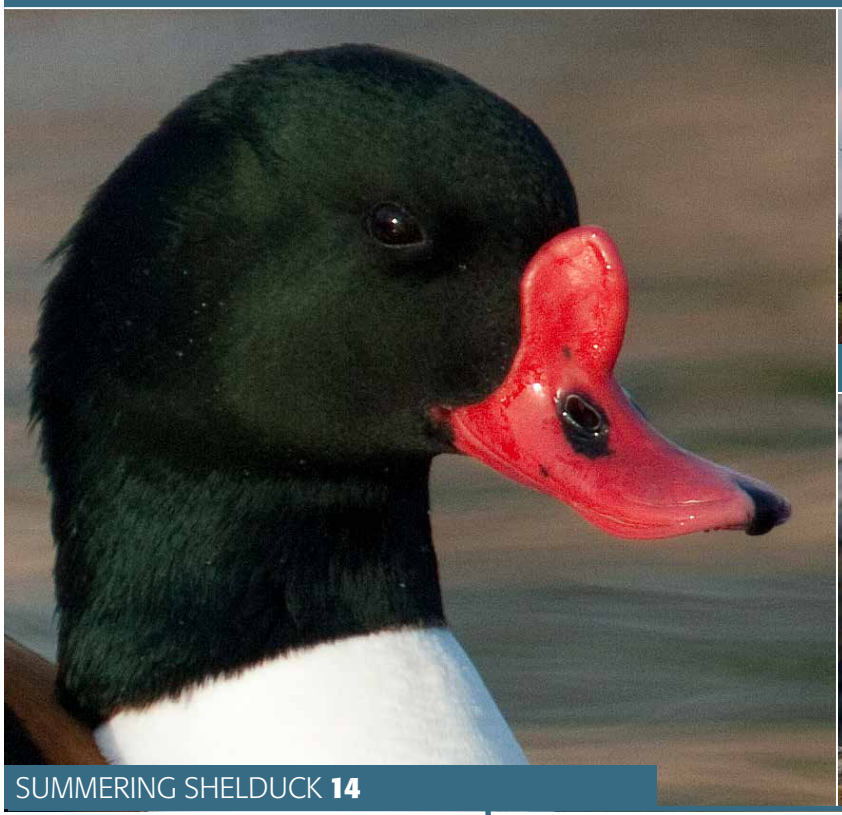
WeBSnews

The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey

WeBS

ENTERING WeBS COUNTS VIA BIRDTRACK

See page 10



SUMMERING SHELDUCK **14**

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ISSUE 36 • AUTUMN 2020

ALSO INSIDE

BTO rspb giving nature a home JNCC in association with WWT

WeBS continues to support counts in Sierra Leone

January 2020 saw the continuation of coordinated efforts to count waterbirds along the whole of the East Atlantic flyway, focusing on major sites that usually receive little or no coverage and in support of the International Waterbird Census (IWC). Chas Holt and Richard Hearn explain more...

The January expedition included training and support for countries in west Africa where key stopover and wintering areas are located, including the Sierra Leone coast. WeBS and WWT supported the initiative by covering our travel to Sierra Leone, where we joined up with Jan van der Winden and Camilla Dreef from the Netherlands and a team from the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) to count all waterbirds using the coastal wetland Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the country.

The trip repeated a similar survey carried out in January 2014, and a more complete census of the Sierra Leone coast undertaken in 2005 by Jan, the late Kenneth Gbengba and others. Repeated surveys enable

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome...

...to the latest issue of WeBS News.

It has certainly been a challenging year for all of us with the ongoing Coronovirus pandemic impacting on our daily lives. Thankfully for WeBS reporting, the main lockdown period came in the spring rather than during our peak recording period, and so hopefully this won't have impacted on waterbird trends and peak counts too much. We thank you for your ongoing support.

Data received from WeBS counts are as important as ever, being widely used both by environmental consultants as part of environmental impact assessments, and also by government bodies for the designation and monitoring of protected sites (pg. 16).

The role of the Local Organiser (LO) is crucial to the running of WeBS, and we hear from the new LO on the Isle of Man about the challenges of recruiting new counters and covering sites that have been neglected for many years (pg. 12).

Neil Calbrade

Neil Calbrade Editor & WeBS Officer

CONTINUED FROM COVER

comparison of results for stretches of coastline that are counted in different years. As was the case in 2014, the overall planning and additional financial support for the trip was provided by the Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative (WSFI), a project coordinated by Sovon (the Dutch Centre for Ornithology). The WSFI provides the umbrella for periodic coordinated censuses of waterbirds along the East Atlantic Flyway; in doing so, it provides important additional count data for the IWC.

Having arrived in the capital, Freetown, we first spent several days in the north of the country counting Scarcies Estuary and the Sierra Leone River Estuary (SLRE). Scarcies Estuary is a rural area, largely surrounded by farmland and small fishing villages, whereas the SLRE is adjacent to Freetown and several other large urban areas. Unsurprisingly, the human impacts such as mangrove cutting, sand mining and plastic pollution are far greater in SLRE, although waterbirds are still abundant on its largest mudflats.

We then moved south over the course of the next two weeks to cover Yawri Estuary, the Turtle Islands and most of the Sherbro Estuary. The southern estuaries of Sierra Leone are much less impacted than those further north, with extensive mangrove forest still present in many areas, and plastic pollution far less evident. These areas are mostly remote and hard to reach, with journeys by road taking many hours. All the fieldwork was boat-based and involved surveys of tidal mudflats, sandbanks, and mangrove creeks at low tide; operating as two teams to help maximise coverage of the estuaries during relatively constrained tidal

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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windows. Counts were undertaken at low tide, unlike in most coastal WeBS sectors, because at high tide most of the waders and other waterbirds roost in dense areas of mangrove where they are impossible to observe.

A trip to west Africa during the winter provides an opportunity to see a mix of exotic resident birds and migrants that are more familiar to birders from northwest Europe. Coastal wetlands in winter are dominated by waders that breed in the far north, many of which may migrate through WeBS sites during passage periods.

Over the course of the survey, the most abundant species proved to be Curlew Sandpiper with nearly 15,000 birds logged. Several thousand each of Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper were also counted, along with several hundred Knot, Greenshank, Sanderling and Avocet. Many of these counts exceed the relevant species thresholds for wetlands of international importance. These waders share the intertidal mudflats with a variety of other birds. A typical estuarine mudflat in Sierra Leone can feature Great White Egret, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Western Reef Egret, Green-backed Heron, Sacred Ibis, Woolly-necked Stork, Palm-nut Vulture and Pied Kingfisher, as well as, in favoured areas, more localised species such as Great White Pelican, Pink-backed Pelican, African Spoonbill and Black Egret. The sandbanks and spectacular Turtle Islands again held large groups of terns, comprising Royal (6,000), Sandwich (1,700), Common (1,300) and Little (1,100) with smaller numbers of Lesser Crested, Gull-billed, Caspian and Black Terns.

Away from mudflats and sandbanks, mangrove channels hold relatively low densities of birds but still provided encounters with a diverse range of species including several Hamerkops as well as a couple of Nile Crocodiles. Other memorable sightings during the surveys were provided by African Skimmer, Goliath Heron and Giant Kingfisher – all exceptional-looking birds! The most exciting discovery in terms of local rarity was a Laughing Gull, a first for Sierra Leone.

PAPANIE BAI SESAY (CSSL)/CHAS HOLT

▲ **A selection of Herons, Egrets and a Stork feeding on the tidal mudflats are a familiar sight in Sierra Leone.**

◀ **Counting waterbirds from sandbanks exposed by the low tide.**

Notable absentees from our list were Kentish Plover and Little Stint, whereas a census of the same area in 2005 produced totals of 98 Kentish Plover and 1,271 Little Stint! Populations of Kentish Plover are known to have declined across the species' range and Little Stint are prone to marked fluctuations in annual breeding productivity on Arctic breeding grounds – but their apparent disappearances are striking.

As well as counting waterbirds, our activities in Sierra Leone included engagement with local communities and training of CSSL staff to help them develop their bird identification and counting skills. A preparatory training workshop also took place in December 2019 at Tasso Island Ecolodge, in the SLRE, where survey participants and other representatives of communities from all of the main Sierra Leonean estuaries learnt about waterbirds, their ecology, monitoring and conservation, and the sustainable management of estuarine environments. Everyone involved in the initiative is keen for a regular and sustainable monitoring programme of surveys, undertaken by Sierra Leoneans, to become established. We therefore look forward to continuing this training in the future.

Sierra Leone is a poor, but beautiful, country which has suffered tough periods during its recent history, from militant warfare in the 1990s to an outbreak of Ebola in 2014 (incidentally a matter of weeks after our previous trip).

With the Coronovirus situation now affecting the health of communities around the world as well as impacting the ease of international travel, we hope that it is not too long before there is an opportunity to return and continue this important initiative.

WeBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT

The Swale

The Swale is a tidal channel that separates the Isle of Sheppey from the Kent mainland and is one of the most important sites in southeast England for waterbirds.

Brian Watmough WeBS Local Organiser

Each winter the Swale supports more than 60,000 waterfowl and ranks 19th in the Principal Sites table of UK wetlands. There are internationally important numbers of Black-tailed Godwit, Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Wigeon and nationally important numbers of a further dozen species. The grazing marshes at Elmley have the largest concentration of breeding waders in southern England, supporting more than 400 pairs each of Lapwing and Redshank.

The 6,658-ha Swale SSSI is a double ended tidal channel (not an estuary)18-km long between the Isle of Sheppey and the north Kent coast and is part of the Greater Thames estuary. It includes intertidal flats, saltmarsh, saline lagoons, and extensive coastal grazing marshes. On the northern shore of the Swale the Elmley and Swale National Nature Reserves are managed by the Elmley Conservation Trust and Great Bells Farm is being developed by RSPB. On the southern shore Oare Marshes and Swale Local Nature Reserve are managed by the Kent Wildlife Trust and the RSPB are developing a new reserve at Seasalter. This concentration of reserves has contributed to the Natural England assessment that 90% of the SSSI is in favourable condition.

However, not all the waterbirds are flourishing. There are amber Alerts for Dunlin and the waterbird assemblage. Dunlin have declined by 38% in the long-term at the site, which mirrors the regional and national trends so it is probably not due to local conditions. Twenty-two of the 35 waterbird species that use the site have declined by 30% or more in the medium-term so we need to consider why. For some species the answer is straightforward, the 67% decline of the nationally important population of White-fronted Goose is linked to a decline in the UK population as a result of short-stopping: as the winters become milder, the birds are no longer migrating as far at the UK. For other species the reasons are less obvious, such as for Redshank which has a long-term decline of 53%.

JOHN WHITTING

For the WeBS counts, the site is divided into 17 sectors with a core team of more than 20 counters. Counting on the coast can often be challenging. Whilst some roosts, like those of Oystercatcher, are regular, for other species the preferred roost changes through the season. At the highest tides roosts can be flooded and the birds relocate, requiring the counters to check with each other to avoid double counting.

We are always looking for new counters and we hold an annual meeting for counters from the North Kent estuaries – the Thames, Medway and Swale – to which we invite representatives from conservation agencies to discuss local issues.

The Swale Wader Group (**www.swalewaders.co.uk**) has ringed more than 10,000 waders over the last 40 years and many of the ringers are also WeBS counters. Such a long history of ringing helps interpret the WeBS counts. For example, the national decline in breeding Curlew has meant they are now Red-listed but the numbers of birds wintering on the Swale have declined less than the national trend. Ringing recoveries of Swale Curlew show that our birds breed in Baltic states and Finland where breeding populations are stable or increasing.

In summer, the coastal grazing marshes at Elmley support more than a thousand pairs of breeding waders. An extensive programme of predator control involving fox proof fences and trapping of stoats, hedgehogs (which are relocated) and Carrion Crows has contributed to high productivity of fledged birds. This in turn raises the question what happens to the fledged

Black-tailed Godwit and Wigeon occur in internationally important numbers on The Swale, and Lapwing fledging rate is assessed using colour-ringing.

young? A colour-ringing project is hoping to provide some answers.

Like all sites in southern England, the Swale is under a number of threats, including sea-level rise, disturbance, development, wildfowling and fishing. The population of Kent is forecast to grow by more than 300,000 by 2030 and this is likely to increase disturbance. Fortunately, the main roosts are protected from land-based disturbance on nature reserves but are still vulnerable to increasing disturbance from water and air. The local authorities, statutory agencies and NGOs established Birdwise, **www.birdwise.org.uk**, an initiative to mitigate disturbance to birds wintering in Kent. Bait digging is frequent on intertidal areas but there seems little understanding of its impact. Similarly, there is no monitoring of the number of waterfowl shot. The impact of the development of the largest solar array in England adjacent to the Swale SPA and an important feeding area for Brent Geese, Lapwing and Golden Plover is unknown.

The Swale has some of the best sites to watch waders in southern England and whilst the reserves can sometimes seem crowded it is still possible to spend a day without seeing another person. The variety of habitats at the site contributes to the importance of the Swale for waterbirds providing birds with the opportunity to respond to changing conditions. WeBS counts make an important contribution to its conservation. The challenges for counters remain; to maintain consistency of coverage, to extend the counts to include the summer months, to complete the low tide counts and to share and enjoy.

WIGEON BY EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO; LAPWING BY RICHARD POPPE AND BLACK-TAILED GODWIT BY NEIL CALBRADE

WeBS Obituary

Mark Rehfisch
1960–2019

Mark Rehfisch was head of the BTO's Wetland and Coastal Ecology Unit from 1995 to 2009, overseeing BTO research on waterbirds and seabirds, and the development of WeBS and other waterbird monitoring. The team's work on climate change not only highlighted the shifts in many species' distributions north-eastwards towards their breeding grounds in association with milder winters, but also the potential impacts of sea level rise, providing the basis for predictions of future impacts.

During this period, Mark also oversaw the development of more robust methods for the Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey and for surveys of gulls and non-native geese. He was integral to many of the developments in WeBS that we are now familiar with, including online data capture and reporting, the WeBS Low Tide Counts scheme and the WeBS Alerts reporting for protected sites.

Mark will be greatly missed by former BTO colleagues, collaborators and volunteers.

Age and sex recording in WeBS

A new feature in WeBS Online allows counters to record proportions of male and female or adult and first-year birds to help research into productivity and populations.

Teresa Frost WeBS National Organiser

In January 2020, we launched a new feature in WeBS Online data entry, to allow counters to optionally record the number of birds of different ages and sexes for certain wildfowl and wader species. This might be all the birds of a particular species present, or a sample from larger flock(s). The data gathered will be invaluable for future analyses of breeding success by looking at age composition across years, and tracking changes in migratory behaviour by recording the ratio of male to female birds.

WHY AGE DATA?

WeBS Core Counts allow us to track how whole populations are doing. But additional information is needed to understand the drivers behind the headline trends. Collecting information on age ratios is one way to get information on breeding success. Productivity is an important demographic factor affecting populations, helping us to understand why WeBS and international population trends are increasing or decreasing. Many of the waders we count in winter breed in the high Arctic, where it is difficult to monitor breeding success. By counting the proportion of first calendar year birds we see in a flock, we are able to gain valuable information on breeding success. Wader ringing projects collect data at places like the Wash and the Swale, but there are other parts of the country where no ringing is done, and WeBS counters can help fill the gap.

Proportions of juvenile birds in flocks can give an indication of breeding success

ALLAN DREWITT/BTO

WHY SEX DATA?

Just as with age data, information on sex ratios will give us finer detail of population structure in different months and different parts of the country, and whether these differ from year to year. We know that there are considerable differences in overall sex ratios in many wintering duck flocks and that a greater proportion of males are found in the north of the flyway. Collection of sex ratio data can provide useful data for investigating differences in survival between the sexes. Timing of migration, and moult migrations are also known or suspected to differ between sexes for several species and after a few years of data collection, it is hoped we can shed some light on this – perhaps you could collect data regularly at your site, to see how it varies over time?

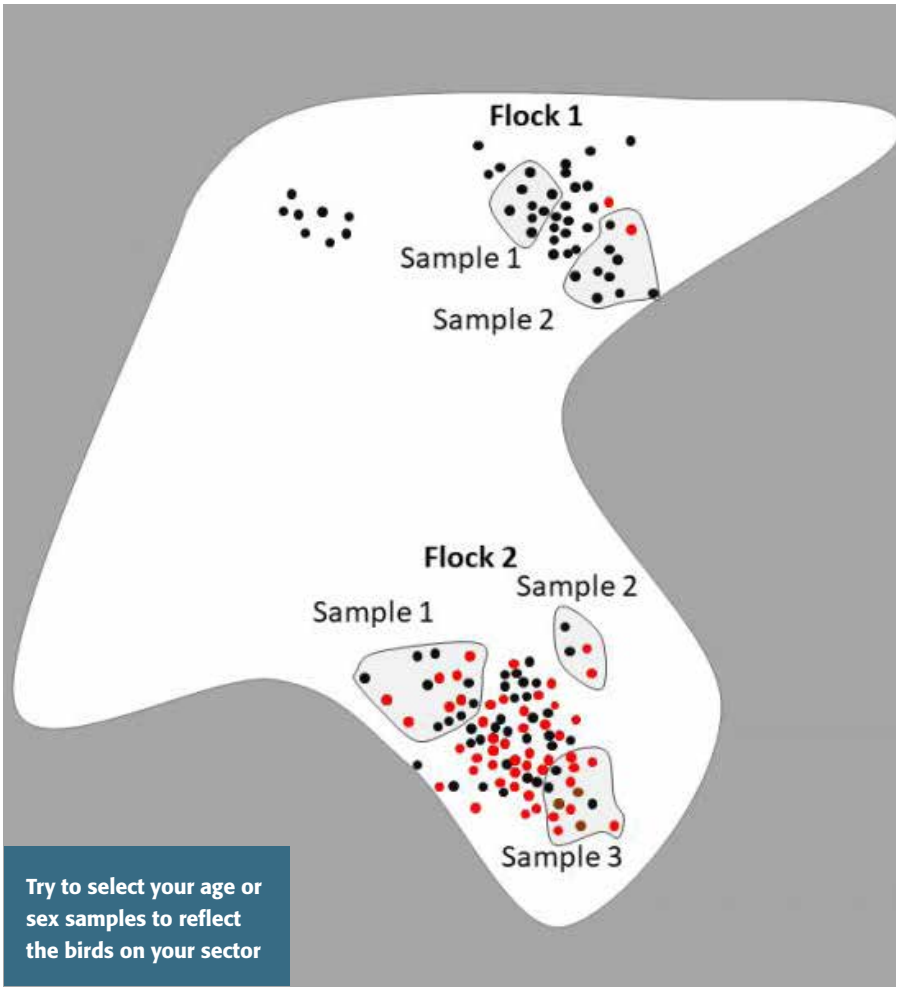
HOW TO HELP

Recording age and sex data need not be done on every WeBS Count, or for every species, to be useful. There are two times of year where it will be particularly helpful. We are keen to receive samples of duck sex ratios in January, as this is when the Duck Specialist Group encourages data collection alongside the International Waterbird Census. Early autumn is a helpful time to collect juvenile wader data, of interest to the International Wader Study Group.

If you don't have time to collect the data during your Priority Core Count, you could go back on a different day, and submit data with a casual count or supplementary count. And if you aren't confident enough of your age/sex identification skills for certain species to take part, don't worry – you can still do your WeBS count as normal, as age and sex recording will remain entirely optional.

We will highlight future project research requests via this newsletter, social media and your friendly Local Organisers. For example, Ros Green explains what summer breakdowns by age and sex for Shelduck could help reveal on page 14.

Remember, you do not have to collect data on every bird present on your count, just representative samples. To avoid bias, we ask about the "flock size" you are drawing each sample from. If you are only able to see enough detail on birds close by to age them, a further away group might have a different age structure to the one close to you, so it helps to know what proportion of the birds on your sector you drew the samples from by giving the flock size as well as your usual total sector count. Or perhaps there are two groups of ducks in your WeBS sector, a big flock of mostly males and a small flock of mostly females – we need to know which sample is from which flock to be able to calculate the overall ratio correctly.



Try to select your age or sex samples to reflect the birds on your sector

If you do not use WeBS Online, but submit paper forms to your Local Organiser or the WeBS Office, and want to take part you will need to record the information separately. If there is sufficient demand, we will create a supplementary form that can be used, so please let us know.

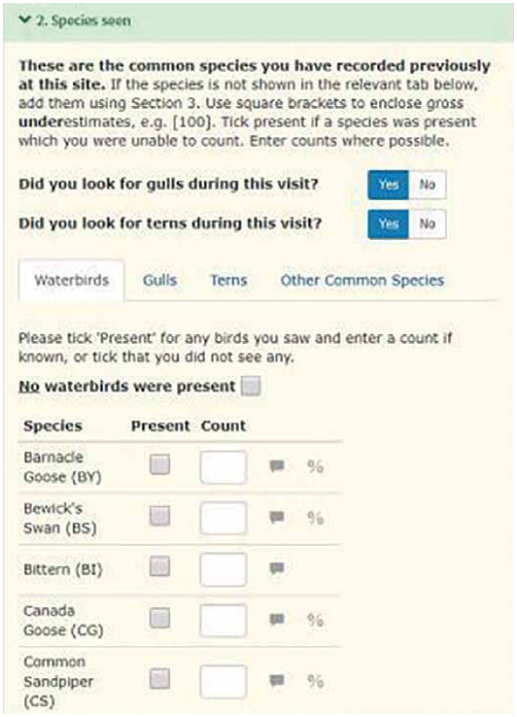
So far we have received 541 age samples and 2,188 sex samples – many thanks to all of you who have submitted data, but we would be delighted to have some more! As we mentioned in *WeBS News 35*, the very first National Wildfowl Counts forms from the 1940s used to have space to record this information, so this is a return of data collection after a very long hiatus! We are looking forward to being able to compare some recent data with data from over 70 years ago, once we have digitised some historical forms.

Continued overleaf ▸

If you already undertake field-based age assessments for WWT, please continue to submit your counts to WWT in the usual way. WWT undertake age assessments on Whooper Swan and Bewick's Swan and eleven goose populations native to the UK. They collate information on breeding success using the proportion of young (first-winter) birds in non-breeding flocks and the average brood size. For further information contact: **https://monitoring.wwt.org.uk/contact-us/**

ADDING AGE AND SEX RECORDINGS INTO WeBS ONLINE

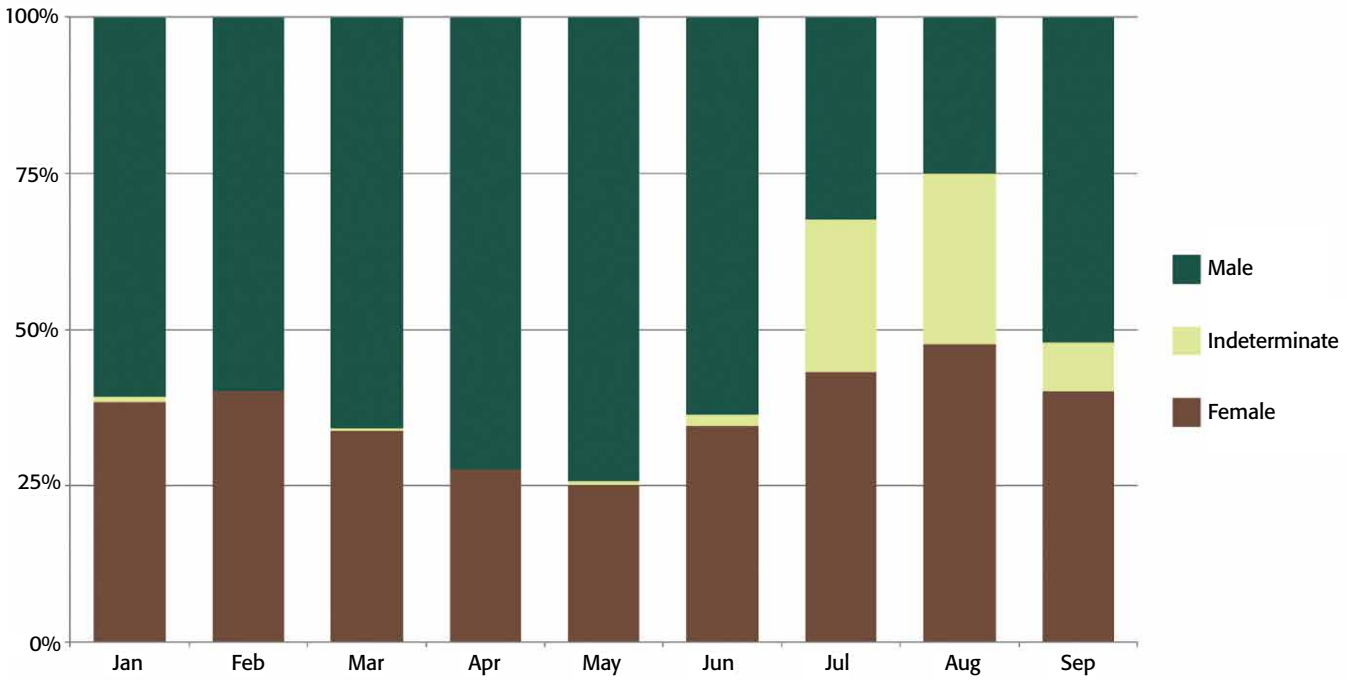
Log into WeBS Online and enter count data. You will see that there is a percentage symbol (%) next to each species where recording of age or sex is permitted.
To enter age/sex recordings for a particular species, click on this symbol. Note, that if you have not marked this species as present first, it is not possible to select this option. You must ensure that the species is either marked as present or a count has been added before you can add age/sex recordings.



Unless you are recording age and sex composition for all birds within your WeBS count sector, please enter data for samples for separate flocks, so that we can calculate proportions correctly. The reason we ask for samples divided into flocks is that sometimes birds separate into flocks with *e.g.* mostly adults or mostly males in one part of a count sector.

To enter data, select the green '+ Add Flock' button. From here, you can enter the size of Flock 1. The size of Flock 1 will default to your WeBS sector total. If the flock you are sampling from is smaller than this, as the sector is split into separate flocks, please estimate the size here, so we know how representative your samples are.

Full Guidance, including tables of which species can be recorded and suggested months where this is possible taking into account plumage and moult, can be found in the counter resources on the WeBS website, via the help button in WeBS Online, or at **bit.ly/WeBSAgeSex**.

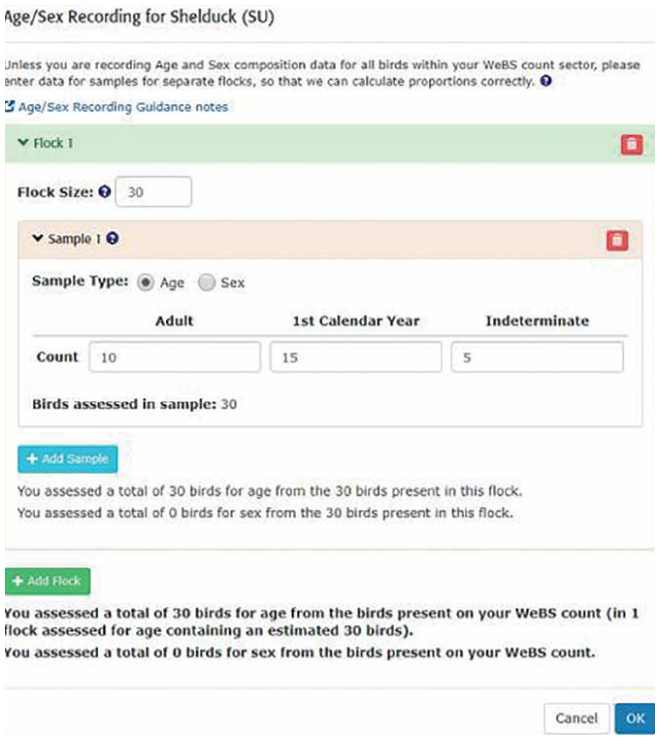


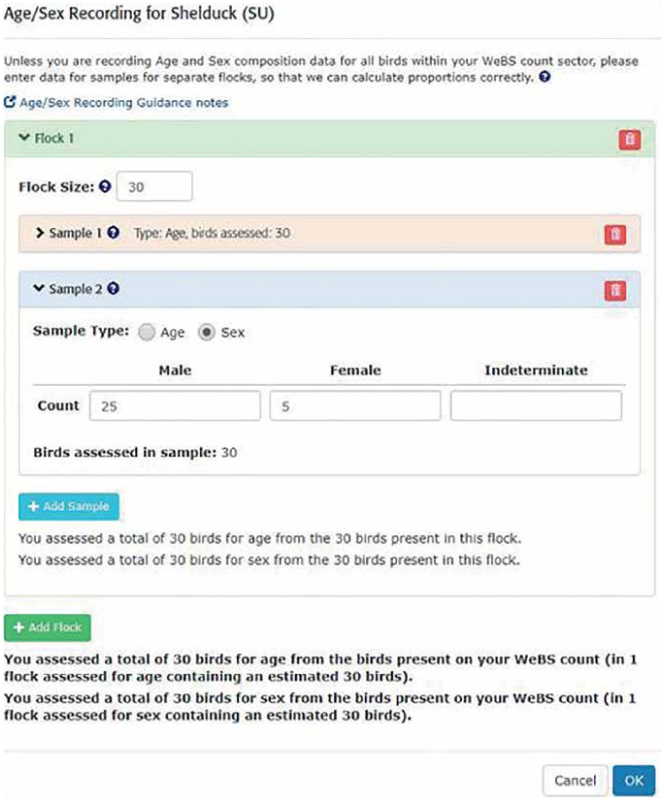
▲ **Preliminary Mallard results suggest that fewer females are detected between March and June on WeBS counts, which is when they are incubating, and highlights the moulting period where it is more difficult to distinguish females from males in eclipse plumage.**

To add age recordings, select the blue '+ Add Sample' button and select 'Age'. This will then show options for you to type in the number of birds seen which were at 'Adult', '1st Calendar Year' and 'Indeterminate' ages.

You can add as many samples as required. To add sex recordings, once again select '+ Add Sample' and select 'Sex'. This will then show options for you to type in the number of birds seen which were at 'Male', 'Female' and 'Indeterminate' sex. You can add as many samples as required. If you are recording both age and sex samples, these do not necessarily have to be the same. You could for example record three samples from the flock for Sex and only one for Age. You will see that the total number birds assessed for age and the total assessed for sex within the flock is kept up-to-date underneath the '+ Add Sample' button, so that you can ensure the numbers recorded for age and recorded for sex for the samples do not exceed the total flock size.

To add data for additional flocks, select '+ Add Flock' and carry out the same process. The total for all the flocks is given underneath the '+ Add Flock' button, so that you can ensure the totals do not exceed the WeBS count total. You can delete specific flocks, age and sex counts by selecting the red bin button at the top right hand corner of the corresponding sections. Once you have entered all the Age/Sex recordings for a specific species, select 'OK' and the box will disappear. If sample numbers are too large within a specific flock *e.g.* you have recorded a total of 26 birds across all samples in Flock 1, which is greater than the flock size (10), an error message will occur and you cannot submit the data until this has been corrected. Once all age/sex recordings have been noted, please submit your data by selecting 'Submit Count'.





Proportions of males and females can indicate differences in distribution and winter survival

EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

WeBS and BirdTrack now on speaking terms

One of the main comments regarding WeBS Online we received from WeBS counters who also use BirdTrack, was that they had to input their counts twice into the different systems. Well, that is no more...

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

As we mentioned in *WeBS News 35*, we have now introduced an optional feature for importing records submitted in BirdTrack into WeBS Online. This is to make it easier for those who carry out WeBS counts and who also keep regular BirdTrack lists, so that data does not need to be manually entered online twice. You can, of course, simply enter your counts straight into WeBS Online if you prefer.

You can use any of the existing ways to enter your counts into BirdTrack (through the webpage or Android and iPhone apps) and all waterbird species you record in your list, together with counts and species comments, will be transferred when you import into WeBS Online.

REGISTERING A WeBS SITE IN BIRDTRACK

If you already have a site set up in your BirdTrack account that covers the same area as your WeBS site, you can use the existing site.

Otherwise, the first time you enter data for WeBS in BirdTrack, you will also need to create your WeBS site as a site in your own BirdTrack account.

To create the site through the web browser, log in to BirdTrack at **https://app.bto.org/birdtrack**. Select 'My Places' on the left, then select the green '+Create new place' button on the right. Type in the site name *e.g.* 'Little Ouse - Thetford WeBS site', find the site on the map and either drop a pin in the centre of the site or draw the site boundary. Then press 'Save' to create the site. Referring to WeBS in the place name helps you and others identify the WeBS site, but is optional.

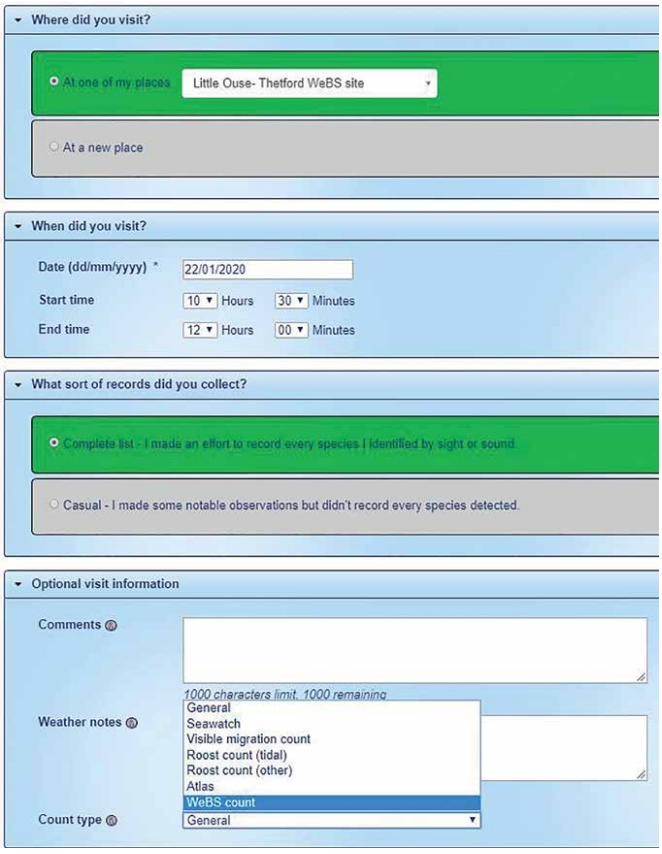
If you are using one of the BirdTrack phone apps, you can do this within the app by pressing 'Create/Add New Place'.

If you do not have a BirdTrack account, you will need to register first. You can find guidance about how to set up and use the BirdTrack system in the 'Taking Part' webpages at **www.birdtrack.net**.

ADDING WeBS RECORDS INTO BIRDTRACK

When adding data into BirdTrack, it is useful to specify that the list is also a WeBS count. This helps you and others identify your WeBS visit from your other BirdTrack lists. This information is also passed on to County Recorders when they download BirdTrack data, so they will know the data may be duplicated if they also download WeBS data. To do this, when detailing your site visit, under 'Count type' within the 'Optional visit information' section, select 'WeBS count'.

You can choose to enter waterbird records only into BirdTrack as a 'Casual' list, or alternatively do a 'Complete' list including all bird species seen, as you prefer. Then enter your records into BirdTrack as normal.



IMPORTING RECORDS FROM BIRDTRACK INTO WeBS ONLINE

Once you have added data into BirdTrack, go to WeBS Online, select 'WeBS Core Count' then select the WeBS site and enter the date of the count, ensuring that they correspond with the record you have entered into BirdTrack. When you have done this, a blue button will appear next to the date saying 'Import counts from BirdTrack'.

When you press the blue button, all BirdTrack visits you have made on that date within 5-km of the centre of your WeBS site will be listed. Select the relevant list and select 'Start Import'. To help you identify the relevant list the 'Count Type' shows as 'WeBS count' if you have previously selected this in BirdTrack.

Once you have clicked 'Start Import', the data from BirdTrack will be transferred into the WeBS form but you will still need to add the ice cover and count accuracy information. Check your counts carefully, making sure you did not forget to include any species and that the counts are correct for all waterbirds, gulls and terns.

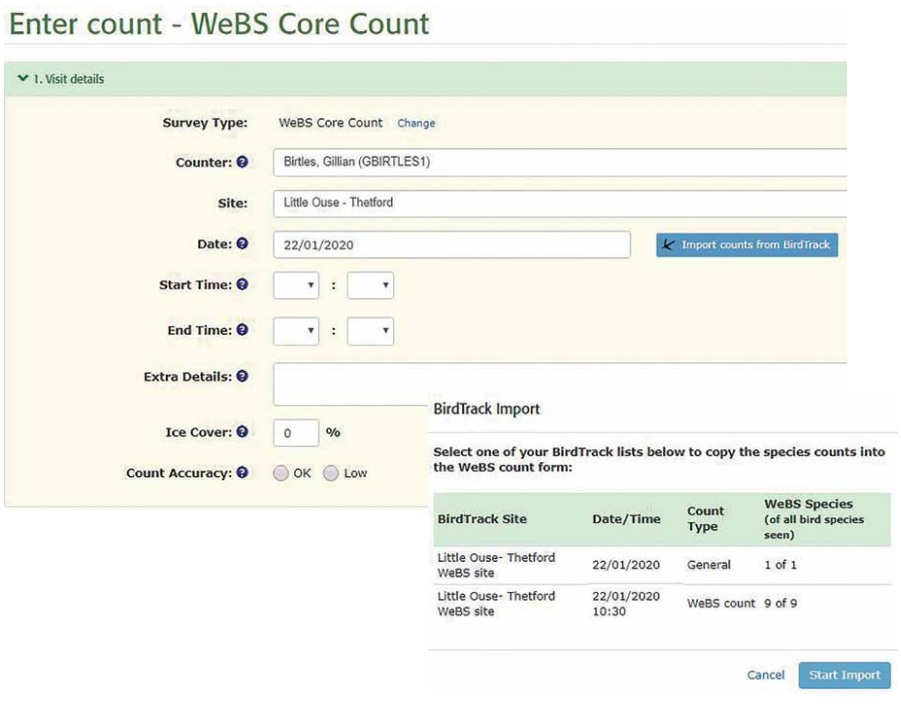
Non-waterbird wetland species such as Dipper will appear in the 'Other Common Species' tab as usual.

If you have any species of waterbird or common wetland birds that have not previously been recorded at the site for WeBS, these will appear in the bottom section.

If you usually look for gulls or terns and did not see any, you will need to go into the tabs and select that they were not present.

If you recorded plumage data in BirdTrack this has not been imported. However, if you click on the % sign by a species to add age or sex data, your BirdTrack plumage and species comments are displayed to help you complete this section, (see the Guidance in part 6 of the WeBS Counter Handbook).

Once you are happy that everything is correct, click 'Submit Count'.



This new feature was launched on 5th March 2020. Over the days that followed (including a Core Count weekend) it was used 129 times, by 70 different counters. We had a very positive response, with 11 counters taking the time to contact us by email or on Twitter to praise it. Comments included: "Great work to those involved", "worked a treat", "great addition", "timing [of launch] was perfect", "saves so much time", "it was so easy", "couldn't be simpler" and "highly recommend".

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2020–2021 season...

2020...

18 October

15 November

13 December

2021...

17 January

14 February

14 March

11 April

23 May

13 June

25 July

22 August

12 September

10 October

7 November

19 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**

Manx WeBS counts on the up

Taking over as Local Organiser may seem a daunting challenge, but the rewards are well worth it, and often it brings with it new faces among the counters.

David Kennett WeBS Local Organiser

I took over as WeBS Local Organiser (LO) from Pat Cullen in September 2019. For several decades, Pat carried out WeBS counts at most of the 50-or so sites originally assigned to the Isle of Man. Many of the records go back to the 1960s and 1970s, long before the current set-up was established and the online system introduced; some sites haven't been surveyed for several years. Though retired as WeBS LO, Pat kindly agreed to again carry out Whooper Swan counts in January this year, as part of the five-yearly International Swan Census - as he put it, he had been counting Whoopers for over 40 years and was very familiar with their preferred winter haunts!

In July 2019, at the start of the WeBS reporting year, only six sites were being regularly counted. In the south, one volunteer who, encouraged to sign up to WeBS after an inspiring talk by Dawn Balmer at a Manx Ornithological Society (MOS) meeting in early 2017, took on not one, but four sites in the Port St Mary area! Further along the south coast, the North Perwick Bay to The Chasms site was added; this had been covered since April 2019 by the new counter who had previous WeBS experience at a site in the Forth Estuary in Scotland. In the north of the Island, coverage continued at the important Point of Ayre (POA) Gravel Pits site (now part of a major new nature reserve) by the same counter who has been recording there every month for the past 20 years.

Following a few emails and some WeBS promotion at MOS winter meetings (many thanks to our bird club secretary and BTO Ambassador, Janet Thompson, for her encouragement and help), there was some very welcome interest in the survey. The Isle of Man is lucky in that the whole island is covered by a single OS 1:50,000 map (sheet 95) which (in addition to the WeBS Vacant Sites online page) makes it quite easy to display and show the vacant sites in a local context. In January 2020, six more sites were adopted: the important and demanding, but often disturbed, areas of Derbyhaven Bay and Langness (Castletown Bay East); the inland sites of Kionslieau and Eairy Dams by another new recruit (already a BBS volunteer); and in the north, Glascoe Dub (dub is Manx for a pond or small water body) and Ramsey Vollan (possibly better known locally as Mooragh Park Lake) by a fourth new counter who was already very familiar with both sites. And more were to come!

In April this year, two more counters (with previous WeBS experience at sites on Anglesey) took on, not only the existing site at Garwick Bay, but also created two new sites, the adjacent Laxey Bay (including the harbour) and a nearby farmland dub. In June, the seemingly unstoppable volunteer, already counting at the Glascoe and Ramsey Vollan sites, adopted

Though the Isle of Man does not hold the huge numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders seen at many estuary and coastal sites in the UK, these records are well worth highlighting...

Whooper Swan	Single, POA Gravel Pits, October 2019
Pink-footed Goose	77, POA Gravel Pits, December 2019
Greylag Goose	600, POA Gravel Pits, September 2019
Long-tailed Duck	Single, POA Gravel Pits, April 2020
Red-breasted Merganser	Single, Ramsey Vollan, January 2020
Goosander	Female, Kerrowdhoo Res., June 2020
Ringed Plover	163, Derbyhaven Bay, May 2020
Purple Sandpiper	19, Port St. Mary Bay, December 2019
Snipe	3, Kionsleau, January 2020
Curlew	290, Derbyhaven Bay, January 2020
Wood Sandpiper	Single, POA Gravel Pits, May 2020
Turnstone	67, Port St. Mary Bay, January 2020
Black-headed Gull	350, Langness, January 2020
Herring Gull	1,087, Langness, February 2020
Kittiwake	644, N. Perwick to Chasms, August 2019
Guillemot	3,422, N. Perwick to Chasms, June 2020
Razorbill	377, N. Perwick to Chasms, June 2020




Single Wood Sandpiper, Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser were some of the highlights of the 2019/20 WeBS Year on the Isle of Man, while Purple Sandpiper numbers peaked at 19 birds.

Ramsey Harbour (last surveyed about ten years ago) and finally, another new counter (and the second BBS volunteer to sign up to WeBS), took on the Clypse and Kerrowdhoo reservoir sites.

At times, throughout all this activity, I have felt a bit of a fraud, as although I'm familiar with many of these sites, I have yet to do a WeBS count myself. As LO, of course, I can visit the sites to do single visit counts and hopefully I may eventually get round to doing this.

Despite the restrictions due to the Coronavirus crisis, the vagaries of the weather and more than half the sites being covered for only 6 months, or less, the 2019/20 season saw 10 counters make a combined total of 96 visits to 17 separate coastal and inland sites, recording 69 different species. Of these, 40 were "core" wetland species, including wildfowl, waders, rails, grebes and cormorants, plus gulls and terns, while the remaining 29 are on the additional species lists, and included seabirds (*e.g.* the cliff nesting species), raptors, corvids and numerous small passerines. All the records have been interesting, whether from the big sites at Langness/Derbyhaven and the POA gravel pits, to the small Dubs with only a few ducks and Moorhens as the reward.

As very much a novice, still in my first year as LO, this has all definitely been a very steep learning curve but has been made much easier by the huge amount of help and advice I've received from the Counter Network Organiser, Gill Birtles, and of course, by the refreshed and very user-friendly, version of WeBS Online. The new 2020/21 season is already off to a good start with our latest counter (previous WeBS experience at sites in Chichester Harbour), taking on Douglas Harbour and Bay. This is a very welcome addition which will bring the total number of sites covered up to 18.

I think it's been a remarkable year for WeBS in the Isle of Man, despite the difficulties of the last five months. It just remains for me to say a very big thank you to all the counters for their determination and hard work, and to the photographers who kindly allowed me to use their pictures in this article. I hope they will all be pleased to see their efforts recognised by a wider WeBS readership.

ALL PHOTOS BY PETER CHRISTIAN

Unravelling Shelduck Migration

More WeBS counts of Shelduck in June, July and August could help fill gaps in knowledge about how Shelduck move around the country during the period of their moult migration.

Ros Green BTO Research Ecologist

Despite being such a common and conspicuous species, there is still much to learn about Shelduck migration and moult strategies in the UK. A recent BTO review (Green *et al.* 2019) has consolidated what is known, and a tracking study (Green *et al.* 2020) has improved our knowledge of how quickly Shelduck can migrate across the North Sea. However, lots of knowledge gaps have also been highlighted, which more WeBS data could help to fill.

The majority of British breeding Shelduck migrate to the Wadden Sea (The Netherlands and Germany) between late-June and September to moult their flight feathers, though several UK moulting sites also exist, including the Firth of Forth, the Humber Estuary, The Wash, Bridgwater Bay and the Mersey Estuary. Little is known about which Shelduck from which populations migrate to which moult sites. Do west coast breeders use UK moult sites, while east coast breeders travel to the continent? Do males, females and immature birds travel to different areas? No-one seems to know, and here's where your data collection can help!

We'd love to know how Shelduck numbers fluctuate across the country during the non-core WeBS months. We suspect that numbers might reduce on the west coast as they increase on the east coast between June and August, and that known UK moulting estuaries will see an increase in numbers, as numbers in smaller sites decrease. Count data from these months would really help build up a picture of how Shelduck move about the county during migration. Any data on the sex or age class of birds would also be helpful. Thank You.

Recording ratios of male to female Shelducks could help scientists understand their migration strategies

EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO

You can enter proportions of male and female or adult and immature birds from your site in WeBS Online using the % symbol next to the species count box. Guidance on how to record sex and age ratios in WeBS Online can be found on pages 6–9 or on the counter resources page of the WeBS website **www.bto.org/webs-counter-resources**

References:

Green, R.M.W., Burton, N.H.K. & Cook, A.S.C.P. 2019. *Review of the migratory movements of Shelduck to inform understanding of potential interactions with offshore wind farms in the southern North Sea*. BTO Research Report 718, BTO, Thetford, UK.

Green, R.M.W., Burton, N.H.K. & Cook, A.S.C.P. 2020. *Pilot tracking study of the migratory movements of Shelduck to inform understanding of potential interactions with offshore wind farms in the North Sea*. BTO Research Report 725. BTO, Thetford, UK.

Ruth Thomas – the journey

Despite suffering life threatening injuries, Ruth made a remarkable recovery and her work on Curlews on the Solway helped her achieve a Degree that once looked out of reach...

Ruth Thomas WeBS Counter

GUY BROOME

Following her accident, studying Curlews on the Solway became Ruth's passion

Ruth Thomas was a budding Zoology student at the University of Cumbria with a dream of a successful career in ecology and conservation ahead of her when it all came crashing down, literally, in July 2018 after she was critically injured in a major car crash in the Lake District.

Airlifted to the Critical Care Unit at the Royal Preston Hospital with what the doctor on board the helicopter described as some of the most serious injuries he had ever seen, Ruth spent three weeks in a coma and a total of three months in hospital, suffering nine fractures to her pelvis and lower spine and a Traumatic Brain Injury, having to learn to walk and talk again, but determined to return to her studies and, as she describes them, "her birdies".

And, just over a year after the crash, Ruth returned to Carlisle to complete her final year. Ruth's passion for ornithology never left her and ultimately formed the basis of her dissertation entitled "A Study Assessing the Effectiveness of WeBS Core Counts on Curlew numbers on the Solway Firth".

Ruth could be found morning and evening, almost daily over a several month period, out in all weathers, recording Curlew on the estuary and hinterlands; a bird with a UK conservation status of Red-listed and thus monthly counts are vital for monitoring their numbers. Ruth's study set out to prove that the established WeBS monthly core count methods for wetland birds did not account for all the birds present in one day.

A small area of the Solway Firth between Boustead Hill and Drumburgh was selected to perform the study and a circuit devised that included the estuary habitat WeBS already covers plus the adjacent farmland that WeBS does not record. This is due to wading birds like Curlew feeding on both habitats. The local WeBS count organiser kindly provided the official WeBS count numbers to which Ruth compared her numbers and found that in one month a significant number of Curlew were recorded that had not been seen by the WeBS counter. Hence it could be concluded that including hinterland numbers when performing WeBS core counts is vital in recording all Curlew present.

Ruth has since graduated university with a 2:1 honours degree and is currently looking for work in the ecology and conservation fields.

You can follow Ruth on Twitter at @zoologyruth

Your counts count

The wealth of bird data provided by WeBS volunteers are used daily by Natural England's conservation advisors and ornithologists for a wide range of purposes.

DETAILED DATA...
Conservation advice is available via the Designated Sites System search page at **https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteSearch.aspx**

Allan Drewitt Senior Ornithologist, Natural England

WeBS data are particularly valued for managing protected wildlife sites important for birds: Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Protections Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar Sites. We use both Core Count and Low Tide data to help support the case for nature conservation designations for birds; to set conservation objective targets; to monitor and assess site condition against these targets; and to assess the potential impacts of built development and other activities on these sites. Data collected away from protected sites are similarly of value in that they contribute to our understanding of regional and national population trends, identify potential new protected sites and help to locate and count SSSI and SPA birds which periodically feed or roost outside protected site boundaries.

MARK MAINWARING

WeBS data were valuable for the designation of Morecambe Bay and Duddon Estuary SPA

WeBS DATA UNDERPIN PROTECTED SITE DESIGNATIONS

The most obvious and perhaps rewarding application of WeBS data is the designation of new SSSIs, SPAs and Ramsar Sites. Recent examples of major site designations are the combination of two SPAs to create the new Morecambe Bay and Duddon Estuary SPA/Ramsar Site and the extension of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast SPA/Ramsar Site, both including additional areas of habitat important for coastal non-breeding and breeding birds. These new sites protect habitat used by a combined total of nearly 30,000 waterbirds and seabirds, including new species as 'qualifying features' such as Ruff and Mediterranean Gull. Proposals to designate new protected sites are subject to public consultation and the highest level of scrutiny before receiving Ministerial approval. As such, very few designations would have succeeded without the evidence provided by WeBS counts, with their proven track record of rigorous survey methodology, coordinated coverage and data validation.

WeBS DATA INFORM CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

WeBS data relating to birds which are qualifying features of protected sites are used in Natural England's conservation advice packages. These set out our conservation objectives for SSSIs and SPAs, providing information on desired bird and habitat feature condition, including abundance targets which are often based on WeBS counts. Annual monitoring is crucial here, as we want our targets to reflect situations where numbers have consistently increased over time, and also to ensure that we take care not to make less favourable numbers worse still. WeBS provides an up to date, long-running data series which we rely upon to review and revise our targets. Our conservation advice packages also assist environmental assessments of any proposed activity affecting sites by advising on activities that can potentially affect bird features or habitats, and therefore have potential to undermine our objectives.

WeBS DATA REFLECT SITE CONDITION

Recently we have worked with BTO to develop ways to use WeBS Alerts to help monitor the health (or 'condition') of sites designated for non-breeding waterbirds. Alerts are provided for 49 species or species populations and are available for 55 SPAs across England. The latest Alerts, using data up to 2017/18, show trends and percentage changes in numbers against the 'baseline' values used to justify site designations. This means that we can compare the existing value of sites with their importance at the time of designation which, in many cases, is over 30 years ago.

Changes in bird numbers can reflect site-level factors, such as increased disturbance or habitat deterioration, but can equally result from wider changes outside our control such as changes in migratory bird movements, including 'short-stopping'. Comparison with regional and national trends over the same time period will ultimately allow us to identify those sites which are in 'unfavourable condition' and where resources are necessary to undertake research into the causes of declines and implement necessary management changes. Sometimes this research can involve greater interrogation of the WeBS data, for example in studies of the potential disturbance effects of recreational activities on estuaries. Although bird trends are usually just one component of site health checks, which include many other attributes relating to habitat suitability, they provide the most obvious, reliable and regular indicator of change, once again underlining our reliance on WeBS.

WeBS DATA ARE CRUCIAL FOR IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

All WeBS counters will be aware of the many human activities that can influence bird numbers, including built development on or near bird habitats, industrial operations, flood defence works and a variety of recreational activities. These can result in habitat loss or deterioration, either directly through changes in land management or indirectly because of increased disturbance.

When assessing the effects of any proposed activity on protected sites the most important information is the number and distribution of birds likely to be affected, particularly those which are qualifying features. Recent bird counts at the sector level are crucial and we often compare five-year peak means for affected areas against the overall site totals to provide essential context for our advice. When considering effects of habitat loss and/or displacement on intertidal areas we also use Low Tide data as additional supporting information.

WeBS Alerts have long been used to assist such site protection casework, often providing important details on bird trends which can help understand the implications of new proposed activities and strengthen the case to oppose changes or mitigate their effects. The comparison of site-level trends with regional or national trends is often particularly revealing and helpful in these cases, and the more advanced sector-level alerts can help understand where and why sites are failing to support their bird populations.

Much of this work would be impossible without WeBS data and we would like to thank all volunteers working both on and off designated sites for their efforts. Your data are highly valued and essential for our work to protect, manage and monitor England's internationally important waterbird populations.

GLOSSARY

Protected Sites:

- **Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**: land designated under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 for the special interest of its flora, fauna or geological or physiographical features.
- **Special Protection Area (SPA)**: strictly protected sites designated under the Birds Directive (Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds).
- **Ramsar Sites**: wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention.

Qualifying features: the features for which a SSSI, SPA or Ramsar site has been designated. In the case of birds they normally include species present in nationally or internationally important numbers (*i.e.* at least 1% of GB or biogeographic populations respectively) and/or important assemblages of different species.

Conservation objectives: a description of the desired state of the qualifying features of a protected site including specific targets or target ranges. Features being managed in a way which maintains their nature conservation value are in "favourable condition", meaning that the features are being adequately conserved and monitoring demonstrates that they are meeting all the mandatory site-specific targets set by the conservation objectives.

Baseline values: normally the numbers of individuals of specified bird species, or numbers of individuals in an overall bird assemblage, present at the time of site designation. These figures are often provided in formal descriptions ("citations") of a site's importance.

Low Tide Update

Low Tide Counts complement the Core Counts on estuarine sites, and give an insight into the distributions of different species within a site.

Neil Calbrade WeBS Low Tide Organiser

The winter of 2019/20 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 18 estuaries around the UK, including the Solway Firth, Taw-Torridge, Fowey, Hayle, Ythan and Deben Estuaries.

The counts for the 2020/21 winter will soon be underway on The Swale, Firth of Tay, Camel Estuary, Pegwell Bay and Irvine-Garnock Estuary among other sites being counted under the six-yearly programme.

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme, so please contact the WeBS office (email: **lowtide@bto.org**) if you are able to organise a team or be able to count a whole site yourself and would like to take part. The counts are carried out, ideally, once a month between November and February and will allow comparisons of distributions and densities of species across a site with previous years.

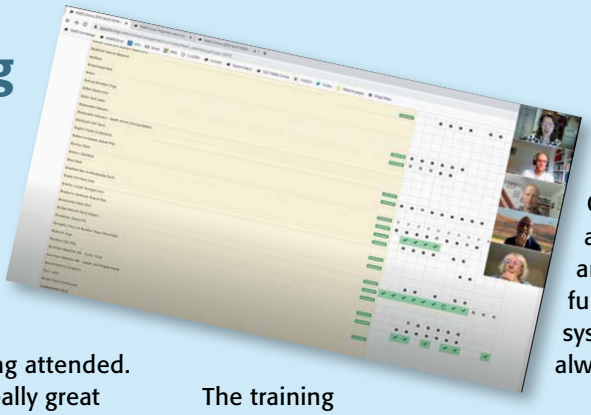
As part of the online WeBS Reporting interface via **www.bto.org/websreporting-lowtide**, dot density maps for all sites and species are now available. This allows the user to compare the distributions of birds using any combination of site, species and years side by side for ease of comparison. Monthly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

Estuaries that have been counted under the Low Tide Count Scheme ▶

WeBS TRAINING

Local Organiser Training

Gill Birtles explains how the current trend toward virtual meetings has opened up new opportunities for training...



Due to the popularity of recent BTO virtual training sessions, in August, September and one due at the beginning of October this year, the WeBS team conducted a series of WeBS Online training sessions for Local Organisers using Zoom, to demonstrate how they can manage counters, sites and data within their regions. These sessions have also proven popular, with 30 Local Organisers having attended.

It has been really great for the WeBS team to 'meet' Local Organisers and put a face to the name, many of whom we may never have met if it weren't for the rapid development of virtual training at the BTO, and I'm sure likewise it has been good for them to meet the WeBS team too.

The training has been a really good opportunity to highlight 'tricks of the trade' that may not be well known, as well as addressing on the spot questions and aiding discussion about coverage in different regions. It has been great to hear what works well for Local Organisers and also where there are opportunities to further develop the system, which we are always looking to do.

If there is sufficient demand from Local Organisers who haven't been able to join the recent events, there is potential for similar training sessions to be offered in the future, so watch this space!

COUNTER NETWORK

Local Organiser News

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Ben Welbourn (Cotswold Water Park); Peter Jones (Irt/Mite/Esk Estuary); John Thorogood (North Blackwater); Kevin Feeney (Merseyside – inland); Andrew Warr (Worcestershire); Alastair Inglis (Forth Estuary – North); Jeremy Squire (Loch Leven); Shane Wolsey (Down (other sites) and Londonderry (other sites)); Michael Stinson (Tyrone); Steve Holliday (Northumberland (inland)); Richard Barnard (Humber Estuary – Mid South); Pete Roseveare (Cornwall (excl. Tamar Complex)) and Peter Hearn (Morecambe Bay – North) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter.

We would also like to thank the following new Local Organisers: Martin Routledge who has taken over as the Buckinghamshire – North Local Organiser; Derek Julian who is the new Cornwall (excl. Tamar complex) Local Organiser, Charles Nodder for taking on the Tamar complex (Cornwall); Martin Overy who is the new Exe Estuary (Devon) Local Organiser; Barbara Moore who has taken over as the Humber Estuary - Mid South (Lincolnshire) Local Organiser; Tim Daley for taking on Northumberland (inland); Eve Tigwell who is the new Local Organiser for Somerset Levels; Jonathan Pattullo for taking over as the Angus (excl. Montrose Basin) Local Organiser; Alan Seago for taking on Carmarthenshire and Mike Douglas for taking over as Morecambe Bay – North Local Organiser.

Special thanks is particularly needed for two long-term Local Organisers who have stepped down in the last year. John Thorogood, who was the Local Organiser for North Blackwater (Essex) and Steve Holliday who was the Local Organiser for Northumberland (inland). Between them they have a combined WeBS experience of 70 years and leave behind them a great legacy of WeBS counts in their regions. We would all like to thank them for their hard work and dedication to the scheme.

Special thanks also go to Alistair Duncan who began counting in 1974, including a stint as Local Organiser for Aberdeenshire for 30 years, who has now retired. We would also like to thank John Topham who stepped down as a counter this year after nearly 19 years of counting two sites in the Huddersfield/Halifax area (Yorkshire) region. This is a massive achievement – thank you for your support!

Desperately seeking organisers...
We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Harrogate and Yorkshire Dales, Clwyd (inland), Buckinghamshire (South), Derbyshire, Durham, Halifax/Huddersfield area (Yorkshire), Kent (East), Kent (West), Irt/Mite/Esk Estuary (Cumbria), Worcestershire, Cotswold Water Park (Gloucestershire), Isle of Cumbrae, Jersey (inland), Forth Estuary –North, Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin) and 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 LOAC

LOAC Update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the counter network to improve communication with WeBS staff, providing ideas, feedback and advice. Although the LOAC hasn't met for a couple of years, we are planning to have a meeting in the new year.

If you have any comments about any aspect of WeBS that you would like to bring to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your Local Organiser or LOAC regional representatives listed below.

WeBS LOAC Representatives

Southwest England
Eve Tigwell
eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk

Eastern England
Chris Gunn
donandchris@hotmail.co.uk

Midlands
Brian Moore
b_moore@ntlworld.com

Northern England
Colin Wells
colinewells@outlook.com

Wales
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andrew.king53@virgin.net

South and East Scotland
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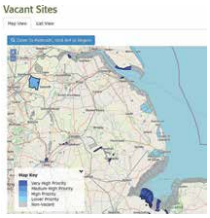
North and West Scotland
Bob Swann
robert.swann@homecall.co.uk

Northern Ireland
Kerry Mackie
kerrymackie9@gmail.com
or
Shane Wolsey
shane.wolsey@btinternet.com

BACKCHAT

WORD OF MOUTH...

Vacant sites...



Do you have a friend who would make a good WeBS counter, or perhaps you have time to take on an additional site yourself? We are always looking for more help! Vacant sites and priority sites can be explored via the 'Find a vacant site' button on the webs homepage at **www.bto.org/webs**.

It is also possible to set up new sites, particularly where these would help fill gaps in coverage of certain habitat types and regions – contact the relevant Local Organiser or Gill Birtles at the WeBS office to discuss.

2020 IWSG Golden Plover Survey

The 17th–18th October 2020 sees a Europe-wide Golden Plover survey take place on behalf of the International Wader Study Group. Additionally, records of Lapwing and Curlew are also requested. These dates are over the WeBS Count weekend, so all of your WeBS counts of these species will be fed into the survey, but please add any extra flocks that you see away from your WeBS site into BirdTrack.

Five years of Wader Tales

This September marked the fifth anniversary of the WaderTales blog series. WaderTales blogs are written by Graham Appleton, to celebrate waders and wader research. Many of the 98 articles are based on previously published papers, with the aim of making wader science available to a broader audience. Read all the blogs at **www.wadertales.wordpress.com**

Snap shot

Award winning WeBS Counter!

We would like to congratulate Adam Lake, one of our youngest WeBS Counters from Devon, who won the 14–17 years category and the overall Young Bird Photographer of the Year title for 2020, with this superb image of a Mute Swan.

Calling all photographers and artists

We are always in need of good quality photographs and artwork of WeBS species for use in the WeBS annual report and WeBS newsletter. If you have artwork or images that you would be happy for us to use, with full credit given of course, please get in touch.

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
Web Software Developer
matthew.baxter@bto.org

Gill Birtles
WeBS Counter Network Organiser Counter and Local Organiser database management, WeBS Online
gill.birtles@bto.org

Neil Calbrade
WeBS Low Tide Count Organiser, Data Requests, WeBS News Editor
neil.calbrade@bto.org

Teresa Frost
Management of WeBS, WeBS Core Counts, Annual Report
teresa.frost@bto.org

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