



Organising Counts and Counters

2.1 Coverage and coordination

There are well over 100 sites in the UK that are of international importance for waterbirds, and many times this number that are of national importance. For WeBS to fulfil its objectives, it is important that, as far as possible, all of these sites are covered. We rely entirely on the network of LOs to ensure that important sites are covered each year. Thus, if a counter retires or moves away, the LO is best placed to recruit a new person. Even if there are no especially important sites in your area, it is equally important for WeBS to have a wide coverage, both geographically and in terms of habitats. Thus, there will always be locally important sites that need to be covered and which contribute to understanding national contexts. Where sites cross county boundaries, we ask LOs of both regions to liaise to ensure coverage.

The priority period for counts is September to March as this is when most sites hold the greatest number of birds. **However, we are keen to receive counts during the summer period**, particularly from sites with significant waterbird interest at this time (e.g. estuaries during **passage periods** or inland waters important for **moulting and breeding birds**). Counters should be encouraged to undertake summer counts if at all possible, however, we appreciate that many sites hold very few or no birds during the summer and that counters often prefer to devote their time to other activities during the summer months.

Priority dates are published for each month, corresponding to a Sunday when tidal conditions are suitable for as many coastal sites as possible. Where possible, counts should be encouraged to take place as near as possible to this date. If tidal conditions at a coastal site are not suitable on the priority date, local co-ordination should take preference over national co-ordination; an LO may arrange for the counts to be moved to an alternative date with more favourable conditions.

It is also important to ensure that adjacent **count sections** within a region or site are counted synchronously particularly where there is the possibility of birds moving between areas and either being missed or counted twice. This is particularly important for **complex sites such as estuaries**, which are sub-divided into many smaller count sections to facilitate monitoring by groups of counters (please also see Summary Forms page 10).

Some LOs, particularly those co-ordinating counts on a large site such as an estuary, organise group meetings with their team of counters. Such meetings may be useful to maintain counter interest and to discuss local monitoring and conservation issues. If you are planning to organise a meeting and

would like a member of the WeBS staff to attend, either to give a short talk or presentation or simply to advise on particular aspects of monitoring, then please contact the WeBS Office.

2.2 Counters

The network of volunteer counters is a hugely valuable asset. Without this network much of the important work that relies on WeBS data simply could not be achieved. The LO is the important link between the WeBS partners and the network, and of course vice versa.

Please inform the WeBS Office of any new counters and we will ensure they receive a copy of the **WeBS Counter Handbook** consisting of a folder and a number of loose-leaved sheets with useful information about all aspects of WeBS. This should give answers to many questions that may arise, and provide good background information for new or potential counters. The Counter Handbook can also be downloaded from the website under Taking Part (www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/taking-part/counter-resources).

Counters who are new to the BTO or online surveys will need to **visit www.bto.org/webs** to register for WeBS Online and select an **Online Username**. Those who have taken part in other BTO online surveys (e.g. BirdTrack, Breeding Bird Survey, Garden BirdWatch, BirdAtlas etc.) and already have a BTO online username simply need to visit www.bto.org/my-bto and click on the orange **Sign Up** button underneath the Wetland Bird Survey project and accept the Terms & Conditions to activate their access to WeBS Online. Counters who do not have access to the internet or who prefer to not to submit data online can also be allocated an Online Username, please contact the WeBS Office with their postal address and we will set them up with a Username. Existing non-online counters will already have an Online Username but may also have a **Counter Code** which was used prior to the creation of WeBS online.

In order to submit their data online, counters will need to be assigned and allocated to their site(s). LOs can do this online and will need the counter's Online Username. Please see **Sections 4.4 and 4.5** for full instructions on how to do this.

If you or an elected volunteer enter counts on behalf of anyone else they will need to select that person's Username from the drop-down box in the appropriate section of the Visit Details section of the Core Count Entry page to ensure that the true counters name appears next to that submission (see **Section 3.2** for full instructions). Data returned to the WeBS Office on paper forms or in Excel spreadsheets can use either reference.

LOs will also need to add new counters to the mailing lists for the Annual Report and Newsletter, please see **Section 5.3** for full instructions.

2.2.1 Under 18s

We have an increasing number of volunteers who are under 18 years of age. Every volunteer under the age of 18 must ask their parent or guardian to complete and sign a Parental Consent Form, copies are available from the WeBS Office or you can download them from the website (please see other resources on page 11). There is no need to question every counter who requests a site as we assume that they (or their parent) will let you know if they are underage. **However, volunteers who are**

known to be underage should not commence fieldwork until a form has been returned to the BTO.

2.2.2 Retiring counters

When counters retire from WeBS you will first need to update their subscriptions to the Annual Report and Newsletter (see **Section 5.3**) - they are entitled to receive a copy of each Annual Report that they have contributed to – and de-allocate them from their site (see **Section 4.6**). It is our policy to continue to allow them to view their data, therefore you can only downgrade their access to VIEW.

If you receive the sad news that an existing counter has passed away please follow the instructions above and notify the WeBS Office immediately. We will ensure that the records for the volunteer are archived and will notify other departments within the BTO as appropriate.

2.2.3 Unresponsive counters

At one point or another every LO will have a counter who does not submit data when expected and does not respond to attempts to contact them. This is always a difficult situation as there could be any number of reasons why the counter has not been in touch. The importance of the site is another factor to consider, an unresponsive counter might not be such an issue at a very small site, whereas it will be a much bigger problem at a high priority site or sector.

Occasionally we have found that a letter from the WeBS Office can prompt an otherwise unresponsive counter to get in touch. However, as long as every attempt has been made to contact them (including sending a letter via snail mail); you are at liberty to find a replacement counter. If you would like us to contact a counter to request data or you would like to discuss the best course of action with the WeBS Team please do get in touch.

2.3 WeBS Online in brief

WeBS Online helps WeBS run smoothly by providing tools for data input, management and output. All counts computerised so far from WeBS and its predecessor schemes from the 1940s onwards are held in the WeBS Online database, making WeBS data accessible, as appropriate, to counters, LOs and relevant staff from the WeBS Partners. As an LO you will have access to all historic and recent counts for the sites in your region. If you notice possible errors in data from earlier years, please don't hesitate to contact webs@bto.org.

WeBS Online includes many features specifically for LOs, to help you carry out your role more efficiently, saving you time and effort. The later chapters of this handbook provide step-by-step instructions on how to use the various LO WeBS Online options. Chapter 3 gives an overview of the LO features of WeBS Online and the LO Manage My Team section. Chapter 4 covers managing locations (sites) and assigning counters to sites. Chapter 5 covers managing the contact information and other details of your counters. Finally, Chapter 6 explains how to check the counts submitted by your counter team.

What if I don't want to use WeBS Online?

If you feel as an LO that you do not want to use WeBS Online, then please let us know. It is possible that some of your counters will be using it. Therefore we will make a point of checking submissions made to WeBS Online for your region at the end of each WeBS year. We will then send you summary print-outs of the counts that have been entered online which you will be able to check over. If you would prefer to receive more regular updates, please let us know.

Whilst we are keen to encourage continued uptake of WeBS Online by counters and LOs, it is **not** compulsory. Counters may choose to send counts in on paper forms, and LOs will be able to continue with their valuable role without having to use WeBS Online, should they so wish. Our priority is to maintain as high a level of quality coverage of the UK's wetlands and waterbirds as possible.

WeBS Online has changed a great deal since it was first launched in 2006. We have made a number of modifications to improve the functionality for LOs. We see this as a rolling process, and are always keen to hear of suggestions for future changes and improvements.

2.4 Recording Forms

For counters who do not have internet access, paper recording forms are available. These are sent out to LOs in May each year and they should be distributed to all counters who need them in your region. Although the main counting period is September to March, some counters continue all year round and will need sufficient forms to cover all twelve months. If you need more (or fewer), or if you would prefer the forms be sent direct to your counters instead of to you please let us know.

2.4.1 Labels for count units

To save time, and to reduce the potential for errors in data processing, we provide LOs with adhesive labels for each count unit (site/sector) in their area for use on the recording forms (one per form). Each has the site or count section name, the OS grid reference and a unique code (which we use when processing the data). These should be affixed over **box 2** on the recording form (see section 3a of the Counter Handbook) before sending to the appropriate counter.

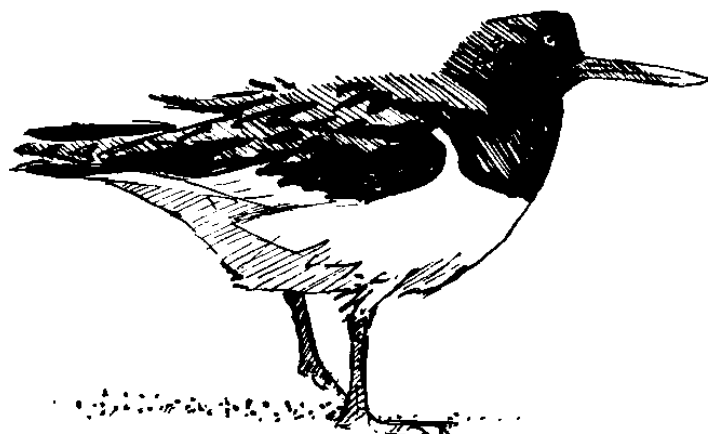
If no label is provided for a count unit, the name and grid reference should be written in by hand, either by yourself or the counter. Labels are distributed each year with the recording forms.

2.4.2 Submitting data from forms into WeBS Online

We encourage LOs to submit data sent to you on paper forms (or via email) into WeBS online whenever possible. This helps to reduce our processing costs and means that the data are immediately available, as it can take several months for data to become available online when returned to the WeBS Office.

You can submit data under the counter's name (or under the lead counter's name where a team of counters have completed the counts); all you need is the counter's online username. See section **3.2**

Submitting data for your counters on page 14 for full instructions on how to submit data under someone else's username. If you are entering the data online there is no need to return the forms to the WeBS Office as well.



2.4.3 Returning forms

The WeBS **recording year** runs from July to June. Counters who visit their site year-round should return their forms to their LO as soon as possible after the June count; counters who only visit their site(s) during the core winter period (September to March) should return their forms as soon as possible after the March count.

If unable to submit data online themselves, LOs are requested to return all completed forms for their site/region to the WeBS Office by the end of August (if you have submitted the data online there is no need to return the forms). Thus, counts from July 2017 to June 2018 need to be submitted by the end of August 2018, and so on. This allows us to process all data and publish the Annual Report in a reasonable time. It does not matter how regularly we receive counts over and above this, whether it is every month or in batches whenever a reasonable number of forms have been amassed.

We know many LOs provide records to their local or county bird report. Since these are concerned with the calendar year, you may wish to ask counters to send forms to you after the December count. These could then be submitted to WeBS and the January to June counts sent in another batch of forms at a later date. As long as all counts up to and including June are with us before the end of August, it is very much up to the LO to adopt the most suitable method for them and the counters in their region.

You will receive a reminder from the WeBS Office shortly before the deadline if you still have counts outstanding. If forms are received after the end of August, we cannot guarantee that the data will be included in the Annual Report. However, we appreciate that some counters are not always forthcoming with their data. Even if the deadline has passed, please keep chasing them and send the counts in. We will include them in the database

Which form?

WeBS has a suite of recording forms designed so that counters and LOs can record information efficiently and adopt a system that enables data to be collected and returned as frequently as required for local needs.

Core Count Recording form
Yellow coloured, A3 folded

Each form can be used to record counts for one count site (or count section) for up to seven monthly counts. This is the most commonly used form, and is designed for situations where counters return forms to their LOs once or twice per year (see returning forms).

Single Visit recording form
Orange coloured, A4

This form is used to submit counts from a single visit to a WeBS count site (or count section), and is typically used where counts are returned to the LO on a frequent (often monthly) basis. This normally occurs at complex sites where counts from a large number of sections are returned by numerous counters, e.g. on an estuary. Some LOs choose to collate the results on a monthly basis, and provide regular feedback to their counters. WeBS **Summary Sheets** can be provided to assist with this process.

Non-breeding waterbird supplementary recording form
Pink coloured, A4

Some sites may hold important numbers of birds at times other than during the Core Counts (e.g. roosting Cormorant, Goosander or gulls). Similarly, sea and weather conditions may make counting some species (e.g. seaducks) difficult during Core Counts. Supplementary recording forms are designed to record counts on separate visits to WeBS count units where only selected 'target' species are counted. Please remember these forms are for recording counts which are *additional* to the WeBS Core Counts and will enable us to improve our understanding of these species and better reflect the importance of a site for waterbirds.

and they will be used for many other uses within WeBS, even if they are not included in that season's Annual Report.

2.4.4 Summary Sheets

These are a pale orange colour, A4 in size and are mainly used by LOs at complex sites (e.g. estuaries or large gravel pits) to provide feedback to their counters. Alternatively, where there is a lot of movement between sectors as these complex sites, the forms can be used to give a truer representation of the number of birds using the whole site. In which case please return these to the WeBS Office or submit them online **in addition to** the individual sector counts. Please let us know if you would like to receive a supply of Summary Sheets.

2.5 Newsletter and Annual Report

Everyone who participates in WeBS is entitled to a free copy of the Annual Report of the WeBS scheme, **Waterbirds in the UK** and the WeBS Newsletter **WeBS News**. We aim to produce the Report a year following the end of the last count covered by the Report, i.e. by May the following year. The Newsletter is published annually in September. These are both normally delivered direct to the counters, however, if you would like to distribute them yourself please let us know. If you require more Reports or Newsletters, extra copies can be obtained by contacting the WeBS Office. We are happy to provide spare copies, for example, to give to private landowners who allow access for sites to be counted, or to promote or publicise the scheme.

2.6 Expenses

We are able to reimburse reasonable expenses associated with organising the counts. Stationery – the costs for this will be fully reimbursed on the production of a valid receipt, alternatively WeBS headed paper (A4) and compliment slips are available upon request. Postage – whenever possible communication should be sent electronically but where this is not possible, please use 2nd class mail. Receipts for stamps and/or proof of posting should be supplied.

2.6.1 How to claim

Claims, no matter how small, should be returned monthly; these will be processed as soon as possible after they are received. Please return all receipts to the WeBS Office, we can accept the original receipt or a scanned copy (please email scanned copies to webs@bto.org).

2.7 Publicising WeBS

We ask LOs to promote and publicise WeBS wherever the opportunity arises. The WeBS Vacant Site tool (see **Appendix 5**) can help you find and promote sites needing coverage in your area. Many bird clubs and local RSPB groups hold meetings that provide good opportunities to do this and to recruit new counters. Information leaflets about WeBS and how to become involved are available from the WeBS Office. Local site wardens may agree to stock leaflets in visitor centres or in particular hides.

Many local ornithological groups also organise regular programmes of indoor meetings. If you are interested in giving a talk to your local group, please feel free to contact staff at the WeBS Office who will be able to provide you with power point presentations, additional information or handouts to take away such as copies of WeBS Newsletters. Alternatively, staff from the WeBS partner organisations

are happy to give presentations to local groups about WeBS and related topics; again, please contact the WeBS Office.

2.8 Low Tide Counts and other surveys

LOs for Core Counts are often the first port of call when WeBS partners organise Low Tide Counts or other additional surveys covering habitats and species which are difficult to monitor by Core Counts alone. WeBS LOs often have expert local knowledge of both sites and counters, a valuable resource in such surveys. As with Core Counts, Low Tide Counts can be submitted via WeBS Online or on paper forms. However, Low Tide Counts are by no means a compulsory part of the Core Count organiser's job, and we regularly rely on different volunteers for these other surveys. All of the LO online options outlined throughout this document can be used for Low Tide Count Management unless otherwise indicated.

2.9 Keeping in touch

We keep a record of your contact details on computer for the purpose of co-ordinating the survey. Please let us know if any of these details change, as we occasionally need to contact LOs with queries about the counts or for information regarding special surveys. Periodically, we will contact all LOs to confirm that our records are correct.

We occasionally forward LO contact details to other LOs so that they may liaise with each other and LO email addresses are given to new counters so that they know whom to contact. Additionally, we have a '**Contact your Local Organiser**' form on our website, which shows your name next to your region. If the volunteer selects your region, an email will be sent direct to you with the contact details they have added to the form. They will receive a copy of the email and therefore your email address.

If you do not have an email address please ensure we have the correct postal address for you and a home telephone and/or mobile number that we can give to new volunteers so that they may contact you. At the time of writing, if you do not have an email address the 'Contact your Local Organiser' form will forward correspondence to the WeBS Office (webs@bto.org); we will send you a copy of the new volunteer's details by post.

2.10 Other LO Resources

2.10.1 Local Organiser web page

We have a page on the website that is specifically for our WeBS LOs, you can find it at www.bto.org/webs/lo. Here you will be able to download:

- extra copies of **this document**;
- **WeBS Introductory letter** - This is a letter of introduction for you or your volunteers to give to a landowner when asking for their permission to complete WeBS counts on their property;
- **Parental Consent forms** – volunteers who are under 18 years of age will need to ask a parent or guardian to complete and sign a consent form and return it to the address on the form;
- PDF version of a **WeBS presentation** – due to size of the original presentation the images have been removed and it has been turned into a pdf document to make downloading easier. This is only an example of what is available. For the full, up to date, version of the presentation please contact the WeBS Office;
- **Local Organiser Job Description.**

You will also find a link to the contact form which will enable to contact the LO for a specific region. However, if you wish to contact more than one LO at time or would like a full list of LO contact details please get in touch with the WeBS Office.

The BTO has a team of Regional Representatives who are responsible for at least one of the 125 BTO regions around the UK. They are responsible for organising other BTO surveys (e.g. Breeding Bird Survey; Heronries Survey etc.). If you would like to get in touch with the BTO Regional Rep for your area, you will find a link to their contact details from this webpage.

2.10.2 Local Organiser Forum Group

We have set up a group on the BTO Forum for all WeBS LOs and we hope that you will join.

The purpose of the group is to allow sharing of ideas between organisers. Feel free to start a discussion/thread on any aspect of organising WeBS counts, for instance if you need advice with an access issue; or you are a new organiser and want to hear ideas about communicating with your team of counters; or you have an idea for a WeBS development. We also hope the group will facilitate open discussion of topics started by the WeBS Team, for example when we are developing new features on WeBS Online, up and coming one-off surveys or for gathering feedback from you on other aspects of WeBS.

We've set a couple of house rules: please be respectful of fellow organisers, counters and staff in all your communications via the group, and we particularly request that if you are asking for advice about a local issue involving counter(s) **please do not mention those involved by name.**

Joining instructions:

Please follow this link and you should be directed straight to the discussion group:

<https://forum.bto.org/c/regional-networks/RN-WeBS/12>



NOTE – Important communications from the WeBS team will still be emailed to you directly, so if you choose not to join this group you will still receive these.