Cormorant and Shelduck as well as sea duck and several wader species, the latter including one of the most northerly wintering populations of Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit in Britain.

Regular monthly winter counts began in the late 1960s and these were extended to cover the whole year from 1979 on the Eden Estuary and 1992 on the Tay, although not always complete during some summer months. The marine habitat

in St Andrews Bay has been counted regularly since 1971 although again not always complete. There have been Low Tide Counts since the early 1990s on both the Eden and Tay at intervals of six to 10 years.

WeBS Core Counts are undertaken from several points on the Tay, plus the Eden Estuary and St Andrews Bay. A team of nine dedicated counters covers all sites although coordination is not always achieved for various reasons. The Eden Estuary is managed as an LNR, where the ranger counts according to his work schedule and not at weekends when most of the counts elsewhere are made.

Low Tide Counts are a logistical nightmare! There are 90 sectors on the Tay and 12 on the Eden. Problems counting the Firth of Tay are exacerbated by the inner estuary being unapproachable through extensive reedbeds along the north shore. One of the largest tidal reedbeds in Britain, they extend for 15 km and are up to 0.5 km wide. Although high tide roosts are limited on the inner Tay,

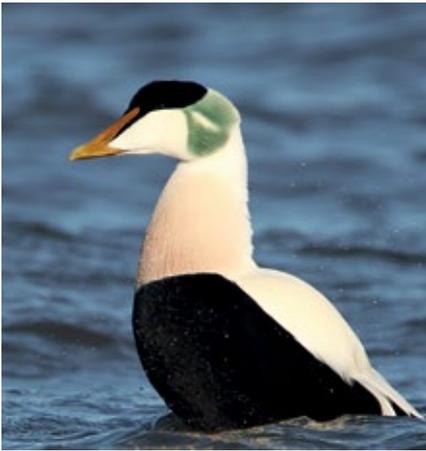
large numbers of waders feed on some sectors at low tide. The reedbeds themselves hold important breeding populations of Marsh Harriers, Water Rails and Bearded Tits.

Numbers of geese vary and are not always recorded on regular counts. Between 1,000 and 3,000 grey geese use the estuaries, mainly for shelter and resting. Both Redshank and Bar-tailed Godwit numbers have declined this century, though still of international importance. There is evidence that some species move between the two estuaries. For example, Dunlin roosts fluctuate; in some winter months roosts appear to alternate between the Tay and the Eden, but between 3,000 and 7,000 winter in the whole SPA. Oystercatcher, Sanderling, Grey Plover and Knot are all present in significant numbers while Black-tailed Godwit on the Eden number up to 300 and a small flock of Light-bellied Brent Goose winter here. Over 600 migrant Ringed Plover have been recorded in May and August, testament to the importance of counting throughout the year.

Sea ducks are less easy to monitor, especially with rough seas. The majority of Eider frequent the mouth of the Tay. Counting is only undertaken when conditions are suitable. Numbers reach 15,000 although, in the past, 20,000 to 30,000 have been present and may still be if distant birds were visible. After 2005, numbers of scoters decreased; Common Scoter declined from peaks of 2,000–4,000 to a few hundred, only to return to previous levels from 2016. Being very mobile, this suggested movements either further out to sea or to another coastline.



EDEN ESTUARY BY NORMAN ELKINS



Eider and Bar-tailed Godwit are two species that occur in large numbers on the Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary.



The Common Scoter used to be accompanied by 1,500–2,000 Velvet but the latter have not shown a similar recovery. Occasional Surf Scoter and King Eider appear, the latter once roosting on Lucky Scalp – a vegetated sand and shingle islet in the outer Tay. This is also a favourite place for moulting Goosander between June and October, numbering 200–300 birds. Parties of up to 100 Red-breasted Merganser winter in St Andrews Bay, together with Red-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe. Grey Heron also roost on the scalp, not far from two heronries in adjacent Tentsmuir Forest. Little Egret were first recorded in the area in May 2002, with a peak of seven on the Eden in autumn 2014. We live in hope that they may join a local heronry one day.

The outer Firth of Tay suffers from disturbance, particularly on fine days

when walkers and dogs can cause havoc among waders roosting along shores where public access is not restricted. Jet skis and boats also cause problems. Unfortunately there is little that can be done to reduce this, despite warning signs at the Tentsmuir Point NNR. There is limited and controlled wildfowling on the Eden Estuary but little other disturbance there. For 65 years until 2015, fast jets used the adjacent airfield at RAF Leuchars. Despite the noise level, jets never overflowed the estuary and the wildfowl showed no significant reactions. Neither has any significant change to their numbers been noted since flying ceased on the RAF's withdrawal.

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 If you would like to see your WeBS site in the location spotlight in future issues of WeBS News, please contact the editor.

WeBS Snippets



Gaining air miles

A Svalbard Light-bellied Brent Goose, thought by experts to be the oldest of its kind, has flown up to 100,000 miles in its lifetime.

The Brent Goose was ringed in 1996, meaning that it is likely to have migrated from its breeding grounds on the island of Svalbard in the Arctic to Holy Island, Northumberland (where it winters) 46 times in its lifetime. I'm sure counters there will be keenly looking for its return this winter.

Opting out of paper reports

The WeBS Partner Organisations strive to reduce the use of paper where possible. While we will still produce paper WeBS Reports and Newsletters, we are always looking at ways to reduce the number of copies printed. If you are a WeBS Counter and you would like to opt out of receiving paper copies of either or both of these publications, please contact webs@bto.org to let us know. Both the report and newsletter are available to download from the website at www.bto.org/webs-publications

International Swan Census

If your WeBS site or a non-wetland area near your site gets Whooper or Bewick's Swans, please take part in this census on the weekend of 11/12th January 2020.

Kane Brides WWT

In January 2020, the next five-yearly International Swan Census (ISC) will take place across Europe. The census, coordinated by the IUCN Species Survival Commission Swan Specialist Group, aims to estimate the size and distribution of the Iceland Whooper Swan and northwest European Bewick's Swan populations.

Since the first flyway-wide census took place in 1986, the Icelandic Whooper Swan population has been continually growing. The most recent census in 2015 reported 34,004 birds, which represents more than a two-fold increase since 1986 when 16,731 birds were recorded. In contrast, the Bewick's Swan population has declined, with the overall census total falling from 29,277 in 1995 to 20,147 in 2015. At the national level, in Britain and Ireland, although numbers fell following the peak of 10,758 in 1990, the subsequent censuses saw the population remain stable at around 7,000 birds, up until 2015 when there was a significant decline to just 4,392 birds. Ireland has seen a particularly large drop in numbers, with the census in 2015 recording just 21 birds compared with a peak of 2,004 in 1990. The 2020 census will result in updated flyway-scale population estimates for these two populations, along with the results helping to determine future conservation needs, especially for the Bewick's Swan.

Overall, the census in Britain and Ireland is coordinated by WWT; whilst counts in Ireland are organised by I-WeBS and the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group, WWT organises



ELLEN CHESTNEY

the survey in Britain.

Although WeBS and I-WeBS cover a large proportion of sites frequented by Whoopers and Bewick's, in order to attain complete coverage and a population estimate, we also need to survey areas that are not regularly covered or not covered at all by these schemes, such as feeding sites in agricultural areas. The census also involves collecting additional information on breeding success and habitat use of the swans, as well as counts of roosting birds made at dawn or dusk.

The 2020 census date is over the weekend of 11/12th January, coinciding with the WeBS priority count dates for that month. The WeBS Office has already contacted all the Local Organisers and counters to ask for their assistance in organising the census in their respective WeBS

region – and many thanks to all those who have responded so far – but there are still some gaps to fill. Please contact Kane Brides (kane.brides@wwt.org.uk) if you would like to get involved in the census.

Further information can be found on WWT's Waterbird Monitoring website at <https://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/get-involved/isc-2020/> and results from the census will be made available here in due course.

Coming Soon...

As part of the new WeBS Online developments, you will soon be able to optionally add age and sex data to your species counts. We hope that this will be in place in time for the January 2020 Swan Census and East Atlantic Flyway total count, so keep an eye out for information on the launch by email.

WeBS as Bird Therapy

A book has recently been published revealing the therapeutic benefits of birdwatching for people experiencing difficulties with their mental health, and WeBS counting is a good way to connect with nature.

Joe Harkness WeBS Counter

Since 2016, I have been committed to conducting a monthly wildfowl count at my local patch. I have missed a few counts, for a variety of reasons, but I make a date in my diary – literally – and try not to miss it. WeBS is a monthly count of the wetland birds that are present on a specified waterbody. Counts are done on the same day nationwide and this helps to map trends, not just locally but also on a national scale too. I discovered that my patch wasn't registered as a survey site and managed to get the BTO to register it.

A feeling of purpose and responsibility came with doing these surveys and purpose is a running theme throughout my writing. A 2014 study into purpose, by Larissa Rainey of Pennsylvania University, is interesting reading. By taking elements of many other definitions, she deduces that there are five key 'ingredients' of purpose. Two of these ingredients are particularly relevant to birdwatching – that purpose provides direction and creates goals for the future and that it provides a benefit and/or connection to someone or something other than the self.

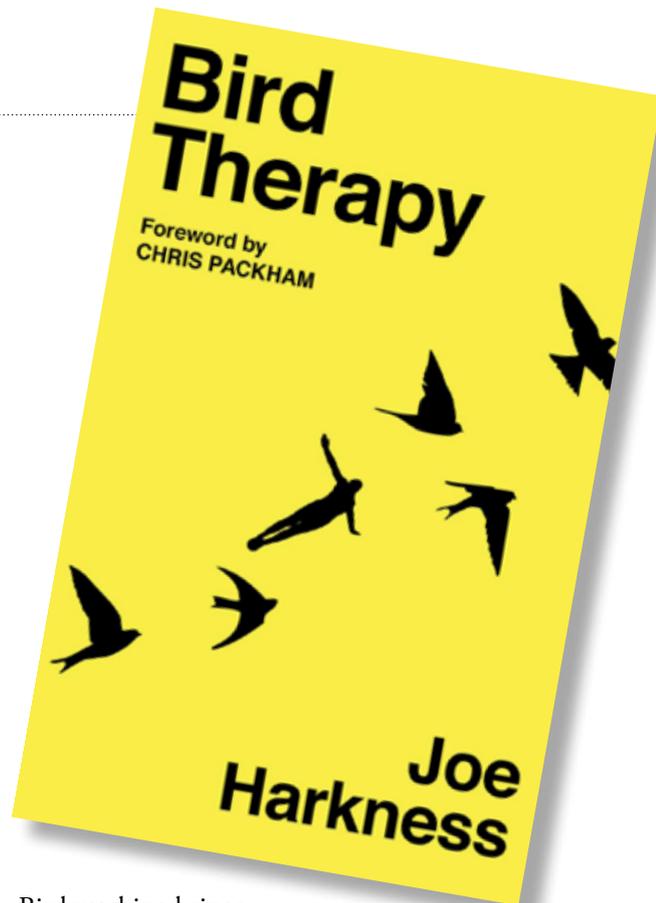
Birdwatching certainly provides direction and goals for many people. This can be through twitching and listing – with a goal to see more birds than other people. Or perhaps, specialising in learning about one family – woodpeckers, for example. In my own experience, I longed to be part of something – to feel a sense of connection and community. I also have a personal goal – to share my message about the therapeutic benefits of birdwatching with as many

people as I can. Birdwatching brings opportunities for lots of altruistic actions – whether that's inspiring the next generation or sharing sightings with others, it definitely connects one to someone or something other than the self – even when that connection is with the birds themselves and the natural environment.

My monthly count made me feel good. I was part of a network, a web of other people who, on the same day, were scanning their own flocks of wildfowl on a local lake, or dreaming of a rare grebe paddling out of the reed fringes. I was part of an initiative, a citizen scientist. As well as having a count to look forward to every month, it strengthened the bond I have with my patch and ultimately, led to me spending more time there. I also noticed that this

produced feelings of consistency and purpose, that were having a positive impact on my wellbeing – helping to curb the inflated sense of responsibility that I often tarnish my everyday life with.

This extract was taken from Joe's Bird Therapy blog, you can read more at birdtherapy.blog, while his book, *Bird Therapy* can be bought at bookstores or online. Joe also does excellent talks on his experiences, further details are on his blog.



Mapping High Tide Roosts of estuarine waterbirds in Wales

Roost sites are critical for waders, and being able to map the locations within a count sector can help ensure these sites are protected.

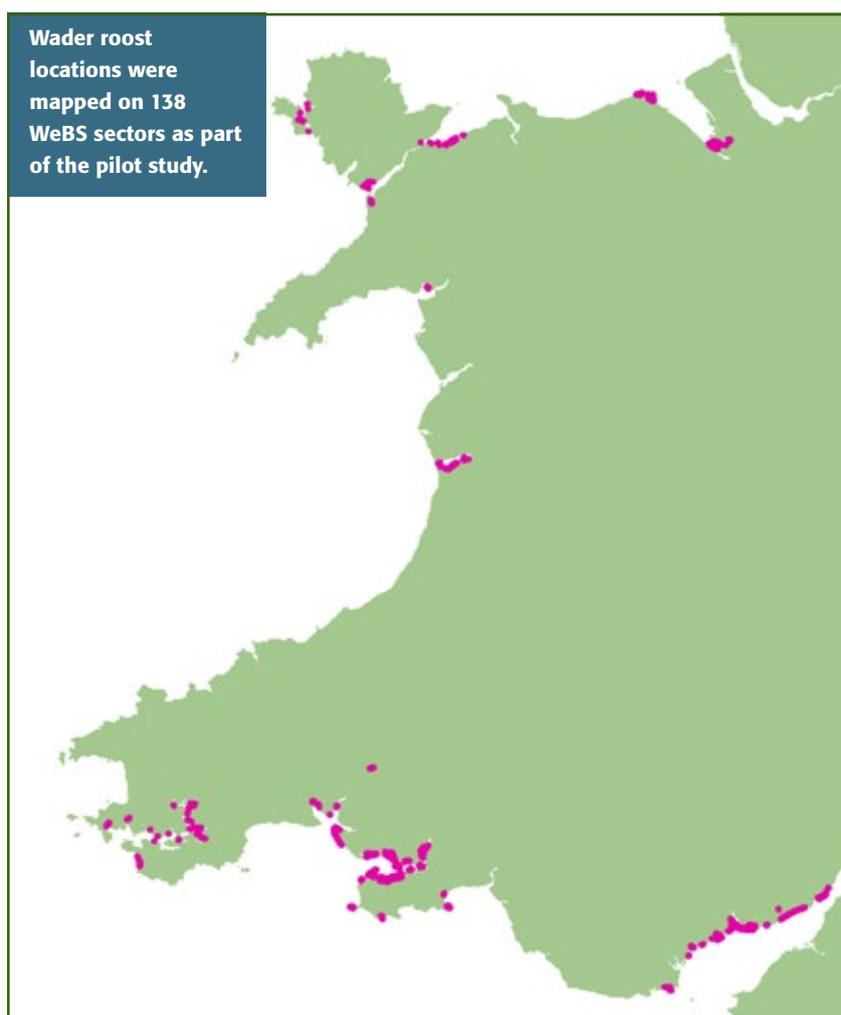
Teresa Frost WeBS National Organiser

The Wetland Bird Survey is site-focused: the database of counts is structured against locations, a hierarchy of count units within what we call a 'site' – a freshwater wetland system, perhaps, or an estuary. The national trends and population sizes calculated from the data are important, but in every issue of *WeBS News*, the incredible value of these counts at the site level is demonstrated with stories from around the country.

WeBS counts provide evidence for the impacts that changing site habitat management or allowing a development might have on waterbird species, influencing decisions made day-to-day by local and national government, conservation bodies and landowners. There is, however, a knowledge gap. At estuaries, a count sector could contain several roosts that are being counted for WeBS at high tide. The counters know where these key places are, but in the past there has been no way for this information to be recorded.

A development proposal might only potentially affect a very small part of a WeBS count sector. It might be a part of the estuary that isn't much used by birds – or it might be a key roost site which the birds depend on, and which could be highly vulnerable to disturbance. Knowing where regular roosts are located could be critical extra detail to help decision makers reach appropriate evidence-based judgements.

Improving the collection, storage and dissemination of data on roosts has consequently been identified as a priority for investment by the WeBS partnership. Work began in 2018 by

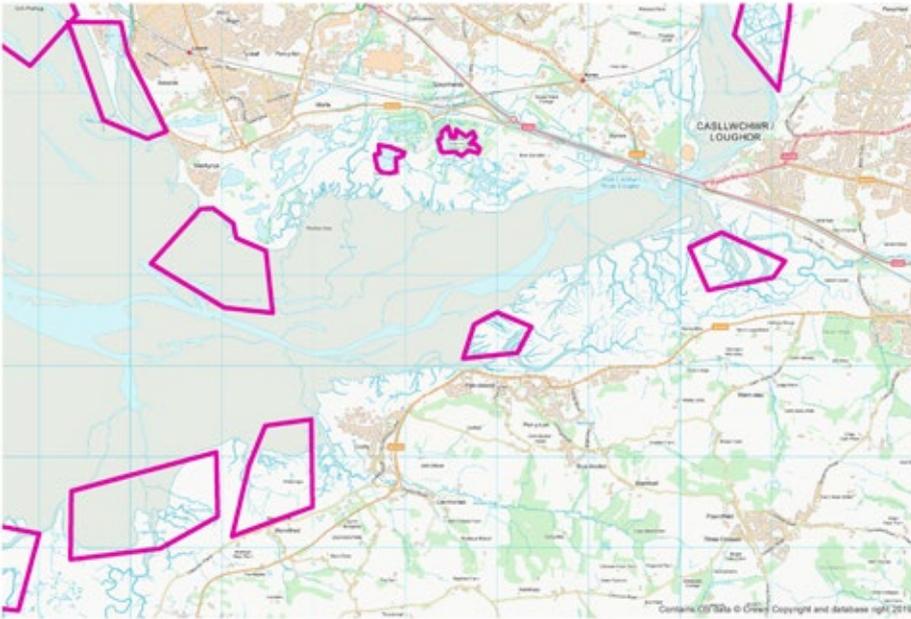


consulting with staff at the country agencies and the WeBS partners to determine what information would be useful and practical to collect from WeBS counters. Based on this we started building a new online data entry tool, WeBS Roost Sites.

The Welsh agency, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), had also identified collecting roost data as an urgent priority. In January 2019 we used the prototype WeBS Roost

Sites tool to collect data on Welsh roosts as a pilot project. The counter draws around the boundary of a roost and then enters data on the typical species and numbers using the roost and which months and tide states it is in use. Counters are also asked what human activities are known to take place nearby, what the habitat is like, and for any other comments on the roost.

We identified 138 relevant WeBS



▲ Hide tide roost locations on the Burry Inlet.

sectors in Wales that could potentially have high tide roosts on them and contacted the corresponding 11 WeBS Local Organisers and 57 WeBS surveyors. Some roost locations had already been identified in projects focused on particular estuaries, and these were also added to the new Welsh roost database. Including these, by the end of the project we had data for 150 roosts relating to 76 WeBS sectors.

Matty Murphy, Senior Marine Ornithologist at NRW said, “We were keen to capture information on roosts and activity around roosts. This is really important for casework. The dataset from the roost project will be very valuable and we are going to be using the data regularly.”

We now plan to work on extending the system to collect information from other estuaries and possibly other types of sites. Behind the scenes we need to do some database maintenance and add features missing from the prototype tool, such as recording that there are no regular roosts on a WeBS sector. We also need to think about how often data collection should happen. If you are a counter on an estuarine site, you will hear more about the WeBS Roost Sites tool in the future.

The WeBS partnership and NRW would like to extend a huge thank you to all the counters and local organisers in Wales who contributed to the Welsh Roosts project.



ALLAN DREWITT

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2019–2020 season...

2019...

13 October

17 November

15 December

2020...

12 January

9 February

8 March

12 April

10 May

7 June

5 July

23 August

20 September

18 October

15 November

13 December

Where tidal conditions at coastal sites are unfavourable on these dates, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates. Ideally, these should be separated by at least three weeks from counts in the preceding and following months. Counts on different count units within complex sites should be coordinated to avoid the possibility of double counting.

Keep up-to-date with count dates and add them to your electronic calendar at www.bto.org/webs/coredates

Survey 'cross the Mersey

An important site for many species, the Mersey Estuary, with docks, an airport and a major city along its length, faces many potential pressures. Thankfully, a dedicated team of counters monitor the site throughout the year, gathering valuable data.

Dermot Smith WeBS Local Organiser

The Mersey Estuary is one of our top 10 wetlands. It is the best place in the UK for Dunlin and Shelduck, yet, although surrounded by urban development and heavy industry, it is probably one of the least watched wetlands in Britain. Although there are many places to see the estuary from Liverpool, Birkenhead and Widnes, the very best areas for birds can't be seen by the public.

Just over 120 years ago, the Manchester Ship Canal was built along the south edge of the Mersey Estuary. There are no bridges across the Canal from the locks at Eastham where it flows into the Mersey Estuary until Runcorn, a distance of over 15 miles. This means that there is no public access to the most extensive saltmarshes and most

fertile mudflats in the estuary. This is where all the best birds are. We know this because WeBS counters have been getting special permission for access through Stanlow Oil Refinery, a ferry across the Canal and then out onto the marshes. Some counters have a very short walk to Stanlow Point, the site of an old monastery once set in the untamed marshes. One group of counters have a much longer trek five miles east, down by Ince Marshes and all the way down to Frodsham, and then five miles back again. Another group of counters walk four miles west, across the saltmarshes to Manisty. This means that doing a WeBS count of the Mersey takes all day, and there are no facilities out on the marshes.

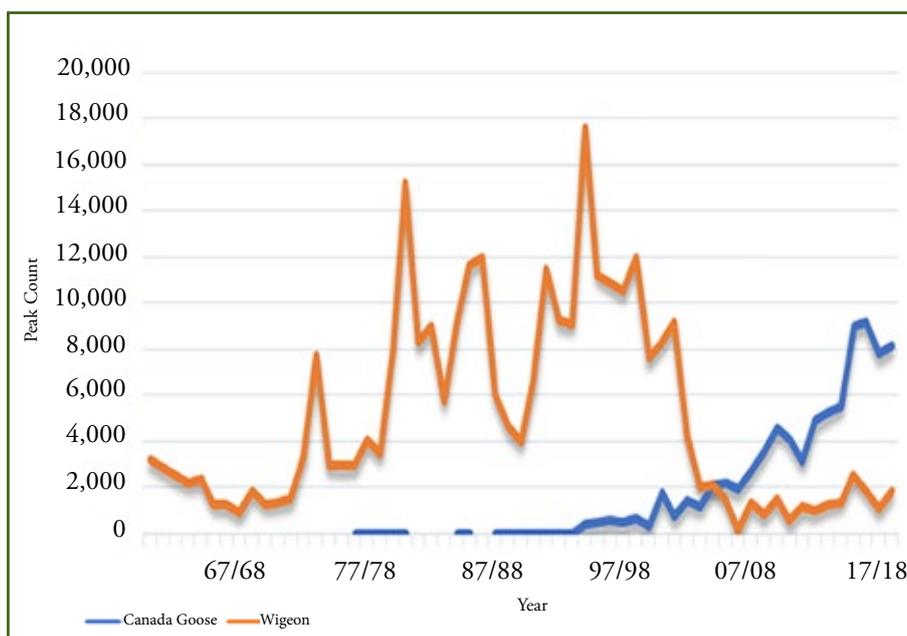
The counts on the estuary have

been going on since the 1950s and such a database is a mine of information for a data geek like me, showing the changing populations of many bird species.

Today the estuary is a great place and internationally important for Dunlin, Shelduck, Ringed Plover, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit. The graph below shows an interesting correlation between Canada Geese and Wigeon. We can't be sure whether the Canada Geese have displaced the Wigeon or whether the Wigeon moved elsewhere and the Canada Geese have moved into an empty niche. Whatever the reason, this proves the value of doing year round counts.

Unlike many other sites the Shelduck peak in July or August. They seem to like the rich and undisturbed habitat which makes an ideal place for them to gather and moult after breeding. The estuary is nationally important for Shoveler, Teal, Lapwing, Ruff and Curlew. We also have the largest flock of Canada Goose in the country with over 9,000 birds. These, like the Shelduck, peak in the summer months as they too seem to like this rich and peaceful habitat for moulting.

The building of the Ship Canal, although cutting off access, may have actually preserved the estuary as elsewhere the land surrounding the estuary is intensive farmland, industry, homes and an airport. The estuary is a really dynamic place; unlike the Dee or Ribble there is no dredged shipping channel and so the river channels can erode



▲ A comparison of Canada Goose and Wigeon counts on the Mersey Estuary

and deposit in a very natural way. This may give rise to some of the variation in bird numbers that we see as the channel moves and the proportions of mudflat to saltmarshes changes.

What I find most remarkable about the estuary is that such a truly wild place with such rich birdlife can exist in such heavily built up area, and yet it is also a remote area with quite an arduous adventure to get to the best and most extensive saltmarshes.

Although the intertidal area is designated as both a SSSI and an SPA, the land outside the boundary is less well protected, and this supporting habitat is under immense pressure for development. However, a more pressing concern for me is the Mayor of Liverpool's feasibility study into a potential tidal barrage to help turn Liverpool into a centre for green, sustainable energy. The term "green" energy really annoys me as a tidal barrage would be anything but green as it would have significant impacts on the environment and its birdlife. It would no doubt alter the dynamic geomorphology of the estuary and reduce the amount of intertidal



DERMOT SMITH

mudflats, the crucial habitat for Dunlin and Shelduck, the two most important species for the estuary. Below is a dot density distribution map showing the distribution of Dunlin at low tide. You can see how widespread the birds are, but also how dense the concentrations are in some key areas.

We don't know the outcome of the feasibility study but we

were very keen to do some comprehensive low tide counts so we can understand where the most important feeding areas are as this will be vital information if a barrage does make it through the feasibility study. If it does, then we have the evidence provided by WeBS data of how important the estuary is and hopefully this data will contribute to it staying that way!



Contains Ordnance Survey data
© Crown Copyright and database right (2016)

Diving into WeBS data

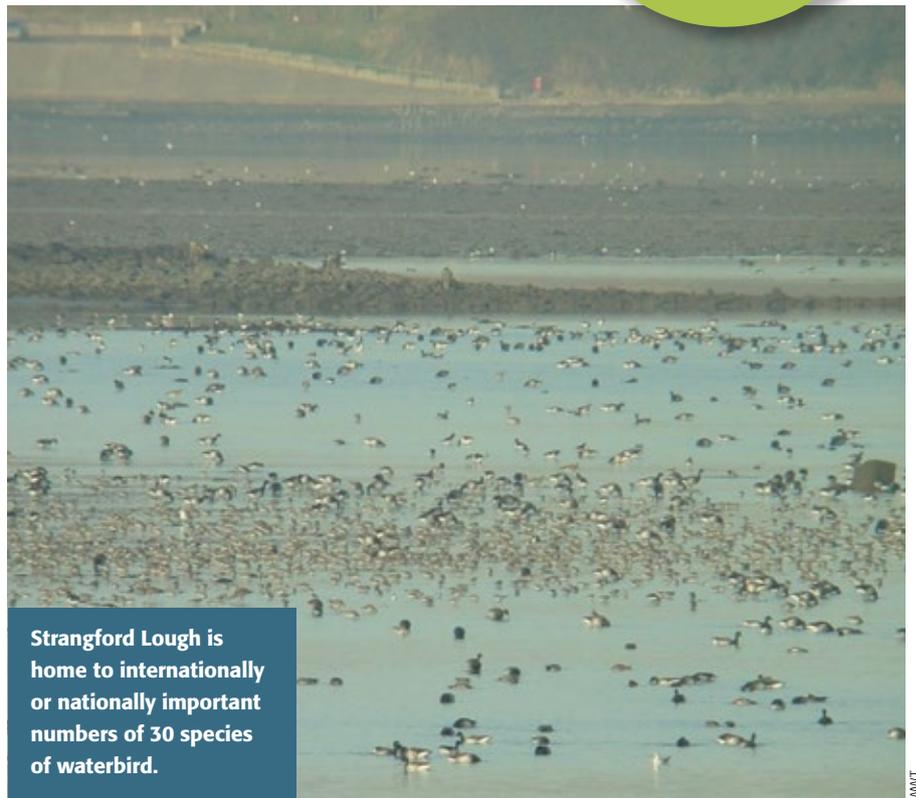
Northern Ireland's sea loughs provide fantastic bird-watching opportunities for anyone keen on their waterbirds, but close examination of WeBS data can reveal which locations in the loughs are supporting increases and which are suffering declines.

Katherine Booth Jones BTO Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a land of loughs, from the giant land-locked Lough Neagh at its heart to the labyrinthine Upper Lough Erne in the west, to the huge sea loughs on the coast. Sea loughs are tidal and their dynamic waters contain incredibly diverse and rich habitats for many species of wildlife, including nationally and internationally important populations of waterbirds in the winter months.

Not only are the sea loughs wonderful spots for bird life, but these valuable habitats also provide many benefits to humans. The scenery draws visitors to experience the magic of the loughs by boat or on foot, and the shallow tidal water provides excellent opportunities for shellfish aquaculture, which is big business in Northern Ireland. Where humans and waterbirds share the loughs, there is the potential for our activities to disturb waterbirds while they are feeding or roosting, behaviours that are essential to tired birds that may have travelled hundreds of kilometres to their wintering grounds. It is therefore important that we know which particular locations within the sea loughs are supporting waterbirds, and what the trends are of these species within the loughs.

In January 2019, BTO conducted the first sector-level analysis of WeBS data in Northern Ireland, focusing on Strangford and Carlingford. Analysing trends within sectors is revealing, as it can highlight where birds are



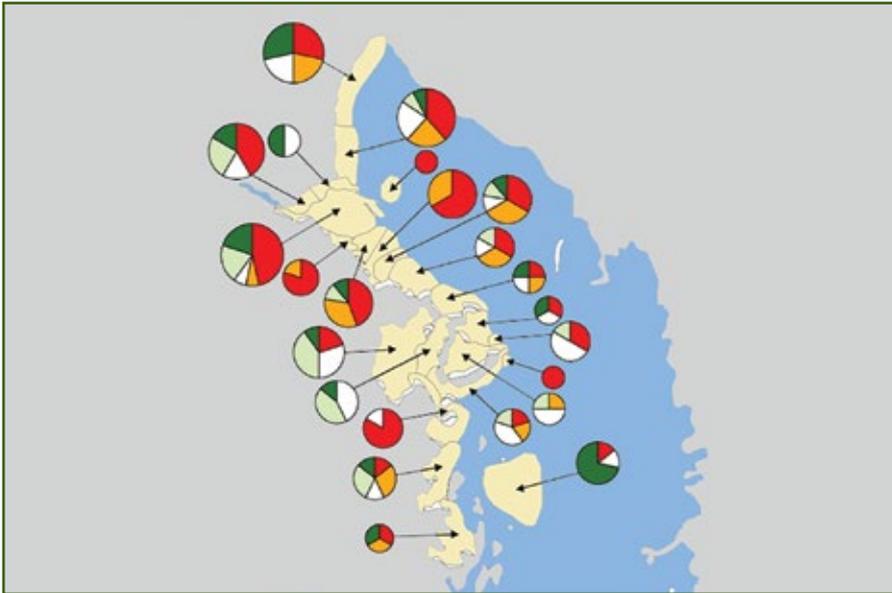
Strangford Lough is home to internationally or nationally important numbers of 30 species of waterbird.

doing well within a site, and where changing habitat or human disturbance may be coinciding with negative population trends. A useful overview can be gained by mapping pie-charts representing differing trends between the sectors, as shown opposite.

Sector-level trends can also be picked out for individual species and compared to the trends for the site overall. By comparing these we can investigate whether increasing, decreasing or stable trends in sectors are following that of the site overall and hence can infer whether there are local environmental factors that are influencing a particular species in the area.

For example, in both Carlingford and Strangford Lough, spectacular flocks of Light-bellied Brent Geese amass each winter in internationally important numbers. Around half of Strangford Lough's Light-bellied Brent Geese are found in a single sector in the north-west of the lough, where numbers have remained stable over the long term. Although not found in all WeBS sectors around Carlingford Lough, along the southern shore numbers of Light-bellied Brent Geese increased, suggesting an increase in the suitability of the habitat there, while numbers in the saltmarshes of Mill Bay

WeBS STAT...
51%
The decline in Redshank on Carlingford Lough since 2000/01.



▲ **Population trends of waterbirds within north-west Strangford Lough between 2000/01 and 2015/16.** The area of each pie chart relates to the number of species for which trends could be determined on the WeBS count sector in question and within each pie chart the proportions of those species that have undergone a substantial decline (red), a moderate decline (orange), "no" change (white), moderate increase (pale green) and sharp increase (dark green).

remained stable over the long term. Therefore Light-bellied Brent Geese appear to be doing well in their usual sectors in both sea loughs, and the overall population has remained stable in Strangford Lough, and increased in Carlingford Lough, driven by increases on the south shore.

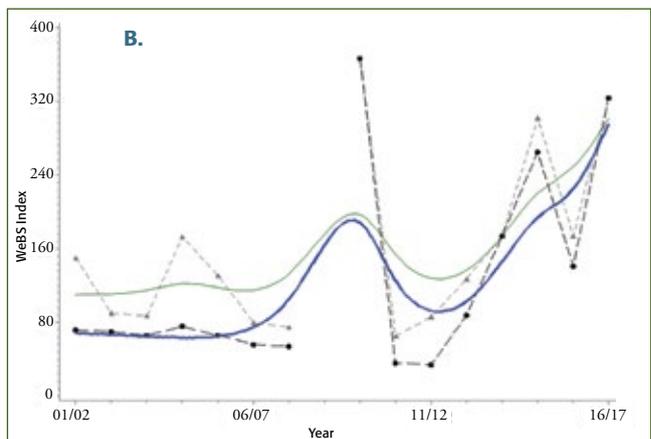
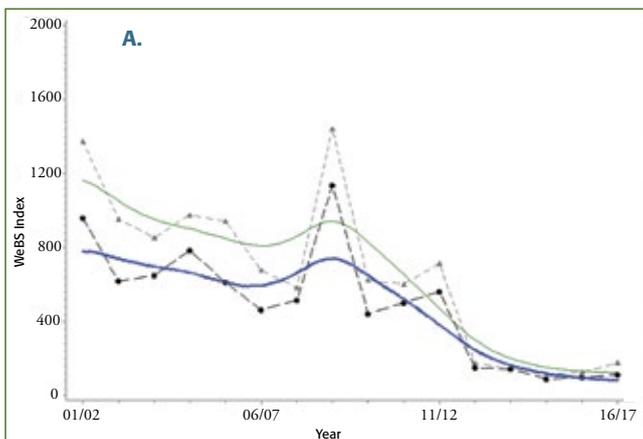
Stable or increasing trends in the loughs do not necessarily mean that birds are sticking to their traditional sectors. Observers hoping to see pretty flocks of Teal may find them in unexpected new areas. In both Carlingford and Strangford Loughs numbers of

Teal remained stable (300 and 2,200 respectively), but within-site trends suggest that Teal are moving around the sites, with small declines in some sectors balancing with small increases in other sectors, an insight that would be missed if we looked only at site level trends.

The most useful application of sector-level analysis is to identify declines in species, and to be able to pin-point whether there are particular sectors driving declines, and when declines began. Redshank are found in internationally important

numbers in Strangford Lough (2,300) and the population in Carlingford Lough (700) is nationally important. However, the fate of these striking waders is mixed within the sea loughs. For example, while the population is on the up on the southern shore of Carlingford Lough, on the north-western shore, numbers have declined (see graphs below). Similarly there are sectors in Strangford Lough where Redshank have increased despite declines elsewhere, suggesting some redistribution of birds within the lough. Despite small increases in some sectors, Redshank have declined in both Carlingford and Strangford Loughs, therefore identifying which sectors are suffering losses is key to addressing falling numbers in the future.

With these data we cannot say for sure what is driving the changes we see in waterbirds within Northern Ireland's sea loughs. However, WeBS data provide an extremely powerful tool to enable us to identify how birds are choosing to distribute themselves in the available habitat, which can be compared with areas that are potentially under threat. Detailed field studies informed by the findings of our initial WeBS analysis will be needed to identify and quantify the impact of disturbance and habitat change on the waterbirds of Northern Ireland's sea loughs.



▲ **Sector-level trends in the number of Redshank in Carlingford Lough.**

The upper (green) trend line is fitted through the winter peak counts whilst the lower (blue) line is fitted through the winter mean counts. A: Rostrevor to Newry. B: Omeath to Greenore.

David Stroud

A celebration of the career of one of main driving forces behind WeBS over the years, on his retirement.

Dawn Balmer BTO

David Stroud retired from JNCC in April, and with that, stepped down from the WeBS Steering Group. David's encyclopaedic knowledge of birds, his attention to detail, and his broad knowledge of wetland and waterbird conservation will be greatly missed. We'll miss his sense of humour too! David has always been hugely enthusiastic about WeBS, and we really appreciate all the guidance and support he has given the scheme.

David joined the Nature Conservancy Council in October 1985, initially working on the Moorland Bird Survey in the Flow Country. From 1 April 1991 he moved into the role of Head of Publications and Senior Ornithologist at JNCC. He was responsible for providing aspects of JNCC's ornithological advice to government, the statutory country conservation bodies and others at both UK and international scales. He was a member of the Ramsar Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and was previously Chair of the Technical Committee of the African Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement.



▲ David holding a Greenland White-fronted Goose, a species he has been studying since the late 70s.

David has contributed to the work of Wetlands International, the EU Birds Directive's Ornis Committee and its Scientific Working Group as well as the International Wader Study Group and the UK Ornithological Expert Panel on Avian Influenza. Previously David has been Chairman of the UK Joint Working Party of Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites, and Chairman of the UK Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP). David will remain on the RBBP in a personal capacity.

David has always ensured that WeBS data, and other BTO data sources feed into national reviews, making the best possible use of data. He has co-ordinated three national reviews of the UK network of Special Protection Areas classified under the EU Birds Directive, and contributed to four reviews of Birds of Conservation Concern. He has also worked on Article 12 (Birds Directive) reporting.

He has a real passion for Greenland White-fronted Geese, and has been involved in a long-term population study involving numerous expeditions to catch and ring birds, and authored many papers on their status. He has also worked on Spotted Crakes, developing a better understanding of their historical and current distribution and trends in the UK.

We wish David well in his 'retirement', though knowing David he will be as busy as ever! He has exciting plans to manage his own wetland habitat, and will hopefully find some time for birding too.

Low Tide Counts Update

The winter of 2018/19 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 19 estuaries around the UK, including Southampton Water for the first time since 2000/01. The Alde Estuary, Northwest Solent, Lindisfarne and the Tees Estuary were all also counted. We thank all the counters at all of these sites for taking part.

The counts for the 2019/20 winter will soon be underway on the Solway Estuary, Ythan Estuary, Auchencairn Bay and Deben Estuary among other sites being counted under the six-yearly program. The Wash is also going to be counted under contract to Natural England, which will be a massive undertaking of such a large site.

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even

those that have not yet been counted under the Low Tide Counts scheme, so please contact the WeBS office (lowtide@bto.org) if you are able to organise a team or able to count a whole site yourself once a month between November and February and would like to take part.

As part of the online WeBS Reporting interface via www.bto.org/websreporting-lowtide, dot density maps for all sites and species are now available. This allows the user to compare the distributions of birds using any combination of site, species and years side by side for ease of comparison. Monthly peak counts and average densities can also now be seen for all species recorded on each site in a particular winter.

COUNTER NETWORK

Local Organiser News

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Kane Brides (Cheshire - North); Ken White (Berkshire); Geoff Orton (North Kent Estuaries); David Cookson (Cheshire - South); Morag Wilson (Orkney); Gareth Harris (CWP); Duncan Halpin (Clwyd(Inland)), Bill Haines (Harrogate and Yorkshire Dales), Chris Coppock (Buckinghamshire - North) and Pat Cullen (Isle of Man) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter.

We were greatly saddened to hear that Gladys Grant passed away in May 2019 (see obituary below). Gladys was the Local Organiser for the Tamar and had been a WeBS counter for 20 years. Brian Knights, a long-standing counter on the Stour Estuary, also sadly passed away in April 2019. Our condolences go out to their families, they will both be greatly missed.

We would also like to thank the following new Local Organisers: Murray Orchard has taken over as the Thames Estuary - Hoo Local Organiser; Phil Hampson who is the new Cheshire - North Local Organiser, Brian Watmough for taking on the Swale Estuary; Bob Knight who is the new Medway Estuary Local Organiser; Paul Miller who has taken over as the Cheshire South Local Organiser; Sarah Money for taking on Orkney; Kirstie and Calum Ross who

are the new Local Organisers for Lochabar; Ben Welbourn for taking over as the Cotswold Water Park Local Organiser, Sean Murphy for taking on Berkshire and David Kennet for taking over the Isle of Man.

Special thanks are needed for two long-term counters who have stepped down this year. Reg Etheridge who was the counter for the Alde Complex and Gary Whatley who is stepping down as a counter for the Deben Estuary. Both counters have been counting their sections for over 30 years. A massive achievement – thank you both for your support! More special thanks go out to Mike Innes, who has been counting for over 14 years at three sites. His Local Organiser, Moray Souter, would like to thank him for all his hard work and dedication to the scheme.

Desperately seeking organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Tamar, Harrogate and Yorkshire Dales, Clwyd (Inland), Buckinghamshire (North), Angus, Buckinghamshire (South), Derbyshire, Durham, Halifax/ Huddersfield area (Yorkshire), Kent (East), Kent (West), Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin), Co. Londonderry, Co. Tyrone, Co. Down. If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office webs@bto.org.

WeBS OBITUARY

Gladys Grant 1942–2019

Gladys was born in a nursing home in Lode (Cornwall) on the 28th July 1942, but was brought up in Plymouth. She loved watching sport. Although disabled, it did not stop her from following her local football club, Plymouth Argyle, of which she was a season ticket holder. She had also been a season ticket holder with Taunton Cricket Club for over 50 years.

Her love of birding began when joining the Plymouth RSPB Group. She became a Young Ornithologists' Club (YOC) leader, a volunteer and a committee member. Gladys would make her annual trip to Norfolk and the Isles of Scilly, where her car would be transported by ferry to enable her to get around the island.

Since 1989, Gladys counted the waterbirds at Millbrook for WeBS, became Local Organiser for the Tamar Estuary and represented Southwest England on the Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) between 2011 and 2015. Her presence will be greatly missed by her many birding friends.

Carole Bartlett and Jenny Stidwell

STAFF CHANGES

Changing of the guard

At the end of June this year, Heidi Mellan left the WeBS Office after 14 years in the role of Counter Network Organiser for another role within the BTO. Heidi was the first point of contact and was very well known and loved by Local Organisers and WeBS counters alike.

However, we are delighted to welcome Gill Birtles, who is now the main contact within the WeBS Office for any information about WeBS Online, getting in contact with your WeBS Local Organiser, site allocation or to make any comments.

Prior to joining the BTO in July 2019, Gill worked in West Yorkshire as an environmental consultant on development projects. Before that, she studied Wildlife Conservation at Liverpool John Moores University and spent her placement year carrying out practical and research work at the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust reserve in Slimbridge. It's here that her love for wetlands and birds was nurtured!

I'm sure you will all help us in supporting her and making her feel very welcome!



BACKCHAT

Word of mouth...

Trip Counts..

Have you ever considered whether your holiday could fill in some WeBS Coverage gaps? Experienced counters can be particularly of help if you fairly regularly visit a region in winter where obtaining complete coverage is difficult due to low numbers of local birders. Perhaps you go somewhere to help out with Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme counts and could count for WeBS as well. Check coverage at www.bto.org/webs-vacant-sites and talk to the relevant Local Organiser or Gill Birtles at the WeBS office if you think you could help.



Calling photographers and artists!

To keep our publications, online report and publicity for WeBS looking great and telling the story of what we do and why we do it, we need your photos of waterbirds, your WeBS sites and wetland habitats. Line drawings for the annual report are also needed. Please send labelled images, that you give us permission to use anywhere, that you would like us to add to our library. We always credit the photographer.

East Atlantic Flyway 2020

Every three years, a special effort is made to do a total count along the major East Atlantic Flyway sites for the International Waterbird Census (IWC), as resources are not available to do this in all countries every year. Please help by making sure not to miss your January WeBS count (Core Count priority date 12th January 2020). WeBS is again supporting counts in Sierra Leone with funds, and providing support from Richard Hearn (WWT) and Chas Holt (ex-WeBS).

Snap shot



Mesmerising murmurations!

Imagine trying to count over 22,000 Knot and 6,000 Oystercatchers at once on your WeBS site. This is what the team at Snettisham RSPB reserve manage each year, this particular flock photographed by Phil Gwilliams in August 2019.

WeBS Alerts

It has been six years since the last WeBS Alerts report. Alerts are advisory indications that a species of importance has decreased on a protected site or the SPA suite in Great Britain or Northern Ireland by more than 25% (medium alert) or 50% (high alert) in the short, medium or long term. The report will be published within the WeBS Report Online at www.bto.org/webs-reporting-alerts on 22nd October 2019.

The WeBS team & contacts

Although the first port of call for counters should be their Local Organiser, many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help...

Graham Austin

WeBS Alerts, WeBS database management, Statistical analyses
graham.austin@bto.org

Matthew Baxter

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Gill Birtles

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Neil Calbrade

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