WeBS data and avian influenza

As most of you are doubtless already aware, WeBS data are used regularly by the government conservation agencies to designate reserves and other areas of protection, and to fight potentially damaging developments. Recently however, WeBS data have proved invaluable in our fight against avian flu. David Stroud from JNCC explains . . .

The spread of the Asian lineage highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 across Eurasia during the last 12 months has been the subject of considerable (though often inaccurate) media attention. During this period, the WeBS Partners have been working with the UK government and the European Union to provide the necessary data and information for a number of risk assessments. From a policy perspective, the central question asked by government has been “what is the risk of H5N1 arriving in the UK, when and where?”

Late last summer, the role of wild birds in transmitting H5N1 was unclear, but it is now apparent that wild birds are one of the multiple routes of transmission of the virus, (as was demonstrated by the arrival of the virus in Europe prior to any outbreak in poultry.) Other transmission routes such as the movements (both legal and illegal) of poultry and poultry products, the wild bird trade and mechanical transfer have all contributed to the global spread of the disease to varying degrees.

The wealth of existing data on wetland sites, waterbird distribution and movements within the UK has been invaluable in responding to the fast-changing events of the last year. In assessing the risk of transmission specifically by wild birds, WeBS data have been used in the major risk assessment undertaken by the European Food Safety Authority1 as well as a recently published assessment by the European Commission2.

Closer to home, WeBS has been a primary source of data for national risk assessments undertaken by DEFRA in response to the rapidly changing situation1.

During the spring of this year, the ability to be able to rapidly advise government was tested with a ‘false alarm’ in Orkney in mid-March. Unfortunately this was soon followed by the confirmation of the real thing (of the HPAI H5N1 strain) in Fife in early April, when a decomposing Whooper Swan was found in Cellardyke Harbour near Anstruther. A few weeks later, an infection of poultry in Norfolk by the by low pathogenic H7 strain was confirmed. For each of these incidents the immediate questions asked were related to the location of and composition of any concentrations of waterbirds in the vicinity, coupled with questions as to spread through onward waterbird movements.

Ringing data, such as that summarised by BTO’s Migration Atlas, have also been crucial to an understanding of waterbird movements, and

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Editorial

Summer again and it has been another busy year for WeBS. As the everyday tasks of running the scheme, collating all your records, writing reports and answering requests for data weren’t enough, in August 2005 (shortly after WeBS News 21 went to press), the “bird world” was plunged into the issue of Avian Influenza. A year on, many of us now know more than we ever expected (or wanted!) to know about virus strains, disease control, the poultry industry, the workings of governmental and inter-governmental agencies, and, of course, the media. We had already featured an article on the virus in WeBS News 21 but I have to admit I hadn’t realised the significance of the piece at the time!

In many ways, the massive attention suddenly given to AI was unwelcome, a distraction from ongoing work (and indeed, life outside work!) However, on the other hand there has been no greater opportunity in recent years to demonstrate to the government, the media and the public the value of the volunteer bird monitoring carried out in the UK. Given that the majority of cases have involved waterbirds, WeBS and the ringing scheme have obviously been at the forefront, but data from almost all surveys, ranging from those looking at garden birds to the large-scale allases have been brought into play to inform the debate. JNCC Chief Ornithologist David Stroud talks about of this in his article (see front page).

One of the features of avian influenza is that it is very much an international phenomenon. Luckily, so is bird monitoring. Ornithologists have suddenly been needed across the world to inform their local policymakers and to contribute to the global view of the virus. In a way that would have been impossible in previous decades, transfer of information, ideas and theories has been made straightforward by e-mail and the internet. An e-mail discussion forum was set up in August 2005 for ornithologists to discuss AI issues. At the time of writing, there have now been 2,352 messages posted and there are 120 members of the group, from all over the world. Such international cooperation between national counting and ringing schemes has long been the case, but situations such as AI underline the importance of international organisations such as Wetlands International and Euring. Such international cooperation has long been the case but situations such as AI underline the importance of international organisations such as Wetlands International and Euring. WeBS counts are fed into the International Waterbird Census, a collation of January counts across the world by Wetlands International. As well as helping to answer questions about specific issues such as AI, the IWC is also of crucial importance in determining international population sizes and trends.

Of course, we keep saying it but it’s true: none of this would be possible without you. The counts we all make at our individual sites not only make up part of the national picture, but also the world view. Once again, thanks for all your help and have a good 2006–07 season!

Andy Musgrove
WeBS data and avian influenza
.....continued from page 1

along with information deduced from
the virus have helped us learn more
about the likely source of these infec-
tions. Thus, the genotype of the H5N1
isolated from the Fife Whooper Swan
was virtually identical to those of HPAI
H5N1 viruses then circulating in the
Baltic, indicating the ultimate source
(although whether it had actually been
brought across the North Sea by the
swan or other species is obviously
unknown).

Whilst last winter saw largely reac-
tive use of WeBS data to advise
government, the BTO and WWT are
currently involved in a major project
for DEFRA to assess areas of potential
higher risk of avian influenza occur-
rence; identifying where there are
large concentrations of poultry in close
proximity to significant numbers of
waterbirds. This will provide important
information to allow a more strategic
approach to the targeting of AI surveil-
lance activity in the months ahead. It
will also help the UK to start to develop
an ‘early-warning system’ related to
circulating avian influenza viruses.
This is crucially important given the
huge potential economic impacts that
outbreaks of influenza can have. The
2003 HPAI H7N7 outbreak in the
Netherlands, for instance, resulted in
direct costs to the poultry industry of
€270 million and indirect costs
exceeding €1,000 million with over 30
million chickens killed before the
outbreak was stamped-out.

The spread of H5N1 also has impli-
cations for bird conservation as the
mortality of a significant proportion of
the world population of Bar-headed
Geese demonstrated last year in
China. Government contingency plan-
ing highlights the potential need to
minimise disturbance to birds in
infected areas and thus reduce the risk
of local spread of the virus. To this end,
the ability to map waterbird distribu-
tions with respect to outbreaks is
critical and will aid conservation also.

The events of the last 12 months
have especially highlighted three
themes:

• The immeasurable importance of
the WeBS data archive representing
countless days of voluntary survey
effort over decades. This voluntary
effort is never taken for granted,
and without it a monitoring scheme
of the size and scope of WeBS
would simply not be feasible. The
end result, constantly growing,
allows increasingly sophisticated
questions to be addressed.

• The fact that, however good our data
archive is, its value in advising
government, especially in real-time
emergencies, is only as good as the
information systems that allow the
retrieval of key data and its summarisa-
tion to provide readily understood
information for decision-makers
within government. To this end, the
increasingly GIS-based information
systems used by WeBS performed
well, and more than justified the
investment that the WeBS Partners
have been making in recent years.
The current development of on-line
systems of data capture through the
WeBS Online project and associated
work will further enhance capabili-
ties to extract and organise past
counts.

• The importance of specialist
professional staff being able to
interpret collated WeBS data so as
to advise and inform government
agencies.

It seems unlikely that the issues
raised by the spread of HPAI H5N1 will
go away soon, and there is currently
much planning within the government
and its agencies to develop rather
more sustainable systems of advice
provision. This is seeing the develop-
ment of information modules that can
readily extract necessary data in
advance of its need. Watch this space!

For more information:
2http://ec.europa.eu/environment/
nature/nature_conservation/
focus_wild_birds/avian_influenza/
index_en.htm
3http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/
diseases/monitoring/riskassess.htm

David Stroud
Senior Ornithologist, JNCC

Wildbird risk area surrounding the H5N1 outbreak site at Cellardyke, Fife.
Dots show position of WeBS sites
The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) aims to monitor the changing fortunes of the UK’s non-breeding waterbirds. It remains one of the most popular of volunteer surveys and coverage is excellent across much of the UK. However, in common with many other surveys, there is a perennial problem in getting the more remote parts of the country covered.

One such area is the north-west coastline of mainland Scotland, from Skye up to Cape Wrath and then east along the north coast of Sutherland. This is a wild and windswept region, with numerous deeply-indented sea-lochs backed by a hinterland of mountains and moors. Relatively few people live in the region and the weather in the winter months can be particularly harsh. Small wonder then that getting regular coverage of the

RAFOS helps out with WeBS Counts in NW Scotland

Good numbers of Shag were recorded during the RAFOS counts. Photograph by Stuart Newson.
area for WeBS has been difficult in all but a handful of areas.

We have been delighted, therefore, that the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) have mounted expeditions to this coast during February 2005 and 2006, following similar surveys back in the 1990s. A small number of hardy souls have counted waterbirds along as much of the coast as possible, concentrating on the larger sea-lochs but with more open areas of coast covered also. The results have been extremely interesting, with several species regular up here that are considered scarce further south. For example, in February 2005 the team found totals of 46 Black-throated and 95 Great Northern Divers, 12 Iceland Gulls and eight Glaucous Gulls, not to mention occasional guest appearances by both Golden and White-tailed Eagles.

In addition, the RAFOS team have also provided counts for some of the inland lochs in the region. As might be expected, these lochs have been found to support extremely low densities, with many having no birds at all and others perhaps holding a Goldeneye or two. Whilst perhaps not so exciting as the coast, we have been very pleased indeed to get these inland counts. We are currently investigating analytical approaches to estimating the numbers of waterbirds present on uncounted waterbodies, both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. To do so, we need counts from at least some of each “class” of waterbody. Whilst an average small loch in Sutherland may only hold one bird in winter, there are tens of thousands of these lochs in northern Scotland. Given that the British estimate for Goldeneye is only about 25,000 birds, the potential interest in learning more about such sites is clear.

RAFOS, organised by John Wells and Jerry Knights, are to be congratulated for their support in this area and have already announced their willingness to be involved in the forthcoming Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird Survey (NEWS) (see page10) during winter 2006-07, which is fantastic. We look forward to continuing to work with them in the future.

Andy Musgrove

Eider were commonly recorded by RAFOS Photograph by Mike Weston
Wintering populations of Whooper and Bewick’s Swans are monitored every five years by an international mid-winter census involving the efforts of hundreds of volunteer and professional ornithologists across the wintering ranges. Very many thanks go to all those WeBS counters who were involved in the January 2005 census, not only for covering their usual patch, but for all the extra effort involved in searching the countryside for additional sites that had the potential to hold swans but are not routinely covered by WeBS.

Results of the January 2005 census have helped to determine the current size of each population, as well as trends in population growth (or decline), and have provided valuable information regarding important feeding and roosting sites, habitat use and breeding success. The results show very different trends for these two species within Britain and Ireland.

The Icelandic Whooper Swan population (which winters mostly in Britain and Ireland) has undergone a period of sustained growth since the mid 1990s. Results show a staggering rise from around 16,000 individuals in 1995, to over 26,000 in 2005. Of all birds counted, 37% were recorded in the Republic of Ireland, 25% in England, 16% in Scotland, 16% in Northern Ireland and 6% in Iceland.

Although numbers have increased in all countries (with the exception of Wales), proportionally the largest growth was seen in England. Continuing increases concentrated at just two sites in England (Ouse Washes in Norfolk/Cambridgeshire and Martin Mere in Lancashire) are largely responsible for the rise in total numbers in England.

As in 2000, the Highlands region held the largest numbers of birds (829) in Scotland in 2005, although many areas experienced substantial changes in numbers between the two censuses. Decreases were apparent in central Scotland and Borders, but were accompanied by increases of more than 50% in Lothian, Fife, Tayside, Grampian, Highlands and Shetland regions. Increases of

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<th>Total numbers of Whooper and Bewick’s Swans in January 2005</th>
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<td>Number of Whooper Swans</td>
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between 25–50% occurred in Dumfries & Galloway, Western Isles and Orkney. In Northern Ireland, numbers decreased in Co. Fermanagh and Co. Antrim but increases were seen elsewhere, particularly in Co. Londonderry and Co. Tyrone (80% and 71%, respectively). In Iceland, most birds were located in the southern lowlands and the southwest, the latter region showing the largest regional increase (57%). Smaller numbers were present in the north of the country and remained similar to that of the previous census.

It is possible that the increasing British numbers of Whooper Swans, particularly in east central England, may be inflated by an increasing proportion of birds from the Northwest European population wintering in Britain. This population breeds from Fennoscandia to north-west Russia and winters in continental Europe, but it is known from ringing studies that a small number winter in Britain. A greater understanding of the extent of interchange between populations, and use of British and Irish wintering grounds by the Northwest European population, is necessary to ascertain the true size of these expanding populations.

In contrast, numbers of the northwestern Europe population of Bewick’s Swan wintering in Britain and Ireland have decreased by 5% since 1995 to around 7,200 individuals. Numbers in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have decreased dramatically from 1,244 birds in 1984, to just 224 birds in January 2005, and declines have also occurred in many western regions of Britain.

Two areas which have seen increases in numbers, however, are East Anglia and southeast England which suggests a possible eastward contraction of the wintering range. East central England continues to hold the largest concentrations of Bewick’s Swans in Britain and Ireland; the Ouse Washes regularly holding internationally important numbers of birds. Although annual fluctuations at the Ouse Washes occur, numbers have continued to rise with a 7% increase between January 1995 and January 2005.

The Northwest Europe population of Bewick’s Swans as a whole (including those on the continent) underwent a substantial increase from 16,046 to 29,277 from 1987 to 1995, largely due to expansion of numbers in the Netherlands. The population throughout the rest of Northwest Europe was also censused in January 2000 and 2005, but full results are still awaited. These results will help to determine whether declining numbers in parts of Britain and Ireland are indeed cause for concern in relation to the true size of the entire Northwest Europe population, or whether changing climatic conditions and warmer winters, are causing more swans to remain closer to their breeding grounds.

An assessment of the number of juveniles present in flocks showed that both species had a relatively good breeding season in comparison with other census years. The overall percentage of young Whooper Swans was 19.2%, ranging from 17.9% in Iceland to 20.6% in Britain and overall mean brood size was 2.3 cygnets. This is the highest percentage of young recorded in a census year since 1986, where 22.9% was reported. Likewise, the percentage of young Bewick’s Swans recorded in flocks was found to be relatively high at 13.9% and mean brood size was comparable to that of previous years (1.98). This is the highest productivity recorded in a census year since 1991.

As with previous censuses Whooper Swans were recorded most commonly on pasture in Britain and Ireland, although use of arable land has increased over the last three censuses. Results suggest potential agricultural conflict is limited since only a small proportion of birds were found on growing crops. Instead, the majority of birds recorded on arable land in January 2005 were using waste stubble and harvested potato fields. In contrast, Bewick’s Swans were most commonly recorded on arable land in 2005, and similar to previous years, most were using winter cereal and sugar beet.

The January 2005 census has shown a continuing upward trend in numbers of Whooper Swans and with the consistently good breeding success seen over the last ten years, it will be interesting to see if this trend continues. Results of the Bewick’s Swan census from the continent are eagerly awaited to determine the status of the northwest population of Bewick’s Swan throughout Europe.

The full results will be published later this year and will also be available on WWT’s Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme web pages at www.wwt.org.uk/research/monitoring/

Jenny Worden
In April I packed my telescope and tally counter and headed for South Korea. I had responded to a request in the Wader Study Group Bulletin asking for experienced shorebird counters to take part in the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Program (SSMP). The vast Saemangeum estuarine system on the west coast of South Korea is the single most important known site for migratory shorebirds in the Yellow Sea, itself a core area on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Internationally important concentrations of at least 18 species of shorebird have been regularly supported by the site, as well as nine or more other waterbird species. Despite its enormous ecological importance, Saemangeum had been targeted for reclamation by the South Korean government and following fifteen years of legal battles was about to be finally enclosed. Few organised shorebird counts had been conducted there in recent years and very little government data had been made publicly available. In addition there appeared to be no program in place to monitor the impact of this reclamation project on shorebirds.

Recognising the need to monitor and publicise the impact of what is probably the largest single ongoing coastal reclamation project in the world, the domestic conservation organisation Birds Korea, partnered with the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG), set up the SSMP. The intention was to undertake intensive shorebird surveying in the Saemangeum system through April and May 2006 (with similar survey effort planned for 2007 and 2008). The SSMP also aimed to count the adjacent Gomso Bay and Geum Estuary, where the proponents of the reclamation claim the birds displaced from Saemangeum will move to.

I left Scotland on April 21st, the day that bulldozers closed the last remaining gaps in the 33-km long Saemangeum seawall. This finally dammed 40,100 ha of tidal-flats and shallows and left tidal exchange controlled by two sluice gates totalling only 540m in length. By the time I left on 30th April the tidal range had been drastically reduced from a near-natural 7 m peak in March to less than 1m. Forecast models indicate that 90% of the tidal-flat will be either dried out or permanently flooded within the next year, and construction of inner dykes is expected to start in 2008. The impact on the area is already enormous with the livelihoods of an estimated 25 000 local people affected. A report by a Korean government institute suggests that this single reclamation could even cause a region-wide rise in sea level, leading to a loss of a further 5% of the Yellow Sea’s tidal-flats. Worst of all this terrible damage has been done without any clear end-use for any land created.

There were several reasons why I volunteered for the SSMP. I had been aware of the Saemangeum reclamation for a while and I thought that there was still a possibility to stop it and further disastrous coastal reclamations in South Korea if Birds Korea could get enough data to convince the courts. It was also an opportunity to use the skills and experience I have gained as a WeBS counter in an international project. Finally, there was the chance to see two of the most enigmatic...
waders in the world, Spoon-Billed Sandpiper and Nordmann’s (Spotted) Greenshank, for which Saemangeum is a major stopping-off point.

I have been a WeBS counter on and off for 15 years and on the Cromarty Firth, my present patch, I have survived sub-zero temperatures, gale force winds and the occasional blizzard. However counting in Korea posed some new challenges. Heat haze and dust blowing down from the Mongolian steppe made for poorer visibility than I have ever experienced in the UK. The numbers and diversity of species was also vastly different from Northern Scotland. I saw more than 30 species of shorebirds during the counts, including four Spoon-billed Sandpipers, three Nordmann’s Greenshank and an Asiatic Dowitcher. Some species were also present in vast numbers. There was one flock containing 56,000 Great Knot. As the only ‘vagrant’ Brit on the team (I was working with Australians, New Zealanders, Americans and Koreans) my excitement at seeing flocks of species like Red-necked Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers caused mild amusement to my antipodean colleagues although they were unbelievably keen on seeing the Great Spotted Woodpeckers in the small scrubby woodland near the hotel!

The SSMP gathered a massive amount of data that is still being analysed. However, initial estimates show that the three most abundant shorebird species recorded in the combined Saemangeum/Geum area were:

- Great Knot, with 116,126 in mid-May (approximately 30% of the world population)
- Dunlin (82,718, also in mid-May)
- Bar-tailed Godwit (15,876 in mid-April).

Additionally 34 Spoon-billed Sandpiper and 14 Nordmann’s Greenshank were recorded within the Saemangeum area in mid-May, with 70 Nordmann’s Greenshank at the Geum Estuary. The Geum is also now scheduled for reclamation.

During the programme counters also spent time searching for legged flagged and colour ringed waders. More than three hundred were recorded showing that birds from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and China all pass through the site.

Birds Korea and AWSG are seeking experienced counters for future years, as well as financial support. As the best developed shorebird monitoring programme in the world, it would be great if members of the WeBS network could go and share their expertise with local Korean counters. If you are interested in volunteering, or any other aspect of the SSMP including more detailed count information, visit the Birds Korea website at www.birdskorea.org.

If you want to express your concern about the ongoing reclamations write to the South Korean embassy. Background information for preparation of such letters is provided on www.birdsaustralia.com.au/articles/saemangeum.

Simon Cohen
The main objective of the survey is to obtain updated population estimates for Ringed and Little Ringed Plover. Also, we are interested in the current spatial distribution, habitat dependencies and patterns of co-occurrence of the two species. There will be a large number of sites involved, and we will probably aim to survey a sample of previously recorded sites and sites known to have been colonised subsequently, plus a stratified selection of random sites. The field methods will involve three site visits between April and July 2007 counting the number of pairs/adults present. The level of skill required for this survey is the ability to identify Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers.

If you would like more information about this survey or know of a site which you would like to survey, please contact Markus Handschu at BTO HQ (E-mail: markus.handschu@bto.org Tel: 01842 750050).

Markus Handschu & Niall Burton

Breeding Great Crested Grebe Survey 2007 (NOTE: subject to funding).

In 2007, the BTO will possibly also run a national Great Crested Grebe survey (currently pending funding). This will be the first national survey of the species in over 30 years, which will provide an updated breeding population estimate. The breeding population has increased considerably, as illustrated by the results of the previous surveys in 1931, 1965 and 1975, which revealed estimates of ca. 2,800, 4,700 and 6,800 individuals, respectively. A further increase was indicated by the BTO New Atlas of Breeding Birds (1988–91), which estimated 8,000 breeding individuals in Britain and a further 4,150 in Ireland. Together with increasing breeding numbers the species’ distribution has also expanded.

The methods for the survey are being trialled during spring/summer 2006, however, it is likely that two to three survey visits will be required during the survey period (April to July). The bulk of the survey will involve counting the number of breeding adults as well as nest and family parties. Some basic information on the type of water body will also be collected.

If you would like more information about this survey or know of a site which you would like to survey, please contact Greg Conway at BTO HQ (E-mail: greg.conway@bto.org Tel: 01842 750050).

Greg Conway & Niall Burton


The United Kingdom is internationally important for its numbers of wintering waterbirds, and many of these are monitored annually by the Wetland Bird Survey counts (WeBS). However, most WeBS counts are made on estuaries and inland water bodies, thereby leaving the majority of our coastline uncounted. Important populations of several species occur around our shores outwith estuaries, and consequently their numbers are not monitored annually by the WeBS counts.

In a bid to bolster our knowledge of waterbird populations around our coastline, the 1984–85 Winter Shorebird Count (WSC) was organised by the BTO, and found that the non-estuarine coast held particularly important numbers of Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone. Building on the success of the WSC, a repeat survey, the Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird Survey (NEWS), was carried out over the 1997–98 winter.

Comparing the results from NEWS to those of the WSC revealed declines in the numbers of Ringed Plover (-15%), Sanderling (-20%), Purple Sandpiper (-31%), Bar-tailed Godwit (-44%) and Turnstone (-16%) wintering around the UK coastline. NEWS also revealed changes in the winter distribution of species such as Ringed Plover and Purple Sandpiper, with the greatest densities of birds recorded on the Western Isles. These changes could be linked to our changing climate, with milder winters allowing birds to winter further north.

It is nine years since the 1997–98 survey, and we are running it again this winter (December 2006-January 2007). There is plenty of anecdotal information to suggest that the populations of species such as Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone (amongst others) have further declined since the previous survey, whilst the distribution of other species has continued to change.

We achieved good coverage during the last survey, but inevitably, we are likely to have a shortage of counters in some regions, such as Highland Scotland, the Inner Hebrides, the Western Isles and Shetland. So, if you think that you would like to contribute to a worthwhile survey over the festive period, then please contact Steve Holloway at BTO HQ.

Email: Steve.Holloway@bto.org Tel: 01842 750050

Steve Holloway
Golden Plovers and Lapwings – do they really count?

They are in the book in the wader section and they’ve got long legs, but do they count as real waders? Moreover, do we count them as waders? Of course the answer is YES they are waders, and NO, we don’t count them, at least not well enough. This is where your WeBS counts can help BTO develop a more reliable estimate of the numbers of Golden Plovers and Lapwings in the UK this coming winter.

Recent years have seen growing interest in these species and it’s not just restricted to the UK. Last Autumn’s International Wader Study Group conference included a workshop bringing together scientists and conservationists from across Europe to discuss gaps in knowledge and work towards coordinated European surveys of Golden Plovers. This follows on the success of the October 2003 count that was coordinated across several north-west European countries. WeBS counts were central to the count of 143,000 Golden Plovers recorded in Britain. But we can do better and this winter’s full survey will be another major step up in our knowledge of these species, and will set the scene for the next European coordinated count in October 2008.

The BTO/JNCC Winter Plover Survey will run from October 2006 to February 2007 and will involve counts of key known sites plus surveys of random tetrads and casual records. We’ve planned for all counts to be synchronised with WeBS Core Count dates as a means of minimising count duplication in these highly mobile dates. So what would we like WeBS counters to do? Well, broadly speaking, nothing! Simply survey your usual WeBS count sectors as normal and your totals for Golden Plovers and Lapwings will be extracted from your forms upon submission to the WeBS Office. If you see flocks of either species just outside your normal count area, please do not add them to your section totals, but instead please would you report them through a simple online form at www.bto.org/goto/winter-plovers.htm. If you do not have access to a computer and/or the web, then please include the details of any additional flocks on a separate piece of paper and include them when you return your WeBS forms.

There may be large flocks that you know roost on your site at low tide, but are not normally present when making your Core (high tide) counts, as they are likely to have moved a little way further inland. Why not see if you can track them down? The same online form can be used to submit any records of Golden Plovers or Lapwings seen anywhere in the UK between October and February. If you are interested in helping out in a more systematic way, or have any questions concerning the survey and wintering plovers more generally then please contact me. simon.gillings@bto.org

Simon Gillings

Golden Plover Photograph by Tommy Holden
Given the enormous amount of data generated by WeBS counters each year, it is perhaps inevitable (if regrettable) that there may be a few errors introduced into each season’s annual report, *Wildfowl & Wader Counts*. Such errors are flagged at the start of the report for the following season. However, one problem with the 2001–02 / 2002–03 and 2003–04 reports has come to light that we feel is worth promptly correcting in a more public manner to ensure that any problems arising can be minimised. In addition, it may be of interest to counters to see how this problem has arisen.

A glance at the accounts for Bewick’s Swan in the last two reports would suggest that there has been a major decline in numbers in Great Britain, with the main decline between the 1997–98 and 1998–99 winters. However, perusal of the text also points out that numbers at the main site, the Ouse Washes, were very high in 2003–04. Given that the Ouse Washes supports about 70% of all the Bewick’s Swans in Britain, it is hard to reconcile these two observations. Happily, it is the picture of decline that is the false one (see the article on page 6). Numbers of Bewick’s Swans are relatively healthy in the GB. The true annual index plot for Bewick’s Swan up to 2003–04 is reproduced here. As can be seen, numbers of Bewick’s Swans in Britain fluctuate but have been broadly stable since the mid 1980s.

The reason this error occurred is related to the fact that, on the Ouse Washes (and Nene Washes and Martin Mere) Bewick’s Swans are counted not only during standard day-time WeBS Core Counts, but also as they fly in to roost in the evening; many swans spend the day feeding in surrounding agricultural landscapes. Prior to 1998–99, such roost counts had not been differentiated from core counts in the database. Thus, our original index which was based only on “core” counts, included roost counts up to 1997–98 but not thereafter. This led to the apparent decline. We are now including the roost counts from these three sites within the index calculation for Bewick’s Swan.

Moreover, the same problem affected Whooper Swan, which also roosts on the Ouse Washes in very large numbers. The previously published trend information for this species in Britain showed a relatively stable population. However, accounting for the roost counts in the same manner leads to a somewhat different picture. Numbers of Whooper Swans in Britain have risen substantially over the last few years, reaching a new peak level in 2003–04.

We apologise for any problems caused by this error. However, it is heartening to see both these fine winter species doing well in Britain. Unfortunately, Bewick’s Swan remains at a very low ebb indeed in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and have also shown a worrying decline in some of the key wintering sites of the Netherlands. It will be important to maintain a close eye on this species in years to come.

Andy Musgrove
We are a fun-loving lot (generally) in the WeBS Office, and we don’t mind having a go at most things. However, even our powers of deduction are strained when we receive count forms with no site name, date or counter details on them! These appear to be from individual counters, rather than via an LO, which only adds to the mystery. Unfortunately, we are unable to use the data on the forms as we have no idea where it is from. These instances are few and far between, but please do check that your counter details, the site name and the date are on the forms before returning them to the office. Many thanks.

In the meantime, do you recognise the mystery form below? If you think it is yours, please identify yourself to a member of the WeBS Office. All replies will be treated in the strictest confidence!
AEWA Update
The Agreement on the Conservation of African Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) is a daughter agreement of the Convention on Migratory Species. The third Meeting of Parties was held in Dakar, Senegal in October 2005 and was attended by around 150 delegates representing 49 Contracting Parties plus the European Union (EU), 29 non-Contracting Parties, nine non-governmental organisations and three intergovernmental organisations. The UK, holding the EU Presidency, played a prominent part in the meeting.

Major highlights and conclusions of the meeting included:
• A decision not to expand the taxonomic scope of the Agreement through the addition of migratory seabirds, but rather to focus on the implementation of the requirements of the Agreement’s Action Plan for currently listed waterbirds that occur mainly in terrestrial and coastal wetlands. The debate highlighted the need to develop concerted international action for a considerable number of the most threatened waterbird species, especially in Africa. The majority of international action plans developed by AEWA have so far been for European species. The UK, on behalf of the EU, strongly noted the need to focus the implementation of the Agreement especially on waterbirds in Africa. The agreement of a Resolution on climate change and waterbirds, promoted by the UK. This requests that the Agreement’s Technical Committee start to assess the implications of climate change for migratory waterbirds, and bring forward technical guidance and amendments to the Action Plan to the next Meeting of Parties. The impacts of climate change will be of major conservation significance for waterbirds and their habitats and this Resolution commences a process to consider how countries may best respond to the challenges raised.

• Agreement to give priority to the drafting of a series of international reviews of different aspects of the conservation status of waterbirds, to come to the next Meeting of Parties, and to be updated triennially thereafter. Such reviews are crucial to inform the parties to the Agreement as to the priorities for their implementation of the Agreement.

• Agreement of technical guidance related to the definition of the term ‘serious long-term decline’ as well as procedures for the review and update of knowledge on international biogeographic populations of waterbirds—important units of conservation management.

• A decision to develop a strategic plan for the Agreement that would give guidance as to the priority areas for its implementation.

• Finalisation of international action plans for Corncrake, Northern Bald Ibis, Ferruginous Duck, the East Canadian population of Light-bellied Brent Geese and White-headed Duck.

For more information:
www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop3_docs/daily_coverage/day1_mop3_23oct_coverage.htm
www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop3_docs/mop3.htm

The Wash to face another public inquiry over mussel beds
The inquiry was called after English Nature refused fishermen permission to scare birds away from their mussel farms on The Wash. The RSPB fears its reserves in Norfolk and Lincs (Snettisham, Frampton Marsh and Freiston Shore) will be harmed if action is taken against the birds. Fishermen blame Eider ducks in particular for feeding on the mussels. They are demanding the right to protect their artificial beds by scaring birds off.

Many birds are present throughout the year in The Wash, whilst others use it as a stopover during their long migration flights. The RSPB is also calling for shell fishing to return to a sustainable level to protect the long term future of both birds and fishermen.

Mark Avery, Conservation Director at the RSPB, said: “The Wash is protected by international European and UK law. Birds that eat shellfish, including Oystercatcher, Knot, Shelduck and Pintail, have dropped in number by more than 100,000 on The Wash.”

WeBS bird ties the Knot!
Congratulations to Assistant WeBS Secretary Emma Davis who became Mrs Glaister in May of this year.
WANTED – ARTICLES FOR THE NEXT EDITION OF WeBS News

Perhaps Simon Cohen’s article in this issue about his trip to South Korea has brought back some memories of exciting days counting birds that you would like to share with us? If so we would love to hear from you, whether as a counter or a Local Organiser. If you are a budding journalist and have a story to tell, start writing now or get in touch with the WeBS Office for further information or guidance. We are looking forward to being able to feature more articles from WeBS volunteers in the future.

Photographers and Artists – please read on

We are always on the look out for good quality photographs and line drawings that we can use for WeBS publications (with full credits given of course). Any species or habitats covered by WeBS would be welcomed. Digital images would be easiest, but we can scan slides (which will be returned) if necessary. So get snapping!

Who’s Who within the WeBS team 2006

Many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS team at BTO. For the benefit of those that are not sure who does what and who to get in contact with for various matters, the following ‘Who’s who’ is included to clarify the roles of the various personnel.

Graham Austin, WeBS Database Manager
WeBS Alerts
WeBS database management
Statistical analyses

Alex Banks, WeBS National Organiser (Low Tide Counts)
Low Tide Counts
Carmarthen Bay Common Scoters, etc

Mark Collier, WeBS National Organiser (Core Counts)
Annual report
Standard data requests
WeBS News

Iain Downie, Web Software Developer
WeBS Online

Emma Glister, Assistant WeBS Secretary
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports

Steve Holloway, WeBS Counter Coordinator
Counter and Local Organiser liaison
Recruitment of new counters and Local Organisers
WeBS News
Non-estuarine Coastal Waterbird (NEWS) Organiser

Ilya Maclean, Research Ecologist
WeBS Alerts

Heidi Mellin, WeBS Secretary
Counter and Local Organiser database management
Mailing of count forms, newsletters and annual reports
Jointly responsible for the production of this edition of WeBS News

Andy Musgrove, WeBS National Coordinator
Overall management of WeBS
WeBS database management
WeBS Online

Email
use the format of firstname.surname@bto.org e.g. andy.musgrove@bto.org

Website
WeBS web site: http://www.bto.org/survey/webs/index.htm
WeBS Alerts
WeBS Alerts report: http://blx1.bto.org/webs/alerts/index.htm
WeBS Online – Almost There!

In last year’s WeBS News we talked at some length about the forthcoming WeBS Online system. Those people paying attention might be wondering where it has got to, particularly those who kindly offered to help pilot the system. Well, as the NHS, Child Support Agency and the Passport Office have proved, IT systems sometimes overrun a little in the development stages. However, we’re pleased to announce that we are finally just about ready to go live. Obviously, we don’t want to set you all loose on the system until we’re sure we’ve ironed out at least most of the inevitable bugs that will crop up to start with, and we’re still planning on a pilot phase with volunteer testers. However, once we’ve resolved any initial teething troubles we’ll be going live, at some time this autumn.

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Monthly Site summary for Taff and Ely Estuary during 2004

The table below compares the maximum counts per month for Taff and Ely Estuary during 2004. Known undercounts are surrounded by [ ]

Although we can’t say a precise date by which time WeBS Online will be up-and-running this autumn, we can confirm that we will be sending out detailed instructions on the use of the system in spring 2007 to all counters. Therefore, if you’re the sort of counter who transfers their counts from notebook to count form at the end of the year (as I do), you’ll be able to transfer them directly to WeBS Online instead should you so desire. If you just can’t wait to get stuck into using WeBS Online at the earliest opportunity, however, then keep an eye on the WeBS website where the latest update will be posted, or else call the WeBS Office to find out more.

Andy Musgrove