

WeBSnews

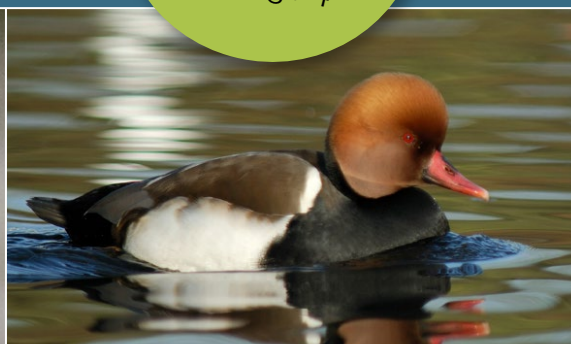
The newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey
and the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme



AVIAN
INFLUENZA
UPDATE
See page 4



COMPARISON OF CORE AND LOW TIDE COUNTS 8



COTSWOLD WATER PARK SSSI 10



SOUTH MEDWIN POOLS 6

ISSUE 38 • AUTUMN 2022

ALSO INSIDE

- 01 NEW GSMP ORGANISATION
- 02 FROM THE EDITOR
- 03 LOW TIDE UPDATE
- 04 AVIAN INFLUENZA UPDATE
- 06 WeBS SITE IN THE SPOTLIGHT
- 08 COMPARISON OF CORE AND LOW TIDE COUNTS
- 10 DESIGNATING THE COTSWOLD WATER PARK SSSI
- 12 DISCOVERING A NEW WeBS SITE IN THE MIDLANDS
- 14 WADER AGE ASSESSMENTS
- 16 THREE NEW WeBS SPECIES
- 17 LOCAL ORGANISER NEWS
- 18 GSMP UPDATE
- 20 BACKCHAT

PLUS WeBS WHO'S WHO, CORE COUNT DATES & NEWS

New Goose and Swan Monitoring Organisation

As mentioned in the recent *WeBS News 2020/21 Special Edition*, WWT have made the decision to concentrate its efforts for conservation of waterbirds and their habitats in other work areas, and as a result relinquished the organising of the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP). This has now been taken over by BTO.

In winter, the UK hosts over 840,000 migrant geese and swans that arrive on our shores after breeding in northerly regions such as Iceland, Greenland and Svalbard. BTO has now taken on expanded monitoring responsibility for these populations in an exciting development of the Goose & Swan

Monitoring Programme, now managed in partnership with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and NatureScot (NS).

The BTO/JNCC/NS Goose and Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) is a suite of annual and periodic surveys that monitor the UK's internationally important

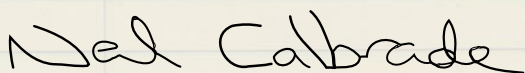
FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome...

...to the latest issue of *WeBS News*. This summer has certainly been a busy one at the BTO, with negotiations not just for the renewal of the WeBS agreement, but also the taking on the running of the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP), for which I will be the main contact, along with my responsibilities in WeBS. This newsletter will cover both schemes in future (pg. 18).

WeBS counts continue to be as important as ever, from assessing impacts of Avian Influenza which has already claimed the lives of thousands of waterbirds (pg. 4) to being used to designate sites for protection such as the newly designated Cotswold Water Park SSSI (pg. 10).

Rare birds are always a welcome distraction on any WeBS count, I fondly remember finding a Baird's Sandpiper on one of mine, and recently we had three new species for WeBS recorded on WeBS counts (pg. 16).



Neil Calbrade Editor & Waterbird Surveys Officer



CONTINUED FROM COVER

populations during the non-breeding season.

The surveys covered by the programme, which BTO will be organising, are the Icelandic-breeding Goose Survey (IGC), International Census of Greenland Barnacle Geese, Svalbard Barnacle Goose Census and the International Swan Census (ISC). In addition to these, collaborating organisations carry out counts and age assessments of Taiga Bean Geese, the Greenland White-fronted Goose Census and the All-Ireland Light-bellied Brent Goose Census, while some species will continue to be primarily monitored by WeBS.

The aim is to collect data to calculate population estimates and

trends at UK, country and site level for selected goose and migratory swan populations, as well as to provide data and information about the demographic factors driving those trends. Productivity data – which are recorded as the proportion of young birds in winter flocks, and the brood size of successful adult pairs – are important for global research and conservation of these populations, as monitoring here in the UK is more accessible than surveying remote Arctic breeding grounds. The results enable us to assess the status of geese and swans wintering in the UK and inform conservation action.

Like WeBS, the monitoring programme has a long pedigree, tracing its roots to the 1940s and the National Wildfowl Counts. This scheme merged with Birds

WeBS NEWS

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Thanks to Dawn Balmer, Gill Birtles, Teresa Frost, Anna Robinson, Jessica Shaw and Viola Ross-Smith for proofreading this newsletter.



The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitors the UK's waterbirds and contributes to the International Waterbird Census.

WeBS is a partnership jointly funded by the BTO, RSPB and JNCC, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers.



The Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) monitors the abundance and breeding success of the UK's native geese and migratory swans during the non-breeding season.

GSMP is a partnership, run by and jointly funded by BTO, JNCC and NS, with fieldwork conducted by both volunteer and professional surveyors.

Information in this Newsletter is compiled from a variety of sources and does not necessarily reflect the views of WeBS partner organisations. © BTO 2022 Published by BTO/RSPB/JNCC.



of Estuaries Enquiry to form the Wetland Bird Survey, until goose and swan monitoring emerged in its current form 20 years ago as a separate scheme, delivered by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) in partnership with JNCC and NatureScot. WWT remains fully supportive of the important work of the GSMP, but has made the decision to concentrate its conservation activity for waterbirds and their wetland habitats in other areas. BTO has entered into a new partnership, with existing partners JNCC and NS, to take GSMP forward, together with a steering group of Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, and Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the collaborating

organisations that lead on some of the species-specific surveys.

This new arrangement offers the opportunity to strengthen existing links with WeBS, which has been organised by BTO in recent years, ensuring that all information on wintering waterbirds will be easily accessible in one place. The partnership will utilise BTO's expertise in running bird monitoring projects that, like GSMP, combine volunteer and professionally collected data, to work with the dedicated surveyors and sustain the volunteer network GSMP relies on.

We are excited to secure the future of this vital programme focused on our internationally important wintering goose and swan populations, all of

which are Red or Amber-listed species in the latest Birds of Conservation Concern assessment. For many of these goose and swan populations, the entire population relies on UK wetlands during the non-breeding season. With uncertainty ahead for these birds – including the as yet unknown impacts of Avian Influenza, increasing land use conflicts and climate change – monitoring remains as vital now as it has ever been.

For more information about the GSMP, see the GSMP website at: www.bto.org/gsmg and pages 18–19 for the latest GSMP news.

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 2022/23 marks the 30th anniversary of the Low Tide Count Scheme.

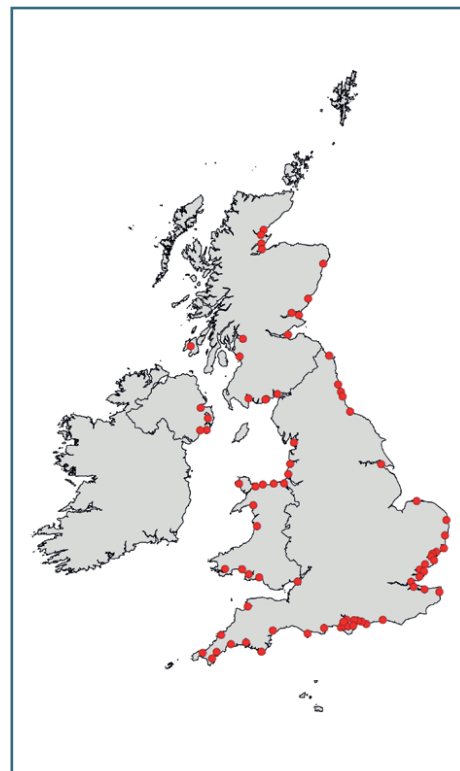
Since the counts began in 1992/93, 87 sites have been counted at low tide, the majority of which have been counted in multiple winters, allowing comparisons of the distributions of feeding birds on the site to be made.

The counts for the 2022/23 winter will soon be underway on the Alt Estuary, the Colne Estuary, Hamford Water and the Camel Estuary, among other sites being counted under the six-yearly programme.

The winter of 2021/22 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 19 estuaries around the UK, including the The Swale, Firth of Tay, Dee Estuary, Inland Sea and Portsmouth Harbour.

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.

Low Tide Counts have been carried out at 87 sites since the scheme began 30 years ago ►



Avian Influenza Update

Avian Influenza has hit the headlines this summer with its dramatic impacts, particularly on seabirds, but as winter approaches, thoughts now turn to wintering wildfowl and waders and how you can help report cases as part of your counts.

Teresa Frost WeBS Manager

Volunteers marked dead Barnacle Geese around the Solway to avoid double counting whilst estimating the impact of avian flu



MARKED BARNACLE GOOSE CORPSES BY KANE BRIDES

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, variously referred to as bird flu, avian flu or HPAI, has been a recurring issue in UK waterbirds since 2006. However, the strain that began circulating in autumn 2021 appears to be the most contagious to date. Testing for HPAI in the UK aims to establish its spread, and whilst it does not therefore reflect the overall mortality in either domestic

or wild birds, the number of recent domestic bird cases in the UK far surpasses that in any other year, and instead of cases only occurring during the winter, outbreaks have continued throughout the year.

A step change appears to have happened in wild birds too. The most dramatic impact of the disease in winter 2021/22 was on the Svalbard Barnacle Goose population wintering

on the Solway estuary, where GSMP observers and local birders began to draw attention to unusual numbers of corpses on the shoreline. Attempts were made to estimate mortality, avoiding double-counting by spray painting corpses as they were counted, but many more dead birds were likely to have been never found. Population counts are carried out monthly and there was a noticeable impact on the

numbers present later in the season. The results of the studies, plus this coming winter's census, will be key to discovering how badly the population was depleted by the disease.

During early summer, attention turned to seabirds with the disease confirmed to be present in several species and many colonies experiencing mass mortality. Great Skua and Gannet, species for which we host globally significant breeding populations, were particularly hard hit. Dead seabirds are continuing to be washed up on beaches. However, as autumn arrives and our skies again begin to fill with swirling waders, and wildfowl that had dispersed to breed gather together once more, there is apprehension about how bad this


winter might be for waterbirds, despite hopes that the outbreaks may fade as immunity increases.

Waterbirds and seabirds are thought to be particularly exposed to the disease, as their aquatic environments aid the spread and persistence of the virus. Scavengers such as birds of prey that may feed on diseased birds have also been affected. It is possible that there is some bias towards testing more easily noticed larger birds – any bird species could potentially have the disease, and mammals such as seals can also be infected. Gulls are of particular interest as potential 'vectors' between seabird colonies and other marine, freshwater and farmland habitats.

The WeBS and GSMP partner organisations have all been leading

work to combat this new conservation risk to our waterbirds, and the usual monitoring data you collect have already been immensely valuable in informing research and developing impact mitigation plans for both wild and domestic birds. It is important to keep reporting dead birds to the authorities to support testing and assessment of the spread of the virus. The latest advice and links to relevant government information can be found at www.bto.org/avian-flu. However, we are now also asking you to tell us via your WeBS Online submissions if you suspect HPAI at your site, to help researchers build up a more detailed picture of mortality and where the biggest impacts are.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Keep counting** and help us fill any gaps in coverage – the regular monthly counts of live birds collected by WeBS and GSMP will be the primary way we will be able to identify population trends and thus which species and sites have been hardest hit. **It is more important to properly count live birds than look for dead ones.**
- **If you suspect bird flu in a dead bird or observe symptoms in live birds** present (e.g. twisting of the head, tremoring, respiratory distress, loss of balance) **report to the Defra (03459 33 55 77) or DAERA (0300 200 7840) helplines.** This is particularly important if bird flu has not yet been recorded near to your suspected case.
- **To help assess mortality, add a note of suspected cases to your WeBS/GSMP count.** Add to the relevant species comment by clicking on the  symbol. Mention "flu" so we can find the comment. Give the number, age if possible, and if the bird was dead or sick, e.g. "3 sick adults showing flu-like symptoms", "2 adults and 1 young bird dead, bird flu possible" or "10 birds dead, avian flu suspected as known to be present at site".
- It is important that only live birds are marked as present when you submit your counts, so if there were no live birds of the relevant species present, instead add your record in the 'Extra Details' comments box at the top. Please specify the species if adding to the extra details comment box, e.g. "2 dead Mute Swan, bird flu suspected, no live birds present".
- Note it is possible to optionally record seabirds and birds of prey in WeBS Online as well as waterbirds, either in the "Other Common Species" tab if they have previously been recorded, or by adding as a new species. You can add avian flu comments for these other species.
- Whilst this is a disease of birds, there is zoonotic potential to cause disease in humans. **Do not touch dead birds.**
- **Report dead birds to site managers, landowners or councils** as appropriate, who may decide to collect carcasses with appropriate PPE.
- If you can do so safely without touching the dead bird, check for rings and report to www.ring.ac – this too will help enable research into the scale of mortality and which populations are most adversely affected.

WeBS LOCATION SPOTLIGHT



South Medwin Pools

An unassuming permanently flooded pasture which is a magnet for passage waders and geese and a nationally important inland breeding Shelduck site.

Derek Smith WeBS Counter

South Medwin Pools are situated in the easternmost corner of South Lanarkshire near the village of Dunsyre, almost exactly in the centre of the country. It is a rural setting and an absolute oasis of peace. Naming the site in the plural is a bit misleading since there is only one main body of water for the major part of the year with other areas flooding in wetter times, but that one area of water is sufficient to attract an incredible array of birdlife to such a modest area.

Spring is the time for passage waders and the arrival of the Shelducks. This is much anticipated. How many are we going to get this year? The numbers are quite incredible for such a small area. As we all know Shelducks are principally coastal breeders with some inland

breeding, usually, in Scotland, on larger water bodies but for some reason they are attracted to this site like a magnet. In spring 2021 there was a staggering total of 32 on this small pool! What an incredible sight it was to see such a number chasing and ducking each other in their amazing breeding behaviour. In 2018, 24 young successfully left the site, nine succeeded in 2020 and, although 18 hatched in 2021, sadly only seven survived given that the pool dried out because of our very dry spring and early summer. It is to be hoped that some facility can be engaged whereby water can be led in from the nearby South Medwin Water to avoid this eventuality happening again, especially given the change in our climate which makes this problem more likely in the future.

As far as waders go, there are always large numbers of Lapwing present at this time of year as well as in the autumn. 500 are common and there are usually good numbers of Golden Plovers accompanying them. Redshank are regular as are Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher and Curlew. Black-tailed Godwit and Common Sandpipers are also quite regularly seen. At this time of the year there are always numbers of geese, mostly Pink-feet, gathering for their spring migration.

Summer is a quieter time with most of the interest taken up with the Shelducks but anything can happen here and usually does. My visit on 12th June 2021 allowed me to see Lanarkshire's first Red-necked Phalarope! It goes to show that finds like that can happen on the days that you least expect them. What a thrill that was!

Autumn is the time of year when South Medwin Pools come into their own. Waders of any kind can turn up. The Lapwing flocks swell with associated Golden Plovers. Ruff seems to be a specialty of the site in autumn; nine were present for a long period in 2021. Green and Wood Sandpipers have been seen together with their Common relative. Curlew numbers are good and Dunlin is regular. Good numbers of Snipe feed in the muddy rivulets. Among the rarer waders, Little Stint was seen in 2020 and I was lucky enough to find a Pectoral Sandpiper on one of my counts in late September of that year.





As far as wildfowl are concerned, the site holds large numbers of Teal in autumn/winter. I have seen over 200. Wigeon are regular in good numbers, while Pintail, Shoveler and Goosander have also been recorded. Whooper Swans stop to feed on migration but the main event is the arrival of the geese in late September. This is a truly monumental event. On 24th September 2021 I arrived to do my regular count. There were 2,500 Pink-footed Geese directly at the pool with some Barnacle Geese, Canada Geese and Greylags. In the surrounding fields there were another 10,000! You can just imagine the sound of their calls and wingbeats when they took off. A birding experience not to be forgotten. The geese linger in the area in varying numbers throughout the winter.

I must also mention the raptors which can be seen. Hen Harrier has been noted but Peregrine, Buzzard and Kestrel are regular in autumn and winter. On a count in September 2018 I noted that the waders had all got up in a panic and a few moments later

a magnificent adult male Merlin perched on a wall about 10 metres from me.

As you can probably tell I am in love with this site so much so that I visit on an almost weekly basis even although it is around 45 miles from my home. It is with genuine excitement that I arrive at the Pools knowing that anything might turn up. I really hope that my enthusiasm rubs off on those who are considering adopting a WeBS site. Please take the next step. You will not regret it.

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

WeBS Snippets

SPECIES	NUMBER	PROPORTION RECOUNTABLE	PROPORTION RECOUNTABLE
Pink-footed	115		
Teal	147		
Widgeon	127		
Pintail	60		
Lesser Grebe	102		
Pintail	17		
Shoveler	10		
Shoveler	10		

Impressive Inputting

Our grateful thanks to office volunteer Deborah Newman, who has been working on digitising WeBS historic data since 2018. So far she has entered data for 7,138 visits for 119 locations, with most forms being from the 1950s, 60s and 70s but going back as early as 1936. Thanks Deborah! If you live close to Thetford and would like to volunteer in the office please get in touch.

Opting out of paper reports

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

High water and low water WeBS counts: how do they compare?

The differences between carrying out the Core and Low Tide Counts, from a counter's perspective.

David Parker WeBS Counter

Last winter I was asked if I would be willing to carry out Low Tide Counts on the Dee Estuary. After 43 years of doing WeBS high tide counts on the estuary, I was happy to take this low water count on for the first time, but how would it differ from my high water experience?

HIGH WATER COUNTS

I started high water WeBS counts on the Dee Estuary in 1979 in what was then Shotton Steelworks. I counted on the intertidal mudflats and saltmarsh at White Sands, on the England/Wales border which bisects the estuary. After some years, my counting point moved to an old colliery spoil heap in Little Neston on the Wirral. Here I had a superb view over the saltmarshes. I was then moved north to my current location known as the Fisherman's Path at Neston Reedbed, just to the south of Parkgate. Over this time I have had only two WeBS Local Organisers, Bob Gomes and Colin Wells.

When the tides are right, I walk from the reedbed to count about 1km out towards the middle of the estuary. I am always on my own and the intimate experience with the birds, the wildfowl, waders, raptors and passerines, can be intense and memorable. Highlights over the years have been up to 5,000 Pintail flying close, encounters in the fog with Shelduck, the increasing presence of Pink-footed Geese (now over 20,000 on the estuary) and with new species on the count, such as Little Egret, Great White Egret and Spoonbill.



KNOT BY SARAH KELMAN/BTO

Huge flocks of Knot are difficult to count accurately at both low and high tide.

LOW TIDE COUNTS

The Low Tide Counts allocated to me were on four compartments, two of saltmarsh and two of mudflats, at Heswall and Thurston, seaward of high tide counts. Immediately I found that the main focus of the counts is different. With high tide counts you are mainly watching moving birds, often flying into roost or to feed. With low water counts these are mainly of birds on the ground but with occasional movements, most often when birds are disturbed by a raptor, usually either a Peregrine or Marsh Harrier. Birds are concentrating on feeding and the habitat is stable over the hour each side of low tide. This is hugely different at high tide, with wildfowl flying in to just flooded saltmarsh to feed mainly on the rich seed resource which becomes available. This is particularly the

case with Pintail and Wigeon. The Dee Estuary has the highest numbers of wintering Pintail in the UK and the range of habitats on the estuary clearly suit it. Pintail is an omnivorous species, and, on the low tide counts, I saw several hundred birds close inshore on intertidal mud and almost certainly feeding on invertebrates.

COMPARISONS

Low Tide Counts take a similar time per compartment to high water counts, about two hours. High water counts usually begin 2 hours before high water and then stop. Low Tide Counts are for an hour each side of low water. The skill set required to carry out high and low water counts is similar. There is also the need for good visibility and a top-quality telescope. My Swarovski 85mm with 25–60x magnification is invaluable and,



High Water WeBS count site at Fisherman's Path, Neston showing flooded creeks, saltmarsh and the Welsh coast (left) and flooded creek, ungrazed saltmarsh and the Wirral coast (right).



Low Water Count site at Heswall showing saltmarsh and a creek which retains water at low tide.



Low Water Count site at Thurston, Wirral showing extensive mudflats extending towards the Welsh coastline.

crucially, works well in poor winter light. With both high and low water counts, birds need to be identified and recorded over great distances, up to three kilometres at times. What can make life difficult at both high and low water is heated air, especially that caused by direct sunlight. This wipes out visibility and can be a problem at all times of the year. Heated air makes identification of both settled and flying birds frustratingly difficult and can result in an incomplete count.

I have had a lot of experience in counting large aerial flocks of waders and wildfowl and do this by counting in blocks of 10, 50, 100 or even 500 birds. This works well most of the time, but with low tide counting, large flocks of Knot can prove problematical. Unlike Dunlin and Oystercatcher, which spread out quite thinly over a large mudflat, Knot tend to stay in dense groups, both on the

mudflat and in the air. With the larger flocks, up to 20,000 birds at times, this makes them very difficult to count and only a broad estimate is possible. I've only had this problem on the low water counts because my high water count site is mainly saltmarsh and I encounter relatively small groups of Dunlin and Knot.

I have seen very large numbers of Oystercatcher on my high tide counts over the years, with over 20,000 back in the 1980s. Oystercatcher were relatively easy to count in those days because they would fly to roost in higher level saltmarsh in manageable numbers (hundreds) over two hours. I remember these roosts and there was no way to count them on the ground: they had to be counted flying into the roost. Fortunately, at low tide, Oystercatcher spread out relatively evenly over the mudflats

and their noisy encounters seemed to maintain the separation of the feeding birds and made them easy to count.

So how do Core and Low Tide Counts compare? I think the main difference is the challenging nature of counting birds spread over large areas of open mudflat at low tide, with each species requiring a different counting technique. Knot are the most difficult to count accurately, with their tight flocks, both while feeding and in the air, and this lack of precision is often frustrating.

However, in spite of all the difficulties, the real reward is the pleasure of being out in a wilderness environment and having that personal encounter with amazing birds, whether the counts are at high or low water.

WeBS data fundamental to SSSI designation – Cotswold Water Park

In September 2021 Natural England confirmed Cotswold Water Park as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its rich array of waterbirds and aquatic plants.

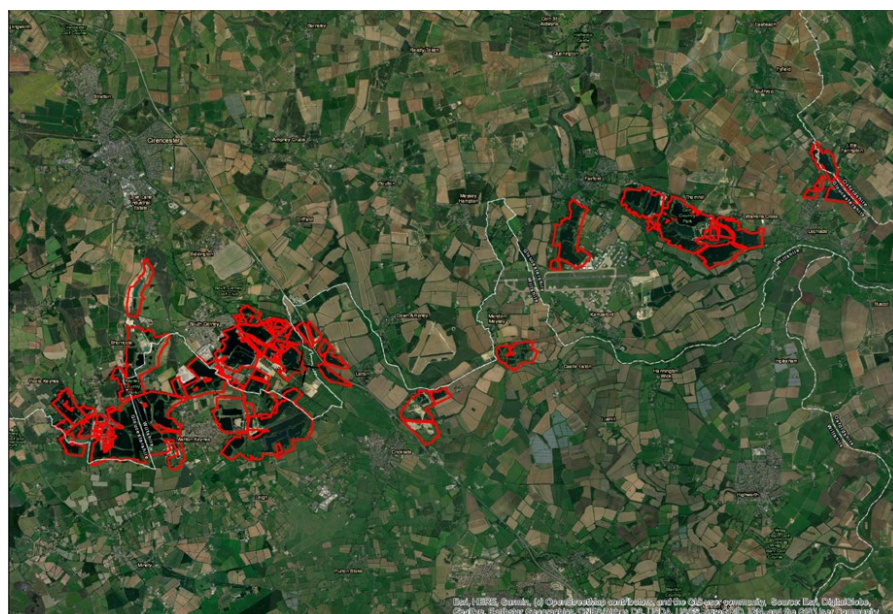
Sarah Anthony Senior Environmental Specialist, Natural England

Cotswold Water Park is a 40 square mile complex of 177 lakes which was created, and continues to expand, because of mineral extraction activity along the upper River Thames on the borders of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire. There are two principal blocks of lakes: a larger one in the west centred on Ashton Keynes and a smaller eastern one centred on Fairford, with stepping-stones formed by recent gravel workings in between.

Just 10 out of more than 150 lakes were originally designated back in 1994. Since then, and with more lakes being created, the bird and aquatic plant populations have continued to grow, and the Park has become of national importance for its bird and plant populations. It now holds over 35,000 wintering waterbirds and an important assemblage of breeding birds including Little Ringed Plover, Little Egret and Nightingale. The scrub and reedbed habitats support breeding warblers including Reed, Sedge and Cetti's Warblers, Blackcaps and Willow Warblers. The Park is also nationally important for four species of Stonewort.

WEBS DATA SUPPORTING THE CASE

Most of the evidence used to support the SSSI notification was drawn from WeBS data collected by dedicated, skilled volunteers. This is vital as without a verified evidence base it would not be possible to build a robust scientific case for designation. WeBS data supported the notification of the following nationally important aggregations of non-breeding bird features at the site: Shoveler, Gadwall,



The area of the Cotswold Water Park now covered by the SSSI.

Pochard, Tufted Duck, Great Crested Grebe, Coot, Green Sandpiper and Lesser Black-backed Gull. In addition, WeBS counts were used as evidence for the inclusion of the assemblage of >20,000 waterbirds as a feature of the SSSI.

The SSSI designation means the Park and its wildlife have legal protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, so that Natural England must be consulted on any new proposals that could significantly affect the wildlife interest.

WHY DESIGNATION?

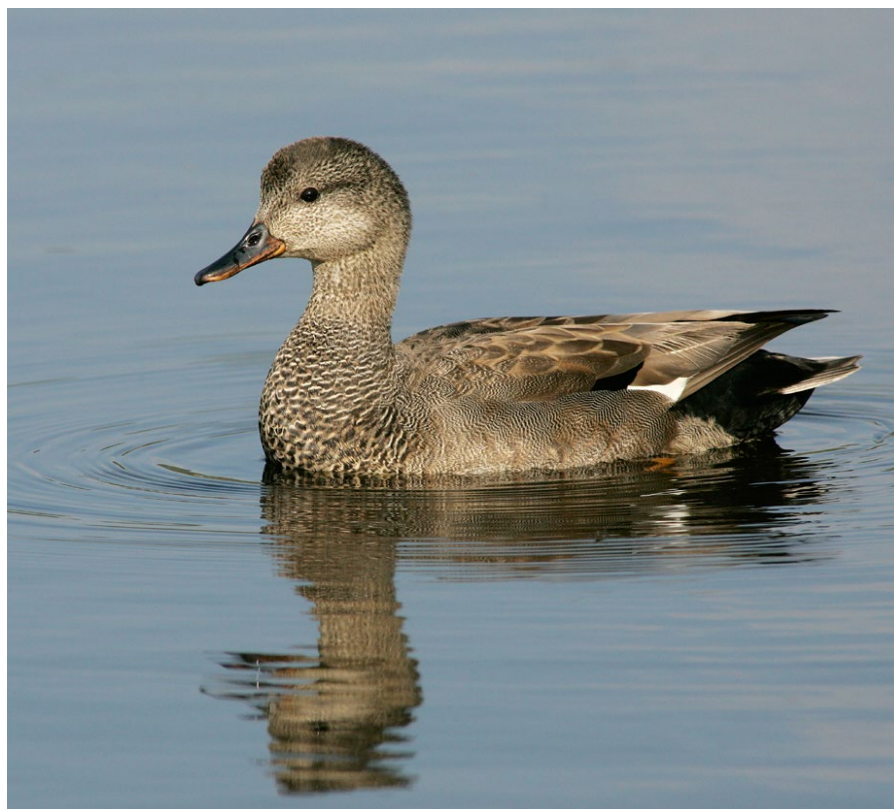
So why did it need this designation at all? Although throughout much of the Park recreation and wildlife was co-existing, there was no strategic plan for future development or increased recreation. In addition, the location of RAF Fairford in the centre of

the Park meant it was unlikely that more open water will be permitted in future mineral extraction sites within the Park. Without a wider designation, future development proposals on the existing lakes could really begin to have an impact on bird and plant communities. Rather than the increases we had been seeing over the last 10 years, the scenario that we would begin to see declines was a very real threat.

This expanded designation means that the wildlife can now be considered as part of all future developments to ensure all needs are balanced and wildlife can continue to thrive.

THINKING AT A LANDSCAPE SCALE

Right from the beginning of this project a landscape scale approach was taken. There was a conscious move away from managing



GADWALL BY EDMUND FELLOWES

Gadwall is one of eight species found in nationally important numbers in the Cotswold Water Park SSSI.

individual lakes to thinking about the site as a whole and its context in the wider landscape. A decision was taken to treat all 177 lakes as one unit to allow for the dynamic nature of the site. The birds move across the whole Park, using lakes in different ways, at different times of the day and year. Having a one-unit approach reflects this dynamism. The new SSSI has also assisted with better alignment of the existing WeBS count sectors to the newly defined boundary and better reflects the situation on the ground. This is crucial for accurate ongoing monitoring of the SSSI bird populations.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING AND CREATING A VISION

This expanded designation has only been possible through a real team effort both across Natural England and with a range of partners and stakeholders of the Park.

Natural England worked closely with the Cotswold Lakes Trust, a charity that brings together all the stakeholders within the Park to ensure that we engaged across all interests and really

emphasised that we understood and valued the wide range of uses.

It has also involved working with partners from the very onset and creating a shared ambition for the Park. This ambition was as much about people as it was the wildlife. The Park is an important site for recreation, tourism and businesses, and in some cases, it is these recreation activities which maintain the mosaic of habitats, for example management of scrub around the lakes by the sailing clubs provides valuable habitat for breeding birds.

Local WeBS counters are key stakeholders for the future of the site, by ensuring the features of the SSSI have ongoing monitoring to enable condition assessment. Most importantly without them we wouldn't have had the robust data to validate the SSSI notification in the first place, enabling the long-term legal protection of this nationally important wildlife site. Data collected by WeBS volunteers is crucial not only for ongoing monitoring purposes for existing SSSIs but also to help identify and notify new protected areas.

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2022–2023 season...

2022...

9 October

13 November

11 December

2023...

22 January

19 February

12 March

23 April

21 May

18 June

9 July

20 August

17 September

15 October

19 November

17 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

Discovering a new WeBS site in the Midlands.

A response to an appeal for WeBS counters in a local county newsletter resulted in a visit to a new area and a rewarding new WeBS site for one counter.

Dale Green WeBS Counter

Before COVID-19 struck us all down, there was a small article at the top of a page of *Grebe*, the Leicestershire & Rutland Ornithological Society (LROS) newsletter, calling out for members to offer their help and support to become a volunteer to help with the BTO WeBS count. Brian Moore, the WeBS Local Organiser, had asked for more members to get involved and promised an enjoyable morning once a month counting local wildfowl in a pleasant setting.

At this time, I was getting into recording what I was watching and enjoyed listing my finds, so I thought I'd offer to help. Why not? Nothing to lose I thought...what an understatement. It was the best email I've sent to date.

Now I'm a relatively new birder, I grew up in the Narborough/Croft area and I've always had a keen interest in birds throughout my childhood/teens and was even a member of the Young Ornithologists Club back in the 1980's. I do have a 1984 list from RSPB Titchwell which included breeding Avocets, Shore Larks, Turtle Doves and Corn Buntings ticked off but unfortunately the avian world and I parted ways and we lost touch until 2015.

Anyway, I digress, back to the WeBS count. I pushed the enter key on the laptop and sent Brian the offer of my services via email, not really knowing what to expect. I had little knowledge of why we counted wetland birds



A Cattle Egret was seen on Dale's recce visit of his new WeBS site

but I soon got up to speed with the importance of this activity. Brian duly responded and said due to my location they can offer me a small set of Lakes at Mallory. So, I said yes, let's do this, I was keen to help. Unfortunately, following a site visit with the owner, to cut a long story short, things didn't work out so I returned an email back to the Brian to say I found it difficult to access but would like to try another area if there was one.

Later that week, Brian kindly said that he did have another area that needed counting, in the very north of the county, it was called Trent Valley Pits but he thought it may be too far for me to travel. Now 27 miles away, I did wonder at first, maybe I'd be stretching it

a little if it turned out to be a just another boring over-fished fishing lake, like it so resembled on the map. I was a little apprehensive but at the same time, I had read recent reports, stating that a Cattle Egret had taken residence at the nearby Lockington Marshes at Trent Lock, so knowing this, it did make me think that the area must have a certain appeal to hold one of our rarer Egrets therefore I agreed to give it a go. Next came the planning to cover as much as I could if I was travelling all that way, I needed to make it worthwhile. After a few emails with Brian, we eventually agreed to cover areas that used to be counted, Cavendish Bridge, Lockington Burrow pits, Lockington Marshes and the main areas Trent Valley Pits.

My initial visit to the area took a while (nearly eight hours) as I ended up circling over 20 scrapes, pits and wetland areas and needed to make my initial visit, covering about 12sq miles in total which seemed a big area. I was excited to see these new habitats and was keen to see what they held. My exuberance was soon deflated when I got off the A50 and drove towards the Trent Valley pits down the road to Sawley Marina. All I could see was 10-foot-high fences, secure gates and quite a few signs stating private land; the actual site looked amazing but really inaccessible to the public or a safe haven for the fishermen, so I focused on the other sites which I'd ringed as possibilities but I knew I'd need to get inside the fishing complex to complete any sort of decent count. Opposite the pits, was a newly built Aldi distribution centre and to the right of this was an unfinished waste land area with a flooded scrape which held one Gadwall, three Lapwing, three Greylags and a couple of Mallards, so the count finally begins.

They were all countable birds on the WeBS list, it made for a decent start. Next, I went back towards Lockington to a couple of pools, one abandoned hole directly off the A50, reedbeds plentiful but only one Coot was present.

Next, I moved down the road to Rycroft Pools. These looked to be popular fishing lakes and as I pulled into the carpark all that could be seen was full pegs, brown water and zero birds. I took a walk to the rear pools but this seemed far worse, so I knocked this one from the count list, far too busy. I still take a fleeting glance but there never seems to be much doing at this site, although it may change once the weather turns and less rods are cast.

After this I went to the next fishing area at Cavendish Bridge which was at the other side the A50 towards Derby. This time there was a good mix of fishermen and birds, with both Reed and



A scribbled map of the area Dale is covering

Sedge Warblers and Great Crested Grebes all looking in harmony with each other. Mute Swans were on the bigger lake here too. I do think this area will suffer when the Trent bursts its banks and becomes a flood zone as there are signs of raised pathways etc. So reminder to self, wellies essential in the coming months!

After checking four medium-sized lakes at Cavendish Bridge, I thought I'd try my luck at Trent Lock. I followed the tow path to the right and on the opposite side (Lockington Marshes) I located a Heron standing area, which held 6 birds. I was secretly hoping to see the star attraction; the punk egret that has the best strut but alas, it was no-where to be seen. Eventually after tallying up: two Black-headed Gulls, 14 Canada Geese, five Common Terns, one Coot, one Cormorant, 21 Greylags, 20 Mallard, 10 Mute Swans and two Moorhens, this made for a decent list in my opinion. I was returning to refresh my thirst in the Trent Lock Pub and out of the corner of my eye, there it was, just came strutting over a grass bank, the Cattle Egret, beautiful bird, made my day to be honest and my pint tasted even better!

After Trent Lock, I came to the final locations that I had yet to visit from my map and this was to take in the various pits, scrapes and wetland zones that

run the length of Warren Lane - Long Lane from Sawley Marina to Kegworth. Now this area is special, it is a vast marshland and has gravel pits in various stages of rewilding, new scrapes and flood plains.

So that's the run I've set myself for the WeBS count apart from the main event, the Trent Valley Pits, no count would be complete without this fantastic area. The president of the Pride of Derby fishing club who own the lakes kindly replied to a letter I sent and said he would approve the count taking place and was keen to know the results. Well, this was brilliant, I was pleased that they had let me in and now I had access to this wonderful site.

So, to conclude, Brian Moore, was spot on, the WeBS count has enhanced my personal birding by 10-fold and to carry out the count each month makes it feel like you are collecting data for a worthwhile end. Which is the truth.

Since starting this I have taken a zoom BTO counting course for tips and now can estimate flock quantities by using my thumb!

So finally, I would like to thank Brian for his continued support and hard work which I really appreciate and only one thing left to say is thumbs up to the WeBS count, get involved, you'll definitely be rewarded!

Your help need to understand wader declines

Carrying out age assessments of wader flocks can support monitoring of breeding productivity and inform research on the drivers of population change..

Teresa Frost WeBS Manager

Waders are a group of high conservation concern in the UK, with 11 species on the Red list and 17 on the Amber list of Birds of Conservation Concern. Monitoring the demography – breeding success (new birds being added to the population) and survival (existing individuals surviving to the next season) – of birds is vital to understanding the drivers of changes in their populations and at what point in their life-cycle problems are occurring. As with geese and swans, where GSMP Age Assessments are an important monitoring tool, many UK passage and wintering waders breed in Arctic areas where only limited observation of breeding success is possible.

Monitoring here in the UK can help fill that knowledge gap. Much of what we currently know about wader demography has come from analyses of ringing data, in particular of the relative numbers of juvenile and adult birds in catches. It is from such ringing studies that we know that changes in food supplies have been associated with reduced recruitment in Knot and Oystercatcher on the Wash, impacting their populations.

However, studies have shown that valuable insights on productivity can also be gained by field observations by non-ringers at certain times of year. For Sanderling, for example, September to October is the key period. To facilitate the collection of such data, in 2020 we made age assessment recording possible in WeBS Online. Since the launch,



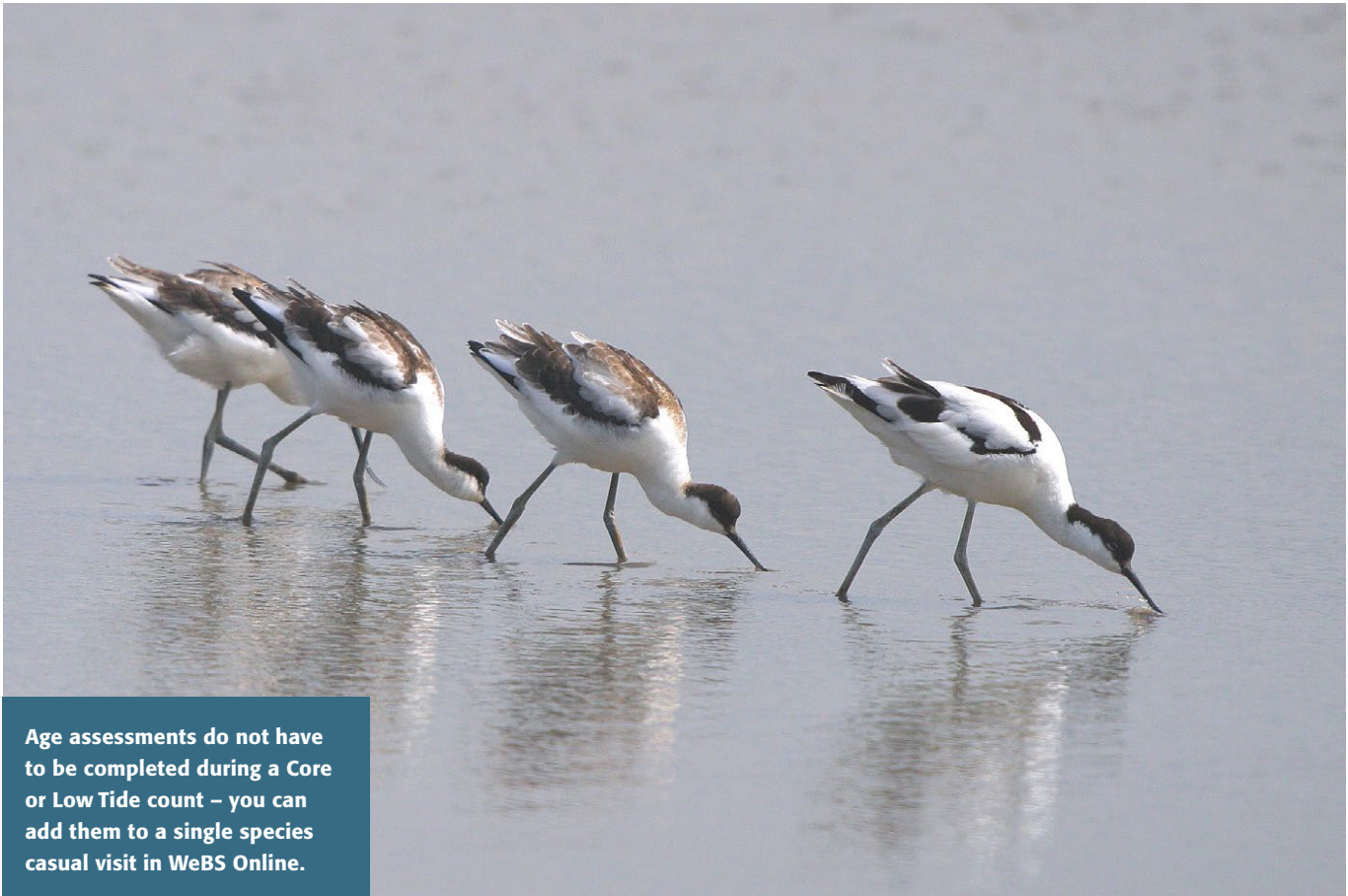
Sample assessments of the numbers of adult and juvenile birds in flocks can given valuable information on breeding productivity– especially if you repeat over several years.

TURNSTONE BY CATHY RYDEN/BTO

we have received 197 wader age assessments, for 21 different wader species – thank you to everyone who has contributed already.

We are really keen to collect more data, so that it will be possible to start reporting on species' annual breeding productivity. Early autumn is the most helpful time of year to collect age assessment data for waders. If you are confident in assessing the age of waders, please collect data at your

WeBS sites! You can submit data with your Core Count. However, if you cannot collect age assessment data then, data collected on other dates can also be submitted using the Casual Count form, which is located on the right as you login to WeBS Online. This will provide a valuable measure of annual breeding productivity in hard to monitor endangered Arctic-breeding populations.



Age assessments do not have to be completed during a Core or Low Tide count – you can add them to a single species casual visit in WeBS Online.

AVOCETS BY DAVE KING



Catching and ringing waders provides an opportunity to collect detailed data on age and moult.

GREY PLOVER BEING RELEASED BY CATHY RYDEN/BTO

HOW YOU CAN HELP...

The Counter Resources section of the WeBS website is a goldmine of useful tutorials and guides including guidance on carrying out age sampling during your WeBS Core, Low Tide or Casual count. To get to it go to www.bto.org/webs and then click on Taking Part and then Counter Resources.

The components of the Counter Handbook are shown first on the Counter Resources page. Here you can download "Part 6 - Guide to recording age and sex ratios". This explains why we allow you to give multiple samples for a flock, which can be useful when there are too many birds present to assess them all. If there is more than one flock present in different areas of your WeBS sector you can separate those too.

Below the handbook list on the Counter Resources page is a link to the WeBS Online video tutorials. Follow the link and then scroll down the video called "How to record age and sex" which shows you how to enter data, step by step.

Back on the Counter Resources page, the link under "WeBS Bird ID Video Guides" takes you to a page with all the relevant BTO ID videos for waterbirds. Here you can find plenty of really helpful, detailed wader ID videos that can be used to brush up on juvenile wader ID, including videos focusing on common shanks, Knot and Dunlin and Wood and Green Sandpipers.

Three new WeBS species!

We haven't had a new species recorded on a WeBS count for many years, and then, like buses, three come along at once...

Neil Calbrade Waterbird Surveys Officer

It isn't very often that we have a new species for the survey recorded on a WeBS Count, but last autumn and winter, we had three!

The first one to be recorded was a White-tailed Lapwing at Blacktoft Sands in East Yorkshire. This was a hugely popular bird, which, although initially found in late August 2021, stayed at the site for several months and was recorded on each subsequent WeBS count from September to December. Incredibly, it then relocated to nearby East Halton Marshes, also on the Humber Estuary, where it appeared on the WeBS Counts in January and February 2022.

In October 2021, another wader, this time a Long-toed Stint, was recorded on the WeBS Count at St Aidan's RSPB Reserve in West Yorkshire. This was just the fourth record for Britain, following birds in Cornwall in 1970 Cleveland in 1982 and Hampshire & Sussex in 2011.

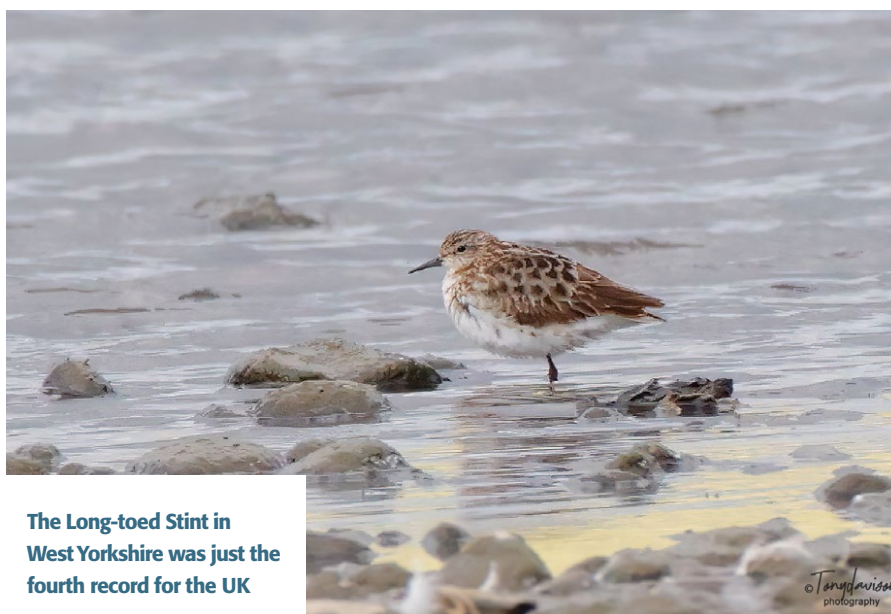
Although for the past few winters, a White-winged Scoter had been wintering in the Firth of Forth, it had never made it onto a WeBS Count. Finally, in January 2022, it was recorded on the WeBS Count at Musselburgh, and I would imagine it may appear on a few more in future if it continues to return to the site each winter.

If you are lucky enough to record a new species for WeBS and need help in adding it to your list, drop us a line and we can add it to the species list.

The White-tailed Lapwing remained around the Humber Estuary for nearly six months



NEIL CALBRADE



The Long-toed Stint in West Yorkshire was just the fourth record for the UK

© Tony Davison
photography

TONY DAVISON (<http://www.simplebirdsandmud.co.uk/>)

COUNTER NETWORK

Local Organiser News

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Andrew Bramhall (Scottish Borders); Barrie Galpin (Northamptonshire); Jane Kelsall (Montgomeryshire); Joanne Hubbard (Nottinghamshire); Norman Elkins (Tay and Eden Estuaries (Fife)); Moray Souter (Aberdeenshire), Bjorn Blanchard (Harrogate & Yorkshire Dales) and Rob Innes (Greater London) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter.

We would also like to welcome the following new Local Organisers: Anthony Bentley who has taken over as Local Organiser for Breydon Water (Norfolk); David Jefferies who is the new Local Organiser for Lancashire - East and Fylde; Dean Jones for taking on the Bann Estuary; Kevin Dupé who is the new Local Organiser for Severn Estuary - North (Gwent/Glamorgan); Maria Antonova for taking over as Kent - East Local Organiser; Martin George who has become the Shropshire Local Organiser; Nicola Hoar who is the new Local Organiser for Dorset (excl. estuaries); and Richard Clarke for taking on Local Organising at Gwent (excl. Severn Estuary).

Special thanks is needed to two long-term counters who have stepped down from counting in Cumbria this year- Mike Critchley and John Peatfield, who between them have counted many decades for WeBS. An amazing achievement and we thank them for their support.

Also particular special thanks to Norman Elkins who has stepped down as Local Organiser after 35+ years! It's a real end of an era and we know that his professional and persistent approach will be missed by the counters in the area.

Desperately seeking organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Aberdeenshire, Badenoch and Strathspey, Buckinghamshire (South), Clwyd (coastal), Clwyd (inland), Cotswold Water Park (Gloucestershire), Forth Estuary (North), Greater London (excl. Thames Estuary), Harrogate & Yorkshire Dales, Huddersfield/Halifax area (Yorkshire), Isle of Cumbrae, Jersey (inland), Kent (West), Montgomeryshire, Northamptonshire (excl. Nene Valley), Nottinghamshire, Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin), West Midlands. 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.

In May the WeBS team hosted a meeting of LOAC, who hadn't met since 2016 so this meeting was a really great way to kick-start the committee after such a long hiatus. We gave the committee an update of recent WeBS developments and discussed what the committee would like to achieve in the future. The aim is to meet as a committee annually in the spring which will be complemented by a Local Organiser-wide meeting in the autumn, thus ensuring

regular communication with the Local Organiser network throughout the year.

We are looking to hear from any Local Organisers who may be interested in serving in the vacant regions of the LOAC. If you would like to know more about what is involved please contact Gill (webs@bto.org).

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

WeBS LOAC Representatives

Eastern England

Chris Gunn

donandchris@hotmail.co.uk

Midlands

Brian Moore

b_moore@ntlworld.com

Northern England

VACANT

Wales

VACANT

South and East Scotland

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Southwest England

Eve Tigwell

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North and West Scotland

Bob Swann

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Northern Ireland

Kerry Mackie

kerrymackie9@gmail.com



Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) Update

The GSMP is a suite of species-specific surveys which monitors the different populations of geese and migrant swans throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, to provide data for the conservation of their populations.

GSMP survey dates for 2022/23

ICELANDIC-BREEDING GOOSE CENSUS (IGC)

Pink-footed Goose: 22–23 October 2022 and 19–20 November 2022

Greylag Goose: 19–20 November 2022

Ideally all sites supporting Pink-footed Geese should be covered during the October and November counts, whilst those holding Icelandic Greylag Geese should be covered in November.

We would like to encourage all counters at sites within the wintering range of Icelandic Greylag Geese to also carry out a count during September if the site also supports British Greylag Geese. September counts are not strictly coordinated but ideally should be carried out during the middle of that month, although any counts made during September will be of value.

If you are unable to count on the above dates, please contact either your GSMP Local Organiser or the GSMP Office so that we may try to arrange cover of your site by another counter.

GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE CENSUS

The census is organised by the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study (<https://greenlandwhitefront.org>). Please contact the organiser Tony Fox (tfo@bios.au.dk) for further details about the census.

Count dates for the 2022/23 census are as follows:

Autumn and spring coordinated censuses:

17–21 December 2022 and 11–15 March 2023

We very much welcome counts from other dates and times but for the monthly counts, we especially appreciate counts in the following periods:

19–23 November 2022, 14–18 January 2023 and 18–22 February 2023

ENTER YOUR IGC AND AGE ASSESSMENT RECORDS ONLINE

Counters taking part in the Icelandic-breeding Goose Census and Age Assessments can enter their counts into GSMP Online.

You will need to register to use the system at <https://app.bto.org/gsmponline>.

If you need any further information on how to use GSMP Online, please contact the GSMP Office at: gsmp@bto.org

IGC LOCAL ORGANISERS NEEDED

We are looking for Local Organisers to coordinate the Icelandic-breeding Goose Counts in Moray Firth, Northern Ireland, Solway Firth (north), Aberdeenshire, Angus and East Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire regions.

If you are interested in helping, please contact Neil Calbrade at gsmp@bto.org



Details about all the GSMP surveys, including how to get involved can be found on the GSMP website at: www.bto.org/gsmp

AGE ASSESSMENTS

The aims of the age assessments are to determine the annual reproductive success of each goose or swan population and are mostly carried out at wintering and autumn stop-over sites. Age assessments of geese and swans comprise two measures of annual reproductive success (or productivity): the proportion of young (first-winter) birds in non-breeding flocks and the average brood size.

Due to differences in plumage characteristics, swans and geese in their first winter are usually easily separated from adult birds, at least for part of the non-breeding season. In many swans and geese, young birds remain in family units with their parents throughout their first winter, and thus it is also possible to measure the number of young produced by successful breeding pairs. Counters, therefore, record the number of young birds present in a flock and also identify family groups making a note of the number of young within each family.

The timing of migration and post-juvenile moult differs between species, meaning that the time period in which data can be collected also varies between species (see below). Plumage differences also vary between species and are more subtle for some species than others, meaning that the level of experience required by the observer varies.

Different species have different survey periods. These key survey periods also correspond to a time when the majority of the population should have arrived on the wintering grounds and, therefore, the differing arrival patterns of adults with and without young will not significantly affect the estimates.

If you are interested in helping with age assessments, please contact the GSMP team at gsmp@bto.org

Survey periods for age assessments:

Bewick's Swan: November – February (focus on December and mid-January)

Whooper Swan: October – January (focus on mid-January)

Taiga Bean Goose: October – mid November

Pink-footed Goose: mid September – mid November

European White-fronted Goose: October – January (focus on January)

Greenland White-fronted Goose: October – January (focus on December)

Icelandic Greylag Goose: October – mid November (care needed with age identification)

British Greylag Goose: August – September

Barnacle Goose (both populations): October – December

Dark-bellied Brent Goose: September – March (focus on October and November)

Light-bellied Brent Goose (both populations): September – March (focus on October and November)



BACKCHAT

Word of mouth...

Another five years of WeBS

The BTO, RSPB and JNCC recently signed a new five-year partnership agreement covering our core surveys including the WeBS, Breeding Bird Survey & Waterways Breeding Bird Survey, and Ringing and Nest Record schemes. New to BTO were the Seabird Monitoring Programme and GSMP. Pictured here are the chief executives of the BTO (Juliet Vickery, centre), RSPB (Beccy Speight, left), and JNCC (Gemma Harper, right).



Missing WeBS site boundaries

We have identified approximately 1,500 WeBS sites where we have never received a map of the site boundary for our files. Many are old sites that are no longer counted, and as a result do not appear on the Vacant Sites page, but some have an allocated counter, yet have no boundary on file. If your site doesn't appear on the 'WeBS Sites' page (www.bto.org/webs-sites-map), please send your Local Organiser or the WeBS Office a map of the area you count so that we can update our maps.

Waterbirds in the UK 2019/20 correction notice

The 2019/20 WeBS Report Online has been revised following a correction to the Oystercatcher count received for the August 2019 visit for a sector on The Wash. The following changes have been made to values previously reported:

1) Site Species Peaks

The Wash, Oystercatcher, 2019/20 - peak previously reported as 44,253 (AUG), corrected to 24,070 (SEP).

2) Oystercatcher Annual Indices

No changes.

3) Oystercatcher Monthly Indices

England - August index previously reported as 82, corrected to 64 - other months unaffected;
Great Britain - August index previously reported as 74, corrected to 62 - other months unaffected;
UK - August index previously reported as 75, corrected to 63 - other months unaffected.

4) Site Totals

The Wash, 2019/20 - previously reported as 422,232, corrected to 400,173. As a result, the five-year average for The Wash has been corrected from 397,158 to 392,746.

WeBS species landmark

250 waterbird species have now been recorded at least once on WeBS counts - and once you add in hybrids and races it rises to over 300 different waterbird types! Find out the latest three species to be seen on page 16.

The WeBS and GSMP 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 and GSMP team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help...

Graham Austin

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

Gill Birtles

*WeBS Counter Network Organiser
Counter and Local Organiser database
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Neil Calbrade

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

Teresa Frost

*Management of WeBS, WeBS Core Counts,
Annual Report, software development,
statistical analyses*
teresa.frost@bto.org



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